

CHAPTER ONE

# Crap Happens and Then We Make It Worse

**Let's go back to that ill-fated hike** from the previous chapter. Thanks to that helpful second map, you managed to make your way back to the car with relatively little drama. You're feeling good about your recovery, and you want to find as many opportunities as possible to get your family outside and off their screens. So you plan another hike. You plan a failproof hike.

You drag a grumbling, cranky family out the door and proudly show them the sign at the trailhead, which reads:

THIS IS AN EXTREMELY SAFE AND EASY TRAIL. NO ONE HAS EVER GOTTEN INJURED, LOST, OR EVEN THE LEAST BIT CONFUSED OR UNHAPPY ON THIS HIKE SINCE THIS TRAIL WAS FIRST CREATED. ENJOY YOUR DAY!

The sun is out, the sky is blue, and it's not long before everyone is in a good mood. Shoot, you're so happy that you don't even get annoyed at your daughter's endless story about the latest third-grade playground drama.

And that's when the arrows start flying.

Literal, actual arrows.

They come out of nowhere and before you can even figure out what the hell is going on, you take one in the side. OUCH. That shit stings.

And then you freak out. Of course you do, because who wouldn't lose their freaking shit if they got struck by a freaking arrow while they were on what was supposed to be the safest

freaking hike in the history of hikes? It's not like you took your family for a walk through an archery range, for Pete's sake. And so you panic and your heart starts racing and you can't breathe and it's not just because you've got an arrow in your side. This wasn't supposed to happen. What did you do wrong? And how the hell are you the only parent on the planet who can't take your kids on even one successful hike?

So there you are, on the side of the trail, writhing in pain and self-doubt while your partner gets going about how nobody in the history of the universe has ever been struck by an arrow on a mini-golf course and your son starts blathering on about these amazing arrows he made in Minecraft once and your daughter starts wondering if this is an intruder drill like the ones she practiced at school, which of course triggers the shit out of you, but you still have a damn arrow in your side and it really freaking hurts and you're starting to wonder if you should try to pull it out or if this is one of those situations you only see on TV where you're supposed to leave it in so you don't start spurting blood everywhere and you're not sure if this is something you actually want to google or not.

You're just about to pull out your phone when a paramedic comes hiking up the trail. HURRAH! You're saved! He immediately removes the arrow, but instead of bandaging you up, he reaches into his bag, pulls out another arrow, and jams it straight into the open wound.

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

## This Ridiculous Story Is a Metaphor for Parenting

This ridiculous story is obviously a metaphor. (Although if for some reason it actually resonates with your hiking experience, then may I humbly suggest you stick to mini-golf?) So let's get into it.

First, that sign at the start of the hike declaring that nothing bad will ever happen. There's a reason you never see signs guaranteeing a perfect experience anywhere. They're not true. They're never true. Even worse, they set unrealistic, unachievable expectations that leave us feeling like shit when we inevitably fail to meet them. And yet from the very moment folks start even thinking about getting pregnant, we're inundated with both subtle and smack-you-across-the-face messages about how parenting should be joyful, intuitive, meaningful, and amazing. Happy isn't just the goal, we're led to believe, it's the norm. It's how everyone else's life is, and how our lives can and should be. And if for some reason they're not, it's because there's something wrong with us or our kids and it's on us to work harder or parent better or find the right specialist or whatever.

Then, of course, there's the arrow. The first arrow, the one that came flying out of nowhere. I wish I could take credit for the arrow idea, but it actually comes from the Buddha (who may have had a young son, which makes his story of running away just so he could hang out alone under a tree for seven weeks fairly relatable). Anyway, the Buddha talked about arrows because, well, guns and reality TV shows and electronic drum sets for kids and all the other things that cause us pain and wreak havoc on

our lives hadn't been invented yet. The details don't matter; the point is that that first arrow, the one that seems to come out of nowhere, represents the inevitable chaos, the chronic confusion, disorder, and unpredictability that crashes into our lives, often when we least expect it. These are the fractured arms, ailing parents, cancelled plans, busted refrigerators, empty gas tanks, kids who spike fevers on the days we absolutely have to be at work, problematic texts we probably shouldn't have sent in the first place, unexpected bills we can't cover, school bullies, and global freaking pandemics.

And just like an actual arrow, chaos hurts. Whether it grazes your skin or lodges itself right in your hip, that shit stings. And then we react to that pain because who wouldn't? Unless you're Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*, you're going to freak out in some way when you're in physical or emotional pain; that's just what humans do. And it's not just that these injuries hurt; they also demand our attention, sap our energy and resources, and leave us with terrible scars. Whether we play a role in causing our own chaos or it comes flying in out of nowhere, it complicates our lives and leaves us feeling sad and angry and confused and anxious. To top it all off, it feels extra bad because we've been raised to believe that our lives and our parenting should be calm, cool, and collected, even when we have a freaking arrow hanging out of our hip.

\*cough\* bullshit \*cough\*

Look, I don't care how well you research your hikes or how many (probably fake) guarantees you get or how careful and planful and thoughtful you are, first arrows will fly. That's just what first arrows do. I mean, it sucks, and in some circumstances

we might be able to slow them down or soften them a little bit, but make no mistake about it; there's no getting around the first arrows of life.

But that truth doesn't stop us from trying—not because we're hopeless idiots, but because much of the self-help and parenting advice out there is focused on avoiding the first arrows of life—the colicky baby, the job loss, the Celiac diagnosis, the tween who is being bullied at school. And some of that advice works, sometimes, like that clever trick you read online for getting a preschooler to drink that nasty antibiotic. Or the new teen room at the library that actually got your kid to emerge from their bedroom. And even though those first-arrow fixes are like the shittiest game of whack-a-mole ever, we keep at it, because that's what parents do.

**One of the most compassionate things we can do for ourselves is not getting sucked into the Big Lie.** You know the one I'm talking about—that parenting should be enjoyable and easy, our kids should always be healthy and happy, and we should be in control at all times. But between all that advice and the highly curated and filtered images and situations on social media and reality TV, it's hard not to believe the big lie—that parenting should be enjoyable and easy, our kids should be healthy and happy, and we should be in control.

And so we're left chasing rainbows, with no freaking clue about what to do when the sky opens up and we're left standing

in the pouring rain and shouting at the storm. This isn't because there's anything wrong with us; it's just because most of us weren't taught how to deal with the arrows of life. We're told, again and again, that we have to prevent them, but we're given very little insight or information about what to do when the shit hits the fan anyway, as it always will, no matter how hard we hustle. And that's how we become the target for a different arrow, the second arrow of suffering.

## The Second Arrow of Suffering

Remember that second arrow? The one that jerk of a paramedic jammed in your side when he should have been bandaging you up? The Buddha referred to that as the second arrow of suffering, and it represents the shame, blame, and contempt we hurl at ourselves every time chaos strikes or we freak out or make a mistake or don't meet our own expectations, or just don't manage everything as perfectly as we've been led to believe we should. Instead of responding to our suffering and pain with kindness, forgiveness, and understanding, we tend to disconnect from our friends and communities, judge ourselves harshly, and treat ourselves with a shitload of contempt.

That second arrow doesn't just hurt, but it also prevents us from healing. Instead of forgiving or bandaging ourselves or getting the support we need or trying to understand what happened in the first place, we end up writhing from the actual pain of the first arrow and the shame and guilt and confusion and anxiety of the second arrow all while trying to reschedule a dentist appointment and figure out why our sister-in-law got

pissy on the phone and pick up a barfing kid from school and finish answering a bajillion work emails.

Yeah. Guess whose wound never actually gets taken care of? Guess who's just left wallowing in a bunch of shame and shitty thoughts and feelings?

It's not that we're actively or intentionally ignoring our own needs. It's just that we get hyper-focused on our role in whatever happened, all the ways we think we screwed up or should have responded differently, and all the things that could happen if we don't fix it right away. No matter how painful that first arrow may be, the second one hurts even more because it hits us straight in our soft spot. Our wounded place. In other words, the second arrow takes a universal, totally normal experience and makes it deeply personal. It makes it our fault, our failing.

Ouch.

As the pithy old saying by people who like pithy old sayings goes, "Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional." Even though there's no way to stop those first arrows of life, we can stop blaming and shaming ourselves each time things go poorly or we miss the mark.

But here's the thing: Most of us don't even realize we're shooting ourselves again and again, much less how or why it keeps happening. But we need to get clear on those second arrows if we're going to have a snowball's chance in hell of avoiding them in the future. Here are just a few examples of the second arrows that most of us shoot ourselves with on a daily basis:

**We Tell Ourselves We Suck.** I'm not talking about accepting responsibility when you make a mistake. That's often a very



skillful choice. I'm talking about when our thinking devolves from "Whelp, that was a major snafu" to "I'm a terrible parent and I'm totally screwing up my kids." When we do that, we're judging ourselves and comparing ourselves to others and thinking about all the ways we're getting it wrong and all the ways a better parent would be doing things differently.

Folks suffering from Shitty Parent Syndrome don't even need to pull out our crap maps anymore—we have them memorized. We suck and we know it and everyone knows it and there's nothing we can do about it. We're so skilled at navigating those rocky trails of self-contempt that we can get to the end of the hike, defeated, exhausted, and cranky as hell without a damn clue as to how we got there. And even if we do realize what's happening, we keep following our crap map anyway because a) it's the path of least resistance and we parents are just too damn tired and overwhelmed to blaze a new trail, and b) we don't have any other maps to choose from (at least not yet!).

**SNAFU is one of my favorite acronyms;** it stands for Situation Normal, All Fucked Up. It originated in the military, but it's made its way into popular lingo. When most folks refer to snafus, they're thinking about the "all fucked up" part, but I prefer to focus on "situation normal" part. Normal, as in typical, usual, or expected. Snafus happen to everyone, and they're no indication that there's anything wrong with us or our parenting.

**We Tell Other People We Suck.** Everyone loves a good parenting-gone-awry story, and lots of us love telling them. But more often than not, the stories aren't just about the chaos, they're actually about how we caused the chaos and maybe even made it worse and ha ha ha ha guess we won't be winning Parent of the Year anytime soon.

I'm not saying we shouldn't tell these stories of parental mayhem; in fact, just the opposite. As we'll explore more in Chapter 6, connecting authentically with others is a powerful form of self-compassion. The goal is just to make sure we're not throwing ourselves under the bus—no matter how funny it might seem at the time.

**We Hang Out with People Who Leave Us Thinking We Suck.** Whether we're scrolling through their social media posts or chatting near the swings, the more time we spend with people who don't show up for us in authentic ways and see and accept us for who we are, the harder it is for us to trust and believe in ourselves. When we hang out (either virtually or in real life) with people who present themselves as perfect and their parenting experience as clean and easy and/or judge us for our mega mess, it becomes far too easy to believe that everyone else is nailing this parenting gig and we're the only ones being flattened by it.

**We Treat Ourselves Like We Suck.** This might be the sneakiest and most insidious of all the second arrows. Every time we put ourselves at the end of the list or minimize our emotional, psychological, and physical needs, we strengthen our underlying beliefs that we're not worthy of care. When we don't reach out for

or accept help when we need it, we reinforce the idea that we're alone in how damn hard this all is. When we bend—or straight-up ignore—our boundaries and say yes when we want or need to say no, we end up so tired, hungry, tapped-out, and stressed-out that we lose our keys or our mind or our temper with our kids.

And then we blame ourselves for that too.

Just to be very clear, putting ourselves first isn't always possible, and that's OK. That's part of the deal when you're a parent, and it doesn't necessarily mean you're shitting on yourself. Life happens and we do our best with what we have. But when we consistently ignore our own needs because a) we believe our children's needs always take precedence over our own, b) we don't feel like we deserve any better, c) we think we have something to atone for, and/or d) we've completely blurred the line between

**Super important point: First arrows aren't second arrows (and vice versa).**

Remembering the difference between first and second arrows is crucial to your self-compassion practice. Here's the short version: First arrows are the shit that happens to you and second arrows are how you think about—and respond to—that shit.

Crappy childhood? First arrow. Blaming yourself for struggling with parenting because you have zero role models? Second arrow.

Diagnosis of clinical depression? First arrow. Feeling like a shitty parent because you don't have the energy or desire to parent the way you want to? Second arrow all the way.

self-care and self-improvement and we truly believe that if we could just be better and do better, life would be less chaotic, well, that's just a bunch of second-arrow BS right there.

## The Third Arrow of Denial and Distraction

And then, of course, there's a third arrow.

Because of course there freaking is.

We pull out our quiver of third arrows, the arrows of denial and distraction, when the pain of the first and second arrows gets too overwhelming. We do whatever it takes, often reactively and instinctively and generally without even realizing it, to just not think about whatever's going on. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with checking out from reality from time to time; in fact, it can be a highly effective coping mechanism. We all need a little time to sip our coffee, stare at the wall, or binge a few episodes of our favorite show.

Until, that is, our nightly glass of wine becomes three, or we're eating an entire tray of our feelings instead of just one cookie. Our compulsive eating, shopping, gambling, endless scrolling, porn watching, exercising, and busyness not only don't solve the problem, but they also reinforce the belief that we can't handle our darkest impulses or emotions. (Which, for the record, we totally can.) While those third arrows may offer a temporary respite from the first and second arrows, they make for a pretty shitty Band-Aid. Over time, third-arrow behaviors can put our jobs, relationships, health, and daily functioning at risk. Even

as they're distracting us from the chaos, pain, and shame of our lives, they're opening us up to a whole new round of first and second arrows. And the cycle just keeps going.

The sharper our second arrows are, the more likely we'll be to bust out the third one because screw that stupid hike and stupid mini-golfing and that stupid ranger and our stupid kids who can't hold their stupid poop and that stupid-ass happy hiker family and their stupid-ass songs and screw it all. We can't control the chaos and we're just so tired of trying so hard and having it all fall apart anyway and we just don't want to think about any of it, so we space out on the couch, turn on a show while we thumb through our phone, throw back a beer or four, stay up way too late, and pretend like none of it ever happened. Fortunately, the fewer second arrows we sling at ourselves, the less likely we'll be to resort to third-arrow behaviors, which makes life and parenting so much easier.

*Thwack thwack thwack.*

**This book is going to focus on noticing and changing our second-arrow habits,** which will not only lessen the pain of the first arrow, but also make it less likely that we'll fall into third arrow behaviors. However, if you're struggling with any kind of addiction—if you're pinned down by a third arrow—please know that a) you're not alone and b) help is possible. Getting help isn't always easy, especially for busy parents who may often have limited time, energy, and money, but it's worth it. Thanks to online counseling options, therapy is more available than ever; see Chapter 5 for more information on how to connect with a licensed mental health practitioner.

## How All These Arrows of Self-Contempt Make Parenting Harder and Less Fun

It's so tempting to believe that we can harass ourselves into being better parents. I mean, wouldn't it be great if that thing we're already doing so naturally actually worked? It would be super handy if that second arrow somehow magically healed our injuries and injected caffeine, patience, and the solution to that sixth-grade algebra problem directly into our bloodstream. Sadly, it just doesn't work that way. Regardless of what your evil aunt, jerk of a high school soccer coach, or sadistic boss might have you believe, bullying never leads to better behavior. Sure, we can terrify ourselves into temporary submission, but the results never last, and we end up back at Square 1, but it's more like Square -1, because now we're left with a bunch of open wounds.

Not only does treating ourselves like crap rarely lead to our desired outcome, but spending all day, every day, believing that we're failing at the most important work of our lives impacts our mental, emotional, and physical well-being in a variety of shitty ways.

We feel more confused and less confident about our parenting decisions and abilities when we're constantly doubting ourselves. After all, why would you trust the judgment of some idiot who keeps screwing up? And then we feel all stuck and confused and our parenting gets all tight and rigid. We can't stay calm or think clearly or creatively, and we end up resorting to arbitrary rules, inflexible reactions, and unwinnable power struggles. Basically,

our self-contempt makes it far more likely that we'll default to our most unhelpful parenting reactions.

All of this causes tension in our family, and the more stressed and overwhelmed we are, the more likely we are to react impulsively and irritably and generally behave in the very ways we feel so ashamed of. This makes it hard to sleep at night, which makes us more prone to depression and anxiety. Or maybe we've been dealing with mental health issues since forever, and now they're just worse. Either way, it's hard not to feel depressed and anxious when we know we're going to berate, belittle, and shame ourselves for every choice we make and every unexpected, unpleasant, or downright awful outcome.

And it's not just our thoughts and feelings that are impacted; our self-contempt isn't good for our bodies either. Self-defeating thoughts and self-deprecating behaviors can lead to a whole variety of health problems, including crappy sleep, higher blood pressure, headaches, muscle tension, gastrointestinal problems, weight gain, trouble with memory and focus, and all that weird shit that happens to your body when it's all stressed-out.

It sucks.

**The ability to remind yourself that you're not a monster** or a freak or a failure, that we're all in this together, is one of the most powerful ways to treat yourself with kindness and ease the shame. You're just a human being trying to raise another human being in a crazy, complicated, and super chaotic world, and none of us really know what we're doing. Some of us are just better at faking it.

# Nature, Nurture, and Now: Why We Think We Suck

Given that shooting ourselves with second and third arrows only makes things worse, one has to wonder how and when we humans started berating ourselves for the totally normal (albeit epically sucky) chaos of life. And why the heck do we keep at it?

The short answer is this: Who the hell knows?

I'm not just being flip here; the truth is that there is often no clear explanation for much of our behavior, including why we're so damn harsh on ourselves. And that's OK, because we don't necessarily need to understand the *why* in order to change the *what*.

Having said that, much of our shitty self-talk and self-deprecating behavior can be attributed to some combination of nature, nurture, and our lives now. As you read through the following list of factors that contribute to our self-contempt, please note that “You're a horrible person and you really do suck more than everyone else” is nowhere to be found. I will hammer this point home until the end of days (or at least until the end of this book), but whether you think your shitty parent stories are true, they're not kind and they're not useful. Seeing as how kind and useful are totally the jam of this book, let's focus on them, shall we?

## Nature: We're Wired for Connection, Comparison, and Catastrophizing

As crazy as it sounds, there's an evolutionary advantage to all those shitty second arrows. Human beings are wired to stay



connected to their communities, and so much of our seemingly senseless behavior (including treating ourselves like crap) stems from that primal need. The reality is that our ancestors who were either a) self-righteous dicks or b) super weird or different were likely to find themselves wandering the savannah alone and at the mercy of the first hungry saber-toothed tiger to cross their path.

So it came to pass that those cave parents who were consistently self-deprecating and doing their best to fit in were far less likely to get kicked to the prehistoric curb and far more likely to stay alive long enough to raise self-deprecating babies. And now, whether we realize it or not, every time we talk shit about ourselves, we're securing our place in the tribe.

Putting ourselves down in front of our fellow parents is just one way to stay connected to our community. Making sure we fit in is another one, and that requires us to keep an eye on what everyone else is up to—how they're feeding their children, putting them to bed at night, teaching them to tie their shoes, and making sure they pass social studies. While we may get some helpful information and insights from our fellow parents, comparisons are inevitable, and comparisons usually suck—at least for the comparer. Although approaching every interaction with a mental yardstick rarely feels good, we keep doing it because it's the easiest way to determine, maintain, and possibly even improve our social status.

There's no question that all the shitty self-talk and constant comparisons are totally not awesome. Even if we don't buy into everything we're saying about ourselves—even if we don't actually think we're shitty parents—the more frequently we repeat something, the more likely we are to believe it.

However, staying connected to our community is crucial, but only when said community consists of actual people who share their experiences honestly and authentically, and from whom you can reap the benefits of being part of a tribe, whether it's a ride to the recital or a reality check. It's not so helpful when your "community"—those folks you can't help but compare yourself to—includes parenting experts and social media mavens who may live in completely different worlds, have access to completely different resources, and share only highly filtered and carefully curated versions of their lives, which generally have nothing to do with yours.

Their advice might be helpful and relevant, or it may just be another crap map. Either way, we shouldn't be comparing ourselves to them anymore than we should compare ourselves to pandas or potatoes. But man is it hard to remember that when we're staring at a video of a smiling parent, happily feeding their cooperative children brussels sprouts as they share their story of overcoming clutter in just one afternoon and finishing their first marathon in under five hours.

Look, self-contempt and comparison wouldn't be so bad if we could find a way to let it all go, to notice those thoughts without actually taking their bait (which I'll teach you to do over the course of this book). But that leaves us with our tendency toward catastrophizing, or assuming the worst will happen. It's not that we're gluttons for punishment; rather, our brains are wired to look for, notice, and remember the threats and failures in life, both real and perceived. As much as this sucks, it actually kind of makes sense; those cave folk whose brains led them to assume that squiggly thing on the ground was a snake instead of a stick

and jumped out of the way were far more likely to survive than those who leaned down to pick it up. And of those anxiety-prone cave folk, the ones who obsessively remembered and replayed the stick/snake situation over and over again were far more likely to react quickly and decisively the next time they saw something similar on the ground. In addition, their children were far more likely to survive, which, evolutionarily speaking, is the whole point of our existence.

Basically, the cave moms and dads who were extra hypervigilant and reactive, doing whatever it took to keep their kids alive, were the ones whose DNA stuck around long enough to pass on their anxious, obsessive, keep-their-kids-alive-at-all-costs parenting style to their children, and their children's children, and every generation, right up to today, to you and me and every other parent with a twitchy eye, blossoming anxiety disorder, and tendency to focus on the worst, including in ourselves.

**Another powerful factor at play is confirmation bias.** The deeply human tendency to hold ourselves responsible for that which is beyond our control is both a cause and effect of the shitty parent stories we tell ourselves. Once we've decided, for whatever reason, that we suck, our brains continue to seek out, interpret, and remember evidence in ways that confirm that belief. This doesn't mean it's true, and it doesn't mean there's anything wrong with us. It's just how our brains work.

## Nurture: We Grew Up in an Imperfect World

Even those of us who had relatively “normal” childhoods were still criticized, bullied, or harassed at some point in our lives. Maybe you were too skinny or too chubby, or you had a name that was hard to pronounce, or you were the only LGBTQ kid or child of color in your class. And even though Adult You can look back at Kid You and see that that your experiences weren’t your fault, they were just the predictable (if shitty) outcome of living in a deeply imperfect and intolerant world, Kid You didn’t know that at the time. Kid You only knew that you were the one who didn’t fit in, so clearly it was your fault. And now some part of Adult You still thinks it’s (whatever it is) your fault, even though it’s totally not and never was.

On the off chance you weren’t different at all (or, more likely, just lucky enough to have a hidable difference), that didn’t mean you were off the hook. Whether it came from a parent, a sibling, or that punk in seventh grade who kept snapping your bra or shoving you in a locker, someone treated you like crap and made you feel incapable, incompetent, or worthless. That’s not to say that your parent, sibling, or seventh-grade bully hated you or was inherently evil; like you, they were also raised in a culture, family, or community that taught or modeled that harassment and contempt are acceptable responses to life’s challenges and chaos. Whatever the reason, whatever they said or did likely had nothing to do with you and maybe didn’t make any damn sense at all, but taking other people’s opinions far more seriously than we should is a side effect of the human condition and an especially strong one when it comes to kids.

And that's just the story for those folks who didn't have traumatic childhoods. For those of us who weren't so fortunate, a history of trauma, neglect, and abuse can lead to entrenched feelings of inadequacy and shame. Children tend to blame themselves for the worst that happens to them, even though it's never their fault. As painful as it may be for kids to think that they're the reason for their parent's rage or rejection, it's safer than believing that their parent, the one person on the planet who is supposed to love and protect them, might hurt them or can't take care of them. And those old stories can be damn hard to shake, no matter how many years go by.

The bottom line is that we all have a childhood story, and most of us have lots of them. Whether it was one especially brutal experience that rewired your thinking or the constant repetition that wore you down and left you filled with self-doubt and shame, any underlying beliefs you may have developed about your own competence and worthiness may still be sticking around, making those second and third arrows sharper than ever. Even when we know that it's bullshit and fundamentally the other person's problem, on some level, it's still damn hard to tune out those voices.

## Our Lives Now: Parenting Is Chaos

We're all painfully aware that raising kids is full of first arrows. These can range from the basic challenges (how and when to feed them, put them to sleep, treat minor illnesses and infections, etc.); the what-we-thought-were-basics-but-apparently-aren't (how to talk to our kids, get them to help around the house,

and schedule their after-school activities, for example), and the purely mind-blowing (when to give them a smartphone, how to prevent eating disorders, and what, exactly, are we supposed to do about school shootings? That's not a rhetorical question. I would really like to know.) And it's not just that we're supposed to worry about things we hadn't even previously realized were things at all, but that the advice keeps changing. If we're still doing what we did yesterday, we're probably doing it wrong.

Good parents, we've been led to believe, don't live chaotic lives. They have their shit together and their heads screwed on straight and a truly fantastic color-coded calendaring system. But don't be fooled. Just getting through the day is often a challenge for even the most organized, energized, rested, and clear-thinking among us. And most of us parents aren't functioning at our best. We're exhausted from trying to be so damn perfect, parenting through a freaking pandemic, balancing our work and home lives, and not having the information, support, and resources we need. And, for all the reasons we just discussed, one of the most popular, if super unhelpful, conclusions that our brains jump to when we're tired and stressed is that if we're not perfect, we suck.

## How the Second and Third Arrows Impact Our Kids

No matter how hard we might work to hide our second- and third-arrow habits from our kids, we can't. Our children absolutely know when we're freaking out, stressing out, or shutting

down. And here's the thing about kids: They're incredibly self-centered. They default to assuming that they have a central role in whatever's going on, and they struggle to keep other people's perspectives and needs in mind. That doesn't mean there's anything wrong with your kids or they're budding psychopaths. It's a developmental stage, and they'll grow out of it. What it does mean is that as they watch us (and not to sound incredibly creepy or anything, but they're always freaking watching us) and try to make sense of our tense, rigid, second-arrow reactions, they're prone to blaming themselves or assuming they're at fault for whatever's going on.

*Thwack. Thwack.*

Our kids can nail themselves with second arrows before they even know what the first arrow is.

But it's not just all in our kids' heads. Our behavior impacts them directly. As the noted author Wayne Dyer once said, "When you squeeze an orange, you get orange juice." When we get squeezed, whatever's on the inside is what's going to come out. And if we're filled with shame and blame and then our kids squeeze us—by crying through the night or biting their little sister or refusing to get into the damn car or flipping their plate and storming off in the middle of dinner or who the hell knows—we ooze our contempt all over them. The levels of tension and conflict in our families shoot up, which weakens our relationship with our kids and makes it even harder to deal effectively with the actual issue. And none of this is because we're shitty parents. It's because we can't give our children what we don't have, and most of us don't have anything better. At least not yet.

And that's just the second arrow. When our kids see us react to difficult moments by stressing out, checking out, or shutting down, they may develop the same habits over time. Each time we space out in front of a screen or eat or drink too much, for example, in response to life's snafus, not only are they learning how to do the same thing, but they're not learning any other more effective and empathic coping skills either.

So even if you're still suspicious of all this self-compassion stuff or you're not yet ready to forgive yourself, hang in there. Fake it till ya make it. Your whole family will benefit.