

# Unhealthy Stress? Break the Cycle!

## Episode 87



**Power of Moms**  
A Gathering Place for Deliberate Mothers

In this podcast, April Perry and Rachel Nielson discuss how to break the cycle of unhealthy stress and how to develop coping strategies.

A few years ago, Rachel went to counseling for an eating disorder and discovered that the stress-management techniques she was learning about in counseling were widely applicable to women in general, especially mothers. As mothers, we are bombarded with stresses, big and small, and need to learn concrete strategies to break the cycle of negative thought behavior.

When Rachel entered counseling, she thought she would need to only address the destructive behavior. She went through periods of under-eating and over-exercising, followed by periods of over-eating. Her counselor informed her that there is actually a **three-part cycle** to destructive behavior and in order change behavior, thoughts must be changed:

The cycle starts with a destructive thought... Which leads to a destructive emotion... Which then leads to destructive behavior... which then comes back around to more destructive thoughts.

For example: We think: "I am a bad mom. I am so impatient. I yelled at my son all day." Then we feel an (or several) emotion(s): I feel discouraged, and depressed, guilty. In order to off-set the emotion, we participate in a behavior that will temporarily comfort that emotion: overeating, surfing the internet, pouring a glass of alcohol, sleeping, etc. The behavior then leads to more negative thoughts, and the cycle starts over: "On top of being a bad mom, I am a glutton." Ad infinitum.

We must interrupt the cycle by changing our thoughts, emotions, and/or behaviors. Rachel briefly addresses some strategies to address all three.

### **Control your thoughts about yourself.**

Rachel's counselor introduced her to the concept "filtered thinking" which is seeing the world or yourself through a negative lens by taking one small, negative moment and believing it represents the whole. Rachel relates a time when she had spent a lot of time on the computer doing work and chalked up the day with a negative thought: she had a "bad mom day." A way to counter this "filtered thinking" is to focus on "big picture thinking." That negative thought is countered with a positive one: "No, not a *bad* mom day, a *distracted* mom day." What supports the opposite, positive "good mom" view? She had fed her son all his meals, hugged him, told

him she loved him, read books before naptime. All this evidence refutes the “filtered” negative thought.

Additional thought strategies:

[Thought Replacement Therapy](#): an article by Saren Loosli that discusses actively reversing our negative thought to a positive one

[It is what it is](#): an article by Rachel that discusses the concept of coping statements or brief, calming mantras to use in stressful situations and help refocus

Rachel discusses “narrative therapy.” She was told to separate herself from the disorder and create a character. Write the dialogue, how you met, etc. The exercise was eye-opening, when embodying the voice of the eating disorder in another “person,” Rachel realized that she was talking to herself in a way that she would never allow another person to talk to her.

### **Feel your emotions**

We don’t want to feel negative emotions (stress, grief, uncertainty, fear) because they are uncomfortable. Rachel used food (either overeating or starving) to numb and escape emotions that she didn’t want to feel. We need to learn to acknowledge, accept, and feel emotions. What am I feeling? Why am I feeling it? And what can I do about it? Don’t be afraid of negative emotions. This can be tricky—acknowledging and accepting negative emotions is not the same as wallowing in them (which can lead to the negative thoughts discussed earlier).

Strategies for feeling our emotions:

[Sit with it](#). Rachel struggled with infertility and realized that her negative emotions directly correlated with this. Instead of ignoring the negative emotion associated with the struggle, Rachel accepted the emotion. She says, “I can sob my heart out, write it in my journal, call a friend and confide—eventually it will dissipate like a wave.” (See Saren’s article: [Riding the Motherhood Waves of Pain and Joy](#).) Feel it, experience it, learn from it, and release it.

[Name it](#). This strategy is similar to what we teach our kids: notice, name, and express (in a healthy way) a negative emotion. For example, when we notice our child acting a particular way we give a name to the emotion, “I can tell you are disappointed/sad/angry.” Offer a solution: “what can we do to control this emotion?” We should do the same of ourselves. If we notice that we are feeling very frustrated and snapping at our husbands or children, stop, and ask, “What is really going on here? What am I really feeling?”

[Deflect it](#). Deflecting is different from avoiding the emotion altogether. When kickball is played on the playground and someone kicks it super hard right at you, so hard that you cannot catch it, you deflect it by kicking/bumping it up in the air to make it more manageable to catch. The same can be done with emotions. If an emotion is too hard to handle at that particular moment, find a distraction to work with until you are able to deal with the negative emotion. Create a list of ideas to deflect the negative emotion: take a bath, take a run, call a friend, etc. Deflecting is acknowledging the emotion with the intent of managing it when it’s not so hard.

Feeling emotions also applies to happiness! Remember the positive moments. Hit pause every once in a while. Be present, notice it, savor it, don't taint with overeating or overdrinking. Record and remember! Enjoy the positive emotion and feel it!

### **Institute behaviors that maximize joy and minimize stress**

When you're feeling fulfilled from the inside, you don't need to look to outside sources to fill you (e.g. food, TV, accolades and acceptance from other people). The opposite is also true: When feeling depleted inside, you will always be looking for outside sources to fill you.

Make a list of what fills you:

Investigate and get to know yourself—don't just assume your list matches another person. List your literal needs, such as eating, sleeping, exercising, as well as emotional needs, such as hobbies, mental stimulation, relationships. After you've made your list, brainstorm and schedule ways to meet those needs, for example if you enjoy reading, start or join a book club. (For more ideas, see April's podcast on [Our Deeper Yes.](#))

Make another list of what depletes you:

Make a list of stresses too! Look at it critically! You don't have to live with the things that deplete you. You can't eliminate all the necessary evils such as cleaning and bill paying, but you can look at ways to manage them better: is there a better time of day for cleaning? could you improve the environment, perhaps a candle or music or audio book? is there someone to keep you company? Brainstorm with loved ones how to minimize stresses. Look at your list and ask yourself: what can I do to minimize the stress of these things?

When you feel like you have too many demands, too much to do, find resources to help. Power of Moms is full of articles, podcasts, and programs to help minimize stress and maximize what we are capable of as mothers. April has put in over 2000+ hours in the Mind Organization for Moms ([M.O.M.](#)) program which helps mom's keep their physical environment and their minds organized. Also, see April's article [Mommy's Quiet Time 101](#) for some amazing ideas on instituting a mommy naptime during the *day*. (see the free ebook download for [Five Steps to Less Stress](#)).

### **Conclusion**

Be patient! Be an observer of your patterns. As the patterns develop, make changes, big and small, the small changes will add up to big changes. You will continue to experience ups and downs. Remember: Recovery is NOT linear!

If you wonder if you could benefit from counseling, please try it. If counseling isn't an option, there are so many other resources. It's okay to have weaknesses and to need help. You are human and will make mistakes, but you deserve to be a happier, healthier mom!

*Transcription by Rosie Liljenquist, with notes from Rachel Nielson*