

Not the Usual Resolutions

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Amber Rosenberg is a certified life coach who helps working mothers manage guilt and stress, while redefining success on their own terms. Her clients include such Bay Area employers as Adobe and Google, as well as the San Francisco Department of Unemployment, and hundreds of women (and men) around the country.

Rosenberg lives with her husband and two children in San Francisco, where she practices Ashtanga yoga – a practice she credits with both energizing and relaxing her. We spoke with her about New Year’s resolutions and other paths to change.

Q: How best to create new habits – in the ways we relate to our children, our partners, our co-workers?

A: When it comes to how you relate to family or co-workers, one of the most helpful new habits you can create is powerful, non-defensive communication.

Have you ever been in a conversation with a colleague, friend or family member about a sensitive topic and ended up in a power struggle, conflict or shutting down? Or perhaps in response to someone else’s criticism, you find yourself justifying your behavior, blaming the other person or avoiding him or her all together? It sounds like defensiveness is at play.

Instead, you can practice effective communication, using curious and questions to understand what the other person means, believes, or feels. “Are you angry (upset, frustrated, irritated) about something?”

Try to avoid questions that start with “why,” as they tend to put others on the defense. For example, “Why are you so upset?” makes an assumption (which may or may not be accurate) and will likely make the other person feel like they’ve done something wrong. Instead, try “I get the sense that you may be upset. Am I reading this accurately?”

Another way to approach a sensitive conversation is to make statements that start with “I feel.” If you’re simply stating what you genuinely feel and you use a neutral tone, the other person can’t say you’re wrong. Your feelings are your feelings and clearly stating them will help to stave off a power struggle from the get-go.

A third way to nip defensiveness in the bud is to use “and at the same time” instead of “but.” Often times when you use the word “but,” it negates everything you said before the “but.” For example, instead of “I understand you had to work late but I made dinner,” - try “I understand that you had to work late and at the same time I made dinner.” Notice how it changes the whole tone of the message? Again, it doesn’t blame the other person. Instead, it simply states the facts.

Next time you find yourself in a potentially defensive situation, try out these tools. They may help you avoid unnecessary conflict, gain respect and strengthen personal and professional relationships.

On average, it takes 21 days to create a new habit. So, in the beginning, some of these skills may feel uncomfortable or forced. But, the more you practice, the easier it becomes. And in less than a month, you’ll be an expert at powerful non-defensive communication.

Q: Fear of change holds a lot of people back as they age. How do you recommend grappling with it?

A: The first step in managing fear is building your awareness around it. Start by simply noticing when you feel fear. Over the next week, write down everything that comes to mind. If you get really curious about what happens when you feel fear, you’ll learn more about your relationship to fear and, as a result, be better able to manage fear. Ask yourself these questions:

- When did you start to feel fear?
- What happened right before you started to feel fear?
- How does fear show up in your body?
- How does fear serve you?
- What is the cost of feeling fear?

Greater awareness of negative/self-sabotaging thoughts (i.e., fear, doubt, worry and guilt) leads to better management of negative

thoughts. Once you're aware of when, why and how you feel negative thoughts, you'll be better able to manage them.

Q: In the last year or so, I've been hearing a lot of women (and men) say, "At least I have a job." It's almost a mantra. No matter how unhappy someone is in her career, she consoles herself with the thought that she's got a paycheck. And it's true, these are hard times. But it has a self-defeating sound. How can we change it so that we don't settle, so we can enjoy our lives, strive to reach our potential, and not go against our nature? Any quick words of wisdom on that score?

A: Instead of saying "at least I have a job," it may be helpful to take a more empowering perspective. Here's a simple five-step approach I've borrowed from cognitive behavioral therapy.

1. Notice the deeper emotion - what's truly going on and how it shows up in your body. With the "at least I have a job" perspective, it may be fear and it may show up as tightness in your chest or in your abdomen.
2. Discover the underlying thought behind that emotion and *write it down*. For example, it may be "everyone I know is getting laid off, so I must be next on the chopping block." Then, dig deeper until you get to the real heart of the emotion. Perhaps it's "I'm not worthy of a job that I enjoy."
3. Debate and explore whether this is really true.
4. Flip this negative thought into a more empowering thought. For example, "I'm fortunate to be employed since it allows me some time to explore what I really want to do next."
5. Expand this new perspective into a positive emotion, like hope, and notice where it shows up in your body. Write it on a sticky note and place it on your alarm clock so you see it first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

Q: One of the buzzwords I'm starting to hear is slow parenting. What does that mean to you and how can someone who isn't a stay-at-home mother draw from that?

A: I've never heard of "slow parenting" before but the words certainly resonate with me. And there are many ways to bring this into your family life and model it for your kids. My working parent clients often say that their weekends are busier than their weekdays. So, perhaps, you can try to schedule one weekend day every week just for family time; or

say “no” to birthday parties that require you to cross a bridge; or limit extracurricular activities to one per child per week.

As you think about how slowing down may serve you, ask yourself a few questions. What's the easiest thing you can do this week to slow down? What's the benefit? What's the cost? What are you learning about yourself? What will you do differently moving forward?

Sometimes a packed schedule can give you the feeling that you're accomplishing a lot, that you're really successful and in high-demand. While all this action and busyness may make you feel important and popular, it's still possible to feel successful and good about yourself without exhausting yourself.

You may find that learning how to slow down is a wonderful gift you can give yourself, your family, and your career. Or you may discover that you're at a point in your life where slowing down simply doesn't serve you. The important thing is to do some honest, careful thinking about what works best for you right now and to know that you always have a choice moving forward. You're worth it.

Q: Do you work a lot with women who are looking to re-enter the workforce after taking time off to be with their kids?

A: Yes, I work with a lot of women who are reentering the “traditional workforce” after being full-time moms for a short or extended period of time.

To get clear on what you really want, write down your vision for your life one year from now. While there's no right way to do this, I do recommend that you sit down to write your vision when you're as present as possible. (Try exercise, meditation, yoga, singing, dancing or prayer to help you get centered.)

Ask yourself the following questions: One year from now...how are you spending your days and weeks; what kind of people are you working with; what impact are you making on the world; what's exciting about that, etc.?

Make sure your vision aligns with your core values. When you're honoring your values, you're fully alive and engaged and you bring your best self. Examples of values include service, learning, and creativity.

Also make sure your vision leverages your strengths. Your strengths might be so inherent in who you are that you may not be aware of them (ask someone who knows you well to help you identify your strengths). Examples of strengths include consistency, authenticity and achievement.

Spend 20 minutes and write down a couple of paragraphs on everything that comes to mind. Once you have your vision, you can work on an action plan. There are a few different ways to approach this to set yourself up for success, but be sure to set achievable, realistic goals and break your larger goals into weekly actions steps. Find an accountability partner (a friend, family member or coach) to help keep you motivated, focused and on track.

Q: What is the value of yoga in your life? Do you recommend it to all your clients?

A: I'm slowly reintroducing yoga back into my life following a yoga/knee injury after the birth of my second child. While I approach my practice from a very different place these days, I still get the same benefit I always received with a more rigorous practice. Yoga energizes *and* relaxes me; allows me to be more present with family, friends and clients; and reminds me of what I'm most grateful for.

I'm a big believer in the value of self-care and recommend that you create – and build into your schedule - whatever self-care practice will best serve you. Examples include gratitude journaling, knitting, deep breathing, listening to quiet music, meditation, prayer, yoga or quiet walks in nature.

Whatever will allow you to really *slow down* your thinking brain (which houses the fear, doubt, worry and guilt) and allow you to be more present and engaged in the moment.

Behavior modification experts say the best way to create deep, meaning, lasting change in your life, is to commit to a daily renewal practice that allows you to be present. I've seen them proven correct time and time again with my clients.

If you're like many of my busy working parents, you may find it impossible to find the ten minutes twice/day of quiet reflective activity that's recommended by the experts. So, start with deep breathes for two

minutes in the morning and see how this benefits you. If you choose, you can work up from there.

Q: What other tips do you have for working parents?

A: Eight tips:

1. Build Your Support Network: Talk to your partner or folks in your support network about your work/life vision. You'll strengthen your relationships, save time and energy and build the support you'll need to make your vision a reality.

2: Communicate at Work: Not everyone has the luxury of working with colleagues who are familiar with the challenges of a working parent. Talk regularly with your supervisor and/or your staff about your schedule, priorities and options. Only you know what you need to balance your roles as parent and professional, so speak up.

3: No Parent is an Island - Delegate! One of the secrets to success as a working parent is learning how to delegate to other staff, your partner, your family, etc. If you're feeling overwhelmed, take a look at your to-do list and ask yourself some honest questions. What do you absolutely need to do right now? What can you postpone, delegate or say "no" to?

4: Learn How to Say "No": Saying "no" is a critical skill and muscle you can build. The inability to say "no" is one of the biggest obstacles to achieving balance. Once you have defined your priorities, you have a clear idea of how you want to spend your time. Think of it this way, saying "no" can actually mean you are saying "yes" to your priorities.

5: Learn How to Let Go: Take a good, hard honest look at what's your job vs. what's out of your control. Once you figure this out, you can spend more time and energy on what's truly your job.

6: Create a Childcare Safety Net: A key ingredient to feeling good about your choice to work is knowing that your children are getting the best care possible. Pay attention to your intuition and your child's individual needs when choosing childcare. And create plan B and C for the inevitable emergency needs.

7: Lower Your Expectations: If you want to maintain your sanity and sense of well-being, adopt the mantra "good is good enough". Let go of perfectionism, relax, and enjoy your life.

8: Get Comfortable with Constant Change: Once you can embrace rather than resist the constant change that parenthood brings, you will experience much less stress. Working parenthood calls for you to be agile and adaptable, work on stretching that muscle.

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For more information

You can sign up for Amber Rosenberg's Working Mothers' free quarterly e-zine at workingmotherscoach.com. Or check out her website: pacificlifecoach.com.