

## Finding Balance in the New Year

Now that the holidays are over, real life sets in again. For some it is a relief, for others a letdown. Kids are back in school, daily life returns to *normal*. So – my questions to you are: How is your normal? Is your normal what you want or what you put up with? Is your normal consciously planned (with glitches and ups and downs, of course) or do you find yourself in a state of limbo or confusion not knowing what end is up?

When we feel out of control of our lives, we fall into emotions of fear, self-doubt, depression, boredom, or resentment—when it seems like something else, something we haven't chosen, is driving us. We are out of balance with life.

Having children around, no matter what age, makes it is easy to fall into that trap of life-at-the-mercy of external events. Actually we usually consider this inevitable and unalterable. Parents, especially mothers, often find themselves in the role of chauffeur, short order cook, maid, private secretary and even the family doormat. Emotionally, they feel drained, unappreciated and invisible.

There is another way. Parenting life is alterable. Balance is the goal. When we are out of balance, nothing goes right, our fuses are short, and everyone and everything else gets blamed. Taking personal responsibility for our emotions and our actions seems unfair. “After all I do, day in and day out, why do I have to be the one to change? Why can't the others do what they're supposed to?” The answer is they can. But they won't, unless you stop doing it for them.

Balance means, first, just becoming aware. Aware of when you feel resentful, used, intolerant—any emotion—and can witness it. With conscious awareness of what is happening, emotions are less likely to take over. Taking responsibility for those feelings only means knowing they are yours and not enforced by anyone else. When you know that, you can take control. When you don't know that, your emotions do the controlling. When you become aware, you have the choice of playing victim to your life or taking hold of the reigns.

At first, practice becoming aware of less volatile emotions—say, sadness. Then name it—“sad” or “I'm feeling really sad.” It may seem silly but the consciousness you put to it can change its effect. It doesn't mean you will stop feeling sad. That is not the goal. But it means you won't wallow in the sadness so much and let it take you down. Then start practicing with tougher emotions. If that doesn't work, back up to the easier ones. You'll get there. As simple as it sounds, it's actually quite hard to reach the level of awareness (mindfulness) that brings detachment from our emotions—not repression, detachment.

Next, start doing more of what you want. You *can* say no to that third overnight in a row, to staying home because your child wants you, to that fourth extra curricular activity that means no dinners—ever. Mothers especially have a hard time saying no to their children. It feels cold, hard and uncaring—especially if there is a hook to the past. Perhaps your parent said no too often, or never said no and handled everything for five kids. A lot contributes to our ease or difficulty in saying no. But I found that when I did—when I made it clear just how much driving I would do, how much of my life I would sacrifice—I actually got that much desired appreciation for what I *did* do. Because my kids knew that it was my *choice*, not my guilt that was driving me. Choice gets thanked over guilt any day.

In order to make those choices, there needs to be some distance, some disengagement between you and your child. You need to know that your life is as

important as your child's—that your needs are in balance with the needs of the rest of your family. Whether it's choosing to serve cereal for dinner tonight, insisting on spousal help, or saying yes to the extra driving required—your family will know a choice, not a sacrifice, has been made.

Women still fall victim to the roles we think we must play. Taking care of yourself—going to that yoga class or pottery studio, taking a job, insisting that all family members help around the house—does not mean you are slacking in your “duties.” Not being *present* with your family because you are feeling angry, resentful, or drained does mean you will not be the parent you want to be. The more we take care of ourselves, the more present we are, the longer our fuses, the more patient our moods.

I will be doing a series of columns over the next few months on ways of achieving balance in our parenting lives. I URGE YOU TO EMAIL ME at [bh@bonnieharris.com](mailto:bh@bonnieharris.com) with questions, with stories of what works and what doesn't. This series will be far richer if you contribute your thoughts and concerns. Please let me hear from you.

And may this next year bring growth, awareness, and ease to your lives.

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(new bio)

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Bonnie Harris, M.S.Ed. founded The Parent Guidance Center, now The Family Center of Greater Peterborough. She is the author of *When Your Kids Push Your Buttons* and is the director of Core Parenting, which includes private parent counseling, national workshops and speaking engagements. Bonnie is the mother of two grown children. Her website is [www.bonnieharris.com](http://www.bonnieharris.com).