

Sumi Loundon Kim

*Mindful Parenting: Nurturing an Intentional, Compassionate Family*

Week Four: Working at Deeper Levels for Deeper Healing

August 25, 2019



My name is Sumi Loundon Kim and this week we're going to learn about how to take mindful parenting deeper. We'll also learn about how mindfulness, meditation, and, importantly, self-compassion practice, can help us heal some of the habit patterns we have from our childhood, while also providing liberating insight.

Let me share a personal story that we'll call "Scrambled Eggs." It's specific to me, but also invokes some universal themes. Some years ago when my kids were very young, around the ages of three and five, we lived in an apartment that had a rug in the dining room. One day, I was getting my kids ready for breakfast, and I served them some soft scrambled eggs. I put it on their plates and then I went back to the kitchen. I did a few things in the kitchen, and when I came back to the rug-laden dining room I saw that there were scrambled egg bits all over the floor. With great exasperation I went under the table and I began to try to lift these gooey pieces of scrambled egg out of the fibers of the rug. That was very difficult to do, as you may know for yourself.

At some point, I saw myself as if I was being filmed, as if someone else was there filming me as a mom. My children were sitting in the chairs above, and I could see their legs kicking and hear them giggling. I heard myself say, "Oh, you think this is funny? For heaven's sake, how many times have I told you to eat with your chin over your plate? How did these scrambled eggs get onto the floor? I just cleaned this rug. Maybe you should come down here and clean this rug." I went on and on like that. As I heard myself speaking this way, I thought, "This sounds fairly judgmental and harsh." Then I thought about how other people would see this situation, with my two children being so young. I thought to myself, "I have very high expectations. Maybe it's the nature of a three-year-old to get scrambled eggs on the floor." From the dark corner of my mind, a thought arose: "I wonder if I speak to myself this way?" Whoa.

As soon as I heard that thought, I realized I had something to practice with. At the next meditation opportunity, I set myself up, took a few deep breaths, and just listened to myself. What does Sumi's inner voice say to herself? After a few minutes, I heard this voice loud and clear. It said, "Sit up. Straighten your shoulders. You've been meditating for 30 years and you can't follow a single breath? Pfft. Pathetic." As soon as I heard that voice I felt such an overwhelming feeling of sadness. I had been speaking to myself this way for many decades.

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Right away, there were three insights that went like fireworks. The first insight was that the way that I speak to my children and my spouse is a reflection of how I speak to myself. The second realization was that the way that I speak to myself is an internalized voice from one of my parents. One of my parents had very high expectations and often spoke to me in a very harsh and critical way. Over time, I had adopted that parental voice as my own. Now I was speaking in that parental voice to my children. The third insight was, “No wonder I don’t enjoy meditating. I’m sitting here using the time to beat myself up, being critical and harsh on myself.”

Right away I knew what I needed to do from then on, and I was very excited about it. The first thing I did was switch out the judgmental, high-standards voice for a much kinder, gentler voice whenever I heard this voice in meditation. I would even fake it a little bit. If I heard, “Wow, you’re such a bad meditator,” I would imagine myself as a beloved dog, and I would hold my hands in my face mentally and say, “Who’s a good girl? Who’s a good meditator? Oh, you’re a good meditator! Yes, you are!”

Very soon I began to really enjoy meditating, because it became a time of care, love, and appreciation. I also began practicing lovingkindness meditation only for myself, for about 20 minutes. I would repeat “May I be happy, may I be healthy, may I be safe and protected, may I live with ease.” Sometimes I switched this practice into self-compassion, when I needed resonance and empathy with suffering. I would then repeat: “May I be free from suffering, may I be free from shame, may I love myself.”

Interestingly, within a few weeks of practicing lovingkindness for myself I noticed the way that I spoke to my children and to my spouse began changing. Instead of speaking harshly and judgmentally, I began to speak in a kinder, gentler way. I was still clear with my boundaries and expectations, still making sure that my kids were doing what they needed to do, but the tone and the expectation behind it was entirely different.

I hope this narrative provides an example of why seated meditation practice or personal daily meditation practice is both the beginning and the end point for mindful parenting. Often, the parenting habits and patterns that we’re trying to change have deeper roots. We can’t try to change them by simply regulating our speech or willing ourselves not to get angry or yell. This is a form of mindfulness that quickly turns into control and micromanagement. It actually

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reinforces some of the self-loathing and the self-regulation that is the cause of our woundedness or pain.

We need to work at deeper levels and do deeper healing. Once we relate to ourselves with greater kindness and love, that will come forward naturally, and we'll begin to interact and talk to our family members with greater love and care.

This narrative is also a good example of how mindfulness meditation and self-compassion work together. Because of my daily meditation practice I had sufficient mindfulness to be able to notice that I was speaking harshly. Then I could hear that very valuable thought: "I wonder if I talk to myself in the same way that I'm speaking to my children?" I could then return that awareness back into the meditation practice to observe and cultivate deeper insight into my own habit patterns and psychology.

This self-compassion and lovingkindness practice was essential to healing something very deeply wounded in me. You've already been exposed to lovingkindness by practicing this at bedtime with your children, so it may be time for you to pick up self-compassion practices for yourself during your own meditation. I highly recommend the work of Christopher Germer, Kristin Neff, and Sharon Salzberg. There are also a number of online guided meditations for self-compassion. As hard as it may seem, I would challenge you to try doing self-compassion for two weeks, perhaps the next two weeks ahead. Just notice whether practicing self-compassion has any impact on the way you interact with your children and the way you parent, given that many of us have inherited dysfunctional patterns or behaviors and ways of parenting from our parents. Perhaps our parents inherited those patterns from their parents. When we bring awareness and lovingkindness to our parenting, we are disrupting these cycles of violence and pain. We have the opportunity to heal not only ourselves, but the generations ahead. The way that we parent now will determine how our children parent our grandchildren. When we do this essential work we're not only doing it for ourselves, but we're doing it for many others, both in the past and ahead. This is essential and valuable work. We might even say it's a deeply healing and transformative spiritual path.

Today we learned that mindfulness helps us catch the important thoughts and feelings that we really need to pay attention to. We learned that meditation practice provides us with the

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opportunity to look more carefully and deeply into our minds, and allows us to have some transformative insights into our parenting psychology and behavior patterns.

We also learned that self-compassion can provide healing for some of the woundedness and brokenness that we may have had when we came into our role as parents. And lastly, we learned that transforming our work as parents begins with transforming our relationship with ourselves.

As I mentioned, in the weeks ahead I'd like to invite you to begin practicing self-compassion or lovingkindness for yourself and see how it helps your role as a parent.

Thank you for joining me for these four weeks on mindful parenting. I've so enjoyed sharing with you. I wish all good things for you, your loved ones, and your children.