Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Devon Clement

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Sometimes, as a parent, you can feel like you're absolutely losing your mind and you don't know what to do or how to react. Today we have an amazing guest who's going to teach us some really great tools to have a much better experience or, as she calls it, stop hating your life as a parent. Stay tuned.

Welcome to *Parenthood Prep*, the only show that helps sleep-deprived parents and overwhelmed parents-to-be successfully navigate those all-important early years with their baby, toddler, and child. If you are ready to provide the best care for your newborn, manage those toddler tantrums, and grow with your child, you're in the right place. Now here's your host, baby and parenting expert, Devon Clement.

Devon Clement: Hello, and welcome back to the *Parenthood Prep* podcast. I am so excited that we have another guest today, Ashby Lankford. She runs Chime Workshops, which is a group that teaches mindfulness to new parents. I know that can sound a little vague, but what she actually does is help parents hate their life less, which we love here. We're always trying to get you to hate your life less. So Ashby, welcome and thank you so much for being here.

Ashby Lankford: Thanks for having me. I love to talk about this stuff. It's really fun.

Devon: Yeah, and we had a call where we spoke about everything and I just was like, I have to put you in front of the podcast listeners because this is so, so cool and so important. Why don't you tell us about how you kind of came to this thing that you do?

Ashby: Yeah, sure. So I have been a marriage and family therapist practicing in Oakland since 2013 and in training to become a therapist for even longer. It's the whole thing they make you go through, which is good. Kind of right alongside that part of my career path, I also started going on silent meditation retreats of all crazy things to do with your free time.

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

And you know, I was in what you could call the white-privileged rock bottom moment of my life. It's not really that dramatic of a rock bottom, but you know, I had been somebody who was like an uncle to me, had a heart attack and died at the same time that I broke up with someone I was living with at the same time that my car broke down and I had to find a new job. It was just a lot of things going on at once.

So I was complaining to an old friend of mine on the phone about this, and I said, I believe I said something like, it's not fair that I don't get to go to rehab just because I'm not addicted to anything. He said, oh, I know where you should go. You should go to Spirit Rock. I was like, there should be a tinkly music in the background or something when he said that because it did actually end up changing my whole life. I said, what's that? He said, it's this meditation center in Marin, and I stopped him right there. I was like, meditation, yeah, it's not really for me. I was like, I like, and I hear people say this all the time, and I just, I'm like, oh, you are my people, and I also wanna win you over to my side.

But I said to him, I like to do things that are meditative, but I just don't really like to meditate. And he said, you don't have to go to all the meditation things when you're there. They will cook you delicious food for all three meals that you'll get to eat, and there's beautiful hiking trails everywhere, and it's silent, so no one will talk to you. And I went, okay, sign me up, I'll do it. And then I went on my first retreat. They called…

Devon: So nobody talks the whole time?

Ashby: Almost. So the first night that you get there, so this first retreat I went on was for five nights, and then I went on longer ones as I got more and more addicted and into the cult. No, I'm kidding. But they talk to you the first night and kind of give you the lay of the land and the agreements, because you're living mostly in silence in community with about 90 other people. And then once you go into silence in the morning of each day, after breakfast and stuff like that, which is in silence. I mean, imagine sitting in a dining hall with 89 other

strangers eating breakfast in silence. I loved it. I was like, this is amazing. I just kept imagining.

Devon: And you didn't even have kids at that point.

Ashby: No, no, no.

Devon: I'm sure people with kids are like, what, sitting in silence? That sounds amazing.

Ashby: Yeah, they were probably in shock. So after breakfast, there would be a 9 a.m. sit. When I say sit, it means you're sitting for meditation. And that one would be guided. So a teacher would be talking a little bit during it for about 45 minutes. And then there'd be some question and answer period for maybe 15 minutes after that. And so there'd be a little talking. Then the rest of the day would be pretty much in silence until the evening they would have a Dharma talk and one of the teachers would give a talk with a whole bunch of juicy wisdom in it. And so I just really clicked for me.

Sometime in that first week, I went from thinking, are we still sitting here? Oh my gosh, we're still sitting here in silence to actually watching my brain notice what it was saying and then letting go of the thoughts as the teacher was guiding me to do. So this is in the Vipassana meditation tradition. Vipassana means insight.

So for me, it just really felt right because as compared to this idea of clearing your mind, it's the idea that you're trying to gain insight from actually watching exactly what your mind is doing. And I think we can all benefit from this. During that week, I got traction because I would notice, oh wow, I'm really still thinking about that friend who said that thing to me last week and how annoying that was. Why am I still thinking about that when it's day three of a silent meditation retreat and I ate delicious food that someone else made for me and the sun's out and I'm gonna go for a hike by myself later, you know?

It was like, it makes you really aware because you're not getting much input. input from anybody else that what's happening in your own mind is actually kind

of your responsibility in a certain way. Not to say we shouldn't shake our fingers at ourselves for what we're thinking. I had a really great meditation teacher and I can't even remember which one it was who said at one point, the mind is shameless, it will think anything. I remember holding on to that.

Devon: On anything.

Ashby: Yeah. And the idea being, it's a beautiful thing that we all have our private separate minds, right? We don't have to share everything that we're thinking, but also we don't have to feel bad or shameful about any weird thought that comes to our mind. The part when the responsibility kicks in is, am I going to stay with this thought that's uncharitable or unhelpful to me for a long time? Am I going to really dwell in this thought? That's where we start to have some choice, right? But first we have to notice that we're even having the thought to have that kind of influence over ourselves, right?

Devon: Yeah. That's such a huge thing that I've learned from coaching and a lot of the work I've done over the last few years that like you are separate from your brain, like your mind and your brain can do things that are not you. And, you know, the evidence of that is like how mean we can be to ourselves. Like that's not us. That's this evolutionary, whatever we've developed voice in our heads that we can tell to shut up.

Ashby: Yeah, right. I'm glad you phrased it that way too, because I teach a lot of the parents of my groups about how to find their own compassionate voice in their mind. And I have to explain that this doesn't have to be some kind of like poetry reading voice you've heard some time or a Pollyanna kind of voice, like your compassionate voice, depending on your personality and how it is that you talk, your compassionate voice might sound like shut up, that's not helpful right now. And that actually might feel really like kind of kind but firm in a loving way to yourself. So yeah, it can sound all different kinds of ways and we absolutely can tell our brain what to do and make it listen to us.

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

Devon: Yeah. So you were working as a therapist at this point or this was before?

Ashby: Let's see. I went on my first retreat, I think it was 2010. So I was, yeah, I was working as a therapist under supervision, but I wasn't licensed yet.

Devon: And then, so then you started incorporating this into your practice and then you made it like a separate thing.

Ashby: I don't think quite that early. I don't think I started incorporating it into my work, but eventually, yes, I did. By the time I was licensed in 2013, when I had then started going on a couple of retreats a year and really becoming a mindfulness junkie, I definitely started infusing mindfulness into my therapy work.

And I still do and I find that it really just gets people further faster sometimes than anything else. I mean, there are absolutely times when it's appropriate in therapy to go back into who were those early relationships that were important for you growing up and what are the messages that you got from those people and is there trauma that needs to be worked on there? Is there a reprocessing in some way that needs to happen?

But sometimes it's what's happening right now? What's that feeling you're noticing you're having, that annoyance at your husband right now? And what happens right before that? And what are you saying in your own mind when that's happening? Oh, you're saying that in your mind? Maybe that's part of what's keeping you really stuck and not finding any solutions.

So I think it just gives us more bang for the buck sometimes to look at what is happening right now, which not ironically is what mindfulness means. It means paying attention to what's happening right now as it's happening. I think that's important to say because a lot of people hear the word mindfulness and first of all they yawn and they're like, oh, this is going to be boring. I want to go talk about something more sexy.

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

But also they think - they've been kind of misled by things like, you know, I remember hearing this when I worked for nonprofits for 10 years before starting my private practice, we would get emails through this mental health agency nonprofit that I work for to all staff, you know, from admin saying, please be more mindful about the paper in the copy room. You're using too much paper, whatever.

And that that's not actually - what they actually meant was please be more considerate. Please be more aware. Please don't do it is what they meant, but that's not actually what mindfulness is. So I think that's a really important distinction to make because because people use the word mindful in that way so much, I think it makes people maybe even unconsciously think, ooh, mindfulness, that's not for me. That's going to be something where someone's shaking a finger at me and telling me how I should be better. And that's absolutely not.

Devon: Yeah. And like, I'm already so mindful of all the mistakes that I perceive I'm making in the day-to-day that actually those are not mistakes and that is just your mind telling you that you're making mistakes and that's not the kind of mindfulness we're talking about.

Ashby: Exactly. And so many parents that do sign up for my groups, I mean, there's a healthy 40%, I would say, that would describe themselves as perfectionists and they're very judgmental of themselves and that's something that we work on.

Devon: Yeah. Absolutely. And, you know, as you're saying all this, I'm thinking about like the parents that are in those early days, maybe not like the first couple of weeks when you have family around all the time and everyone's there, but when you're sort of just like alone caring for a baby all day, the only company you have sometimes is your own mind. And if that could be a pleasant place to be instead of a place that's telling you everything it thinks you're doing wrong, then that would be such a more lovely experience to be with your baby if you, you know, were not shitting on yourself.

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

Ashby: Yes. Yeah, you nailed it. So that's what I'm all about, trying to help new mamas with and new parents if they don't identify as mama or mom in my postpartum group. So I teach mindfulness tools and we really become very aware of what are the thoughts that I'm having. It's really important because the baby's born and everybody says, oh, is it a boy or a girl? And what's the name? And how much did they weigh? Maybe somebody asks how many hours was your labor? And maybe your really good friend asks what was birth like? Tell me about it.

But people mostly don't ask, they ask you then as the weeks go on, do you need a meal? And are you sleeping? And of course you're not. You're like, why are you even asking me that? No. But people aren't asking you, what are you saying to yourself in your own head week five of being a parent.

Devon: Yeah. Week five is a tough week.

Ashby: Yeah. And even if it's not your first time, you know, my experience actually having my second one was much harder. Some people might think, oh, you've already had a baby once, you know how to do this. It wasn't as much the baby, although the baby was harder the second time, just coincidentally. But also it was, I am totally depleted and exhausted. And I also have this very emotional, ragefully jealous, almost four-year-old running around who needs a lot of my attention and a lot of my kind of emotional attunement. And I'm spent. I don't know where I'm going to pull that from. So, the second-time parents often really need support in that way.

Devon: Oh, I say that all the time with our newborn care, with the overnights and stuff like that. I thought going into being a postpartum doula, it was going to be all these first-timers who didn't know what they were doing, and it is. But I think even more, we have people coming at us the second time around going, I didn't have help the first time and it was a nightmare, or we were struggling and we were so alone, like the first time was great, but now we know that we're going to be dealing with two kids and we don't know how we're going to manage that without getting sleep or without having some support.

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

And you just have this new awareness of how difficult it's going to be. And you're like, yeah, sure. I know how to change a diaper. Okay, great. I don't know how to attend to my baby's needs and my toddler's needs at the same time. On zero sleep.

Ashby: Right. And a lot of my moms in the postpartum group have very reasonable questions for me right at the beginning that are kind of like, I'm feeling this and this and this. How do I know if it's postpartum depression and I should get treatment or if it's just feelings? You know, it's like, these are really important things to talk about, you know, and there's this thing that happens. And anybody who's had a child is, is going to be familiar, where it's so common, it maybe doesn't happen for everybody, but happens for a lot of people even happened for my husband, who is the person who's the most calm, least freaked out person on the planet.

I tend to run a little more anxious when I go to my darker place, but he's very even keel, which of course we partner together. So what happens is you have a baby and then you start having these thoughts, for some people it could be all day or for other people just a couple times a week, where you're imagining all of the terrible ways that your baby could get hurt or die. And you might feel psychotic. Your brain has never done this to you before. But I think it must come from a primal protective place.

So I remember pushing my baby in the stroller on a steep hill and thinking, oh my gosh, what if I let go of the stroller right now? The baby's just gonna crash into a tree and die. And the amazing thing was my husband, I don't remember how we figured it out, he must have just said to me, are you having these thoughts? Because this was so new for him to worry about anything. He's such a chill person, but suddenly he had this vulnerable little child to protect and his mind was telling him here are all the ways that you could accidentally drop her or she could, you know. So that stuff is really important to talk about and to have somewhere to talk about.

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

Devon: It's so true. And I remember we had clients years ago that had this like cool house, but the way the upstairs worked was that there was almost like a bridge connecting one side to the other, like over the living room. So the living room had like super high ceilings and then there was this like gap in between. And it wasn't, I mean, it wasn't like a bridge bridge. It was like house, but imagine just like railings on both sides. And I'm pretty normal. I have, you know, natural, like, oh, no, I have to be careful. I don't slip on the stairs or whatever.

But for some reason, whenever I was walking with the baby from like one side of this bridge to the other, because the nursery was on one side and the parents room was on the other side, I was terrified that she was gonna somehow like fly out of my arms and like soar over the railing and like fall to obviously her death at the bottom. And I was terrified. Well, I was like clutching her so tightly. And I'm normally someone who's like very relaxed with babies because I've been doing this so long. I'm like, they're fine, you know, whatever.

Ashby: But that's actually, I think it sounds so funny to say.

Devon: But it was so scary.

Ashby: Yeah, it sounds funny to say about you having a thought about a baby jumping out of your arms and over a railing. But I think actually the fact that your psyche was doing that is a sign of health, that you were just extra aware of how vulnerable this little person is and how I have to be careful right here and this area is not quite as safe as other areas of the house, right?

Devon: And I think because it was so unusual, it was like, my brain was like, this is a new situation, this is different, you're not used to like walking on a bridge in someone's house, like.

Ashby: Right, I need to be vigilant in this moment.

Devon: Yeah. But you know, one of the things I tell my clients and people that have new babies is, you know, there's the normal thoughts that make sense, Like it's okay to feel anxious that when you're in the shower that the baby's

going to start crying and you might not hear them. But like if you start thinking of things like while I'm in the shower, a wolf is going to come in the house and eat the baby. That's not a normal fear. And maybe we should talk about that with your doctor or whatever.

But it's so hard to tell what, you know, what's what, like, is it normal to imagine crashing the stroller into a tree? Is it normal to imagine throwing the baby over the railing somehow by accident? But yeah, so you were doing these meditation retreats, you were working as a therapist, and then you had your first baby. And is that when you started working with parents primarily?

Ashby: When she turned one. Yeah, actually, she turned one. My husband went out of town for the first time since she was born, just for like a weekend or something. And she was napping in the afternoon. So I had two whole hours of silence in my house sort of by myself. And I just thought, okay, she's sleeping well now. My brain has come back to me. What do I want to do?

And it was the first time, maybe ever the first time in my life where I had an idea of something majorly new that I wanted to do. And I actually just decided within myself, yep, I'm going to do that. I'm fully qualified to do that. And I didn't ask anybody else's advice. And I thought what it was right then is I want to run a mindfulness group for new moms. And I checked myself. I was like, am I grandiose thinking I can do that? I was like, well, no, I'm a licensed therapist and I've studied mindfulness meditation for a long time. No, I think I actually can do this.

Because I noticed so much in that first year how those tools that I had learned, all that wisdom that I had just soaked up from all of those nights of being on meditation retreat helped me in all of the new and uncomfortable moments with a new baby and just figuring that out and forgiving myself for not knowing what to do and being present in the moment and not panicking when something wasn't working right away and all the ways that that helped me. So I really just felt a natural inclination to wanna pass that on.

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

And so I thought about it during my daughter's nap for about 30 minutes and then I sent out a blast, like an e-mail blast or on WhatsApp or something, I forget, just saying, I'm doing this. It's gonna start on this date. Anybody who's interested, sign up. It was cool in that way. And the first one, I just offered it for free because I was like, I'm new at this. I'm not going to pretend I'm not, you know. And I did it in my house and we don't have a big house.

So we had to like push the dining room table against the wall. And I borrowed these two porch Adirondack chairs from my neighbor every week and put cushions on them. So they'd be comfy for new mamas who were sore from birth and whatever and made it work. And there were nine moms that came every week with their babies and smooshed into my house. And it was just, it was so lovely and it felt really natural. they really just soaked up these tools.

And I stole an idea in the way that I facilitated the group from one of my mindfulness teachers, who's wonderful in the Bay Area, Temple Smith, who I used to do, I did these intense. three-month kind of programs with him in a group of people where he would teach on various Buddhist topics. And one of the things he did during those three months periods is that he would send this text messages with little mindfulness reminders and what was kind of magical about it is as compared to sitting and listening to a didactic lecture where someone teaches you this is what you should do when you're in a moment where you feel stressed or something and you may or may not remember that later in the moment. He's texting you and most of us look at our phones a lot for better or worse.

You see the text and the text sort of catches you in whatever real-life moment that you're in, you know? And the text would be kind of a little bit vague in a way where you could apply it to whatever's going on for you right then, you know? It might just ask you to observe this or that and observe how your body feels right now and are you paying attention to your emotional state in this current moment that you're in or whatever, you know? And that was so powerful because it was like having your teacher's voice in your ear just at different moments all throughout the day.

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

So I've borrowed that and I do that in my groups and it's just so fun. The first week or so, you know, for example of the postpartum group, my other group is for parents of any age, kids or teens actually, and that one's on Zoom. But the postpartum group is in person and I divide, so let's say there's nine mamas or parents in the postpartum group, I divide them into smaller texting groups so that you're not getting pinged 100 times a day when people respond and stuff, you know.

But so I send it to in the groups of three and people are a little shy the first week. They don't respond that much. And then by week three, typically, there's somebody texting their group at two in the morning. I'm losing my mind. My baby won't stop crying. And I always verify with everybody, like your sound's turned off on your phone in case you're sleeping or whatever. And for everybody, that tends to be true. So it's really great because suddenly these moms in my group have a 24-hour support system, you know.

Devon: And that's so, so important. Somebody who's like in the thick of it with you. I used to run a sleep training group and it actually came to me very similarly to your meditation group coming to you because I was sleep training babies like individually. I was helping parents remotely or in person. And I was like, you know, they really need like support beyond when I'm like first there or for people who don't necessarily want to pay for or can't pay for like me to come and be with them. Like who else can support them?

And I was in this mom's Facebook group and I was noticing how much they were all supporting other and I was like what if everybody just started sleep training their baby on the same night and we had like a way to talk to each other while this was happening and it was amazing. I did it for years. It was great. Like we sleep trained a lot of babies and they would become friends and they would have like all this camaraderie with each other and I didn't have to like think all the time like oh they're doing bedtime like I have to be there, like they were there for each other which was great.

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

Ashby: Yeah. I mean, it's interesting what you're saying makes me think of when people do my Chime for Parents group, the feedback I get often at the end is, you know, I wasn't so sure if the group setting was right for me, but actually it turned out to be exponentially helpful to hear from the other parents what they were going through because I didn't feel like it was just me struggling and I got ideas from other people.

And I kind of want to say, duh, we're meant to live in community. This is why the village that everybody refers to, you know, it takes a village. But it's funny that we need to be reminded of that. And I think that's a little bit the disservice that some of the American cultural messages get.

Devon: I talk about that all the time.

Ashby: Yeah. You're the special individual that only has your own specific needs and you just need individual therapy and individual everything, you know, and it's like, actually, no, we really heal and learn in a group.

Devon: And if you're having problems, then you're the only one who's having those problems and everyone else is perfect. And what is wrong with you?

Ashby: Oh, right. Yeah. I have to give examples to my individual clients often to prove to them that no, you're not a freak for feeling this way, thinking this way, having done this way, you know?

Devon: Yeah. With my clients too, all the time are like, oh, I must be like the worst mess you've ever seen. I'm like, you are by far not the worst mess that we've seen. This happens all the time. This is really common. And they love that. They love hearing that this is happening to other people. And I think that seeing other people going through it alongside you, because I think a lot of times, too, you forget down the road.

You might have a two-year-old and your friend has a brand new baby and you're like, oh yeah, I guess the newborn period was hard, but whatever, we're out of it now and I want to have another baby. And then they're like, what the fuck? This

baby is a week old and I can't imagine ever having another one. But when somebody else is right there with you, I had a twin mom I worked with years ago and I was working with them a lot.

And I mentioned to her just casually that sometimes in the middle of the night when the two babies were up and I was juggling them and feeding them and diapers and everything. I was like, sometimes I just have to like pause and take a breath and like recenter. And she was like, oh my God, you too? She's like, I felt so terrible, like, that I have to do that. And you're such like, you know, you're the professional and like blah, blah, blah. So you have to do that. And then meanwhile, I was like, oh my God, did I just admit that I'm like not perfect at my job and they're going to fire me or whatever?

Ashby: You're the professional because you know how to pause and take a breath.

Devon: Yeah. She was so grateful to just hear that I go through the same thing. So even just sometimes saying to somebody like, yeah, like I've been there. I know, you know, I know how that feels is so huge. Yeah. So what are some of the things that you teach to your parents, to your group? I mean.

Ashby: Yeah, let's get into the juicy stuff. So what I now do, it's evolved somewhat so what I teach in these groups, part of it is just straight from old Buddhist wisdom, mindfulness tools, and especially in the group for parents of older kids and teens. I also, every week with the mindfulness tools, I also give them really actionable, tangible, do this, say this with your kid tools, because I just think we're too stressed and we need all the different kinds of support.

Devon: So in that way, they're sort of passing it on to the kids as well.

Ashby: That does happen sometimes too, but I wasn't actually referring to that, but more just that, for example, So, you know, a tangible tool that I would give is, you know, and I didn't make this up, this is out there in the field of psychology, but that there's been research that we don't realize how much kids, they have

adrenaline pumping through them sometimes in a conflict with us because they're actually intimidated by us because we're just bigger than they are.

And so we don't think that, you know, often parents actually feel really disempowered when they can't, for example, get their kid to do something they want their kid to do, you know, but we're towering over them. And even if we're not yelling or we're not saying anything mean, they just they start to kind of fog up their brain starts to fog up because they're intimidated by us. So a really tangible tool is when you're in a tense conversation with your kid or some kind of conflict and they're, from your perspective, maybe overreacting or melting down as some people call it, it really helps to make yourself physically small.

And you know sometimes you'll see, like we've all seen this in a park or a store, and nothing against these parents, I'm sure I've been this parent before, the parent that's squatting down at eye level with their kid saying I see that you're really upset right now. Now that's a little too intense. That's kind of squatting down right in your face. Also could feel intimidating, right?

But if you literally, if you're at home and you can, you know, like lie down on the rug and maybe avoid eye contact with your kid right then, because they're flooded, they're overwhelmed, you know, make yourself small and then actually use a little small voice too. And I'll even, when my son who's getting close to three now starts to get really mad at me because, you know, I asked him to, that it's time to go change his diaper or get ready for bed or something.

Devon: Because he sked you for a banana and you handed it to him and somehow that enraged him because he's three.

Ashby: Yes. Yeah. Exactly. So I'll get really small on the rug and I'll use a tiny little exaggeratedly small voice. I call it squeaky mouse voice when I'm teaching parents. And I'll say like, you're so mad, but I just want you to brush your teeth. I'm just a little squeaky mouse that wants you to brush your teeth. And that just disarms him. He will kind of look over at me like, oh, my mom's doing your squeaky mouse thing again. And then he's just, he's not as angry and he's not,

he doesn't feel like I'm towering over him because I'm literally not, I'm lying on the floor, you know? And from there we can come to we're on the same team instead of we're against each other, you know? So there's really practical things like that that I offer parents.

Devon: To that point, I wanted to say something that you made me think of. You know how it's so common for kids to, like at Christmas time, parents will take them to like see Santa Claus at the mall and they'll freak out and they'll be so scared and upset. And like a lot of times at home, like kids that I've taken care of and stuff like that, they're so excited to meet Santa and they've read about it in books and seen it on TV and all this stuff. And then they see it in person. And I think the reason is because an adult man is huge. Like you see your Santa little statues, you see Santa on TV, like in your mind you're thinking he's a person.

Ashby: Oh my gosh, that's so funny.

Devon: But you don't think of him as this like massive adult man. And then you see this huge giant version of, like, you know, relative to-.

Ashby: Devon, you're a genius. You've cracked the code. I never thought of this. We need to tell little kids.

Devon: This has been my theory for a long time.

Ashby: We need to tell them, you're going to get your picture taken with Santa. By the way, he's a huge real man.

Devon: By the way, he's a real man. Like, you know, thinking of it from our perspective, like, imagine if you went to Disney World and Mickey Mouse was like 10 times the size of you. You'd be freaked out.

Ashby: Yeah. You nailed it. I've never thought of that before. That's brilliant.

Devon: It's so true because you're like, oh yeah, Santa, like as a concept, great. As a large, jolly, you know, huge beard, like adult man standing over you, it's

scary. We need to find like ten-year-olds willing to dress up as Santa and kids will love it.

Ashby: I like it. Or just like very small, petite little men.

Devon: Yeah. Or women, little gymnastics women dressed up as Santa.

Ashby: It's great. It's time to open it up. Let's let other people take a turn playing the part. Come on.

Devon: I kind of want to do like a science experiment and have like a like an event with like a very small Santa and see if kids respond better.

Ashby: I love it.

Devon: Yeah. So anyway, that's just what it made me think of when you talked about that, because it's true. You are much bigger. And even if they're not consciously aware of it, we have that lizard brain or whatever you want to call it, that's designed to like we were talking about, you know, new parents thinking that their baby's in danger all the time. Like that same brain is telling your kid that they're in danger if something is bigger than they are.

Ashby: Absolutely. Yeah. Speaking of creatures that are dangerous and scary. Yeah. So for example, when I give them a tool for their mind, that's not something tangible you do. It's just, this is what tell yourself to think this when you're going to lose your mind.

So a lot of people, especially who have young kids, dinnertime is stressful and it's even just stressful on a nervous system level, even if your kid is eating their food and you know, nothing's going terribly wrong, but you know, they're dropping things on the floor. They're not necessarily sitting in the chair, facing the table, they're clicking their glass, all kinds of things that just after a while start to irk your nervous system. And so one tool that I've given parents...

Devon: And by that point in the day, you're like kind of done too.

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

Ashby: Yes, that's really important too. It's your most depleted time. So it's the witching, we call it the witching hour that time after 4 p.m. It's the witching hour for us too. We're the least patient. We're the most tired. Yeah, we had a hard day at work. We want to come home to perfect children and that mostly doesn't happen, right?

Devon: Or we've been home with the kids all day and we're just like tired of looking at them and tired of hearing their constant noises.

Ashby: Yeah, our brains are maxed out. So what one tool that I've told, this is just a silly one, it's not from Buddhism, it's from me being a goof, which is imagine that your child is a baby bear. If a baby bear just walked into your house one evening in the middle of dinner in place of your child and sat in the chair where your child sits and they were eating their rice in fistfuls by the hand and dropping some of it on the floor and like clattering their glass against another glass and you would not feel irritated. You wouldn't. 100% you would not. You might feel scared or alarmed that there's a baby bear in your house at your table. You might feel curious or amused depending on your disposition. I think I'd feel terrified my husband would probably be like getting his camera out.

But the point is that if you can tell your mind this is a baby bear, you're not gonna feel frustrated with your kids. So that just shows us that it's the way our mind is working that's making us upset. It's not just literally the thing that's happening is objectively upsetting, right?

So maybe what's layered over that in our mind that makes us upset is this kid is six years old. They should know how to use a fork by now. They shouldn't be doing this. So there's a lot of upset, and this is pure Buddhist wisdom that many of us may have heard, is just the difference between what is and how we think it should be, that gap causes suffering. And if we can have radical acceptance of what is happening in the present moment, and acceptance doesn't mean that you like it or you think it's okay, it's just literally saying this is what's happening right now, so how can I work with it? So if you imagine your kid's a baby bear,

it's an okay analogy. It's not perfect, but in terms of impulse control, a five-year-old and a baby bear, not that different, actually.

Devon: And I think a lot of times, especially with your first, and especially if you're someone who has no experience with kids, which very, very many parents do. When I talk to people before they hire us, I'm like, have you ever been around a newborn? Have you ever held a baby? And sometimes they're like, yeah, all my siblings have kids. I help them when their kids are babies, or I've always babysat or whatever.

But sometimes they're like, no, I've literally never like touched a baby in my life, you know, more so men than women in that there are people socialized as men versus people socialized as women because we just tend to be exposed to it more. But just not knowing developmentally what a six-month-old can do, what a one-year-old can do, a two-year-old. Like I'll tell my friends sometimes with their kids like, wow, this thing that he does is like pretty advanced for his age. And they're like, wow, it is? Or they'll get so frustrated with something. And I'm like, he's two. Like, that's not how his brain works yet, but it will. It will. It doesn't mean that it's going to be like this forever, but it's just not there yet.

Ashby: Right. That makes me think about another one of the tools that I've stolen from Buddhism that I teach my parents that's very straightforward and easy to remember to use, but it can have profound effects on the way people feel in their parenting. And the tool is called Vedana. It's the Pali word that translates as feeling tone. And so I just tell the parents…

Devon: Feeling tone, you said?

Ashby: Feeling tone, yes. Okay. So the three possible types of feeling tone, and that's just if I asked you, Devin, in this moment, what's your feeling tone right now, don't overthink it. You would just know that you're feeling either pretty good, not that good, or terrible. You know what I mean? They're kind of neutral or whatever. So the three kinds of feeling tone are pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

And so the suggestion is in any parenting moment that you're in, and especially if it's unpleasant, label it as such in your mind, not out loud to your kid for obvious reasons, Although that would be funny. So in your mind, you start saying unpleasant, unpleasant. And actually labeling it that way will calm you because you are then filling up your brain so you don't have space to be making a whole lot of negative meaning out of it. Why is my kid acting like this? They're just the worst kid ever for doing this. Other kids don't do this. How am I ever going to get this to stop? Why am I not a parent who the kid is listening to? You know, why am I not a parent whose kids listen to them?

So instead you're just saying unpleasant and that's really all that it is and a lot of the time what we aren't aware of is that our nervous system is just so upset by the noise level or something else that we think something must be really wrong and our overly smart brains try to make overly smart meaning about it and we try to come up with the reason and we only make negative meaning in those moments, right? That isn't helpful and that makes us feel worse and that pathologizes either our kid or ourselves or both, right?

So if we can just say unpleasant, unpleasant, and you'll be surprised how quickly the unpleasantness passes and moves on to something else. We might think in that moment, like this is just going to be unpleasant from now, kids came home from school at 3:30, it's so unpleasant right now, it's going to be unpleasant all the way through until they go to bed at eight. But actually, if we pay attention to when is it pleasant, when is it unpleasant, and when is it neutral, there's a lot more pleasant and neutral that we might be aware of.

This is so funny, in one of my parenting groups maybe last year I taught that in the first week, that tool of feeling tone and labeling things. And she said totally earnestly, she asked the question and I loved it. Everybody in the group cracked up with recognition, not laughing at her. She said, but Ashby, how do we know when to stop saying unpleasant? And it was like, yeah, I get it. Sometimes like everybody's whining and it does actually go on like that for a full 20 minutes, but not usually longer than that. It usually shifts to something else.

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

And so then the secret with vedana, feeling tone, is that neutral is the one that we space out the most during. So neutral is, you know, I'm not too hot or too cold, I have enough food in my belly, nobody's screaming at me right now, right? Neutral in parenting. And when we're in neutral, We typically space out and we start thinking about what am I going to cook for dinner or I feel so guilty about that time when I yelled at my kid at the park yesterday and we're actually missing the present moment.

And the real juicy gift of neutral is, and the secret of neutral, is that if you actually are aware that you're in neutral when you're in it and you're able to label the things around you, the elements or the characteristics of your moment that are making it neutral, like the things I just said, the temperature is pretty good, I'm not hungry, I rested, whatever, then neutral turns to pleasant because just by bringing our awareness to those things that are all okay, we start to feel pleasant. And so we're really missing out on a lot of potential pleasant, which we desperately need as tired, stressed parents by just checking out when things are kind of okay.

Devon: Oh, I love that. That's so, so important. I mean, and just goes to, I have not studied meditation, but you're just teaching me so much, but also it's reminding me of stuff I've learned from other modalities, other principles like our mutual friend Kara Loewentheil talks all the time about how, you know, your brain evolved to have a negative bias.

So you don't remember the berries that you ate in like cave times. You don't remember the berries that you ate that tasted fine and were whatever. You remember the berries that were poisonous and tasted horrible. So it's kind of the same thing as a parent. You just are so much more inclined to remember all the negative things or focus on the negative things and not focus on the neutral because it doesn't affect your brain in any way. It doesn't affect your evolution in any way to feel neutral. So you're just like, whatever. And you're not aware of it, but it's so, so, so important to do that. I love that.

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

Ashby: Yeah. And just going along with what you're saying, yeah, what we know about neuroplasticity tells us that you can actually train your brain if you treat it like a set of muscles like you would any other muscle group in your body that you want to strengthen. You can intentionally start having thoughts that are more full of the possibility, the hope, this is the thing I did well, even amidst these other things I didn't do as well as a parent today. And you can work this new groove in your brain that's more likely to notice the positive. And then, of course, I don't even have to explain how this trickles down into the way that you view your kid and the kinds of comments you make to your kid, which makes them feel good and then makes them treat you better and, you know, it's just, it all cycles in a good way?

Devon: Oh, 100%. And I've definitely spent a lot of time training my brain on new thoughts and new thought patterns. And it is possible. It's difficult, but it is possible. And it is just like working out. You're just doing a little bit more, getting a little bit stronger, lifting a little bit more weight, as it were, each day or whatever. And I'm just thinking sometimes, like with your kids, it can just feel so bad that trying to think of a silver lining or something positive or something good just feels so out of reach. There was a moment when like they were playing with their toys quietly and I, you know, got to go to the bathroom by myself or whatever that you're just like, even though that was neutral, it was better than horrible.

Ashby: Yeah, absolutely. And even in those moments where it just feels horrible, doing something as simple as labeling it unpleasant, unpleasant, it kind of reminds you that this is temporary also. This is just an unpleasant moment. It doesn't mean that I'm a terrible parent or my life is over. I shouldn't have had kids. It just means right now it's unpleasant. That's it. We don't have to complicate it. Yeah.

Devon: Yeah. Wow. Okay. I love this. I love all these tools. This is so good. Is there any other major tips that you have or have we just already blown everybody's mind too much with these?

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

Ashby: I can always share more.

Devon: Let's do one more. What's your favorite?

Ashby: That you haven't already done? I can't even pick my favorite. Here's one that's really applicable to a lot of situations. So I guess I'll share this one because it can just help so much. So the way I figured this out kind of was I was sitting on one of these silent meditation retreats. And if you haven't done that, you have to take my word for it that day three, sitting in silence and meditating with 90 people in person, your mind is in a somewhat altered state. It's not the same as being at Burning Man, but it's definitely an altered state. So I'm in that state. So give me a little grace when I describe-.

Devon: And if you want to know anything about Burning I have a whole episode about how having a baby is like going to Burning Man.

Ashby: Oh, good. Yes. I love it.

Devon: Because the whole time I was there, the first time, I was like, this is just like having a baby.

Ashby: Oh, my gosh. Okay, I need to listen to that episode.

Devon: Because you kind of don't know what you're getting into, and it's crazy, and you're just like... Everything is insane. Anyway, sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you, but it was so funny that you mentioned that.

Ashby: So many useful metaphors from Burning Man. So I'm sitting in this meditation hall with 90 people, and this is how I came to this tool, which I find just infinitely helpful. I'm sitting there, and so I'm kind of extra sensitive more than usual, and there's this man's voice I can hear, somebody sitting not right next to me, but maybe four people over from me, and he keeps, we're all in silence meditating, and he keeps going like, and I just was so annoyed and it was I mean my what was happening in my mind was so not giving him any grace.

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

It was like why is he making those sounds this is so unnecessary I'm sure all of us our backs are hurting from sitting on this freaking cushion for three days but why does he have to be moaning out loud about it, so entitled, he's distracting us all, and like I'm probably thinking like really, really unfair things. Like, of course it's a man making that noise, you know? I'm just going for it. And then a minute later I notice all of a sudden, all these are grown adults in a meditation retreat, okay? They all start giggling. A whole bunch of people just start giggling in the room.

And I realize, oh my gosh, they're laughing because of that guy. And it kind of goes around like a wave, the giggling, and it dies down. People try to get it under control, but then you hear somebody like go, and then someone else starts cracking up again. So it goes on for a while. Finally it's quiet. And then I'm amused. I'm laughing with them, you know. And then it's finally quiet and I'm kind of like feeling that come down from the laughing and I just feel kind of relaxed and I'm like, oh my gosh, if they hadn't laughed, I wouldn't have realized actually how comical it was that that guy was making those sounds.

That laughing just opened up something in me where a couple minutes later, I just started to cry because it hit me the very obvious truth that that man was suffering. He wouldn't have been making that embarrassing sound in a silent room of 90 people if he weren't really in some kind of physical or emotional pain, right? And I felt suddenly this like wave of compassion come over me for just all people who are suffering and of course I've suffered before and you know.

And so what I realized from that that I now teach with the parents of my groups is that we can't go immediately from frustration to compassion. And a lot of times I think parents are told that that's what they're supposed to do. and maybe even people who aren't parents, but just that you feel irritated with your kid, but look, they're only two, really have compassion for them.

But I actually think it's not possible that when our brain and our body is flooded with frustration and with kind of a feeling of being irrationally rageful, we need something else to help us metabolize that before we're ready to actually feel

compassion. And what I realized from that story I told is that one possible really useful stepping stone between frustration and compassion is humor or amusement. So what I tell my parents is, the next time you feel like you just want to throttle your child, try to imagine and ask yourself, is there anything amusing to be seen in this moment?

Because, you know, it's strange, but I actually think anger can go to humor more quickly than it can go to calm. You know, most of us have had a fight with a family member where we're screaming at each other, and at some point someone says something just absurd, and we both start laughing for a minute, and then maybe we even go back to fighting, you know?

Devon: Or sometimes you're like looking at your kid who's like losing their shit and you're just like, you look ridiculous right now and you just, or they say something, kids say like something silly that they mean in like such anger, but you, and you're trying not to laugh because you don't want to like laugh at them, but you are feeling it in your, in your brain like that was hysterical.

Ashby: Right. Yeah, it is. They're, they're close cousins, anger and amusement, I think. So, and maybe it's partially because we're kind of cartoonishly out of control of ourselves when we're super angry, you know, so it is naturally a little bit funny. So I tell the parents, consider whether there's something amusing to be found in that moment. And if you can't find anything amusing, then consider whether if your best friend were there right now, just viewing what's happening, would they find it amusing? Because sometimes then we can get in touch with the humor if we outsource the headlines a little bit.

Devon: Oh, yeah. Even just imagining making eye contact with your best friend in that situation and not being able to keep it under wraps, yeah.

Ashby: Exactly. And if that doesn't work, just imagine yourself in solidarity with all of the stressed parents all over the world right now. Because we know for a fact, every single second, like you and I are talking right now, Devon, right now, there are thousands and thousands of stressed parents dealing with a kid's big

feelings or tantrum or whatever at this very moment. And that just helps give us perspective. I just guide parents to kind of train their mind in that way. But this is how I get myself from frustration something else first and then when I feel my body start to calm down then I can consider is there some compassion that might be warranted in this situation and then usually it comes kind of...

Devon: And it just and it just breaks the pattern it just like...

Ashby: Yeah, it interrupts.

Devon: Exactly. Yeah that's exactly it interrupts that intensity and then you're you're like out of it. I love that. I always... tell the worst fight I've ever had with my sister. We were both like college age, like I wasn't living at home. I was like away at school, but I was home for like the weekend and we got in the worst fight. And it was just the two of us. We fought all the time. We're like best friends now, but we fought all the time. But this was the worst fight we've ever had. And it got physical. And we were in my mother's bedroom and she wasn't home and one of us like pushed the other one into the closet door and the door like fell off the track.

Ashby: Oh, that's a real fight.

Devon: But we went in that moment in that split second from, oh my God, I hate you, I've never hated anyone more to, fuck, we just broke mommy's closet door and we have to fix it before she gets home or she's going to kill us. And my mom is great. I'm not saying she was abusive or anything.

But you know, if your mother comes home and finds that her adult children have destroyed the house in a fight over, I don't even, neither one of us even remembers what the fight was about, but we do remember that in that moment, it just switched off and we were like, we have to work together to fix this. And then everything was fine. Everything was fine. It was crazy.

Ashby: You were on the same team suddenly, with the enemy being the broken door. Yeah.

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

Devon: Exactly. Exactly. It was hysterical. And just in that moment, you're like, you realize in having a situation like that, you realize you actually can snap out of it. Not that you have to or should feel bad if you're feeling your feelings, but it is sometimes that simple. If you're fighting with your partner and your baby wakes up and starts crying, like, you know, you're gonna go and deal with that, like, you know.

Ashby: It's sometimes good to be interrupted and just shift the energy, yeah. I mean, it's pretty standard in helping clients with anxiety that when the anxiety gets really, really intense and fixated on a particular anxious thought that really what you wanna try to do is distract the brain from, you know, anything else to distract, right? So that makes sense that a closet door crashing down provided you and your sister with that distraction.

Devon: We just got on the same team immediately because we knew that we both had to fix the situation. So yeah. Well, this is so great. I love all of this. So let's go just quickly over the tips. Let me see if I can remember. So make yourself small, get yourself down to their level, but not in their face, which I think is so huge. Even with a tiny baby, like eye contact is very stimulating to them. So like, it's great to do it while you're playing and stuff, but like if you're trying to get them to go to sleep, don't make eye contact because that's going to get them riled.

Ashby: Stimulating.

Devon: Thinking of your child as something else, like a baby bear, and how would you be responding if they were that? Right. So you take yourself out of this place of, like, why are they doing this or making it mean something? I think that's so helpful. Identifying the feeling, so pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. Was that the next one?

Ashby: Yeah. Just labeling.

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

Devon: Labeling it and just saying that. And that's been something similar that I've done in some of my being coached and things like that. And just even identifying the feeling is so huge and being able to separate it out from all the things you're saying about it, I think is so huge. And then also focusing on neutrality sometimes when you are feeling neutral and being aware of that and that can.

Ashby: Get more enjoyment. Yeah.

Devon: I love that. I love that. And then what was the last one?

Ashby: And then using the possibility of humor or amusement or even imagine a friend's amusement as a stepping stone in between frustration and compassion.

Devon: Yeah, it can be so difficult to get so far emotionally in one giant leap. You have to take that interim step and interrupt the pattern. I love that. Well, this is great. I am gonna start using these tools immediately and working on them with my clients, but how can people find you? You said you have a Zoom group too, right? So that could be for like anybody, even if they're not in your area in person.

Ashby: Right, it would have to work. You know, I do it California time at 12 p.m. So they'd have to have probably their kids in after-school program or something because it would be 3 p.m. East Coast or earlier in the middle of the country. But yeah, anybody could do that. That's on Zoom and I have a new one starting up about every eight weeks because it's a six-week group and then I take a little break in between. They can find me through my website, ashbylankford.com or they can just look up Ashby and Chime Workshops and they'll probably find some link my reviews on Berkeley Parents Network online.

Devon: Perfect. And we'll have links in the in the show as well and on that page. Well that is fantastic. Thank you so much. I already have decided that we have to do this again because I know there's even more stuff that you can teach us and I'm so excited to learn.

Ep #47: Parenting Chaos Meets Mindfulness: Ashby Lankford on Keeping Your Cool

Ashby: I'd be happy to anytime.

Devon: Thank you so much.

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