



# FIRST, PUT ON YOUR OWN OXYGEN MASK

## Be a Better Parent by Caring for Yourself

by Sarah C. Wayland, PhD

**W**HEN WE BECOME PARENTS, our focus shifts from caring for ourselves to caring for our children. While expectant parents may not fully understand how profoundly their lives will change after children, most of them embrace their new role with enthusiasm. As their children grow and find their voices, they learn to be independent and valued members of the family and community. Their parents' sacrifices and hard work pays off.

But what of the parents whose children's developmental paths don't follow that happy trajectory? Whose kids don't "behave" and struggle to fit in? The sacrifices and hard work go unrecognized and unrewarded. And despite the fact that parents who are raising kids with neurodevelopmental differences face challenges that other parents never have to consider, society sends messages like "Your child's differences are your fault." Or "You can control your child. You just need to try harder." These thoughts don't make parents of kids with differences feel very good.

Fortunately there's help. You can change *how you think* about what is happening and *how you respond* using cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), an approach that improves how people feel about themselves and their lives.

## Change your feelings by changing your thoughts

Brené Brown talks about the importance of the story you tell about the events in your life. She reminds us that we can choose to tell a story of perseverance, hard work, and courage—or one of overwhelm, fatigue, and powerlessness.

In CBT you evaluate your thoughts to determine whether your interpretations are distorted. Here is a standard set of cognitive distortions, along with strategies to counter them, adapted from *The Feeling Good Handbook* by David Burns (Plume, 1999).

**1. ALL-OR-NONE THINKING:** You think in extremes—things are either perfect or a failure; there is no middle ground and no room for mistakes.

**WHAT TO DO?** *Think in shades of gray. Could the truth be somewhere in between?*

**2. OVERGENERALIZATION:** You reach a general conclusion based on a single incident or piece of evidence. You exaggerate the frequency of problems and use negative global labels like “always” or “never.”

**WHAT TO DO?** *Use time-limited words like “this time” or “today.”*

**3. MENTAL FILTERS:** You pay attention to information that confirms your beliefs, but ignore evidence that counters your interpretations. This might mean that you focus on the negative details while ignoring all the positive. You may even feel the positive “doesn’t count.”

**WHAT TO DO?** *(1) Identify the positive parts of your experience, no matter how small, and write them down. (2) Do a cost-benefit analysis of continuing to attend to only the negative and then of attending to the positive. Which approach has more benefits?*

**4. CATASTROPHIZING:** You expect disaster and inappropriately exaggerate the importance of things. You may feel like you cannot handle it if the worst thing does happen.

**WHAT TO DO?** *Collect data on how often the most horrible outcome actually happens.*

**5. MAGNIFYING:** You make a problem more important and worse than it really is by exaggerating its degree or intensity.

**WHAT TO DO?** *Use the “blow-up technique.” What is the worst possible outcome? Think about whether, if that horrible outcome happens, what will that mean for you. How bad will it be? Can you handle it?*

**6. SHOULD:** You have a lot of rules about how you and other people should act. You feel guilty when you violate the rules, and people who break the rules anger you. You use words like “should,” “must,” and “ought to.”

**WHAT TO DO?** *Treat yourself with compassion. Be less judgmental. Accept yourself and others as they are.*

**7. PERSONALIZATION OR BLAME:** You see yourself as the cause of a negative event or someone’s reaction when, in fact, it had nothing to do with you. Another distortion is when you blame other people while overlooking your own contributions to the situation.

**WHAT TO DO?** *List all the possible reasons why it happened. Be honest about your own role as well as other factors beyond your control.*

**8. MIND READING:** You think you know how other people are feeling, why they act the way they do, and what they are thinking about you.

**WHAT TO DO?** *Ask the other person what they are thinking. (Don’t assume you know.)*

**9. EMOTIONAL REASONING:** You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: “I feel like it will turn out badly, therefore it must be true.”

**WHAT TO DO?** *Think about how someone not involved in the situation would think about what will happen.*

**10. MISLABELING:** An extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself. “I am a bad parent.” When someone else’s behavior rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him or her.

**WHAT TO DO?** *Define the label. Then think of another label that is time-limited (“I’m not a bad parent—I made a mistake”). Practice self-compassion (“That was really hard”).*

When you find yourself feeling bad, determine whether your thoughts are distorted. If they are, try the strategies to see what works to change your thinking.



## Change your feelings by changing your behaviors

Here's a little secret: Your actions really can change how you feel. When your actions reflect the person you want to be, your feelings come along for the ride. Here are some simple ways to get started.

- **TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.** This is difficult, especially for parents with kids who need a lot of support, but it is critically important. If you don't take care of yourself, you won't be around to help your kids as they get older. Think about what brings you joy, and then plan for the time when you will do it. Sometimes all you can fit in is five minutes to enjoy a cup of coffee in the morning before everyone else gets up. If that's all you can do, then do it and savor it!
- **RELAX YOUR BODY.** Some people don't know what it feels like to be relaxed. Two strategies that can help you experience relaxation are *progressive muscle relaxation* and *mindfulness meditation*. If you know what it feels like to be relaxed, it will be easier to invoke that feeling when you need to stay calm.

- **STAY CALM,** even when you are surrounded by big emotions. You can use imagery (think about being a boulder in the swirling rapids of a river), or repeat calming phrases to yourself ("You can't argue with a thunderstorm.") Deep breathing can also help. If you start to feel out of control, it's okay to walk away from the situation. Better to leave than to hurt the people you love most.

These strategies for changing your thoughts and behaviors are the foundation of CBT, but it also addresses other challenges by teaching you how to stop procrastinating, conquer your fears, and communicate effectively. You can learn more by working with a therapist familiar with CBT, or by working through the exercises in *The Feeling Good Handbook*. 📖

---

**Sarah Wayland, PhD**, is a certified RDJ™ consultant and special needs care navigator in Riverdale Park, Maryland. She has served on numerous nonprofit boards, including the Parents' Place of Maryland, The Arc of Prince George's County, and the Special Education Citizens' Advisory Committee for Prince George's County. She founded her company, *Guiding Exceptional Parents*, to help caregivers navigate the process of supporting kids with neurological differences.