

Rekindling Our Inner Fire

from a parent's perspective

by Roslyn Duffy

– Situation –

At 2 a.m. your toddler begins to whimper, then howl. You grope your way to his bed, pick him up, change his diaper, and pat him as he relaxes back to sleep. But, it seems that no sooner do you crawl back under the covers and close your eyes, that the alarm blares its 6 a.m. wake-up summons.

Wrestling the children out of pajamas, into their clothes, and through a hurried breakfast of cold toast (with nothing for you) is next. Child care drop off, though mercifully without drama, is followed by a slow crawl through freeway traffic, interspersed with sips of cold coffee from your disposable cup.

At work, a reprimand from your boss for an unfinished report; a soggy sandwich eaten while catching up on e-mail; and two aspirin gulped down to quell a raging headache make up the day.

Back at home, you discover that the only dinner ingredients available are a cardboard carton of macaroni and cheese (at least something the children will eat!) and some very limp carrots. You are still pushing around a mushy forkful of orange glop when your three year old races in, tears streaming down her cheeks, to tell you her brother just bit her — YOU HAVE HAD IT! You storm from your chair, order your sobbing daughter to her room, and plop your son in his crib — while yelling that “this kind of behavior has got to stop — RIGHT NOW!”

– Solution –

Whose behavior

Don't we have to wonder whose behavior is being referred to? We all have days like the one above, and even the most patient among us will “lose it” at times. But, though we may agree that being a parent can be stressful — few of us make our needs a priority — or even a consideration.

Imagine a campground or fireplace with a prominently displayed stump of wood. In order for that stump to provide warmth, something has to happen. That something is called “kindling.” Those bits of paper, small twigs, and medium-sized branches that constitute kindling can transform a stump into welcoming warmth. Well, it isn't only wooden stumps that need kindling.

Kindling

Each of us is very much like that unlit log — cold and lifeless with nothing to release our inner warmth, the warmth our family members seek from us, without kindling. What constitutes human kindling? Human kindling are those things that energize and encourage us. Here are some of the types of “kindling” I hear listed in my parenting classes:

- listening to music
- time alone
- time to talk to friends
- exercise: yoga, swimming, running, gym workouts, bicycling
- time for hobbies (though few even mention this one — as it seems so impossible)
- a warm bath or shower
- time to read
- time with friends
- playing music

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Couples also have lists of what helps keep the flame of their relationships burning. These are some of their ideas:

- time together (away from family responsibilities)
- time with friends
- time for sex (and other types of shared intimacy)
- playing sports together

One thing both lists have in common is the mention of “time.” Another is that the need to re-ignite ourselves isn’t OPTIONAL! That’s right — meeting our own needs is every bit as necessary as providing food, rest, or shelter for our children.

Airlines remind us that “in the event of an emergency, please place an oxygen mask on yourself, before your children.” Why? The answer is simple — if we’re unable to breathe, how can we help them? The same is true for meeting our other needs. All the discipline in creation won’t be enough to make up for the loss of that loving warmth that only we can provide — warmth that doesn’t get ignited on its own.

But how? When? There is no time! The answer to all of these is the same — NOT OPTIONAL. A half-dozen deep breaths might be the best we can manage. So, breathe. After all, if we don’t find time and means to care for ourselves — who will?

Finding time: Think small

Tammy, a nurse, began to use the stairs at the hospital to go to and from her breaks. Five floors down, five floors up — and on week two she realized she was no longer gasping like a dying locomotive by floor three. Another benefit was her improved focus — further reducing her daily stress.

We all know that exercise is valuable but — “Ya-da, ya-da, ya-da,” right? We say we will join a gym, take part in a triathlon, start jogging . . . one of these days. Well, how small can you think? These are admirable goals but they may be way TOO BIG. If we set goals that are TOO BIG, we end up feeling discouraged. So — think small. Think tiny. Think maybe only one flight of stairs instead of five, and who knows — once you have begun, adding another flight may not seem all that impossible.

Finding time: Plan and pay ahead

Another strategy is to “plan and pay ahead.” Evan wanted to sign up for a series of weight-training classes at the gym near his office. They began at 6:30 a.m., but that would mean leaving an hour earlier for work. So he talked the plan over with his wife and they agreed that if he packed lunches the night before and gathered their twin sons’ shoes, coats, and clothes for the next day — she would be willing to take over the morning routine. Added to that was the fact that these classes had to be paid for in advance, so even if (or more likely, when) Evan didn’t feel like crawling out of bed — the thought of that already spent money would prod him out the door.

“Ands” not “buts”

True, not everyone will have a willing partner around for support. This isn’t a BUT however — it is an AND. In other words, BUT you don’t have someone to give you time to yourself, AND what will you do instead?

*BUTS get bigger.
ANDS get us going.*

“I want to exercise AND I could”:

- set up a babysitting trade with a neighbor or another child care parent
- find a gym with child care services and hours that work with my schedule
- ask Grandma or a neighbor to drop-off my little one at preschool to give me a half-hour for yoga

Get the idea?

Finding time — away

Sherri and Sam could only manage a single day and night away from their home and children. They didn’t want to spend this precious time mired in traffic, so — they rented a room at a bed and breakfast ten minutes from their house. After a dinner out, they went to a nearby club and listened to a blues band. The next morning they slept in, made love, and read the paper over cups of coffee and warm croissants. By that evening — they were laughing, holding hands, and ready to greet their children as the loving parents they wanted to be.

Single mom, Abby, was just as refreshed when she rejoined five-year-old Kyle, after a weekend spent scrapbooking with two of her friends, while Kyle had been at his dad’s. Instead of spending her time cleaning, catching up on laundry, and doing some reading — things she often did on Kyle’s weekends away, what she had needed more was time with friends and a chance to use her creativity.

Other options

What if there is no partner, money for a sitter, or ex-spouse in your picture? Once again, this is an AND — not a BUT. A half-day trade with another parent can give both a needed break, cost nothing, and pay out huge dividends for all. Single friends also

love the chance to be an “auntie” or “big brother” for a day.

In extreme cases — when you are truly overwhelmed (and probably haven’t paid attention to your own needs for a while), many areas offer emergency respite care. Find these resources and use them. It is not shameful or selfish to do so. Your children will be cared for and you will get the break you need. Everyone will benefit.

From stump to warmth

Kindling is prevention at its most basic. Our families need warmth — not cold stumps, and caring for ourselves is truly NOT OPTIONAL.

P.S. If, by chance, you still think caring for you is selfish or optional — please look up my counseling number (or one in your area), as you may just be needing such a service sometime soon.

What problems do you experience?

Send a description, a short word “snapshot” of the situation.

Each issue, we will address your real-life issues.

To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear.

Elements of several problems may be combined for this column.

Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.

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