

# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers Tool Kit is meant to be an introduction to and a way of creating new, healthy emotional habits that will vastly improve women's lives, working through friendship, simplicity, love, value, faith, solitude, money, fear, hope, and purpose.

Below is a list of the 10 habits of happy mothers, starting with how to recognize your own value as a mother. As you click through each habit, you'll find some of my tips on how to put these habits into practice.

HABIT #1: Understand Your Value as a Mother

HABIT #2: Maintain Key Friendships

HABIT #3: Value and Practice Faith

HABIT #4: Say No to Competition

HABIT #5: Create a Healthier Relationship with Money

HABIT #6: Make Time for Solitude

HABIT #7: Give and Get Love in Healthy Ways

HABIT #8: Find Ways to Live Simply

HABIT #9: Let Go of Fear

HABIT #10: Hope Is a Decision—So Make It!

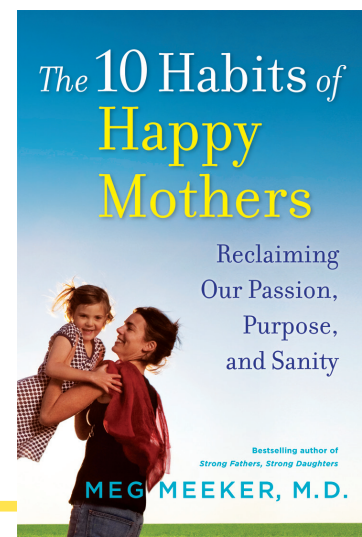
You may wonder how to balance some of the habits in this book—for example, friendship and solitude. How does one find the time and energy to be a good friend while also carving out time for oneself? The point is that it is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Think of it as a cafeteria-style plan: Find the habit that appeals to you, your life, and your needs, and focus on acquiring it.

If you'd like to read more about my new book,

*THE 10 HABITS OF HAPPY MOTHERS:  
RECLAIMING OUR PASSION, PURPOSE, AND SANITY,*

visit my website at:

<http://www.megmeekermid.com/blog/>.



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### Habit #1: Understand Your Value as a Mother

If you are like most American moms, you are far too critical of the job you're doing. You want to get it right and you critique your performance daily. Kids don't care if you're thin or plump, they don't care if you make brownies from scratch, from a box, or if you buy them. They just want to eat the brownies with you. Understanding our value and then feeling good about the mothers that we are is one of the toughest challenges we face.

Below are three ways to work on understanding your value as a mother: make a list, live to impress no one, and write down what goes in the box.

#### #1: Make a List

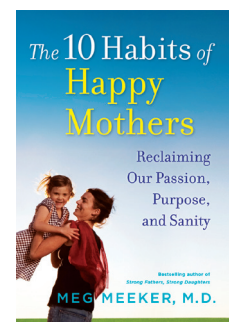
Many of us mothers don't know what we are good at, what we can accomplish, and what brings us real pleasure. We obsess so much about what we don't like in ourselves and we completely fail to define ourselves by what we do like. So stop with the negative! Make a list of the things you are really good at and write them down. Write down what you like, and what you dream about, and whenever the negative thoughts come, think of these things that are positive.

Then go a step further: Act on them. Buy an outfit that shows off the best part of your figure. Schedule an activity that makes you feel good about your life. Make a date with a friend who is upbeat and who likes who you are. Start being the kind of friend you want to be and stop thinking about how you let your friends down. Tremendous amounts of energy leave us daily because we exhaust it in trying what not to be rather than embracing what we want to do.

What did you write down on your list? What will you do to act on it?

Today, (enter date), I realized I was good at:

Here is what I did about it:



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### #2: Live to impress no one

Women who have a healthy sense of their own value are delightful to be around because they never play games, put on airs or try to impress anyone. They don't need to because they have a sense that they lack very little. It isn't that they are enamored with themselves—quite the opposite. They are humble. They are so comfortable with who they are that they are free to elevate others. Mothers who constantly badmouth others are profoundly insecure but mothers who feel secure speak with an ease and joy that lets the hearer see their confidence. One of the best ways to feel better about who we are as mothers is to push ourselves to accept who we are. We do this by refusing to pretend with anyone.

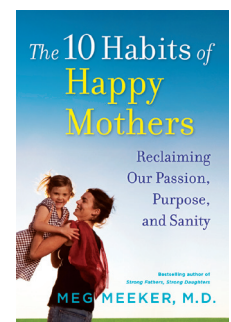
### #3: Write down what goes in the box

There is no secret that I have come to believe that faith and God are intimately interwoven into our lives as mothers. I have seen enough deaths to question the afterlife and the will of God and I have seen enough births to believe in the goodness of God. That is why I cannot discuss our value as mothers without including Him in our conversation.

If we are both flesh and spirit, then God loves both. At the beginning of our lives and the end, He alone will accompany us. The One who made all things stops to accompany us in order that we will never be alone and never feel unloved. Now that is something to celebrate when pondering our worth. Figure out what's going to be the most important to you in the end.

What is most important to you? Write it down here:

I made time to meditate about what is important to me this week. This is what I learned from that time:



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### Habit #2: Maintain Key Friendships

Every mother needs connection with women on different levels. Some friends will satisfy our longing for intimate emotional connection and others will provide us comfort and affection on a lighter level.

Below are three ways to work on maintaining key friendships: having an inner and outer circle of friends, balancing the types of friends you choose, and loving a friend better than you know how.

#### #1: Have an inner and outer circle of friends

Women comprising our inner circle are usually few in number—three or four. These are the friends who can step into our kitchens at dinnertime and take over feeding our kids, put them to bed, and clean up the peanut butter on the floor and jelly on the chairs when we suddenly fall apart from tragic news. The hallmarks of inner-circle friendships are trust, maturity, and faithfulness, all of which work together to cultivate the deep love between us. And each one of these must flow in two directions: Both friends must fulfill for the other.

Who makes up your inner circle of friends?

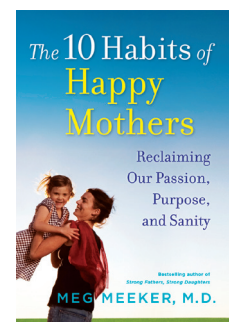
Outer-circle friends, while no less valuable, are nonetheless different. These are the friends who bring casseroles when we are sick, who run our kids to school and soccer games, and who are always up for a brisk walk after dinner. They are companions who bring laughter and comfort and uplift us when we are down. Usually there are more outer-circle friends in a mother's life—about ten or so.

Who makes up your outer circle of friends?

Make time to call an inner circle friend this week. What will you say? What will you ask her?

Do something nice for an outer circle friend this week.

What need in her life can you fulfill?



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### #2: Balance the types of friends you choose

Often mothers find themselves drained by their friendships and this usually happens because they have no balance in their tribe. There are the type of friends who need help constantly—the ones who ask (if they're going to ask at all) how you are doing half an hour into the conversation. These women are the takers—the needy ones who are always in crisis mode. Have a few friends like this, because you have something to give, but never, ever have only this type of relationship. It will suck you dry. You need friends who ask how you are right off the bat and also let you answer. Since friends bring their own giftedness to relationships, try to find friends with diverse gifts as well. This is the beauty of friendships between women in our tribes—each can complement the others so that many of our needs can be met.

Do you have balance in your tribe of friends? What are the different gifts you receive from your friends? Do your friends accept you as you are and at the same time challenge you to improve?

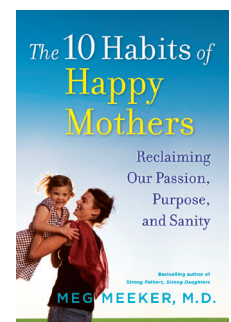
### #3: Love a friend better than you know how

Loving friends extraordinarily means interrupting our work schedules when a friend is in crisis, speaking boldly in her defense even when we are angry with her, and stepping into her shoes if she for some reason can't function at her normal level. It means we will be there for her and her children because that's what women who love other women do. While women friends aren't habits, working hard at friendship with them is a habit.

My friend (enter friend's name) is in crisis.

I can help her in the following ways:

Helping her will help me in the following ways:



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### Habit #3: Value and Practice Faith

We all put our faith in something, and we do so every single day. So the real question isn't whether or not we should have faith. The more important question is who or what should we put our faith in, and why? And further, if faith is such an enormous part of our everyday experience, why don't we pay any attention to it?

Below are four ways to work on value and to practice faith: think before you leap, make it personal, find community, and serve.

#### #1: Think before you leap

Real faith requires that we have a knowledge about who we put our faith in and what good it does for us. Each of us has a burning desire to understand the deeper things in life. The only way to come to understand, rather than simply feel, is to recruit our intellect.

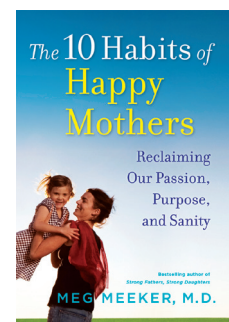
When we choose to pursue faith, we must keep our eyes and minds wide open, but we must keep our hearts open as well. We must find the balance between learning, reading, and seeking answers on the one hand and following answers that we feel God is giving us on the other. We should seek and then when God answers, find what He gives us.

So where do we start? Read and then read more. There are countless resources and I recommend starting with the real thing. Read the Bible. If you find it intimidating, Eugene Peterson has rendered the Old and New Testaments in everyday language in a lovely work. If you are Jewish, read the Torah. Go to the learned in your community whom you admire and ask for readable materials that will help you figure out the tenets of your faith. It can be done in little bites—a few minutes each week.

If what we come to believe about our faith is real, then it must stand the test of questioning and reasoning. So question the material you read and question it again. If what you're reading is true, you will know it over time. The wonderful thing about the truth is that it is hard to talk yourself out of it.

My favorite work of Scripture is:  
Because it makes me feel:

Share this work of Scripture with a friend or loved one.  
Ask them to share their own personal response to it.



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### #2: Make it personal

I have said that faith is not a religion. It is a deeply personal understanding and relationship that must be discovered and nurtured. The reason for this is that we mothers are personal people. We want relationships, communication, and a sense of deep exchange with others. In order for us to foster a faith like this, we must become involved. Reading and study are important, but we must also allow ourselves a certain openness and availability to God if faith is to be personal. Herein is where the exchange begins.

Prayer begins this communication. In the quiet of our rooms, the car or in bed at 3 A.M., the conversation begins. It is God and us. We begin by asking questions or simply by saying “hello.” Sometimes we scream or cry; other times we simply ask if He is real or if, perhaps, we are sharing our innermost hopes with nothing but the cosmic void.

Then we wait. Over time, we pray again and again and tell God that we need to know if He is there or not. Then we wait again. What we learn through the prayer and the waiting is the beginning of faith.

If we have cultivated a prayer of meditation life with God we can instinctively slide into a conversation in prayer for comfort and help when the real tough stuff happens.

### #3: Find Community

A close friend of mine, a woman who is twenty years my senior, once told me that sustaining a vibrant faith all alone is impossible. She said that because faith is hard, it must be done with the help of others who believe as we do. When life is good, getting along with God is easy. But when bad stuff happens, hanging on to our faith can be like holding on to a rope behind a speeding car: It frays and soon we lose contact.

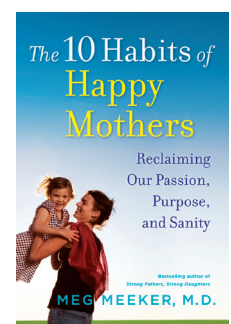
So find a faith community that will help you hold on. Just as we need friends to fill in the gaps, we need women, men, and other mothers who will buoy us and remind us of what we understood to be real about God when we weren't hurting as deeply.

Others in a faith community teach us about the character of God. As believers who long to adopt His character and follow His directives, they reflect who He is. The love that God feels for them will move into them and then we who sit in the pews next to them or who pray beside them will mysteriously soak in some of His love. In a faith community, each of us learns more about God, people, humanity, and acceptance than anywhere else on the planet.

Think about your faith community. Who does it include?

How does it help to continually reinforce and solidify your faith?

How does it benefit and influence your family life?



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

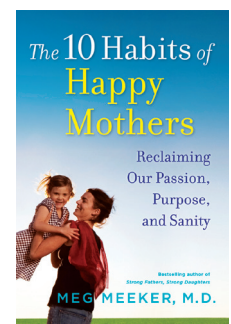
### #4: Serve

This is probably the last word an exhausted mother wants to hear, but it is important. Over our lifetime, the only way each of us will come to understand the value of another human being is by serving him. Giving brings about humility and humility draws us closer to God.

Sometimes, particularly when our children are young, the demands at home are too great to serve anywhere else and this is perfectly appropriate. As they mature, however, we may be freer to spend time working at a food pantry, a soup kitchen, a women's shelter, or a rehabilitation center. Certainly we can serve people in our lives wherever we are, but the service we extend to people whose lives are harsher than ours changes us in a different way. Working with those who are brokenhearted allows us to see God reflected in them more easily because there is less in their lives to cover His presence.

Build your faith through service now, and reap the benefits later when you need it most.

Think about the needs of your community. Where can you best be of service? Can your family participate with you in your charitable works?



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### Habit #4: Say No to Competition

As moms we compete in two arenas, we have our lives as well as the lives of our kids to watch out for. Sometimes jealousy takes such a strong hold on us that we have difficulty having any good relationships with other mothers. When we are jealous of other mothers because they seem to have life perfectly balanced or figured out, we find ourselves wanting to be with them and hating to be near them, all at the same time. We want to see how they do it, but since we feel that we can't do what they do or have what they have, we leave angrier than ever. We always feel so inadequate or guilty when we are with them that we just scrap the whole friendship thing altogether.

Below are five ways to work on saying no to competition: recognize jealousy and don't be fooled, head competition off at the pass, give frequent verbal applause, focus on fullness, not emptiness, and be deliberate in kindness.

#### #1: Recognize jealousy and don't be fooled

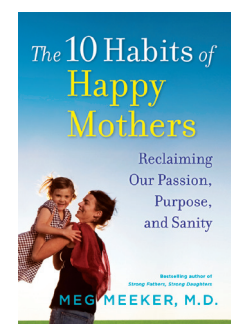
The first and most important step in changing any habit is recognizing it. So think about the voices in your mind that gently articulate the desires you have for something that another mom or person has. Saying it out loud can free you from your jealousy.

Write down here the focus of your jealousies. Speak it quietly, then speak it out loud. Take a moment to clear the negative feelings from your brain and soul.

#### #2: Head competition off at the pass

Once we feel criticism, gossip, or agitation at another welling up, waiting to erupt, we must tell ourselves that we will not compete. We need to say it out loud to ourselves, or at least own up to it in our minds. Once we can admit our feelings, what we are jealous about, we can then also admit to ourselves that we don't really need the thing about which we are jealous. When issues of jealousy are over large issues we need another objective person who loves us enough not to think ill of us when she hears our stupidity verbalized. That's what good friends do—they accept what we think and feel and take it all in stride.

How can a friend help? A good friend may be able to see your jealousy and competitiveness when you can't, and if she is a really good friend, she can gently tell you that. Or, if you already know that you are struggling with jealousy, you can recruit her help to work through it.



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### #3: Give frequent verbal applause

One of the best ways to ward off jealousy is to speak well of the woman who has something we want. Giving praise to someone you have hard feelings for—particularly when you do it sincerely and to her face—heals all sorts of ills.

I sometimes feel jealous of:

Even though I strive to applaud her positive qualities, including:

Make time this week to share your admiration with her!

### #4: Focus on fullness, not emptiness

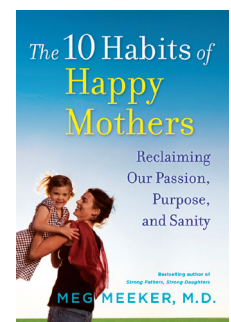
Write down what you are grateful for and use this list to focus on what you have, not what you don't have. Do this for three to four weeks and wait to see what happens to your mood.

### #5: Be deliberate in kindness

Being kind to loved ones is easy, and it makes us feel good because when they are happier, we feel happier. Helping good friends and loved ones can be a bit self-serving because we usually reap great rewards for our kindness toward them. Either we directly benefit from it, or they return the favor. But the real test comes when we reach out on behalf of those we don't really like. And most often we don't really like the mothers whom we're really jealous of. So if we want to get rid of our jealousy, the best way to shovel out the rot of the feelings is to find something very nice to do for the other mother.

In the next month, I will think about some ways that I can help my fellow mothers. I know that they are also striving to be the best mothers they can be.

Here are a few ideas about how I can help:



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### Habit #5: Create a Healthier Relationship with Money

The complicated business of money stems from the fact that we all have relationships with it. And these relationships are complicated. It gives us a sense of security, control, and independence, and it can boost our self-esteem. But money can also be a curse. If we don't pay attention to our relationships with it, its power can swallow us up and take over. If we allow it too much power, it can turn us into crazy people. And we don't have to have a lot of money for this to happen.

Below are three ways to work on creating a healthier relationship with money: open your fist and grab someone's hand—therein lies real security; ask yourself why you're opening your wallet; look close to home for contentment—not to money.

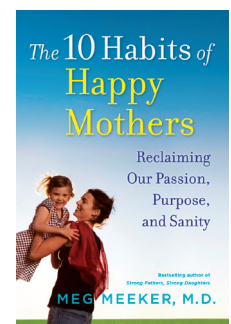
#### #1: Open your fist and grab someone's hand—therein lies real security

Those who rely on money alone for security sooner or later find themselves disappointed. So don't do it. Place your trust in real things—in yourself and in loved ones. Real security comes from solid relationships with people who will never leave you. Challenge yourself to focus on the good relationships in your life and put your energy into loved ones.

#### #2: Ask yourself why you're opening your wallet

The next time you have an impulse to get something for searching here and find out whether you are doing it because your best friend just bought something similar for her son, or because you believe it to be a genuine need. If you realize that it is because you are doing it to feel better about yourself as a mother, don't spend the money. Challenge yourself instead by giving your son something more long-lasting. Carve out an evening you that you can spend together. Then do a test: See how you feel about life the next day. Chances are excellent that you will feel a deeper sense of satisfaction about life and about yourself. Nothing else compares to success in connection with a child when it comes to experiencing satisfaction in your parenting.

This weekend, instead of picking up takeout, make a family meal at home. What is your family's favorite restaurant meal? Would it be fun to re-create that meal at home? Use your special occasion dishes, make decorations for the dining room with your children, and don't forget to play dress-up. This will all contribute to the festive atmosphere.



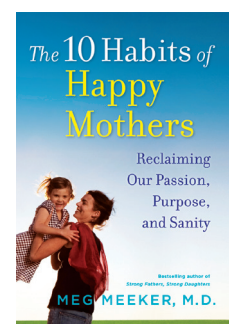
# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### #3: Look close to home for contentment—not to money

The wonderful thing for mothers is that we can train ourselves to have this same contentment. It will never come if we continually look outward at the next thing we want to get. It will come only if we acknowledge that we struggle in appreciating what is in front of us. So take a challenge to not buy anything new for one week, one month, even six months. It will change you and I guarantee it will cause you to feel happier.



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### Habit #6: Make Time for Solitude

Alone. All alone. For us mothers, the thought of being alone arouses feelings of elation. Whether we spend the day at home chasing toddlers or in the office attacking deadlines, we all dream of peace and quiet at the end of the day. The truth is we need solitude. While we can't survive without friends, community, and family, we also need a healthy balance of time alone in order to recharge physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Below are four ways to work on making time for solitude: start with bite-sized moments, find a place for solitude (and let everyone know), quiet your mind (yes, you can), and go deeper.

#### #1: Start with bite-sized moments

The first challenge is simply to determine that you will find moments for solitude and then that you will take advantage of them. For example:

- Going to the grocery store alone
- Sitting on the deck alone for fifteen minutes after the kids are in bed
- Find other places for solitude: the car, the bathtub or shower, the office, or the backyard

This week I will find three separate occasions to have 15 minutes alone:

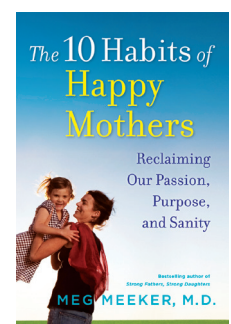
- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

#### #2: Find a place for solitude (and let everyone know)

Having your own spot, beanbag chair, or easy chair reminds you that you will have quiet soon. With a visible object, we have a reminder that spending time alone is doable and important.

My favorite "alone space" is:

I made time to visit this space:



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### #3: Quiet your mind (yes, you can)

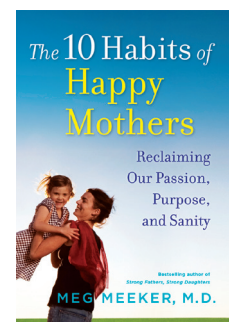
When you are alone, the next challenge is to break the habit of thinking about all of the things that you should be doing rather than quieting yourself. This is a tough one. Shutting your mind off can be done, but it takes training. Reject silly worries and give yourself permission to worry about other things later, like in thirty minutes, but not during your solitude.

Write down your worries here before visiting your alone space:

Now you can go with an open mind to take time to regenerate yourself and your soul.

### #4: Go deeper

As mothers we need to learn to wait in our solitude. We must wait for refreshment. We must learn to be patient for answers, understanding, healing, and finally peace.



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### Habit #7: Give and Get Love in Healthy Ways

The mystery of love is that it gives us life, but it can also throw us into a pit of pain in nanoseconds. That's exactly why we need to stop and take a hard look at how we do it. Giving love well takes a lot of work and receiving it is even harder for most of us.

Below are four ways to work on giving and getting love in healthy ways: take calculated risks, don't take loved ones so personally, learn to read loved ones and let them read you, and express love even when you don't feel like it.

#### #1: Take calculated risks

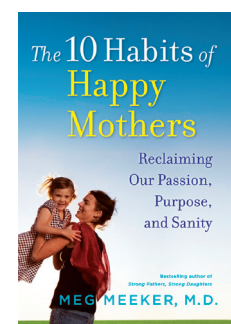
Taking charge in our love relationships means that many times we will "go first." We will be the ones to tell loved ones how we feel, we will apologize first, and we will let them know what we need. This is terribly hard and feels risky because when we do each of these things, we give people a peek into our hearts. We don't take blind risks, but we take them on the people we know deserve a chance.

So whatever relationship in our life needs help, we must take that strength and be the first to make amends. Sometimes this means thinking through the problem in the relationship. Is it communication? Is it stubbornness and an unwillingness on someone's part to let go of getting her way?

If you can't figure out the breakdown in the relationship, have someone else help you. Ask a close friend or go to a good counselor. Trust someone to help you and then when you can wrap your mind around the problem, even if it's just part of the problem, figure out what you can do to bring about resolution. Find out what measure you need to take and risk it. Go to the loved one and begin to resolve.

Think about a blind risk that you took in the past that turned out badly. Why did the situation go wrong? What did you learn from that experience? Did it discourage you from risk-taking behaviors later on?

Think about a difficult dilemma you are facing with a loved one. Would a calculated risk help to resolve the problem? What would that risk be? What are your fears about making the leap? What positive outcome could result from taking a chance?



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### #2: Don't take loved ones so personally

When we are hurt by loved ones, we must stand back and assess their words as if we were mothers of toddlers. Think about how we respond when our kids are toddlers. They have temper tantrums, throw themselves on the floor, and scream countless and ridiculous streams of accusations against us. Do we respond by apologizing to them? Or do we pick them up and put them in a safe place—their room or a time-out chair? Hopefully, we do the latter. So when a loved one hurts us, the best thing for ourselves and for our relationships with them is to do a simple exercise. Review the words as though they were directed at a friend, not at us. By removing ourselves for a moment, we can objectify their words and try to see if they are reasonable or not. So many times the words really have nothing to do with us, and everything to do with the person who is angry.

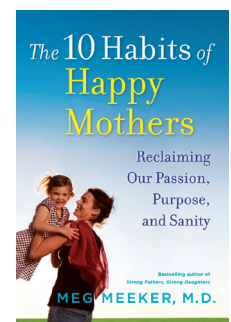
Think about a time when a loved one hurt your feelings. Is that hurt still fresh? Can you recreate the experience in your mind, imagining it from the perspective of your loved one? Call your loved one or write them a note, letting them know what you learned about your relationship after imagining the conflict from their point of view.

### #3: Learn to read loved ones, and let them read you

The best way to express love is to figure out what, specifically, makes a loved one feel loved. Love works best when we feel it and every one of us needs to feel it at different times. So how do we make our kids and spouses feel loved?

We need to do some investigative work. We need to watch them and see what makes them feel good about their relationships with us. Does our daughter calm down after a long talk? Does our son smile to himself when we mow the lawn for him when he's overloaded with homework? Every child responds to different gestures we make. Sometimes those gestures come in the form of words, physical affection, or work we do for them.

While it isn't appropriate to ask our kids outright what they can do to make us feel loved (because this isn't their job), it is very important to communicate this to our spouses. Raising kids feels like a thankless task many days so it is very important that we get refueled with love somehow. Women can read other women and figure out what they need, but men can't. They think differently. So tell your spouse what makes you feel loved and that you need it from him.



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

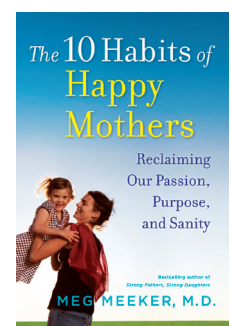
Since you are helping him learn to “read” what makes you feel loved, you must reciprocate. It won’t work if you ask for intimate things and then fail to give back. He may not know what makes him feel loved, you may have to do the same detective work you did with your kids—find out what works.

Reading clues about loved ones and revealing clues about ourselves is risky but it is the only way to let love grow between us and loved ones.

### #4: Express love even when you don’t feel like it

Love that requires us to say things that are right and good, to extend comfort and forgiveness to a loved one when he doesn’t deserve it, or refuse to give up trying, is the kind that truly makes life worth living. It is the kind of love that requires saying no to our kids and then being willing to reinforce the “no” for hours afterward. With our spouses it means that we are willing to see their faults and frailties but appreciate them anyway. Our relationship is especially important because it goes two ways more equally than do our relationships with our kids. We often give our kids a pass when they let us down because, we reason, they’re just kids. But when our husband fails us, we get tied in knots. We get mad and bitter because he should know better—he isn’t a kid, he’s a grown man. Our spouse can be our soul mate if we work at the relationship. He can become a well of support and comfort whereas our kids often drain us. This isn’t a criticism of either relationship—just an understanding of the different dynamics.

Make extra time this week to express love for your spouse, even if it’s just a few minutes. Offer a back rub, a word of encouragement before a tough day, an unexpected moment of intimacy. Surprise him by taking care of a dreaded chore, or cooking him his favorite meal. Set aside time each evening for conversation. Ask him about his day, his experiences, his joys, and his concerns.



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### Habit #8: Find Ways to Live Simply

Most of us would agree that our primary purpose as mothers is to raise emotionally, intellectually and physically healthy kids. Now think about this. If we believe that this should be a goal for every day of our lives, then we need to ask ourselves if our daily lives reflect that purpose. That is precisely why we must periodically stop and reevaluate how we are living.

Below are three ways to work on finding ways to live simply—identify and really live your priorities, change the way you talk, and loosen your grip.

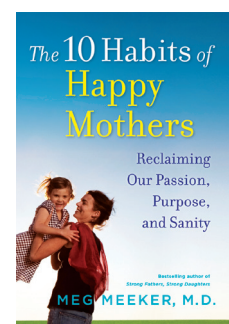
#### #1: Identify and really live your priorities

List your priorities, and then work to really make them important in your everyday life.

Make a brutally honest (and private) list of what you expect from yourself and be very specific. The list might go something like this:

Be patient with my kids and husband and never yell,  
get more physically fit,  
be nicer to my friends and in-laws,  
be ready to invest more (time, energy and effort) into my kids,  
work harder at being prettier, wear nicer clothes, etc.

Every mother's list is different. Now keep that list and write an entirely new one. Write a list of the goals you have deep down for yourself. These are your secret hopes, the things that you would do if time and money weren't an issue. List them in order of priority from 1 to 10. The two lists probably won't line up, and that's all right. Review the first list a few times. Now tear it up, burn it, or throw it into the trash compacter. Take the second list and scratch everything but the top three items off your list (remember, these should be the three most important expectations you have for yourself as a mother). Commit to yourself that you will work on only these three things for six months or a year and let everything else go.



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### #2: Change the way you talk

What we say affects the way we think and the way we think affects the way we behave. Therefore, if we train the way we talk, we can actually change the way we feel and act. For example if you want to feel better about yourself, make a list of your strengths and compliment yourself every day on at least one of them. In time, this will change your perceptions of yourself. If you want your daughter to stop worrying about her weight, stop commenting on it. We must let yes mean “yes” and no mean “no.” So often our yes means “maybe” and our no means “well, let me think about it and I might change my mind.” We make ourselves crazy by breaking these two simple rules and most women do it universally. For some reason (and this is particularly true when dealing with kids) we feel that we need to justify why we say no and convince the one we said it to that we mean it. How freeing it is to say yes or no, accept it, and then move on. Give it a go. You won’t regret it.

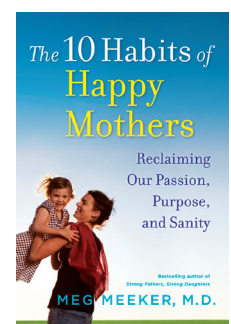
Today I said:

I meant to say:

I could have said:

The desired result would have been:

Remember that each new interaction with your family, friends, and loved ones is a brand-new opportunity for improved and more effective communication.



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### #3: Loosen your grip

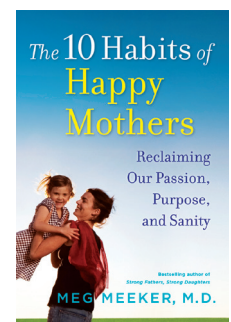
Life becomes unmanageable when we wrap our fingers around something or someone and we refuse to let go. The truth is, letting go can be one of the hardest tasks we could ever accomplish.

Our children are fully different creatures than we are, and we are in their lives for a time in order to nurture them, love them, and nudge them in different directions. We simply must accept that they are loaned to us for a time and then they are released into adulthood. That too could be said regarding other loved ones in our lives. They, too, are gifts loaned to us for a period of time. We are to love them and provide what care we can and then let go of feeling completely responsible for what they experience. If we simplify our expectations of loved ones and we simplify the expectations we place on ourselves regarding caring for them, contentment seeps into the relationships.

My suggestion is to loosen your grip on one thing at a time. Uncurl those fingers and start to release the easy stuff first. For example, we can clear away the clutter that prevents us from spending time doing things more important for the present. Simplicity is the disciplined art of letting go. It means willfully determining that your inner self needs some focus, some paring down and reorganization of priorities.

I see myself in my children. Here are some of the characteristics and habits that we share:

I admire and encourage the strengths my children have that are different from my own. Here are some of their differences that impress me every day:



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### Habit #9: Let Go of Fear

Fear acts as a self-protective mechanism because it diverts our attention away from feeling the emotions below it. For many of us, feeling anxious is simply a ruse because we can handle the emotions underlying fear. We just don't realize it.

Below are three ways to work on letting go of fear—clarify the fear, be brutally honest with ourselves, and desensitize, step by step.

#### #1: Clarify the fear

We can't fight what we don't see. Enemies must be identified and set apart. Fears are feelings, and as such, each fear must be teased apart from other feelings. One of the easiest ways to accomplish this and flesh fear out is to ask a series of "why" questions. We need to be bold enough with ourselves (and any close friends helping our efforts to overcome fear) to press ourselves regarding why we do what we do. For instance, every mother who works must ask herself why she works as many hours as she does. Is it really for the income? Is it because she doesn't want to face life without the success and identity that come with working so hard?

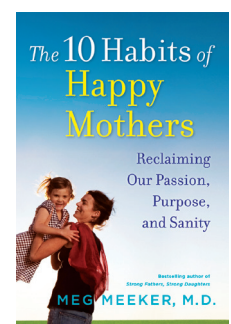
Write your biggest fear down here. Think about the joys and opportunities in life that this paralyzing fear prevents you from appreciating.

#### #2: Brutal honesty is in order

Once we get what we're dealing with, the really hard part begins. We must face the demons down. We must have the courage to admit specifically what we are afraid of and then repeatedly (see step 3 below) tell ourselves that we are in the process of smashing it. We must talk about it. We must imagine what life would be like if our worst fear came to pass.

#### #3: Desensitize, step by step

When patients have anxiety or full-blown panic attacks, physicians often put them through a program of cognitive behavioral therapy. This is a desensitization plan that forces the anxious person to face her fear over and over. A good therapist re-creates a situation where the patient can envision herself frightened, so that her anxiety escalates. She is forced to live through a series of "what-ifs" regarding her anxiety. If my fears were realized, here is what the world would like:



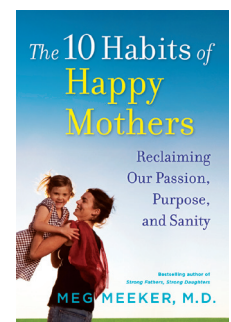
# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

Write down the scenario that you imagine. Read it over carefully. Then, rip up the paper and throw it away.

Repeat this exercise every few days until you feel that you are in control of your fears.



# The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers

MEG MEEKER, M.D.

## TOOL KIT

### Habit #10: Hope Is a Decision—So Make It!

Life cannot be sustained without hope. That is what is so remarkable and intriguing about this tiny word. It has a mysterious and generous quality. We know hope when we have it and feel miserable when we don't. Sometimes we feel as though we can't control it, but the truth is that we can. The greatest secret to having a happy life is sustaining a vibrant hope.

Below are four ways to work on making hope a decision: cultivate an attitude of appreciation, learn to trust, expect good things to come, and challenge negative thinking.

#### #1: Cultivate an attitude of appreciation

Focusing on what we have is important. First, it keeps us grateful for what we have so we will pay attention and care for it all—our children, our health, our jobs. An attitude of appreciation helps keep us hopeful. Staying appreciative also keeps us from complaining, and complaining accomplishes nothing of value. What is on your gratitude list? One of the most powerful ways to cultivate a hopeful and positive attitude is to refuse to complain.

Write down your gratitude list on a piece of paper that is your favorite color. Carry it with you in a special place. Draw upon that gratitude list whenever you are feeling depressed or discouraged.

#### #2: Learn to trust

Trust is hard, and since hope requires that we trust the one in whom we place our hope, it too is hard. Many of us have found if we trust another, we only find disappointment, and so we fall back on ourselves and retreat from leaning on others.

While independence is good in many instances, the truth is that we are very dependent people. We are relational; we need communion and connection. If others are to provide that for us, then we must trust them to some extent.

