

Transforming Motherhood: Creating Your Personal Journey

Diane Sanford, Ph.D., is the President of Women's Healthcare Partnership in Creve Coeur. She is also the author of Postpartum Survival Guide; Midlife and Menopause: A Celebration of Women's Health. www.dradianesanford.com 314.991.5666

In recent years the idea of raising kids as a woman's life purpose has come back, and accordingly mothers today face an unbelievable amount of pressure and performance anxiety. Media loves the myth of a "Super Mom," and women are bombarded with impossible standards of what a modern-day woman should be – smart, successful, beautiful, thin... Unfortunately the majority of us have bought into this fantasy and are working too hard to achieve perfection at too many roles – being the best mother, wife, professional, friend, hostess, fitness guru ... and the list goes on and on. Perfection is held up as the standard of being a successful mom--rather than letting women know that such lofty goals are unrealistic and inhuman, and often lead to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and the feeling that we are forever falling short.

The results?

- * To meet these ridiculous standards for success, women are running ragged, exhausted and stressed, as we try to do it all on our own.
- * We are in competition with one another. We compare ourselves to other moms who we think accomplish these unattainable goals with more ease and ability than we do. We think that if we try harder we can be at the top of the "successful mom" list and sometimes this means outdoing as well as doing our best.
- * Women today more than ever view their children as extensions of themselves, reflecting to the world their competence, success and goodness not only as a mother but also as a human being, and they are taking on their children's successes and failures as their own. We think that unless our children are performing well in all aspects of their lives (school, sports, etc.), we have dropped the ball and are failing as mothers and human beings.
- * As they spend all of their time supporting their children's interests and desires – e.g. chauffeuring them to every activity, event, party, etc. – they are ignoring themselves and not pursuing activities they once found satisfying, rewarding, and fulfilling. They think that if they pour all their attention and energy into their children's activities and achievements, they will feel successful and whole. Instead, they end up feeling burned out, run down and emotionally depleted which is a recipe for disaster for them and their families.
- * Because women have poured themselves into mastering so many roles (i.e. being the director of their child's social, emotional and intellectual development), they have neglected what makes them happy and nourishes them. They don't make time for activities which used to bring them joy (reading, crafts, going to the gym, lunch with

friends) and by mid-life, even begin to forget what these things were. They feel that something is missing but can't imagine what it could be because their lives are so full and busy. Over time, they have lost themselves .

Breaking the cycle:

Although women may think and the media promotes that the way to feel successful is to learn to do more faster and better, this is not the solution. In truth, women need to find ways to slow themselves down enough so they can reflect on their lives and how they feel. To be able to consciously decide where they want to put their attention and energy by making sane choices about what is truly important for them and their children. Running around on fumes won't provide the emotional sustenance which they and their families need for their health and well-being.

As William Ross Wallace wrote in his poem *What Rules the World...* The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rocks the world. And it's true. Motherhood is the pre-eminent force for all of human kind's well-being. While this reality can be awesome and crushing, it is also infused with great hope and opportunity. **We** have the chance to rewrite the unattainable and unrealistic expectations which characterize contemporary motherhood and create a kinder, gentler reality for ourselves and our children.

Dr. Sanford's Advice for Mothers of All Ages:

1. Nourish yourself so you can nourish your children. A nursing mom can't feed her baby if she doesn't feed herself. It's the same for a mother, no matter what stage of life and parenting. Get your needs met -- separately from your children and husband or partner. Watch your feelings. Feelings of self-esteem, love and self-fulfillment likely mean you're on the right track. If you're feeling anger, depression or anxiety, something is amiss and you need to pay more attention to you.
2. Pay attention to your basic needs in addition to what nourishes you emotionally. Get adequate sleep, eat well and make healthy food choices, participate in regular physical activity and take breaks during your day to rest and catch your breath.
3. Take a few minutes each day or a couple times a week to reflect on how you feel about your life and yourself. Again, recurring feelings of anger, depression and anxiety, are signals that you may be feeling depleted and unhappy with how things are. If this seems to fit, think about what you can do to take a little better care of you. Often simple steps like taking a half-hour in the evening for a soothing bath or spending time on the phone with a good friend instead of doing another load of laundry, will be just the calming balm you need to feel better again.
4. Chart your own motherhood journey. Remember, there is no one right way to be a mother. Find and accept your true self. You may not be wired for motherhood to fulfill you 100% at the deepest levels, and that is okay. Having a husband and children should *not* come at the expense of fulfilling your own hopes and dreams. You too have a life

purpose. To be completely happy, healthy and fulfilled you will likely need to combine mothering with other creative endeavors. Not only is it good for you, it's good for your kids too. Carl Jung once said that the greatest unconscious force in the lives of children is the unfulfilled dreams of their parents.

5. Recognize your children for who they are. Love them. Support them. Encourage them. But don't get caught up in their achievements or failures. Relying on your children to feel better about yourself is an unstable source of self-esteem. And, it's not fair to them to have this heavy burden. As Kahlil Gibran wrote in *The Prophet*, "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself... You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. For life goes not backward nor carries with yesterday".

6. Live in abundance. Another mother's or child's success is not a failure for you or your child. There is plenty to go around. Embrace the spirit of support and cooperation rather than competition, and joyfully acknowledge the successes of others. It will come back to you ten-fold.

7. Remember that we are all connected and that who we are and how we raise our children affects not only us and our children, but everyone around us. Approach each day mindfully by being a person who sees the best in herself and others, and extends lovingkindness to all that cross her path and everything she touches. Chief Seattle, a native American leader and important teacher put these thoughts beautifully into words,

“ This we know. All things are connected
like the blood which unites one family.
All things are connected.
Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth.
Man did not weave the web of life.
He is merely a strand of it.
Whatever he does to the web. He does to himself.

[BOX] Thoughts become words, and words become actions.

To create a loving, healthy environment in your home, begin by paying attention to your thoughts. To what are you giving your attention? If you are thinking negative thoughts, then that is what will be reflected in your life experience. If you think kind and loving thoughts towards yourself, your partner, your children and all others whose lives you touch, you *will* succeed in creating the kind of home and world we all desire for ourselves and our children.

Recommended Reading:

The Power of Intention, by Wayne Dwyer

The Spontaneous Fulfillment of Desire, by Deepak Chopra

Mother Daughter Wisdom, by Christiane Northrup

The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom, by [Don Miguel Ruiz](#)