

...because even when it's good, *it's complicated!*

A STEPMOM'S GUIDE TO
.....
**ANXIETY &
DEPRESSION**

A COLLECTION OF *Best Of* ARTICLES FROM

StepMom
M a g a z i n e

A Stepmom's Guide to **ANXIETY & DEPRESSION**

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M a g a z i n e

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Stepmoms With Anxiety

Ways to
Recognize and
Manage Your
Symptoms

BY BRENDA SNYDER, LCSW

Are you someone who worried yourself sick before final exams? Have you ever felt like throwing up when you had to give a presentation at work? Do you ruminate and worry over things that will probably never happen?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, it is likely that some facets of stepparenting life evoke similar reactions in you. In short, if you had anxiety—diagnosed or undiagnosed, treated or untreated—before you were a stepmom, you probably experience flareups or an increase in anxiety symptoms when things in your stepfamily become stressful.

Some stepmoms have a pretty good handle on what to do about anxiety based on their previous experience with it. However, they may be so focused on this-or-that situation with their stepdarlings (or the ex-wife) that they fail to realize that whatever they did before may work now even though the triggers and circumstances are different.

Other stepmoms clearly exhibit signs of anxiety but have either never felt its effects to this extent before or have never received appropriate treatment for it.

Recognize Your Anxiety Type

The Anxiety and Depression Association of America estimates that 40 million adults are affected by anxiety disorders in the U.S. This is 18 percent of the population. We can deduct from other statistics, too, that a large percentage of these people with diagnosed anxiety may be involved in stepfamily situations.

There are several types of anxiety disorders. Symptoms vary depending on the type you are experiencing. Consider these four categories while observing or thinking about your own reactions to stepfamily stressors:

► **PANIC DISORDER.** Panic disorder causes discrete sudden and unexpected attacks that are characterized by a feeling of terror and accompanied by physical symptoms. These episodes induce a racing heartbeat, sweating, chest pain and changes in breathing that sometimes make it feel as if you are having a heart attack. People generally don't have panic attacks without knowing it.

► **SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER (OR SOCIAL PHOBIA).** Social anxiety disorder is experienced as overwhelming worry and self-consciousness about everyday social situations. Your worry is usually focused on a fear of being judged by others or of behaving in a way that would cause embarrassment.

I CALL IT “SPINNING” WHEN SOMEONE EXPERIENCES CIRCULAR THINKING—having thoughts that always lead back to a main fear—or “spinning out” when those thoughts spiral into worse and worse possible scenarios.

► **SPECIFIC PHOBIA.** A specific phobia is an intense fear of a specific object or situation. The level of fear you experience is usually out of sync with the level of threat and can cause you to avoid common everyday situations. A person who has a specific fear of snakes, for example, might quit taking her dog on walks for fear of seeing one.

► **GAD: GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER.** Generalized anxiety disorder causes excessive and unrealistic worrying even though there is little or nothing present to provoke the anxiety.

Georgette contacted me because she couldn't stop ruminating about her stepson's impolite attitude toward her. We spent a few sessions discussing the specifics of the situation. His father coddled him, he wasn't made to complete household chores and he often spent unscheduled time at their house with no prior inquiries made as to household plans. So, we came up with a new game plan.

Georgette and her husband had several productive conversations about the dynamics in their stepfamily. Around our fourth session, Georgette was distracted by a situation at work. We talked about it a little bit and she described a similar reaction to *that* situation, using some of the same terminology to describe

her work-induced symptoms as she had when we originally talked about her stepson's behavior.

“It's mostly when I'm in bed at night,” she explained. “My mind starts going and I can't shut it off. I think about every possible scenario, every possible conversation and every possible outcome. I just can't stop and go to sleep.”

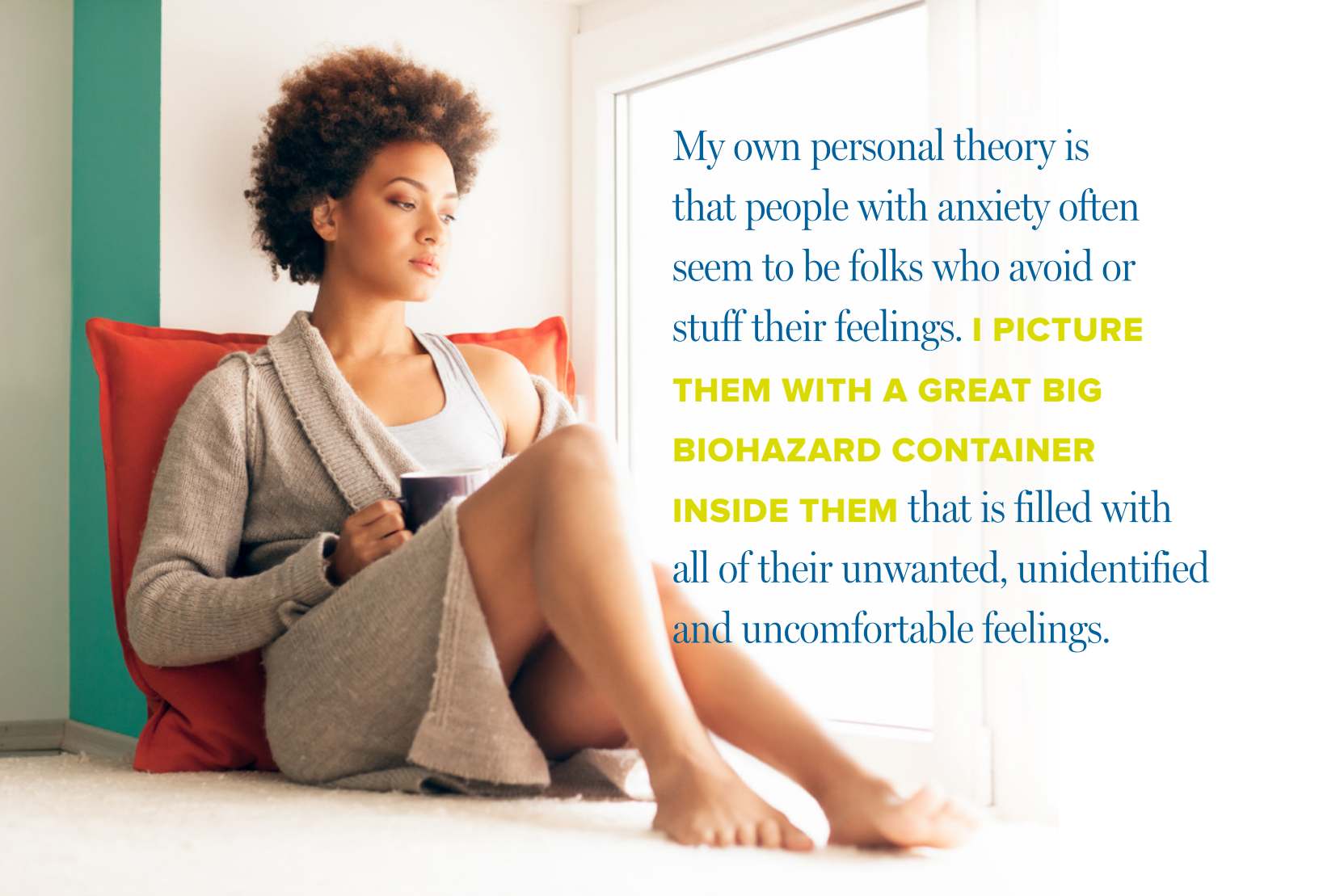
While the situation with Georgette's stepson needed to be addressed, her underlying anxiety disorder was the crux of her sleeplessness. Once we identified anxiety as a problem, we were able to come at it from more than one direction. Georgette's stepfamily situation improved because of her new game plan.

Her quality of life also improved because of the anxiety-specific tools she began to employ in all facets of her life.

Know the Symptoms

The main symptom of anxiety is excessive and unproductive worrying.

I call it “spinning” when someone experiences circular thinking—having thoughts that always lead back to a main fear—or “spinning out” when those thoughts spiral into worse and worse possible scenarios. Worriers tend to have a certain pattern to the way their thoughts “spin” and they easily recognize it. They just don't know what to do about it!



My own personal theory is that people with anxiety often seem to be folks who avoid or stuff their feelings. **I PICTURE THEM WITH A GREAT BIG BIOHAZARD CONTAINER INSIDE THEM** that is filled with all of their unwanted, unidentified and uncomfortable feelings.

Anxiety can also induce a range of physical symptoms:

- ▶ Restlessness or fatigue
- ▶ Diarrhea or stomach churning
- ▶ Irritability or being easily startled
- ▶ Muscle tension, headaches or migraines
- ▶ Sweating, flushing or a quickened heartrate
- ▶ Difficulty concentrating, falling asleep or staying asleep
- ▶ Trembling or numbness ("pins and needles") of arms, hands or legs

Keep in mind that we are mostly talking about Generalized Anxiety Disorder here. Post-Traumatic Stress

Disorder and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder also fall under the umbrella of anxiety disorders, but the symptoms for those can differ.

Understand the Causes

Some people are just wired to be a bit high strung. If you are blood related to someone with an anxiety disorder, you are at higher risk for developing one yourself. If, for example, your personality is just like Aunt Helen's and she tends to be a bit, *hmmm*, intense, that might also be the case with you.

My own personal theory is that people with anxiety often seem to be folks who avoid or stuff their feelings. I picture them with a great big biohazard container inside them that is filled with all of their unwanted, unidentified and uncomfortable feel-

ings. Their anxiety is the toxic fume that wafts off when their container is too full.

Several factors that can tip someone from her normally well-managed stress level into experiencing some of the symptoms described earlier are easily recognizable for stepmoms:

1. Legal strain
2. Traumatic events
3. Stress at work or school
4. Stressful family dynamics
5. Stress related to finances or money-related issues
6. Stress brought on by a natural disaster (a house fire, hurricane, etc.)
7. Stress in personal relationships, marriage or friendships

No wonder stepmoms sometimes experience high levels of anxiety!

Andrea, a young stepmother with whom I recently worked, described her situation to me. She worked with her stepchildren's mother in their smalltown bank. At this same bank, she and her husband were turned down for a loan. This prompted issues around child support, which the ex had no problem divulging to the stepchildren.

Andrea's situation hit on at least five of the factors mentioned earlier (Nos. 1, 3, 4, 5 and 7) after just three sentences! We could also make a pretty good case that this particular ex was a "natural disaster" (No. 6) who produced a wake of "traumatic events" (No. 2)—for an unfortunate 7-out-of-7.

Her situation was extreme, but almost every stepmom experiences stress around some of the topics listed here. If that stepmom is already predisposed to anxiety, symptoms definitely ensue.

Overcome Your Fears

"Great," some of my clients say. "I thought if I got a new game plan for my stepfamily, I would feel better. Now you tell me I have anxiety!"

The point of identifying anxiety is not to add to the negative way you already perceive yourself. The point is to identify additional tools you can apply in all facets of your life. If you address your stepfamily dynamics in a positive way, your stress level will decrease—but *everybody* experiences stress.

That is why it is important to have an array of antidotes you can turn to when anxiety hits:

► **THERAPY.** A competent therapist can teach you skills specific to your situation and help you understand the roots of your anxiety. Selecting a therapist who is well-versed in the dynamics of stepfamilies is extremely



EVERYBODY NEEDS TO RECHARGE.

Think about what that means for you and schedule it into your regular routine. Reading, seeing a friend, sitting outside or hanging out with your dog are all examples of things you do for yourself.

important, especially if your anxiety seems to have flared up in response to specific family situations.

► **YOUR DOCTOR.** The best results often occur through a combination of medication and talk therapy. Just a "pinch" of this-or-that anti-anxiety medication can take the edge off, giving you the increased emotional stability you need to tackle the source of your problems.

► **EXERCISE.** I know you have heard this a million times, and I hate to be

annoying, but exercise really works. I once had a patient in a day-treatment program who suffered from such severe anxiety that she could barely function. As part of her treatment, she began walking on a track near her home. Two weeks later, she was a new woman. And, while I'm confident in my professional capabilities, I'm not that good a therapist.

► **ALONE TIME.** Everybody needs to recharge. Think about what that means for you and schedule it into your regular routine. Reading, seeing



a friend, sitting outside or hanging out with your dog are all examples of things you do for yourself. You don't necessarily have to be alone. You just have to be sure you're operating in your own self-interest.

► **REFRAMING.** We all have times when we allow ourselves to “spin,” or play out a worst-case scenario even when we know that our fear is unreasonable or irrational. The first step is to identify the thought that is feeding your anxiety. Then label it as “helpful” or “unhelpful.” Spinning thoughts are often *unhelpful*. Reframing or correcting the thought will lessen your anxiety. Sometimes, a therapist can help with this.

► **CAFFEINE AVOIDANCE.** Yep, really. Those three Diet Pepsis or “treating” yourself to a high-octane

Starbucks coffee drink could be part of the problem.

► **ACCEPTANCE.** Huh? It might sound counterintuitive, but realizing that your propensity for spinning, accelerated heart rate or muscle tension are *due* to anxiety may help you get through them. Don't resign yourself to misery, but do realize what's going on. “Ohhh, this is anxiety,” tell yourself. “OK, I've been through this before. I can manage it. It will go away.”

If you are among that subgroup of women who are affected by anxiety and are also stepmothers, educating yourself about your challenges can really help. In some cases, a combination of medication and

therapy can make life much more comfortable for you.

People in all situations learn to live with anxiety. You can do this. After all, you are a stepmom. You have already proven you're Superwoman! What's one more hurdle to overcome? ■

STEPMOMS AND ANXIETY

What to Do About How You Feel

BY RACHELLE KATZ, EDD, LMFT



During Jen's counseling session with me, the 32-year-old stepmother exclaimed in frustration, "I hate the feeling of dread I get a few days before and during the time my stepchildren stay with us. I just don't know what to do to relieve this tension and stress!" Jen is in a big boat. So many stepmothers experience anxiety with regard to their stepfamilies.

And, while it's normal to experience occasionally, anxiety experienced too frequently can interfere with our daily lives—harming our health, relationships and work. I reminded Jen that anxiety is an emotional signal which alerts us that we're entering an area of perceived danger; one that's triggered when we don't feel in control of our lives.

As a psychotherapist and coach, I've worked with stepmothers for many years and appreciate that each one has her own set of unique challenges. Some deal with difficult ex-wives who don't respect their boundaries, while others have stepchildren who refuse to form relationships with them. Still others have husbands who won't establish any House Rules for their children to follow, so chaos reigns at home. These stepmoms wish they had more control.

There is another, underlying cause of anxiety of which many stepmothers are unaware. Despite the large number of stepmothers with whom I've worked, they all share a well-defined cluster of personality traits: They are incredibly responsible, hard-working and accomplished. Since they are the newest family members, they believe it is their responsibility to "blend" their families. They undertake this task with gusto, whereas a lot of other women would simply walk away.

Yet, after trying their best to create new stepfamily traditions and to form relationships with their stepchildren, many stepmothers hit a brick wall. As their efforts to "blend" increasingly fail, they realize that their expectations and beliefs do not match their realities. The resulting cognitive dissonance can create anxiety and depression for them.

For this article, we'll focus solely on anxiety. (I focus on depression in other articles written for *StepMom Magazine*.) However, before we begin, refer to "How We Experience Anxiety" on the next page. This will give

you some idea of how many symptoms you're currently dealing with, if any.

Responses to Anxiety

Anxiety is an uncomfortable emotion to experience and not all of our responses to it are healthy. We'll cover four maladaptive coping mechanisms here. Consciously or unconsciously, some stepmothers try to alleviate anxiety by changing the way they react to their partners. I asked Jen if she could relate to any of the following behaviors.

CLINGY

When some stepmothers feel anxious, they look to their partners for reassurance. They become overly needy and demanding. As a result, their partners may lose patience with them. This often serves to strain their interactions further.

CONTROLLING

When other stepmothers feel threatened by situations involving their stepfamilies, they try to control their environments by setting long lists

of stringent House Rules: What can be done, what can't be done, who needs to be where and when. Their partners (and their stepchildren) quickly begin to resent their rigidity.

COLD

Some stepmothers become so afraid that their partners will reject them due to ongoing stepfamily problems that they become aloof and withhold affection to preemptively protect themselves *before* their partners can reject them. This icy chill then creates emotional distance between the two partners.

CRITICAL

Some stepmothers act out their anxiety by criticizing partners who then respond defensively. A hostile back-and-forth communication pattern develops which strains their relationships further.

Remedies for Anxiety

Rather than diffuse anxiety, each of the reactions above exacerbates a stepmother's insecurities and fears about

**Anxiety is an
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to it are healthy.**

her relationship being in jeopardy. Yet, at any time, you can reduce your anxiety so that it doesn't harm your relationships any further. Follow the suggestions I gave Jen, which will also help improve the relationship you have with yourself:

- ▶ **Stop working so hard.**
- ▶ **Don't focus on "blending."**
- ▶ **Take good care of yourself.**
- ▶ **Get individual therapy.**
- ▶ **Regain your mojo.**

In my book, "The Happy Stepcouple," I share a variety of ways to maintain a stable, strong relationship with your partner. For now, let's focus solely on recognizing and communicating your needs.

STOP WORKING SO HARD.

As much as stepmothers strive to integrate their family members into a loving unit, they don't have the power to achieve this goal. Bringing a family together depends upon a lot of other factors. Not everyone in the family cares about accomplishing this. Without their cooperation, it won't take place. If this is true for you, as it was for Jen, stop working so hard. Simply accept your stepfamily for what it is.

DON'T FOCUS ON "BLENDING."

"Blending" has become the benchmark of stepfamily success. Those who have attained this status sometimes boast about it, while those of us whose stepfamilies mingle like oil and water can feel like failures. Striving to achieve an impossible goal is wearisome and an unnecessary waste of valuable time. Your stepfamily doesn't have to blend in order for you to have a loving relationship with your partner. By reframing your expectations and by redefining your role in the family, you can reduce a lot of the anxiety you personally feel.

TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOURSELF.

Similar to Jen, many stepmothers make too many sacrifices in service to their families. By focusing their efforts and attention on everyone else, they give up on going to the gym, seeing friends, pursuing hobbies and making time for themselves. End that cycle! Go for a long walk. Listen to fun music. Read a favorite book. Meditate. These activities are healthy ways to reduce your anxiety levels. Additionally, seek support from family and friends.

How We Experience Anxiety

Anxiety affects each of us in different ways. Some symptoms are easy to recognize while others are so subtle they go undetected. Rachelle asked her client Jen, 32, to identify any she was experiencing. Now it's your turn. Which of these symptoms are you experiencing—if any?

- ☐ **Feeling nervous, restless or tense**
- ☐ **Sense of danger, panic or doom**
- ☐ **Increased heart rate**
- ☐ **Chest tightness**
- ☐ **Feeling weak or tired**
- ☐ **Stomachache/nausea**
- ☐ **Headaches**
- ☐ **Sweating**
- ☐ **Trembling**
- ☐ **Shortness of breath**
- ☐ **Panic attacks**
- ☐ **Dizziness or nausea**
- ☐ **Muscle tension**
- ☐ **Trouble sleeping**
- ☐ **Trouble eating**
- ☐ **Excessive worrying**
- ☐ **Irritability**
- ☐ **Problems concentrating**
- ☐ **Ruminating over and over**
- ☐ **Repetitive thought patterns**
- ☐ **Difficulty dealing with worry**
- ☐ **Urge to avoid anxiety triggers**
- ☐ **Feeling as if you're "going crazy"**

When we choose to undertake activities which build pride instead of shame and guilt, life is much more enjoyable and our resilience is reinforced.

Sometimes we just need to know that others are on our side before we can believe in ourselves and make positive changes.

GET INDIVIDUAL THERAPY.

While family and friends can be terrific sources of support, you may be reluctant to “tell all” to even your most intimate friends. Meeting with a professional often provides the extra ingredient necessary to overcome anxiety. Cognitive Behavior Therapy, or CBT, techniques can help you examine which core beliefs contributed to your anxiety. This will then assist you in making the necessary behavioral changes to feel better long term.

REGAIN YOUR MOJO.

When we feel anxious, we lose our self-confidence. This was true for Jen. To rebuild yours, take positive actions. Two founders of the Positive Psychology movement, Martin E. P. Seligman, PhD, and Christopher Peterson, PhD, believed that you are more likely to flourish if you use or “flex” positive characteristics which allow you to perform at your personal best.

Their research found that people who used one of their strengths in a new way each day for a week straight were happier and less depressed six months later than those subjects who hadn’t done the exercise. When we choose to undertake activities which build pride instead

of shame and guilt, life is much more enjoyable and our resilience is reinforced. So, ask yourself:

- ▶ What activities do I enjoy?
- ▶ Which ones come naturally?
- ▶ When do I feel truly authentic?
- ▶ What do I often pay attention to?
- ▶ What do I *not* need a reminder to do?

Figure out what you derive satisfaction from and do more of it. If you’re still unsure, ask close family members and friends who know you well for their opinions about your positive characteristics and primary interests. They often have excellent insights about who we are! Then, commit to doing one activity you love every day.

This alone is a sure way to gain greater self-confidence and to counteract the negative effects caused by worrying. Jen’s anxiety was reduced by incorporating each of the above suggestions into her daily routine. I hope they help you, as well. ■



Stepmoms and Grief

The Real Reasons Stepfamily Life Makes Us Sad

BY BRENDA SNYDER, LCSW

“I’m sorry about your father’s death, but you knew when you chose to keep him in your life that he was going to die some day.”

Huh?!

Feeling awkward and at a loss for words would never excuse this horrific, invalidating statement.

However, “I’m sorry you’re having a rough time, but you knew when you married him that he had children and an ex-wife” is something that few stepmothers haven’t heard.

Do stepmothers have a right to make the comparison between the loss of a loved one and their own losses? The answer is yes.

Stepfamilies are born out of a loss. Children suffer this loss, as their original family structure is fractured beyond

repair and they are forced to spend less time with one or both parents. Their grief can directly impact their ability to bond with a stepmother and sometimes impairs it completely.

But what of the grief of a stepmother?

Often not validated, a stepmother also comes to her family with explicit and implicit losses.

► **The fantasy wedding.** Stepmothers almost always compromise on their original dream of a full bridal spotlight, regardless of what form that fantasy took. (It's tough to be cast as Cinderella when a wicked witch cape is being handed to you!) No bride imagines riding into the sunset on a white horse with all her partner's little ponies trailing behind. Visitation schedules, kids' desires, ex-wives' influence and the sometimes rocky terrain of in-law relationships often factor into planning and executing the day that unites a stepmother to her new family.

► **The white picket fence.** Being the loving women they are, stepmothers have (spoken or unspoken) thoughts about how their families will form and the roles they will have in them. Perhaps she couldn't wait to share her own mother's great Thanksgiving Day rolls for dinner, only to find out that her new family only serves loaves of pumpernickel. Maybe she assumed that her domestic efforts to coordinate schedules, plan meals or decorate the house would be met with appreciation or acceptance, only to find her efforts met with resentment. Even women who get along fine with their fiancées' kids often find that after the wedding their stepchildren behave like alien life forms whose sudden distrust, apathy and/or hostility does little to meet the happy expectations they had when they said "I do."

► **The list of firsts.** A stepmother intellectually understands that she is not her husband's first, but the reality of it can hit hard. Loving her partner with a perfect love makes it hard to know that she wasn't there in the beginning, even if she is his priority now. Instead of starting a life together, a stepmother joins a life already in progress. Even if she has a history, too, longing for the uniqueness of starting a life

with this love is painful. A child together, even if it's her first, is not his first. Their first Christmas together comes with the history of his family's traditions. The uncomplicated coupledness that unencumbered partners experience in their family's beginning is something that stepmothers simply do not experience.

► **A change in identity.** Stepmothers are so often met with distrust and assumptions of the mythical evil that they can sometimes question their own knowledge of themselves. A stepmother I know had planned a career working with adolescents but shifted her focus to adults

Stepmothers are so often met with distrust and assumptions of the mythical evil that they can sometimes question their own knowledge of themselves.

when she failed to win over her husband's teenagers despite an exhausting emotional effort. Another stepmother who presented herself as a client for coaching assured me over and over, "People like me. I am a nice person." She had become so downtrodden by the dislike her stepchildren showed her that she began to internalize all of their negativity.

When people suffer traditional losses, they sometimes turn to Elisabeth Kubler Ross's Five Stages of Grief model to better recognize and understand their feelings. In order to take this metaphor into the stepmother realm with us, it is important to appropriately adapt the grief model so that it is relevant to her specific experience.

DENIAL

When someone dies or moves away, it is easy to name the loss. Grieving the abstractions and concepts listed above, however, makes this grief stage a bit more complicated for stepmothers.

Acknowledging that the happily ever after is anything *but* can be extremely frightening. Many stepmothers don't have the knowledge, support or skills to reframe their original concept of stepfamily, so they cling to it in desperation. A stepmother can easily get stuck in a blame game where she blames herself, the kids, the ex, the in-laws or the husband (or all of the above) for impeding what she imagined family life would be.

The denial in a stepmother's grief cycle is a refusal to accept that stepfamily success will likely depend on changing her vision of a functioning stepfamily and a happy marriage. Sometimes this is because she doesn't know that another concept can develop and believes that losing the original one means losing her marriage. Letting go of her ideal is often so scary that it is easier to deny that the loss of it as it originally existed is inevitable.

ANGER

Stepmothers get angry. In fact, many stepmothers I have worked with scare themselves with the depth of their rage. As she starts to understand that her family is not going to look or feel like she thought or hoped, and as her extraordinary efforts to change that inevitability are repeatedly thwarted, a stepmother gets mad. Anger comes from pain and a sense of injustice. What could possibly be more painful than the rejection a stepmother endures in her own home? What is more unjust than being held responsible for a child's pain over their own parents' divorce? Or having no control over powerful influences on your family? Getting stuck in the hurt feelings or on the unfairness of it all are real risks for a stepmother and her marriage.

GUILT

Stepmoms don't have wicked witch capes; they have superwoman ones. They expect a great deal from themselves. So when their stepfamily relationships don't pan out as they hoped, they blame themselves. Stepmothers spend a lot of time should-ing on themselves (say it out loud for a good laugh). Should, by its very definition, implies judgment. When applied to the ideal you brought into your marriage, it results in minimizing the effort you have made and raising

The denial in a stepmother's grief cycle is a refusal to accept that stepfamily success will likely depend on changing her vision of a functioning stepfamily and a happy marriage.

expectations, often beyond what it is reasonable. Guilt results from the erroneous assumption that a stepmother can actually change the stepkids, the ex, the in-laws and the family dynamics—if only she tries harder. It comes from failing to realize that, since stepmothers get very little appreciation or reinforcement, even a heroic Superwoman needs to go out with her girlfriends once in a while.

ACCEPTANCE AND REFRAMING

Successfully traversing the stages of loss related to becoming a stepmother means that she has let go of the unrealistic expectations she had and has accepted that her family will develop much more slowly than she had anticipated. It means that she has accepted that she does not love her stepkids like they're her own but that she can care for them in unique ways which are appropriate to her step relationships. Her family ideal is remade into a more feasible vision of a strong marriage as a subset of a larger stepfamily unit.

Acceptance also means that the stepmother has allowed herself to grieve the real losses she has experienced in order to have her role in the stepfamily. Validating herself and finding trusted others (family members, her husband, a therapist) is vital to successfully navigating the grief process.

The Grieving Process Takes Time

It is really important to note that while this stepfamily grief model is useful, it is in no way a road map with a straight line drawn from wedding day to happiness. The stages are not linear, which means it's not likely you will complete one stage and never visit it again.

Understanding the grief process does not make a stepmother's loss any less painful, but it is always helpful to know that what you're feeling is normal and that you have a reason to feel the way you do.

On the contrary, various life phases require working through the same issues again and again.

A stepmother I'll call Karen thought she had done pretty well avoiding some of the common pitfalls. She had realistic expectations going in, she left communication with the ex to her husband and she didn't rush relationships or traditions. Marrying later in life, Karen had elected to have a simple wedding even though it was her first. She thought it was more appropriate to her stage in life and less complicated for her husband's children. So, she was completely dumbfounded when she found herself feeling alternatively sad and resentful as she participated in her oldest stepdaughter's pre-wedding traditions. She became so upset at a wedding shower that she actually made excuses and left rather than break down or draw attention to herself. It only took a few therapy sessions for Karen to realize that she had failed to mourn her loss of a traditional wedding. Naming this as a loss and learning about the grief process made it possible for Karen to acknowledge feelings she had initially labeled as silly and an overreaction.

Karen's situation illustrates just one way that traversing family life can easily bring issues to the surface. Even when a stepmother recognizes and works through certain losses, others can come up. It is also possible the same one can repeatedly rear its ugly head.

Joanie was a childless stepmother and had dealt with infertility issues at great emotional expense. She wasn't overly surprised, then, when the birth of her first stepgranddaughter brought feelings that required some attention.

What did surprise her, however, was how angry she was with her stepdaughter. Their normally positive relationship was under some strain as she realized that her loss was not resulting in the re-experiencing of sadness, the feeling she expected, but was instead manifesting itself in anger at the injustice of her stepdaughter experiencing what she could not.

A final example is my friend Elizabeth, who was taken aback when her husband's ex-wife showed up at the father-in-law's funeral. Having enjoyed a good relationship with her husband's family for years, it brought back Elizabeth's pain of not being the first, as well as the pain of seeing her husband's family accept the ex's condolences with hugs and affection.

Understanding the grief process does not make a stepmother's loss any less painful, but it is always helpful to know that what you're feeling is normal and that you have a reason to feel the way you do. Stepmothers are notorious for putting everyone else's needs ahead of their own. The real lesson is to explore and validate what you're experiencing so you can address it and move on to a less stressful and more functional stepfamily life. ■



Stepmoms and Depression

Understanding the Sources, the Symptoms and the Solutions

BY SUSAN DAVIS SWANSON, PHD, LCSW

We've all seen the commercials that tell us that depression hurts. When it's a major depression, it absolutely does. But most people will have milder depressive symptoms and are unaware that this is what they're struggling with. They just know things aren't right.

The Causes

Let's face it, life as a stepmom is not easy. The disillusionment starts early in a relationship and the struggles can really feel burdensome and overwhelming. There is the reality that this marriage is

not what you expected and that stepfamily life is more challenging than you could have ever imagined. There is a natural isolation many stepmoms experience because they personally don't know any other stepmoms—which is why the community *StepMom Magazine* provides is so very important.

As if all of that weren't enough, there is the struggle with the insider-outsider dynamic that is a major part of stepfamily life. You've met your guy—and while you were falling in love, you felt close, protected, loved and connected; it was perfect. But now you experience that horrible feeling of being outside of the bond between him and his kids, you

feel outside when he has to have continual contact with his ex (the only relationship ever where the ex is a daily part of your life) and you wonder where you'll fit in. Add to that the times when you don't want to fit in and want to run away. Now add to that the fact that he simply cannot walk in your shoes, which means he simply cannot understand how tough it is for you and how to help you. This is often the hardest part. It is also natural that neither of you can truly understand what the other one is going through, which keeps you feeling more alone and isolated from one another.

Is this enough to get depressed about? You bet! Now, if you have a history of depression, this stepfamily dynamic can often exacerbate it. But even if you've never had depression before, dynamics of stepfamily life are enough to create disillusionment. And, as the marriage hits its expected struggles, it may trigger a depression that slowly creeps up on you.

The Symptoms

Mild depressive symptoms take hold gradually. If you look back over the past two weeks or longer, you might notice many of these symptoms:

- ▶ **Low self-esteem**
- ▶ **Low energy or fatigue**
- ▶ **Loss of your sense of humor**
- ▶ **Feelings of hopelessness**
- ▶ **Feeling more irritable or anxious**
- ▶ **Poor concentration or difficulty making decisions**
- ▶ **A loss of interest in things you usually enjoy: work, sports, etc.**
- ▶ **A desire to isolate: talking less with friends, making fewer plans**
- ▶ **Eating either more or less than normal (or eating more comfort foods)**
- ▶ **Difficult sleeping or sleeping too much/hard to get up in the morning**

When depression has a stronger hold, suicidal ideation occurs. Mild ideation starts with the thought that you don't want to wake up tomorrow, but if it goes further (to the thought of an actual plan) you are in a very real depressive episode. If you've gotten that far, please find a therapist immediately!

Look, we all go through things in our lives which naturally make us depressed. Life brings stress. Divorce, death, moving and loss of a job or business are just some of the things that people normally become depressed over. But when it is

Now add to that the fact that he simply cannot walk in your shoes, which means **HE SIMPLY CANNOT UNDERSTAND** how tough it is for you and how to help you. This is often the hardest part.

lasting, when you hear yourself talk and it's only negative, then the depression is skewing your view of the world and everything feels that much harder. It can feel as though there isn't any light at the end of the tunnel.

Helpful Things You Can Do

- ▶ **Exercise more.** This usually has to be forced when you're depressed.
- ▶ **Go out with friends you can really talk to.**
- ▶ **Make alone time with your significant other that doesn't include talking about his kids or the ex.**
- ▶ **Reduce sugar intake by reducing alcohol, sweets and simple carbs.**
- ▶ **Eat more vegetables, nuts, beans, legumes and fish.**
- ▶ **See a therapist.** Talk therapy is one of the most highly effective treatments for depression.

While these things may be helpful, if the depression has taken hold of you, it may be time to try an antidepressant. Your therapist can help you with that decision. Why consider antidepressants? Depression actually changes the chemistry of our brains. Neurotransmitters, which are the chemical messengers in the brain that facilitate communication between the nerve cells, stop functioning normally. In this complex process, either too much serotonin may be released, not enough serotonin may be produced or molecules that facilitate the production of serotonin may be in short supply. When this happens to the brain, a medication can restore the imbalance to previous functioning, which reduces the symptoms of depression.

Relying only on antidepressants without talk therapy is not as productive because unless you can begin to understand the underlying causes

of the depression, you cannot overcome it long term. However, antidepressants are very useful in helping overcome the depression faster when in talk therapy so you can feel relief sooner.

I always tell clients to never make major life decisions when depressed because it will always tell you to run, leave, hide or make a major change. In my 18 years of experience as a therapist, I've seen that actions taken while depressed are often not the actions people choose once their depression lifts and they can see clearly again.

Fallacies About Antidepressants:

► **WILL I BECOME ADDICTED?** Antidepressant medications are non-addictive.

► **AM I STUCK TAKING THEM FOR LIFE?** Often, taking medication for six months to a year, along with talk therapy, will be sufficient.

► **WON'T I GAIN WEIGHT?** Not all antidepressants cause weight gain, and it's different for everyone. But here's the Catch-22. You don't feel like getting out and exercising. Antidepressant you will return to normal functioning in approximately four to six weeks. Feeling that you are eager to exercise again and actually doing it will offset any weight gain.

► **WHAT ABOUT MY LIBIDO?** Antidepressant options are available which do not significantly affect your sex drive.

Depression is not something to feel weak about. It's not something you can simply will yourself out of. When brain chemistry changes, it's no different than when a joint loses its flexibility or a systemic infection requires an antibiotic. The great news is that we live in a time when we understand what we can do to facilitate the brain's recovery as quickly as possible and we have the medication to do it.

Marrying a man with a first family and adjusting to the realities of stepfamily life are a big enough life event to cause major stress, anxiety and depression. Please don't hesitate to get yourself some help. I am always so glad when stepmoms come to me rather than try to struggle on their own. You deserve more than a life spent battling symptoms of depression.

To find a qualified therapist in your area, start by asking trusted friends, family members or your doctor. Or visit PsychologyToday.com and use their search engine to find an appropriate therapist in your area. ■



The 'Highly Sensitive' Stepmom

Could Sensory-Processing Sensitivity Be the Culprit?

BY SHELLY WARE, LMFT



Have you ever been told, “You’re too sensitive!” or, “You need to develop thicker skin.” If so, there’s a possibility you’re a Highly Sensitive Person. Whether you’re now wondering what in the world that is or are already familiar with the concept, Researcher and Author Elaine N. Aron, PhD, states that the HSP trait is exhibited by 15 to 20 percent of all people worldwide and that the scientific term for this phenomenon is *Sensory-Processing Sensitivity*.

Aron finds that people with SPS are easily overwhelmed by lighting, odors, textures and noises. In addition, they can get rattled if they have a lot to do in a short amount of time and make a point of avoiding violent movies and TV shows. On busy days, they feel a need to withdraw to their beds, darkened rooms or other places where they can find privacy and relief. They also make it a high priority to arrange their lives so as to avoid overwhelming situations.

Highly Sensitive Stepmoms

Aron’s website, HSPerson.com, is filled with information, self-tests and advice for identifying and living with SPS—or with someone who exhibits related traits, such as a spouse or a stepchild. And, while you can’t diagnose yourself as a highly sensitive stepmom by reading this article, you can figure out if you’re prone to SPS by asking yourself these and other questions:

- ▶ Are you quick to pick up on delicate scents?
- ▶ Are you quick to detect a range of flavors?
- ▶ Are you quick to respond to works of art?
- ▶ Are you quick to hear subtle sounds?
- ▶ Is your inner life rich and complex?

Also, when you were a child, did your parents or teachers frequently describe you as sensitive or shy? HSPs are exceptional listeners who have a great deal of empathy, are highly intuitive and notice subtleties much more readily than those who are not highly sensitive. These are amazing qualities and they are to be celebrated. Each of them makes the HSP a great partner and friend.

On the flipside, being this sensitive *and* being a stepmom might make you feel as if you’re drowning in stress, tension and anxiety. While many stepmoms admit to feeling annoyed and irritated by certain aspects of stepfamily life, the highly sensitive stepmom’s stress is processed in ways which can cause her to experience physical discomfort (i.e., headaches, stomach upset) in connection with stressful events: arguments with her partner, difficulties caused by the ex, the defiant or

disrespectful behavior of her stepchildren, etc.

If you notice yourself experiencing physical symptoms during or after similar incidents, ask whether you may be taking on too much in your role as a stepmom. Ask, too, whether you’re comparing yourself to the ex a little too often. Determine how deeply you hurt when the kids don’t behave warmly toward you or fail to keep in touch when they’re not with you. Are you quick to feel rejected by them—or, for that matter, by anyone else?

If you answered, “Yes,” to any of these scenarios, you may be prone to high sensitivity. Your reactions and feelings are natural, by the way; their presence simply means that you experience life in high definition. So, as part of a stepcouple and/or as a stepparent, you need to allow extra time to develop the skills necessary to properly care for yourself.

You, Others & Your Environment

HSPs experience a range of sensitivities related to: themselves, other people and their environments. As a stepmom with HSP traits, you may beat yourself up about “not doing (x or y) right” or have a really hard time letting go of negative emotions. Too, highly sensitive stepmoms frequently feel raw from the complications of their stepfamily experiences.

While they’re in good company among the rest of us, every experience they have is magnified. This can be beautiful when it involves happiness, but it can be draining and overwhelming otherwise. Generally speaking, HSPs are also highly intuitive to the needs and feelings of others. They tend to pick up on subtleties because they process information at a deeper level. (Remember: They’re living in HD.)

So, if you’re the kind of person who notices even the slightest shift in your stepchild’s mood or your partner’s tone of voice, there may be a scientific reason for why you notice these nuances and others don’t. When it comes to personality types, a majority of HSPs are introverted—though Aron has found that 30 percent are either extroverts or outgoing and talkative. So, even if you consider yourself to be outgoing, this doesn’t mean you may not be highly sensitive as well.

By now, you may be wondering: “Why should I care about high sensitivity and why should it matter to me, as a stepmom?” Plain and simple, what rolls off the backs of others may linger with someone who is highly sensitive. Here’s something else to consider: What if your partner is highly sensitive? If so, they may get overwhelmed and shut down at the idea of setting limits with their children. This leaves you to step up more often than what you believe is reasonable. For that matter, wouldn’t it help

... imagine music being played at a volume level of 4, 5 or 6 out of 10. To the HSP, that same volume level may be experienced as 8, 9 or 10.

to know if one of your stepchildren is highly sensitive?

Being a stepmom can be confusing enough with ever-changing expectations and that role's tendency to play with our self-image; add to that the possibility of being an HSP, or simply an introvert, and it gets more confusing. To further illustrate what it's like to be highly sensitive, imagine music being played at a volume level of 4, 5 or 6 out of 10. To the HSP, that same volume level may be experienced as 8, 9 or 10. That's enough to irritate anyone who's in a headspace that requires peace and quiet, in your stepfamily home or elsewhere.

If you have HSP traits, noises and sights which others can easily ignore might just grate your nerves. Yet, as women in intimate relationships and within families, the expectation is that we “should” be the cook, the maid and the nurturer to others—as well as the peacemaker and sometimes the mediator between our partners and their exes. Not to mention we're expected to manage the emotional labor involved in juggling our family relationships.

What's an HSP Stepmom to Do?

If you felt overwhelmed reading that last paragraph, you're not alone. Those are a lot of expectations for any woman (highly sensitive or not) to measure up to. The same expectations are placed on women within stepfamilies and women outside of stepfamilies. And, while taking on the challenge of becoming a stepmom as a combined HSP/introvert can literally make you want to run away from home, there is hope for highly sensitive stepmoms of all types. The following tips and tricks will help you recover more quickly:

- ▶ **Practice self-acceptance.**
- ▶ **Set healthy boundaries.**
- ▶ **Learn to be assertive.**
- ▶ **Prioritize self-care.**

When you're feeling overwhelmed by the chaos of stepfamily life, run through those bullet points again and remind yourself that there are concrete steps you can take. Then, take them. I've outlined each one, in greater detail, below.

PRACTICE SELF-ACCEPTANCE.

Chances are you've known for a while—way before your current relationship—that you were different. So, if you're an HSP, I challenge you to embrace who you are. You don't have to see the world as others do. You are who you are. The sooner you acknowledge and celebrate your gifts of high sensitivity (i.e., better listening skills, greater attention to detail, higher levels of intuition), the more quickly you can begin to talk to your partner and your stepchildren about your individual needs and personality traits without feeling like a “double outsider” any longer.

SET HEALTHY BOUNDARIES.

Healthy boundaries let the good things in and keep the unhealthy things out. The clearer you become about what you are and aren't willing to accept within your relationships and stepfamily, the more firmly you can stand in your needs and express to others what you can and cannot participate in. Note: Boundaries are *not* meant to make people do what you want them to. They're meant to clarify your inner knowing about what feels right for you and to act as expressions of your intentions and

All stepmoms need to utilize good self-care. But if you're a stepmom who's also a highly sensitive introvert, make sure to ramp up your self-care routine ...

expectations to others. In the end, this ensures that you give up your time and effort only for things which are meaningful to you.

LEARN TO BE ASSERTIVE.

Assertiveness is a gift. Once you've accepted yourself for who you are, it's important to realize that you must assert your needs and learn to say, "No," to others (i.e., your partner, your stepchildren, the ex) for your own wellness. Even if your partner isn't ready to be assertive with their ex or children, you can stand up for yourself. Particularly if you're already feeling overwhelmed and stressed, it's healthy to say: "No," "Let's wait," or "I'll think about it." Remind yourself that most people will be unaware of how high sensitivity impacts your daily life, so make a point to teach others what you need from them in order to feel whole and well.

PRIORITIZE SELF-CARE.

All stepmoms need to utilize good self-care. But if you're a stepmom who's also a highly sensitive introvert, make sure to ramp up your self-care routine when you first begin to feel stress headaches or other symptoms coming on. If you need a nap, give yourself permission to take one. If you need help around the house, delegate and ask for assistance. If you need some alone time, take it with the knowledge that you are recharging so that you can be the best version of yourself—and not out of selfishness.

One, final thing you can do to benefit yourself and others is to become better educated in this topic. Learn more about HSPs, introverts and high-sensitivity traits in the books "The Highly Sensitive Person: How to Thrive When the World Overwhelms You," by Elaine N. Aron, PhD, and "Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking," by Susan Cain. Both point you in the right direction, emphasize the positives and suggest areas where additional support may truly help the combined HSP/introvert function more successfully.

Go to HSPerson.com for online self-tests you can take to determine whether you or someone in your family is an HSP. And, if high-sensitivity traits apply, be sure to use the other tools available on the website to help your entire stepfamily cope with stress in a less prickly manner. ■

Visitation Anxiety

Why It's Normal to Dread Your Stepchild's Arrival

BY RACHELLE KATZ, EDD, LMFT

Q: I am a stepmother to a 9-year-old stepson who spends every other week with us. Overall, he's a good kid but a day or so before his visits I get extreme anxiety. My heart races. I get stomachaches and headaches. I find myself thinking about the visit itself and begin dreading the fact that he's going to be with us for an entire week.

I've been a stepmom for four years now. I don't know why I haven't adjusted to this schedule. I do know I hate change and can't stand that my life drastically changes every other week. It's also funny to note that once my stepson is in our home I begin to feel better. Is there anything I can do to overcome my anxiety issue?

- Laurel

A: Thanks for your question, Laurel. First off, it's important for you to know you're not alone. Many of us dislike any change to our routines. We organize our daily lives according to personal preferences and it is this structure which gives us a sense of control over our lives.

When stepchildren stay with us, we must adjust to different schedules and activities, as well as share our time and space with them. This disrupts our familiar routines in a major way; it robs us of our sense of control and of feeling safe and secure. It's no wonder you don't like change.

The anxiety you are describing is called "anticipatory anxiety." While it's completely normal to dislike the change that occurs when your stepson visits, you can reduce your anxiety in several ways. Please try all of the following suggestions and discover which works best for you. It could be that some combination—or, perhaps, doing all of them—is best suited to your situation.



SHORT CIRCUIT ANXIETY BY BREATHING.

It is possible to override anxiety through breathing exercises. Changes in the natural rhythm of our breathing is generally the first physiological sign of anxiety. That then triggers all of the other symptoms into action. By learning how to regulate your breathing, you can reduce your headaches, stomachaches and other anxious symptoms. When you start to feel anxious:

- ▶ Take a few moments alone.
- ▶ Focus solely on your breath.
- ▶ Breathe in thru your nostrils.
- ▶ As you do, silently count to 7.
- ▶ Slowly exhale thru your mouth.
- ▶ As you do that, silently count to 11.
- ▶ Repeat these steps for one minute or so.

By breathing out longer than breathing in, we are able to calm our bodies. If this 7/11 count isn't

Just like staying in shape requires you to exercise with regularity, reducing the amount of anxiety you experience before your stepson's visits requires that you put these exercises into practice.

comfortable for you, adjust the numbers. As long as your "out" breath is longer than your "in" breath, you'll still benefit from doing this.

RESIST MAKING PREDICTIONS.

Thinking something doesn't make it true. Similarly, anticipatory anxiety is not a true predictor of what an actual event will turn out to be. Generally, the dread we feel before an event is far worse than the feelings we have during the event itself. Knowing this is helpful.

When you begin imagining a worst-case scenario related to your stepson's upcoming stay, tell yourself: "This is just a thought. This is just a thought." This helps to remove the power from your thoughts and reminds you they aren't necessarily true. And, typically, anticipatory anxiety is a negative projection of an unknown outcome.

You can convert this projection into a positive one by imagining a best-case scenario. Also, think back to previous times your stepson spent time with you. What worked? What didn't? Looking for lessons from the past can bolster your confidence in your ability to handle future visits.

CHANGE YOUR ATTENTIONAL FOCUS.

If you start to have a headache or a stomachache, redirect your attention by focusing on something else. Read an online article, do a chore, listen to music or sing a song! Play with your pet, if you have one. Distraction helps reduce anxiety.

Some people find it helpful to look at what's immediately in front of them and to then name those items: Yellow flower, wooden desk, ... comfy leather chair. You get the idea. It is such a simple technique, yet it really works.

FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL.

Avoid emphasizing what you can't control. We all tend to dwell on things which are out of our control,

though this only raises our anxiety. It is far healthier and more satisfying to dwell on what we can control. So, create two lists. In one, outline what you *can* control during your stepson's visits. In the other, outline what you *can't* control during those visits.

TAKE ACTIONS.

From the list of activities you *can* control, focus on what you can do to make your stepson's visit a better experience for you. Do you need some privacy during the time he's with you? If so, when he's with you, be sure to take a walk or read a book for an hour. Spending a small amount of time alone can be very soothing.

What else can you do? Maybe you enjoy spending the day with friends, going to the gym or pursuing a hobby. Make time for those things. If you know you are going to have fun during your stepson's stay with you, you won't experience as much anticipatory anxiety ahead of time.

Just like staying in shape requires you to exercise with regularity, reducing the amount of anxiety you experience before your stepson's visits requires that you put these exercises into practice. Consistently do your 7/11 breathing exercises. Monitor and modify your thoughts regularly. Proactively take care of yourself.

If you make these steps a part of your routine, I am confident your anticipatory anxiety will be reduced significantly.

Best of luck to you,
Rachelle ■



CBT Techniques for Stepmoms

How to Stop Thinking About Things (and People!) You Can't Control

BY MARY T. KELLY, MA

Melissa has been with her partner for two years now. He has two kids, 10 and 11. Melissa doesn't have children herself and hasn't yet decided if she wants any. She reached out to me looking to acquire some coping skills. It seems she spends a lot of time thinking about her partner's ex and his kids. Well, mainly his ex, if she's being completely honest.

"Mary," she asked, "would you please give me some tools to help me *not* be so preoccupied with my partner's ex? I can't seem to help myself. I think about her a lot, judge her and even compare myself to her. I see her reflected in my stepkids' faces and demeanors, which makes the whole thing worse. My brain hurts and I don't even recognize myself anymore. I want to learn to control these thoughts!"

Melissa,

Believe it or not, when it comes to overthinking The Ex, you've already done half the hard work of finding solutions to your problem. How's that possible? Well, you're self-aware. You've recognized that inordinate amounts of time spent thinking about your partner's ex, or other worries, is harming you. It may seem obvious but the first step toward any kind of legitimate change is recognizing and becoming aware of the patterns you're activating and participating in.

So, congratulations! You've finally gotten to a place where you're sick and tired of wasting time thinking about people or things you have no control over. You've gone down that rabbit hole 1,000 times or more. You've talked about her to your friends and to your partner. You've thought about her while in the car, at yoga class, lathering your hair and in any other space you find yourself consciously breathing. You've even dreamt about her. Ouch! Now my brain hurts.

Your obsessive thinking has backed you into a claustrophobic corner and you're ready to find a way out. This woman may be a perfectly fine person otherwise. Or she may be a Psycho Bitch, which could make the rumination worse due to the very real damage then incurred by your stepkids, your partner and yourself. However your partner's ex presents herself in your life, I'm 100 percent certain you can learn to drastically minimize the time you spend thinking about her and, again, other junk that seems to be littering your stepmom mindscape.

One day you'll simply realize that you hadn't spent a single second thinking about any of it. Yes, this can happen for you! Roll up your sleeves. We're about to dig into the task of finding out how you'll reach that goal. For you and women like you, I've outlined three proven

CBT, or cognitive behavioral therapy, techniques which will help you STOP obsessing over the ex and all manner of other stepfamily insults.

First Things First

Let's tackle this one step at a time, as in first things first: Don't get down on yourself. Despite your worries, you're a typical human being. Neuroscience tells us that women tend to process their relationships more than men do. Females also have a higher propensity to cogitate—a fancy word for "think deeply" or "reflect"—to excess about the things which are bothering them.

The trick is to become aware of what might make you more vulnerable to falling into that mind trap: fatigue, fluctuating hormones, hunger, etc. Then, learn to apply the upcoming CBT techniques. These are highly effective strategies which, when practiced regularly, will literally rewire the neurotransmitters in your brain and shift you away from negative thought patterns.

In order to practice them for maximum effect, become an objective observer of your thoughts. Remember: Thoughts are *not* facts. They're just stories you may have come to believe represent your current reality. You've thought them for so long that it's now hard to distinguish fact from fiction. But you can become highly aware of any thoughts you may have about his ex or his kids, going forward, so that it's easier to separate them from who you are as a person.

Ready? Let the healing begin!

1. Stop.

In your mind, put up a red STOP sign. This means STOP thinking about her. Period. No excuses, no meandering in dark, morbid fascination with her during which you judge her, create theories about her, talk about her or attempt to psychoanalyze her. Find something else to think about—and distract yourself. Same goes for any other ruminating thoughts related to stepfamily life. Positive distractions are great allies in getting our minds back on a good and productive path.

You're the expert on what'll work best for you. Choose only those distractions which support and are nurturing to you. When pesky thoughts intrude and you consistently call on the Red Stop Sign, you set yourself up to one day automatically be aware of them and to stop thinking them altogether. Consider this a minute. When you're driving a car and come to a stop sign, you STOP. You don't start rationalizing: "Well, maybe I don't *need* to stop," or, "I don't *feel* like stopping, so I won't."

Without a second thought (pun intended), you know

there are consequences to those choices and that they won't be rewarding ones. The same is true when we allow obsessive thoughts to run amok without putting restrictions on them. Past experience will tell you that the consequences of ruminating can be anything from anger and frustration to feeling powerless, dirty or just plain pathetic. You deserve better than that. So, simply STOP it in its tracks.

2. Jump in.

Another technique you can try runs completely opposite to the first one I shared with you. Go with this a minute: Allow yourself a certain amount of time to immerse yourself in obsessing about your predicament whether it involves the ex, your stepkids or something else entirely. And, yes, this is an actual CBT strategy. When you choose this technique, however, you must adhere to a few strict guidelines.

Pick a time, say 11:00 a.m., and then set your timer for 30 min. During that 30 min., do nothing but focus your thoughts on what ails you. Allow yourself to entertain any thoughts or feelings which come up for you: the good, the bad and the ugly. No judgment. No chastising yourself. Give yourself free reign to go steroidal with your thoughts about the ex or anything else. When the timer sounds its merry little beep-beep? It's Game Over. Time to move on!

Schedule rumination time into every single day, making an agreement with yourself that this 30 min. is the *only* time in which you will allow yourself to obsess. In the beginning, it's likely that ex-laden or other crappy thoughts will pop back into your head 5 min. after your indulgence session has ended. This is a great time to apply the STOP sign technique and distract yourself with other things. You've spent your allotted time obsessing, so it'll just have to wait 'til tomorrow.

Besides, you've got better things to do! What most people find, after practicing this 30-min.-straight strategy awhile, is that they feel so much better when they're not thinking crappy thoughts at all. Pretty soon, you'll feel so much better about the rest of your day that you'll find yourself wanting to skip those sessions altogether. Skip them as often as you want, I say. That urge to skip 'em is a sign that you're on the path to freedom.

3. Sing a song.

Bothered by intrusive thoughts? Try singing your thoughts out loud. Like, crank up your favorite ass-kicking song and make up your own lyrics as you go along. Yes, I'm serious! For the best results, you should probably be alone while you're doing this. The idea is to sing out loud every nasty, troublesome, irksome or other thought you have about stepfamily life and the people in it.

This can be a great way to vent. And, more often than not, you'll wind up laughing over the fact that you feel and sound just a little bit twisted or absurd. Singing those frustrations out loud makes them smaller somehow, insignificant. This helps you realize what a ridiculous waste of your precious time it is to spend so much time obsessing over stuff you can't do anything about.

This technique will also help you STOP taking yourself or your life so seriously. Really, please, lighten up—even if just a little bit. Your situation is challenging, for sure, but it's also surmountable. Singing through it may even help you find the humor that's sure to be lurking between the painful memories. Laughter is great medicine, so use it to your advantage.

MELISSA, YOU'RE HUMAN and it truly is challenging to have an ex or disrespectful stepkids stomping all over your home turf. Daily reminders via text, phone, drop-off, school functions and more don't help. But these techniques do! Keep at it until you stumble upon the newfound spaciousness in your head. If you're consistent, this can take a few days to a few weeks.

Cultivating these practices and increasing your awareness puts you on a pathway to liberation from the chains of obsessive thoughts. Empowerment is sure to follow. This will feel light years better than the drudgery of digging through dark musings. Love yourself enough to have the discipline to regularly work at changing your thought patterns, even if your first attempts seem a little feeble.

As needed, find another woman who's in a similar situation and ask her to hold you accountable. Hell, hold each other accountable. Confide in your partner, too, since I'm sure he'll be delighted to help you move past intrusive thoughts about, if nothing else, his ex—a trick he mastered long ago. ■

Stepmoms and Holiday Depression

How to Recognize It and What to Do About It

BY BRENDA SNYDER, LCSW



My sister and I have decided that we're coming back, in our next lives, as husbands. Seriously, because—in a husband's world—holidays just *happen*. My own husband loves Christmas. He looks forward to Christmas cookies, presents under the tree, receiving cards from friends and family members, reading the annual letter “we” send out, our annual pre-Christmas party, our Christmas Eve gathering, Christmas Day brunch for all 15 of us (including our kids, their spouses and our grandkids) and watching everyone open their gifts.

He loves every bit of it. His contribution?

My husband decks out the house in a light display on par with that of Clark Griswold (played by Chevy Chase) in “National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation.” And he does a great job! His other responsibility, honed over 20 years of training, is to regularly tell me what a great job I've done. He's also sure to mention how much he appreciates the hours I spend baking, organizing, decorating, shopping and wrapping.

Why Holidays Are Tough

The feats above hint at a few reasons many of us feel stressed and overwhelmed during the holiday season. For some women, however, the experience is even more serious—with rampant emotions spilling over into the realms of depression and anxiety. Why are the holidays so tough on some of us? There are several reasons:

- ▶ Ridiculously high standards
- ▶ Unrealistic expectations
- ▶ Unhealthy stressors
- ▶ Too little self-care

In my experience, these are four major contributors. Let's unwrap each of them one at a time.

RIDICULOUSLY HIGH STANDARDS

Stepmoms may try to best, or one-up, the “perfect” experience of holidays past, either for their husbands, their stepchildren or both. Competition with the stepkids' mom regarding gifts or family gatherings often comes into play here. The end result is usually a stepmom who feels badly about herself, especially if her tendency toward comparison widens.

She may compare her own family celebrations to those she hears about, sees pictures of on Instagram or

watches unfold in Hallmark-style movies. Perfectionists, in particular, tend to go into overdrive during the holidays. They may stay up all hours, hoping to make their actual presentations match unrealistic standards set in their own minds or by some Pinterest board.

UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Stepmoms, especially ones who're new to the stepfamily scene, often picture some idyllic form of family unity in the faux twilight created by Christmas tree lights. It's hard to stomach the idea that your stepteen, who rolls her eyes and stomps off on most nights, might bristle at the thought of eating your carefully-prepared holiday dinner or opening one expensive, beautifully-wrapped gift after another. Yet, it's been known to happen. When the day doesn't go as they'd imagined, these stepmoms are left feeling unappreciated and can spiral into self-blame.

UNHEALTHY STRESSORS

Stretching your family budget, doing too much with too little (i.e., time, money, cooperation) and trying to please everyone except yourself—all of these contribute to and have the ability to magnify the stress you feel during the holiday season. Any added responsibilities you worry about, such as the kids being with you during their school holiday break and the perception that you simply “have to” do more than usual (or you've failed to make the holidays great) can lead to an unhealthy shift in your priorities and self-concept.

TOO LITTLE SELF-CARE

Many of us eat and drink too much during the holiday season. All those extra “treats” then lead to poorer physical health—not to mention extra pounds we may regret and wind up fretting over later. Time for workouts, relaxation or couple's time often gets sidelined, as well, as stepmoms prioritize the needs of others. Yet, I can't overstate the necessity of caring for yourself.

There are women (even stepmoms) who figure out ways to get through the holidays unscathed and breathe a sigh of relief when things return to normal sometime around mid-January. Well, it takes *me* until mid-January just to get everything put away, though I do know people who bounce back from the holidays more quickly or allow themselves extra recovery time.

That said, others experience serious side effects or symptoms that (while triggered by the holidays) warrant special notice and, at times, medical attention: depression and/or anxiety.

... someone who *is* depressed can't fathom that things will ever seem better. They feel as if they're in an abyss of despair with no way out.

What to Look Out for

What does depression look like? And how do you know if you're experiencing anxiety, as a result? Some specific symptoms of depression go beyond the ordinary experience of a stressful holiday season. Things to look out for include:

- ▶ Hopelessness
- ▶ Loss of interest
- ▶ A desire for isolation
- ▶ Fatigue/problems sleeping
- ▶ Changes in appetite
- ▶ Anxiety
- ▶ SAD

Suicidal thoughts may accompany mild to major depression. Get help *immediately* if you begin to think people would be better off if you were "gone," start looking for ways to harm yourself or begin making plans to commit suicide. Go to the nearest ER. Contact your physician. Visit CrisisCallCenter.org or call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline: (800) 273-8255.

HOPELESSNESS

Does it seem as if things will never get better? A person who is *not* suffering from depression can see a point, in the future, when their situation will improve: once those gifts are purchased, the house is clean or the calendar strikes February. By contrast, someone who is depressed can't fathom that things will ever seem better. They feel as if they're in an abyss of despair with no way out.

LOSS OF INTEREST

People who suffer from depression don't enjoy the very things which give them pleasure when they're not depressed. They may lose interest in or the motivation to go to work. They can't enjoy the small things which usually bring them joy. They lose interest in sex or

hobbies they usually find pleasurable. Maybe you can't wait to enjoy your Grandma Neidemeyer's Christmas shortbread most years, but this year even *that* doesn't bring you out of your funk.

A DESIRE FOR ISOLATION

Depression often leads to the thought that socializing is too much bother, causing some people to then withdraw from their usual activities. This can lead to a cycle in which people lose the personal support and human interaction we all require to stay emotionally healthy. Isolation then exacerbates a depressed mood rather than offering the intended relief we thought we'd feel.

FATIGUE/PROBLEMS SLEEPING

Having difficulty getting to sleep or staying asleep all night are common symptoms of depression. Because of this, people with depression often feel tired during the day or may take naps even though that's unusual for them. Insomnia, rumination, restless nights and other sleep disturbances make it difficult for them to feel properly rested.

CHANGES IN APPETITE

Maybe you've lost your appetite or have little interest in eating. Conversely, you may have difficulty feeling full. No matter how much you eat, you don't feel satiated. Both are viewed, in combination with other symptoms, as potential signs of depression.

ANXIETY

While anxiety isn't a symptom of depression, it does complicate matters. Anxiety is that nameless fear or untriggered dread we experienced emotionally and/or physiologically which often accompanies depression.

SAD

Some people find themselves feeling blue on a cyclical basis, a phenomenon known as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). This documented change in mood,

**Chances are good you're the only one who'll notice
if certain things don't happen in a specific way.
Use the time you saved to invest in self-care that
makes you feel happy, healthy and refreshed.**

which accompanies changes in weather brought on by the seasons, can be treated by your physician.

What to Do Next

Depression is a treatable disorder which doesn't have to result in tragedy. Medications and a variety of treatment methods (from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to Transcendental Meditation) have resulted in drastic improvements in sufferers' quality of life and outlooks. It's even possible to overcome or ease depressive episodes through the mindful application of the following habits. While these examples are holiday-themed, in keeping with the season, they work year 'round.

► **PRIORITIZE YOURSELF.** Pick something—your favorite thing—and do that. I love Holiday Midnight Mass but gave it up for years since the kids were too young and it wasn't our stepfamily tradition. I recently insisted that my husband and I start going again. Most of our now-adult kids meet us there. Others stay home caring for little ones, like we used to. It's my Christmas moment in which all of the work and stress fade away. What will yours be? Consider ice skating, a holiday movie or "The Nutcracker" at the local ballet.

► **LIGHTEN YOUR LOAD.** You don't have to do everything, so don't. If a Christmas or other end-of-the-year tradition is important to your husband or stepchildren, let them prepare for and then oversee it. As stepmoms, we sometimes get into a *must* mindset: "I must do everything myself." In the process, we don't do ourselves any favors. Yet, when you take time to step back and

relax, you make room for someone else in your stepfamily to step up. You also give them the gift of being able to do it their way—with your blessing!

► **PRACTICE SELF-CARE.** Go to the gym, go to bed or go out with your girlfriends! Whatever you do, don't forget to add yourself to your gift list. Jot down everything you want to do or think you "have to" do. Then, cross some stuff off. Chances are good you're the only one who'll notice if certain things don't happen in a specific way. Use the time you saved to invest in self-care that makes you feel happy, healthy and refreshed.

► **GET ADDITIONAL HELP.** If things are really backing up on you and you notice that some (or all) of the symptoms for depression mentioned above are creeping in, call your doctor and/or get a referral to a trusted counselor. Roughly 25 percent of adults experience depression at some point in their lifetimes, so there's no shame in getting the help you need to manage and overcome a depressive episode. In fact, not getting help will be detrimental to you and your stepfamily. Don't wait. Get the help you deserve today.

After 20 years, I can honestly say that I now look forward to holidays with my stepfamily. Granted, we no longer have to deal with the ex on visitation schedules. Other pressures have dissipated, too. But I think the main reason I enjoy the holidays now is that I avoid doing anything I'll resent later. I delegate and, yes, I fantasize about my next life.

When, as a husband, the holidays will just *happen*. ■

Stepmoms and Gratitude



BY CHRISTINA ROACH, LMHC

**Tired of Being Told
to Give Thanks?
In Truth, There's
Good Reason to!**

Throughout the holiday season—particularly around Thanksgiving—we are reminded to give thanks. The amount of advertising dollars spent on bolstering our practice of gratitude this time of year nearly elevates it to an art form. Should this spike in commercialism be looked at with cynicism? Or is there an endearing takeaway hidden behind the catchy taglines?

As a stepmom, you may sometimes wonder if there's anything to be grateful for. Whether it's the stepchildren who

ignore you, the ex-wife who hates you or the in-laws who discredit you, the thought of being thankful may seem laughable. And while I'm half-heartedly exaggerating, the list could go on and on depending upon your unique stepfamily situation.

The bottom line is: Practicing gratitude isn't anywhere on your radar screen.

Yet, science has put gratitude to the test and discovered it has some real perks which elevate it far beyond a sentimental slogan on a greeting card. Even at the smallest level, the act of being grateful has benefits. Counting your blessings may, in fact, be a blessing in itself.

To understand the impact of gratitude, let's take a step back and look at happiness. Specifically, where does it come from? Sonja Lyubomirsky, PhD, author of "The How of Happiness," researched this very question. And what she discovered may surprise you. Roughly 50 percent of our happiness comes from genetics, another 40 percent is considered to be within our control and the remaining 10 percent is chalked up to circumstance.

Look specifically at the 40 percent under your control and think about how you pursue happiness in your life. If you chase extrinsic goals (such as a job promotion or a pay raise), you'll find that you experience an initial boost in happiness but no long-lasting effect. Why? It's because human beings quickly habituate, or become accustomed to, new states of being.

Positive psychologist Lynn Johnson, PhD (author of "Enjoy Life! Healing with Happiness"), says this newfound state of happiness quickly dissipates as we re-calibrate back to our previously not-so-happy state of being. One way to counter this is by focusing on intrinsic goals: working on personal growth, engaging in meaningful relationships and contributing to your community.

Edward L. Deci, PhD, a co-ordinator of Self-Determination (or motivation) Theory, says individuals who strive for intrinsic goals like the ones outlined above have an overall better sense of self. In short, they feel better about themselves and, as a result, are happier. But don't fret if you have extrinsic goals. Most of us do!

The field of positive psychology has identified ways in which you can still raise your individual level of happiness. The best part is that these interventions, which I've modified to fit the stepmom experience in the 10 tips which appear later, have a more lasting happiness benefit than extrinsic goals.



With the seemingly insurmountable struggles you face as a stepmom, is it really worth adding another item to your holiday to-do list? Related research suggests that the answer is a resounding “Yes!”

With the seemingly insurmountable struggles you face as a stepmom, is it really worth adding another item to your holiday to-do list? Related research suggests that the answer is a resounding “Yes!”

Lyubomirsky, along with psychologists Laura King, PhD, and Ed Diener, PhD, reviewed 225 studies and found that happiness leads to greater success in life. And that's not all. It also extends your lifespan: The happier you are, the more immunity you have against everyday struggles and the better health

you have, in general, which helps you bounce back more quickly from injury and sickness. Happy people tend to live 10 years longer than unhappy people.

So, what does that have to do with gratitude?
Leading researchers in the science of gratitude

agree that, by making a habit out of being grateful, you're more likely to be happy. Not the kind of happy where you're happy one minute but not the next—but, rather, an elevated state of happiness that endures. And that truly is something for which to be thankful!

10 Ways to Get and Stay Happier

► **CONDUCT A GRATITUDE VISIT.** Being a stepmom can be isolating. If someone's helped you through a tough time, write them a letter expressing your gratitude. Keep it short and be specific about what they did and how it made you feel. Once written, the letter can be framed and hand-delivered to signify its importance.

► **KEEP A GRATITUDE DIARY.** Get in the habit of listing three to five things you're grateful for which have made you happy. Ask yourself what went well, how it came about, and what you can do to make it happen again. Whether you do this daily or weekly,

the key is to set yourself up for success and find a frequency that works for you. Read through it now and then for a reminder of positive things which have already come your way.

► **CULTIVATE OPTIMISM.** Similar to a gratitude diary, keep a future-oriented journal that helps you imagine your life as a stepmom, in happier terms: What would be different? How would you interact with your partner and stepchildren? Describe these things in detail. Be specific about what you'd do differently and how day-to-day stepfamily activities would improve.

► **MIND YOUR THOUGHTS.** Martin Seligman, PhD, author of "Authentic Happiness" and "Flourish," says optimistic people view negative events as random, temporary and localized—unlikely to affect other parts of their lives. On the flipside, they view positive events as resulting from something they did, impacting everything in their lives by changing them in ways which are permanent and pervasive. Be aware of how you perceive both good and bad events in your life and restructure your mindset. By doing so, you'll raise your own level of optimism!

► **BUILD YOUR STRENGTHS.** By turning traditional notions of mental health on their collective ear, positive psychology looks to those strengths and virtues which enable individuals to thrive. A great way to learn what your own strengths are is by taking the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths survey for FREE at VIACharacter.org. By measuring 24 universal strengths, completing the survey can help you understand both yourself and others better.



► **EXERCISE.** Engaging in physical activity gets your heart rate up and releases endorphins which elevate your mood. Making exercise a part of your daily routine, then, can help you combat stress and increase your overall energy level. Get your step-family members involved and you could even start a new tradition. End result? You all get a boost in happiness!

► **CHALLENGE YOUR UNHAPPINESS.** No one says you have to take a bad mood lying down. Use your greatest tool—your mind—to combat negative self-talk and reframe events in ways which help you see your potential for growth. For example, if you discover that one of your friends isn't the best person to disclose "step" concerns to, be grateful you've figured this out and can avoid setting yourself up for misguided advice in the future.

► **PRACTICE KINDNESS.** Carry out small acts of kindness each week and acknowledge them. You might even write them down. Holding the door open for your partner or offering to help your step-

child with homework are examples of kindness in action. Regardless of the response, these small acts have a big impact even if you're the only one who notices them.

► **CONNECT.** As Rachelle Katz, EdD, LMFT, noted in "Stepmother Sisterhood" in the September 2014 edition of *StepMom Magazine*, social support is one key to overcoming challenges. So, avoid letting your life revolve around your partner and/or your step-children. Recharge your own batteries by staying connected with family and friends—ones who aren't apt to dwell on your role as a stepmom, dispense bad advice about being in a stepfamily or criticize your choices.

► **HARVEST MINDFULNESS.** The fast pace of our lives often robs us of experiencing life to its fullest. Starting today, take a minute to notice your surroundings. Engage your five senses: Note the colors, smells, sounds, tastes and feelings associated with your experience. Be present. Take a deep breath. And enjoy the moment. You deserve it!

If Stepfamily Life Has You Feeling Sad, You're Not Alone

Lisa Doodson, PhD, author of "How to Be a Happy Stepmom," found that stepmoms experience greater anxiety and depression than biological moms. In addition, her work reveals that stepmoms receive less social support in carrying out their duties. Add those together and the plight of the stepmother doesn't appear to be a happy one, does it?

Your journey, though, is entirely yours—so, steer it in a direction of your choosing! While multiple variables exist in stepfamily life, what science has uncovered about happiness and the power of gratitude is hopeful. You are a large part of the equation (40 percent, in fact!) and can count the entire

StepMom Magazine community as part of your support system.

Continue to count your blessings and know that I'm grateful for all you do in your stepmom role. Pass this gracious spirit on to other stepmoms, letting them know they're not alone either. Together, we can raise awareness and the collective happiness of stepmoms everywhere. ■

Your Own Worst Critic

4 Steps to Healthier Stepmom Self-Talk

BY MEG BURTON TUDMAN

I used to talk to myself in the worst ways possible, worse than I would ever dream of speaking to someone I loved or even to someone I wasn't particularly fond of. I was my own worst critic to the highest degree.

There wasn't anything someone could say about me that was worse than what I'd already said about myself. However, that didn't mean it didn't still hurt when I was criticized or ridiculed by others. It was especially hurtful since I was so cruel to myself to begin with that I didn't have a firm foundation from which to draw balance and strength.

While we'll never be able to control how others treat us, we can immediately start treating ourselves better—so that we can better handle whatever comes our way. We spend more time with ourselves than anyone else and hear our own voices more often than anyone else's. It is an inside job to talk kindly to oneself and you are absolutely capable of doing that.

It may take some practice, especially if you're used to tearing yourself down every chance you get. Sometimes we don't even realize how negative our self-talk is. Women say terrible things about themselves all the time without even thinking: "I'm the worst stepmom ever. My stepkids are always mad at me," "I should be better at being a stepmom by now. Why is it always so hard?" or "I'm such a spaz. I never stay calm around their mother."

Our thoughts create feelings. If we're constantly thinking negative things about ourselves, then we're also cultivating feelings of worthlessness, insignificance and doubt. The good news is the opposite is true, too. When we flood our minds with positive self-talk, we exercise the ability to create feelings of power, confidence, strength and even peace.

Those positive feelings are so helpful when navigating day-to-day life. Just think what it could mean when that life includes complicated family situations. Start with the four steps which follow, cultivating a new worldview through positive self-talk.



STEP 1: CREATE NEW BELIEFS

Create a list of how you would like to feel. Write this list in the present tense using "I am" statements, as if each entry is already a reality for you. Here are some of my favorites to get you started, though your list will include statements which outline traits or circumstances you'd like to embody or experience more often:

- ▶ I am awesome!
- ▶ I am healthy!
- ▶ I am present!
- ▶ I am happy!
- ▶ I am free!

"I am truly grateful!"—to be sharing this exercise with you. It doesn't matter whether a particular sentiment is happening, has happened or isn't true yet. What matters is your intention to make it true. Express that intention by repeating your list to yourself for at least 5 min. daily. The more you repeat

your list and remind yourself of how you truly want to feel, the stronger your intentions and feelings will ultimately become.

This exercise is even more powerful when you repeat your new beliefs while looking at yourself in the mirror. It may feel awkward, at first, to look into your eyes and state something so bold. I encourage you to keep at it. Looking into your beautiful eyes and saying your new belief out loud is incredibly empowering and “I am excited!” for you to experience that.

STEP 2: POST REMINDERS

Write and then post your new beliefs on sticky notes. You can also hang blank ones around the house which trigger new intentions for you. Post these sticky-note reminders everywhere: on your favorite mirror, on your bathroom door, on your refrigerator, on your steering wheel. Heck, post them on your cell phone case, your wallet, your computer screen and your water bottle.

The trick is to put them anywhere you're likely to see them often. The point, here, is to consistently remind yourself of how you want to feel, how you'd *like* to talk to yourself and how you want to regard yourself—aiming for the most positive scenario. Every time you see a sticky note, say that new belief to yourself. Repeat it at least (3) times to really let the belief sink in.

STEP 3: CHECK IN

At different points of every day check in with yourself and notice what you're thinking and saying. Tune in to how you describe yourself when you tell a story, especially one where you might otherwise paint yourself in a negative light. It's easy for us to get caught up in the fray, so set a reminder on your calendar or phone to pause and check in with yourself from time to time.

Just like with your new belief sticky notes, the higher your priority to do this and the more frequently you notice what your self-talk sounds like the better able you'll be to flip the switch on any negativity. If you catch yourself berating or deprecating yourself, avoid letting it become an opportunity to judge yourself further. Rather, view it as an opportunity to congratulate yourself. You just recognized a voice and a thought process that no longer serves you!

Acknowledge your self-correction, saying something positive to yourself to counter the original statement. Then keep moving forward. Be especially

mindful of any negative language that's absolute: “I always ...,” or “I never ...”. Not only are these statements unlikely to be true; these all-or-nothing beliefs work to keep you stuck in a negative spiral.

Over and over and over again you have the power to reframe what it is you say to yourself. Use that opportunity to be sure that what you're saying reflects how you really want to feel.

STEP 4: FRIEND POSITIVE PEOPLE

If you find yourself feeling worse when you scroll through your social media feeds or when you spend time with certain people, then it's time for an audit. Follow and comment on posts which are in line with how you want to feel about yourself. Part of this auditing process is to “unfollow” and release any accounts or people which are no longer aligned with your new beliefs.

Make a conscious decision to engage on social media in a way that serves you best. These platforms are so powerful, so let them help you feel empowered, uplifted, positive and grateful. Off of social media, start to cultivate a group of friends who lift you up. When you connect with these individuals, you're intention is to feel like you can take on whatever comes your way.

There may currently be people in your life whom you can't audit out and that's OK. You can still be mindful of how you let their energy impact you. The purpose here is to create environments and opportunities for yourself which will crowd out some of the negativity and allow you to practice acting and thinking in healthier and more positive ways.

We give so much power to our inner voice sometimes. Let's empower her to serve us in a positive way. Embracing new beliefs, constantly reminding ourselves to be our best selves, checking in to be sure we're honoring our new beliefs and connecting with a tribe of like-minded people are the first steps to realizing the internal power we have to create our very best lives.

The more positive your self-talk is, the more you're able to address complicated situations with your stepkids, their mother and even your dear husband—doing it from a grounded and peaceful place. That strength is inherent in each of us. The key is to consistently buoy ourselves, so that we're in a good place to begin with! ■

Meet Our Contributing Writers



MEG BURTON TUDMAN is a mindset health coach, author and speaker. Meg works with women who are successful, striving for more and yet exhausted. By mastering their mindsets with her help, they achieve inner and outer transformation. That level of empowerment allows them to live more authentically and to enjoy the lives they've created for themselves. Her "Reset Your Mindset Toolkit" is available as a FREE download at MegBurtonTudman.com.



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- Pg 12 - Snyder, B. (November 2013). "Stepmoms and Grief."
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