



THE OXYGEN MASK

MINDFULNESS FOR EXPAT PARENTS



JODI HARRIS, MSW



This article originally appeared as a chapter in *Raising Kids in the Foreign Service* edited by Leah Moorefield Evans (see link to the book at the end of this article). I have made some changes in language to make the content more relevant to expat parents regardless of their professional situation.

The content here should be considered a basic introduction to the concepts of mindfulness. To learn more about mindfulness, there are numerous print and online resources as well as programs in communities worldwide. I strongly encourage you to follow your instinct about what works best for you and to seek out additional resources to support your practice.

If you have mental health concerns, the best resource is finding the appropriate support from a trained mental health professional in your community.



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Introduction

There are so many ups and downs to being an expat parent. Every day in a million ways we're aware that this lifestyle presents our children and us with incredible opportunities. We know this every time we see a place that, for most children, only exists in a storybook, or we eat a new and exotic food, or we make a new friend from a far off place. We know it...but it doesn't mean that this life is always easy.

All of the beauty and adventure can't hide the fact that living a globally mobile lifestyle can be hard. It *is* hard. All parents face worry, stress and doubt. That's normal. However, expat parents face those challenges on the back of stressors like separation from friends and family, moving, professional reinvention or job changes, financial unpredictability, language acquisition...

One of the biggest challenges we face then, is not simply being a good parent but being a parent who is able to mindfully navigate constant transition in a way that enables us to feel more stable, more present, more capable of supporting our children and, ideally, more able to model habits and behaviors that will serve them as they grow into adult third culture kids (ATCKs)

And we have to do all of this while we ourselves are scrambling to get our footing. We naturally find ourselves feeling short-tempered, irritable, lost and doubt-filled. We'd like to be the tree our children can lean on, but we're standing in an earthquake.

There are, however, some surprisingly simple habits that can enable us to parent in a way that is more nurturing to our own challenges and those of our children. We can think of these things as gentle stabilizers. The simple practices I discuss here have their foundation in the practice of mindfulness.

Like all expat parents, I struggle with finding ways to support my children no matter where we go. I'm by no means an expert in parenting – as an expat or otherwise. However, I have both experienced personally and witnessed professionally the power of mindfulness and the way in which it leads to deeper insight, expanded self awareness and improved interpersonal relationships. While it's applicable to all areas of one's life, I find it has been, for me, a steady voice of wisdom in my relationship with my children as we navigate life of constant transition.

Moreover, I find mindfulness practice to be a perfect fit for expats because at its heart mindfulness is about paying attention. Expats are really good at paying attention...or at least we have the potential to be. We have to notice things because everything around us is so frequently new. We slow down, we learn to read situations, we understand the nuance of cultural difference, and we recognize that our views and beliefs are simply one perspective. In other words, even if you're thinking about mindfulness as a dedicated practice for the first time, you already come to the table with many skills that can help you cultivate more mindfulness as an expat parent.

Each of the exercises presented here is designed to strengthen your own mental and emotional well-being and to provide insight into your own journey towards balance and clarity. These exercises won't tell you how to parent, but they will give you a starting point to accessing your best self. They will enable you to better connect with your own strengths and challenges and they lay the groundwork for improving your interactions with your children. They're like that oxygen mask on the plane. They're a starting point for taking care of yourself first, so that you can then better care for your children.



As you read through these habits, I encourage you to consider them flexible. Feel free to make adaptations and adjustments that meet your lifestyle and needs. Mindfulness is first and foremost about paying attention, but approaching them from a place of non-judgment is also important.

These exercises will work for each person differently. You might find that some come more naturally than others or that you begin to use one habit only to find that within a week you've completely forgotten your intention. On the other hand, you may read through this list and feel that it's old hat for you. Maybe you've been doing these things for years and they represent the backbone of your personal or parenting philosophy.

Wherever you fall on this scale, resist the urge to label yourself (or the activities) as good or bad. Be kind to yourself as you adopt these habits into your daily life. Approach them from a place of curiosity as you apply them to your parenting practices and remain open to the outcomes.

Four Basic Mindfulness Practices for Expat Parents

Make a habit of breathing.

Paying attention to the breath is a cornerstone of mindfulness practice. Our breathing sustains us, but we seldom really notice it.

You don't have to do anything fancy for this. In fact, one easy way to start is simply to make a habit of paying attention to your breath throughout the day. For example, at different points throughout the day, try closing your eyes and paying attention to your breath for 2-3 minutes. Don't try to alter your breath – just watch it go in and out. Pay attention to the way it feels on the tip of your nose or in the expanding and contracting of you lungs. As you become more practiced in paying attention to your breath, you can set aside more time during the day (15 minutes in the morning for example) to sit in silence paying attention to your breath.

Paying attention to your breath in this way has a natural calming effect for many people. For others, it heightens their awareness of their feelings, thoughts or physical sensations. It can also cause you to feel more clear-headed and therefore more prepared for the moment. Almost always it slows you down. It enables you to notice things you might typically take for granted, whether your own thoughts and emotions or factors in your environment. It also gets easier and more accessible with practice. In fact, despite the fact that it's not specifically purposed as a stress-reliever, for many it ends up being a go-to stress relief technique in busy airports, during moves and when you're helping children transition to new schools.

Be still.

To get up close and personal with ourselves, we must find a way to slow down. We often equate "doing nothing" with watching television or scanning the Internet, but truly being still is about becoming present with what's around us – and that requires dedicating time to fully paying attention. Like paying better attention to our breath, being still doesn't have to involve any complex movements or adjustments.

Make a commitment to find time each day to do nothing – truly nothing. No scrolling through your phone, making mental check lists, planning dinner, watching television. Find a quiet place where you can be alone – even in your car or the shower – and just be still. Make a mental note of the



sensations around you. Close your eyes. What sounds do you hear? What smells are in the air? Are you cold? Hot? Do you feel tense, worried, tired? If you find your thoughts wandering off, gently return to noticing the sights and sounds and feelings around you in the moment. As you do so, take a minute to name them. You might say in your head, “Birds chirping, traffic, stomach growling, sleepy.”

The observations we make while being still, enable us to home in on what’s happening around us. When we pay attention this way we are brought back to the present – sometimes a very, very challenging place to be as we navigate a life that often includes a great deal of uncertainty. By regularly tuning our senses to notice the world around us we develop the ability to see everyday situations a bit more clearly. We start to hear conversations more fully, to pick up on the things left unsaid and to become more skilled listeners. We notice things we may have missed before – a child that’s unusually quiet, the unsaid feelings behind an argument with a teenager or the exhaustion and hunger hidden under a temper tantrum.

Accept and express all emotions.

It doesn’t feel good to feel sad, angry, resentful, lost, anxious or envious. But, we’re human and these emotions are part of the deal. Cultivating the ability to recognize, express and respond to these emotions is one of the most rewarding things we can do for our mental health.

The first step in improving our acceptance of emotions builds upon the work we do when we notice our breath and when we take time to be still. Learning about our emotions and how they affect us takes recognizing the ways in which the emotions affect us physically. Does anger tighten your stomach? Does sadness make a knot in your throat? Do you hold back tears or let them out? Do you get headaches when you’re feeling overwhelmed?

As we develop a better understanding of the physical effects of our emotions, it is then important to practice expressing our emotions – to ourselves and to others.

You can begin by making simple statements in recognition and acceptance of what you’re feeling. You can reassure yourself by saying, “You’re angry. It’s okay. Take a deep breath,” or “You feel anxious. That’s normal during a move.” You can also practice expressing your emotions to others by simply saying things like, “I feel sad,” or “I’m really angry right now.”

In both of these exercises, we’re taking a step that is very frequently relegated to the back burner when life gets hectic. Probably somewhere deep down we know it’s okay to feel a whole range of emotions. What we don’t always know is how to clearly recognize and express those feeling when they come up. And what we don’t always do is actively practice telling others how we feel. It seems so simple and yet, if we were to think about it, many of us would realize we hold our emotions in a lot of the time – for survival, out of fear, out of shame.

The thing I love most about this exercise is the way in which it’s so applicable to working with our children. We can easily help our children to recognize that our emotions affect our bodies. When we’re worried we get butterflies. When we’re sad we cry. When we’re angry our faces turn red and we grind our teeth. Moreover, as we improve our own ability to express our emotions, we can take the opportunity to help our children do the same. We can say things like, “You’re crying. You miss your friends. I know you’re heart-broken,” or “I understand that you’re angry. You feel like things are not working out the way you wanted.”

By practicing noticing and expressing our emotions and by helping our children to name and express theirs, we place ourselves in a better position to respond to the various emotions that



come up during transition. We then set ourselves up to respond to difficult emotions in healthier, more self-aware ways.

Recognize things for what they are.

Our brains are amazing at building up stories as fact. We can take one simple event and turn it into something more daunting. I like to call this disaster thinking. As expat parents, we're really good at this. It's the jump we do from, "My child is acting out," to "The expat lifestyle has been a failure for my child. She'll never adjust or have friends. She'll hate me forever." However, if we can learn to take these moments and see them for what they are – just pieces of information – then we free ourselves to respond more appropriately, more thoughtfully and more compassionately.

When we're able to recognize what we see in front of us as our own story, with our own perception of history, we can find remarkable freedom from the made up stories (stories of tragedy, failure, etc.) that we tell ourselves.

Practically speaking, we can begin by practicing this with everyday situations. For example: Your children are playing at the table. You've told them to stop, but a glass of milk spills and begins to run all over the floor. Usually, we're inclined to respond by yelling or getting upset. However, you can develop a strategy of stopping yourself – just two seconds is all it takes – before responding. Then make a fact statement to yourself – "Sammy spilled the milk." This doesn't mean that you won't use consequences for the behavior or instruct your children to clean up the mess. What it does mean is that you provide yourself some space so that "Sammy spilled the milk," doesn't become, "Sammy spilled the milk. The kids never listen to me! I told them to sit down and eat! Enough! No TV today!"

As you take time to do this, you'll find it's applicable to many situations that you will encounter with your children – from spilled glasses of milk to all-out defiance. It becomes like putting on a life-vest or bicycle helmet. You may still be stepping into some pretty difficult territory, but now you've taken extra steps of pulling back, seeing things a tiny bit from afar, making the most accurate assessment possible and deciding to move forward a bit more prepared.

Making it Work for You

I often think about the person I was before I began practicing mindfulness. None of this came easy to me. In fact, when I first heard about mindfulness from a friend I was completely turned off. I couldn't imagine how being still or slowing down could ever, in a million years, make me a better partner, friend, parent or human. If you're feeling that way now, after having read the information above, please know you're not alone.

So what made me come around? Honestly, it was a combination of needing something (anything) to make me feel more grounded and centered about my life and just plain curiosity. I feel fortunate that curiosity won out against my usual stubbornness and that all of that happened three years before my husband's job took us overseas. I've used these skills – sometimes unsuccessfully, but mostly with great relief and gratitude – from day one of our worldwide adventure. I'm a work in progress, but mindfulness remains my life preserver, oxygen mask and bicycle helmet all rolled into one.



If you're at a loss for how to start, I recommend dipping your toe into the practices above. Observe and remain curious about what you learn and how practicing mindfulness affects your parenting. Take notes if you need to. Journal if that feels right. I'm partial to sticky note reminders around the house. Try things out and be flexible. There's really not a wrong way to go about beginning a mindfulness practice. Don't think too far ahead. Mindfulness is always about simply putting one foot in front of the other. Something tells me, no matter where you end up, you'll feel stronger and more you, when you get there.

About Me

I am mother, wife, friend, world traveler, clinical social worker, coach and writer. I am the author of *The Expat Activity Book: 20 Personal Development Exercises for Gaining Insight and Maximizing Your Potential Wherever You Are*. I'm originally from Austin, Texas and prior to moving abroad practiced as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. I have lived in Spain, Northern Ireland, Japan, the Dominican Republic and Madagascar. I am the owner of World Tree Coaching – Life Coaching for Expats and I work with expat clients all over the world via phone and Skype. I specialize in reminding expats how capable and amazing they really are and I support people in finding a sense of home no matter where they go.

You can learn more about my work at www.worldtreecoaching.com.
Read more about *The Expat Activity Book* here: <http://bit.ly/1AOJZMK>

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