# A Guide to Being Your Own Best Ally

produced with Courageous Parents Network by Kendra Wilde, Founder, Wild Peace for Parents



#### INTRODUCTION

For so many parents and caregivers caring for children living with illness and medical complexity, the stress and burden of caregiving can be overwhelming. Practicing self-compassion can help us shift out of survival mode, allowing us to better deal with challenges and grow our emotional resilience. Self-compassion is about treating ourselves with the same kindness and understanding we offer our loved ones. It includes three elements: acknowledging our struggles, reassuring ourselves that we're not alone, and giving ourselves grace. With practice, self-compassion can enhance our well-being and bolster our caregiving capacity.\*



\*Based on <u>research</u> by Kristin Neff, PhD



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## **Parental Burnout Equation**

Living in crisis level and chronic stress takes a toll. We imagine we just need to get through the day or reach some endzone. But you can only function in survival overdrive for so long.

Burnout happens when stressors outweigh our coping resources. Burnout (and other problems) sneak up because often we don't even realize we're activated and imbalanced. We need enough coping resources to counter the stressors.

## "SOS" - Survival Overdrive Syndrome

This can be a catch-all term for all kinds of serious problems.

If you want to be the best parent, caregiver, and advocate you can be, you can't be falling apart yourself.

Parental Burnout<sup>\*</sup> is a specific condition resulting from enduring exposure to chronic parenting stress. It is characterized by:

- overwhelming exhaustion
- emotional distancing from one's children
- a sense of parental ineffectiveness
- don't recognize yourself



\*Based on <u>research</u> by Moïra Mikolajczak and Isabelle Roskam, UC Louvain

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## Window of Tolerance

"Window of Tolerance" is a term coined by Dr. Dan Siegel now commonly used to describe normal brain / body reactions to adversity and trauma. It's our capacity to function in everyday life - well enough.

In our optimal zone - our window - we can regulate our emotions. We are able to learn effectively, play, and relate well to ourselves and others. There might be stress, but it feels manageable. This is the ideal place to be.

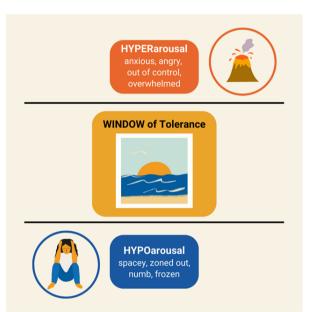
When stress and trauma shrink your window of tolerance, it doesn't take much to throw you off balance and shift you into the Red or the Blue territory.

## Hyperarousal (Red)

You may feel anxious, angry, out of control, overwhelmed, panicked, fearful, hypervigilant, and/or tight muscles. Your body wants to fight or run away (aka Fight or Flight response). You feel stuck in overdrive.

#### Hypoarousal (Blue)

Here you may feel spacey, zoned out, numb, frozen, depressed, emptiness, and/or dissociation. This is also known as shut-down or collapse response. Your nervous system is overloaded.



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## Widen Your Window of Tolerance

When we widen our window, we can more comfortably handle high degrees of emotional intensity and a broad range of emotions. We are better able to make the next right choices, to access our higher brain, to be our best selves.

The more coping resources we have, the more able we are to show up sturdy for our kids.

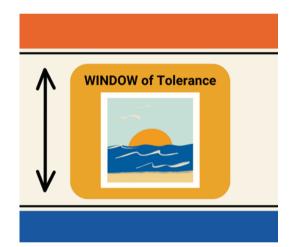
#### **Self-Compassion**

We are conditioned to believe that being hard on ourselves helps us rise to the occasion. But it has the opposite effect: it activates the stress response. Self-

compassion empowers us to be the caregivers and parents we want to be and is one of the most powerful things we can use to help ourselves cope.

#### The Surprising Power of Self-Compassion\*

- Strongly related to mental health
- Supports emotional balance
- Protects from burnout and compassion fatigue
- Increases satisfaction with caregiving
- Makes painful and difficult circumstances more bearable
- Helps us forgive ourselves
- Enhances sense of connection
- Boosts resilience for future challenges



\*Based on <u>research</u> by Kristin Neff, PhD





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# **Three Elements of Self-Compassion**

Self-compassion involves being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or cutting on ourselves.

- 1. **Self-Kindness.** Giving yourself the same warmth, support, understanding, kindness, and care you'd give a dear friend who was in pain.
- 2. **Common Humanity.** We tend to think "it's just me" when we all experience challenges and times of suffering. But this is part of being human and that's what connects us to others. This is about feeling a sense of community and not isolation during times of pain.
- 3. **Mindfulness.** This is about becoming aware of our experience. Neff says it's about being able to turn toward your pain, at least a little bit, to start to give yourself compassion. It's about stepping back to notice what your thoughts, feelings, and experiences are in the moment, without judgment. This can make it easier to figure out what the next best step is.



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## **Self-Compassion Break**

This informal practice can be done in about one minute and can make an almost immediate difference. You can intentionally call in the three components of selfcompassion in these steps:

#### Mindful

Recognize that you're struggling. "This is hard."

#### **Common Humanity**

Remind yourself, "I'm not alone, other people feel this way."

#### Self-Kindness

Offer yourself kindness and acceptance. "I'm a good parent."





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# **Fierce Self-Compassion**

In addition to being tender towards ourselves, we also need our fierce side. Neff describes fierce self-compassion as taking action in the world to reduce suffering. It includes:

#### Protection

Setting healthy boundaries. Channeling your mama or papa bear energy.

## Providing

This can mean putting your own needs over the needs of others at times.

## Motivating

This is about taking action to alleviate suffering; to stand up, to speak up.



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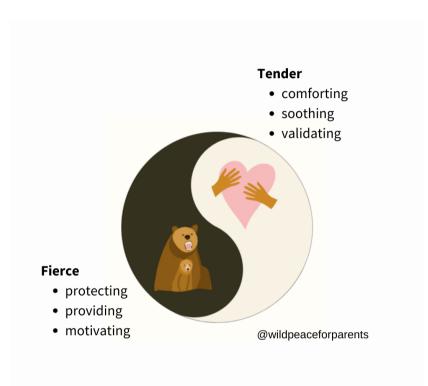
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# The Yin and Yang of Self-Compassion

We need a balance of BOTH tender and fierce to feel whole, authentic, and well. The tender piece is to hold the pain, feel safe, and accept ourselves as we are. The fierce piece is the ability to speak up, stand up, and take action.







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## **Self-Care Redefined**

If self-compassion gives us that balance of tender acceptance and fierce action, it also opens the door to self-care. Which is exactly what we need to stay resourced enough to show up sturdy.

#### **Micro-actions**

Tiny steps "micro-actions" might be the only self-care that feels manageable in the current moment. Experiment until you develop a tool kit that works for you. The more tuned into ourselves we become (mindful, embodied), the better we get at knowing what we need. Eventually, you'll have a range of skills that keep you afloat. Practice, especially when the stakes are low. And as you're ready, make space for more. Research shows tiny habits are the most effective way to make change; nothing is too small to start with.

#### **Microaction Ideas**

- Calm overwhelm by grounding into your feet; dig your heels into the floor
- Help anxiety by tuning into your senses (pick 5 things you see; 4 sounds you can hear; 3 scents you can smell; 2 sensations you feel; 1 thing you can taste)
- Settle your system by resting with your legs up on the wall
- To de-stress, try a Physiologic Sigh: inhale through your nose, inhale again (2nd time) in another burst, and then release with a long, extended exhale through your mouth\*



\*This technique was rediscovered by Jack Feldman, PhD and Mark Krasnow, PhD

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## **How to Maintain Micro-actions**

Picking and doing a single micro-action<sup>\*</sup> to get started is great. You want to make sure you pick something that feels doable so that you can maintain it and continue to grow your skills to keep your window of tolerance as open as possible.

Ways to try and maintain micro-actions include:

- Pick something that resonates, that you'd like to do
- Attach a micro-action to an already established habit
- Make sure to give yourself a "yay me" when you do it



# CONCLUSION

Self-compassion empowers us to be the parents and caregivers we want to be. Being kinder to ourselves helps us face difficult challenges with more balance and opens the door to vital self-care. Finding small microactions that feel doable can be a great start to developing a self-care habit. This will keep your window of tolerance as wide as possible so the stress of caregiving feels a little easier.

\* Based on research by B.J. Fogg, PhD and his book, <u>Tiny Habits</u>.



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