



DR DIANA KOREVAAR is a consultant psychiatrist specialising in women's health, pregnancy and perinatal psychiatric disorders. She has had extensive training in mindfulness-based treatment approaches, and has employed these techniques not only in her work, but also in her personal life. In the course of her work, Diana has observed how men and women from all walks of life have benefited from this approach. She co-wrote the *Mind the Bump* mindfulness and meditation app developed by Beyond Blue and Smiling Mind in 2014. Diana continues her work in this field from her practice in Melbourne, Australia.

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'Beautifully written and illustrated, Dr Korevaar admirably succeeds in translating latest neuroscientific understandings into everyday language and simple practical exercises. I can wholeheartedly recommend this fabulous book – not just for mums and dads, but for aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, and children!'

James Bennett-Levy, professor of mental health and psychological wellbeing, University of Sydney

'This is a little gem of a book. Quiet, helpful and well written. Full of gentle ways to change your thinking, in a way that actually sounds feasible to a parental brain at warp point. The kind way Dr Korevaar writes makes me want to drop round to her place for a cup of tea and a sob. But the book's a close second; warm, helpful and readable.'

Annabel Crabb

*'This book will make you, your children – your whole family – happier. Highly recommended.'*

Dr Justin Coulson,  
parenting and positive psychology speaker and author



As a parent, it can be all too easy to live life on automatic pilot – fulfilling one demand after another while missing out on much of the journey. And though you can't control every situation, you can influence the outcome by learning to change how you react.

Dr Diana Korevaar, a practising perinatal psychiatrist, uses mindfulness practice as a powerful tool to help parents calm down, connect and reframe the challenges they face in order to experience life more positively.

Grounded in science, *Mindfulness for Mums and Dads* features dozens of case studies, as well as simple mindfulness practices that can be carried out anywhere. These are practical tools for anyone seeking to actively engage in their own recovery from anxiety or depression, or for those no longer content to 'just exist' in life, hoping that things will get better in the future.

In as little as three minutes a day, it is possible to take control of your life, become calmer and more compassionate, and be fully present for the small moments in life that create true and lasting happiness.

SELF HELP



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MURDOCH BOOKS

MINDFULNESS FOR MUMS & DADS

DR DIANA KOREVAAR

*'This book provides practical ways in which mindfulness strategies can be adopted into everyday life.'*

Professor David Castle,  
St Vincent's Hospital and the University of Melbourne

# MINDFULNESS FOR MUMS & DADS

Proven strategies for calming down  
and connecting

DR DIANA KOREVAAR

*'A gem of a book. Full of gentle ways to change your thinking.'*

Annabel Crabb

'This book adds to the growing literature on mindfulness but fills a significant gap by targeting specifically new mothers and fathers. It explains the mindfulness concepts then provides practical ways in which mindfulness strategies can be adopted in everyday life. There are helpful illustrative case vignettes which help the reader understand the practical applications of the techniques.'

David Castle, chair of psychiatry at  
St Vincent's Hospital and professor  
at the University of Melbourne

'In this book, Dr Diana Korevaar draws deeply on clinical and personal experience and knowledge of literature across themes of mindfulness and compassion. She brings these together in an accessible and elegantly produced volume addressing how these ways of being can be cultivated in ways that may be helpful for the particular challenges of being a parent. I'd recommend it for mums and dads who are keen to explore what these ancient wisdoms, as now being reinterpreted in light of 21st century research, might have to offer them.'

Graham Meadows, professor of psychiatry,  
Monash University

*'Mindfulness for Mums and Dads* is the perfect blend of science and application. Dr Diana Korevaar has written a book that simplifies the science and makes it easy for almost any parent to create basic mindfulness practices in their family that will enhance wellbeing. This book will make you, your children – your whole family – happier. Highly recommended.'

Dr Justin Coulson, parenting and positive  
psychology speaker and author



# Introduction

The world that we are living in and our children are growing up in is incredibly complex. It moves very quickly and the experience is often challenging. It is all too easy as a parent to get into an automatic pilot mode of living, simply pursuing one goal after another; in the process missing out on so much of the journey. In this book I hope to inspire you to step aside from the busy flow of life, and take advantage of the exciting developments in the field of neuroscience and mindfulness, by finding ways of applying the techniques to your own personal experience of life.

For most parents, attaining a sense of contentment and being at ease can all too often seem frustratingly elusive. What starts with the excitement (or pressure) of wanting to achieve a pregnancy, is often quickly replaced with worry—that check-ups will confirm things are ‘normal’ and that the child will be well. If, at the end of the pregnancy, we are presented with a healthy baby it can then feel as if a whole new world of things to worry about pours into our life. Why is this baby not sleeping? Is she getting enough milk? Why won’t she stop crying? Am I doing the right things? And on it goes.

The trap we can easily fall into is coming to rely too heavily upon what is or isn't happening in order to feel okay. The experiences we get excited about—a new partner, a pregnancy or a holiday, at best provide only a temporary settling of this inner yearning for happiness.

Poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes of life:

“ *Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.* ”

If we dare to accept that these painful feelings of frustration, boredom or worry are not an indication that something is wrong, but are in fact integral to the experience of life and being a parent, then where does that actually leave us?

From my perspective as a perinatal psychiatrist, it leaves us in a more optimistic and exciting position than that of previous generations. Since the teaching of mindfulness was introduced to Western society over three decades ago, it has developed into a rich and diverse practice that lends itself perfectly to the task of enriching our relationships. Not only that, but when the techniques of mindfulness are incorporated in the way we parent our children, research suggests it is more likely they will develop greater emotional resilience, a quality that is more strongly associated with happiness in life than income or career.

However, the term 'mindfulness' has come to be used in many different ways and is used widely in a variety of settings, from the corporate world to education and even in the training of soldiers, which gets very confusing. Although mindfulness training programs in the area of psychology were initially designed to help manage stress, anxiety and depression, they evolved originally from more contemplative traditions such as Buddhism, where there was a much

more direct process of inquiry into what it means to be human and live a meaningful life. There are now decades of accumulated research into the beneficial effects of mindfulness. It has been shown that regular practice leads to improvement in physical health as well as emotional wellbeing and also creates significant changes in the structure of our brains in a process which scientists have labelled neuroplasticity.

This term refers to the capacity of the brain to quite literally grow new nerve cell connections, based upon the patterns of our thinking and our behaviour. In other words, the more we 'practise' certain thinking patterns or behaviour the more strongly this circuitry gets reinforced within our nervous system, or in other words—'nerve cells that fire together, wire together'.

MRI scans of the brains of participants in mindfulness training courses such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction show that with only a few weeks of daily practice, there are measurable changes in brain structure. The small structure in the limbic system responsible for the secretion of the stress hormone cortisol reduces in size over the eight-week period, and areas in the frontal lobe of the brain responsible for balancing emotion, creative thinking, insight and wisdom increase in size.

Over recent years there have been two additional adaptations to traditional mindfulness training, which enable the skills to be of more practical use to parents. These two extra 'arms' of training focus more specifically upon emotion (balancing fear-based emotions with those of courage, kindness and self-compassion) and deepening connection in relationships, in a process which is called 'attunement'.

The last decade or so of research demonstrates how it is possible to shape underlying personality characteristics that were previously regarded as stable or fixed. For example, if genes and early life experiences have tended to make us self-critical, irritable or unable to read the emotions of others with accuracy, regular practice and use of mindfulness skills can bring about significant change.

However, when we are able to integrate mindfulness skills into daily life, we are not the only ones who benefit. Research shows how our emotions don't just shape the structure and activity of our own brains, but the brains of those around us! Mindfulness skills are now core components of training courses in parenting and in education



Lesson  
1

# Wired for negativity



The field of neuroscience has revealed a lot of information about how the human brain works, and why we are so vulnerable to stress. As humans, we have evolved over thousands of years, from species that survived only because they were good enough at protecting themselves from threat. But in Western society the threat is rarely located in our physical environment, so we live with the legacy of a powerful negative bias. The upshot is that the brains we are born with have many design features suited for a completely different era—when on a daily basis threats to life were routine.

In case you hadn't noticed, we have little control over our thoughts. Our genetic makeup and past experience play a big part in determining the thoughts we have and how we interpret experiences. In fact only 10 per cent of the activity of our brain is in conscious awareness, which is why attempting to simply change our thoughts is bound to fail. Whether they are optimistic thoughts or come in the form of worry or negativity is largely beyond our direct control. Our thoughts are intimately linked to emotion, which originates well beneath conscious awareness, in an area of the brain called the limbic system.

Scientific investigation into our vulnerability to stress has highlighted the role of a small structure located deep within the brain called the amygdala, which functions like a smoke detector—constantly vigilant for what might pose a threat or get in the way of an outcome we want. The big problem is that the amygdala has a hair-trigger. It can fire up when we feel frustrated by waiting in a long queue at the supermarket, or when we hear a particular tone in the voice of someone we are close to.

*... the brains we are born with have many design features suited for a completely different era—when on a daily basis threats to life were routine.*

When activity in the amygdala increases, the level of the stress hormone cortisol rises and blood is diverted away from areas in the brain that we rely upon for clear thinking and problem-solving.

We call this the 'stress response'. It may have helped our ancestors escape from predators, but it rarely helps us deal skilfully with challenges we face in day-to-day life.

For this reason, under the influence of negative emotions like anxiety, worry, irritability or anger, the functions of the frontal lobes of our brain are significantly impaired. These 'executive functions' give us the capacity to concentrate, make wise decisions and be creative. Being deprived of access to these skills contributes to processing problems, which in turn feeds the spiral of escalating negativity we become familiar with when we are stressed.

The strong bias in favour of detecting threat ensures that memories laid down most strongly (in the limbic system where the amygdala is located) are the negative ones. This means that we are more likely to remember a situation from years ago when we were criticised or blamed for something than we are to remember when we were praised. Neuropsychologist Rick Hanson describes our nervous system as being like 'Velcro' for negative events and 'Teflon' for good experiences.

Putting all this together, it is hardly surprising that pregnancy and childbirth is a time of increased risk of emotional disorders. Sleep deprivation and hormonal change generally tend to magnify the biological stress response, predisposing to illness that, even when it's mild, can impact greatly upon the experience of parenting.

A stylized illustration of a person with dark hair, wearing a red top, with their right hand pressed against their face in a thoughtful or stressed pose. The background is composed of various colored brushstrokes in shades of teal, orange, purple, and grey.

Lesson  
4

Stress,  
strive or  
connect —  
the three main  
circuits of  
emotion

But Matthew was absorbed with what he was doing and had no intention of leaving. 'No, not going!' he cried as he lay down on the floor with one of the toys. Sunila felt embarrassed in front of the teacher and other parents. Kneeling down to his level she quietly but sternly said, 'NOW, Matthew; Mummy needs to go to work. Come right now!' But Matthew was determined, and as Sunila tried to gently pull on his hand, he started crying, kicking his legs and hitting out with his arms. This was now too much for Gemma, who had been trying hard to be brave, and she ran to her mother in tears.

Let's face it, it's not easy to prepare for the challenges parenting can bring! Ordinarily Sunila was a gentle, perceptive mother who was sensitive to the cues of her children, but when Matthew started screaming she felt as if all eyes in the classroom were on her. She was feeling embarrassed and exposed, assuming that the others were judging her as a mother. All she could think of was how she could get out of the situation as quickly as possible.

At another time, when she felt less uncomfortable, Sunila would probably have used an altogether different approach with Matthew when he began behaving in a way which, after all, was not at all unusual for a toddler. But on the first day of school, Sunila was keen to make a good impression with Gemma's teacher and with the other parents in the room. Powerful emotions like shame, anger and fear often take over when we are least prepared for them, robbing us of an opportunity to respond to what's happening in a calm and wise way.

Under the influence of the stress response and the rapid release of cortisol that comes with it, our brains respond as if a control switch has been flicked off and skills like insight and wisdom become unavailable to us as our frontal lobes go 'off-line'. The work of Professor Paul Gilbert, a research and clinical psychologist, has been particularly useful in helping us understand more clearly how emotions have evolved for specific purposes. They influence our behaviour in ways that have been crucial for our survival as a species, but unfortunately they can also cause us (and those around us) unnecessary pain.

Emotions are at the very heart of what gives our life meaning, but, as we all know, they can wreak havoc, when without permission they sweep in and take over how we think and behave.

### Sunila's story

Sunila had just taken her daughter Gemma to her classroom and was about to take two-year-old Matthew to crèche. It was Gemma's first day of primary school and she had been anxious and reluctant to go. Matthew had sensed that his mother was distracted and in recent days he had wanted more of her attention too.

Having settled Gemma into the classroom, Sunila noticed as she turned to leave that Matthew had begun playing with toys in a corner. She was running late for work, so taking Matthew's hand, she tried to lead him out of the room to get to the car.

Professor Gilbert's clinical work and research has helped clarify and distinguish the way that emotions can be broadly categorised into three main 'systems'—threat or stress, striving and pleasure, and finally the connecting and compassion system. When emotions get activated, specific nerve cell pathways light up, just like lights on a Christmas tree. With their cell bodies located in the brain, long connections run all the way down through the spinal cord connecting to our heart, lungs, gut and muscle tissue. As they become activated, specific hormones and a large number of different chemicals called neurotransmitters are secreted into the blood, around muscles, heart and gut and also into the cerebrospinal fluid surrounding the brain cells.

The threat or stress system is the most powerful. It is always running quietly in the background, never entirely switching off. It monitors our internal and external environments for anything negative or unwanted. From an evolutionary perspective, the purpose of this system was to protect us from danger. But for those of us who live in relatively safe environments, the triggering of this system happens most often in situations where we are reacting to an experience we would prefer to avoid, or, even more often, to difficult memories or worries about something which may or may not even happen.

When the threat system fires up, the level of the stress hormone cortisol increases instantaneously. When cortisol rises we feel stressed in our minds and our bodies. Our minds become highly active and our thoughts get hijacked by the issues that are causing us concern. Thoughts tend to race in a chaotic way, making it very difficult to think clearly. Interestingly, in humans the level of cortisol is at its highest around 4 a.m., which accounts for the fact that if we wake up in the early hours of the morning and something has been worrying us, it can be difficult to settle back into sleep.

Anxiety, irritability and anger are the most common stress-based emotions. In any given moment, the emotions we experience will influence the thoughts we have, how we feel about ourselves and how we behave. They can even affect what memories we have access to, which can be very problematic.

The second most powerful system of emotion, especially in Western society, is the striving and achieving system, and we can feel pretty good when this system gets activated. A chemical within the body called

dopamine gets secreted and can lead to a 'high' much like people get when they use stimulants like cocaine or amphetamine. Like the threat system, the striving system has an important role to play, helping us get what we need to survive (and perhaps a little extra!), and achieve in important areas of our life. But these emotions which can start off giving us the enjoyable feelings of pleasure and success can end in a frantically driven state, where we are chasing goals, judging whether or not we are meeting our expectations, and in the meantime becoming more and more disconnected from the present moment.

The most fragile and easily disrupted system of emotion is the safe, contented and connecting system. When this system is strong and healthy we feel safe, calm and settled, and we are able to see more clearly what is actually happening in the present moment, without the pressure of needing things to be different. Even in situations which are difficult, if we manage to activate the safe and connected system, we don't detach from the challenges we face; in fact, we see clearly what is happening. But we are able to respond from a more wise, balanced and caring position.

Like everything else in our nervous system, the relative strength of various emotions depends upon how often they are used. It's quite simple: the more often we 'practise' anger, striving, anxiety, irritability or worry, the stronger they become.

This bias in favour of threat- and achievement-based emotions over kindness, courage and wisdom is not our fault. We are built from the genes up in a way that has us exquisitely sensitive to threat (even if it's only our own worried thoughts) and searching for ways to acquire things that we think will make us happy—a new car, a glass of wine or, in Sunila's case, a well-behaved toddler!

Coming back to Gemma's first day at school, when Matthew decides to ignore his mother's request, we might imagine that anger and embarrassment would be the emotions that Sunila will feel. When her 'anger circuit' lights up, Sunila is more likely to remember all the

*The relative strength of various emotions depends on how often they are used. It's quite simple: the more often we 'practise' anger, striving, anxiety, irritability or worry, the stronger they become.*



Lesson  
18

The  
science  
of positivity  
and  
optimism

### Lisa's journey through depression

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Lisa had taken antidepressant medication as treatment for depression for many years. She had managed to avoid postnatal depression after the births of each of her three children and attributed her new-found emotional resilience to participating in a course of Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy during her first pregnancy.

The course taught her how to build steadiness in her mind and observe the activity of her thoughts while resisting any pull to engage in a debate with them. Then, as she learned how to bring this capacity to be focused in the moment to her parenting, she found that she could connect more deeply in the interactions she had with her children.

But when Lisa came to see me, she explained that although her life had great meaning and she no longer felt particularly frightened of depression, she found great difficulty feeling positive and hopeful about the world her children were growing up in. How would she feel if one of her children became depressed like she had been? How could she protect them from experiences which might cause them to suffer?

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Positive emotions such as joy and happiness are fragile and are no match for the strength of negative emotions which dominate our thoughts when our inner threat system gets activated.

Apart from the fact that we get more pleasure from life when happiness and joy grace our day, there are other important reasons why positive emotions are worthy of our attention. The work of two well-respected researchers into human emotion, Professor Barbara Fredrickson and Professor Richard Davidson, has demonstrated how positive emotions radically change the way our brains operate, and how with regular practice positivity alters the physical structure of our brains. Rather than positive emotions being the result of success in life, it seems that the reverse is actually the case—success in work life and



The seeds of happiness and optimism, just like compassion and wisdom, are present in all of us. Just like their more pessimistic cousins, the nerve cell circuitry of positive emotions and thinking patterns obey the same principles of neuroplasticity.

In our search for happiness, most of us make the mistake of waiting for something specific to happen—another holiday, a different job or better behaviour from a child. But sooner or later most of us come to understand that this ‘outsourcing’ of happiness is a risky business. Researchers call it the ‘hedonic treadmill’. Hardwired into the striving and pleasure-seeking system of emotion, getting the things we desire can give us an intoxicating rush of positive feelings.

In fact, similar changes occur in the body's internal chemistry with the use of addictive substances like cocaine and amphetamine, which is why we can get ‘addicted’ to shopping or fad diets or gambling. The biochemistry of this pleasure circuitry activates quickly but falls even more rapidly, taking with it our mood.