

HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD

Clean Up
Their Mental Mess

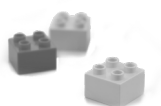
A Guide to Building Resilience
and Managing Mental Health

DR. CAROLINE LEAF

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This book is dedicated to my exceptional family:
my husband, Mac;
my four children, Jessica, Dominique, Jeffrey, and Alexy;
and my two sons-in-law, Eli and Jay.

Every bit of research I do, every word I write, is guided by the
depth of wisdom I gain from my relationships with each of you.
The love we share is a love that lasts longer than time itself.

This book is also dedicated to every parent and every child.
I want to let you know it's okay to be a mess,
because we will clean up the mess together.



We don't have a mental health crisis; we have a mind-management crisis. It is the time and the season to honor the beautiful minds of our children and their individual stories.



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Preface

Every day, it feels like we read another news report about the mental health crisis among children and youth, as well as how depression, anxiety, and suicide rates are getting worse.¹ Recently, the U.S. Surgeon General went so far as to issue an advisory to protect the mental health of youth.² Things seem bad, and for many young people, they truly are.

Although mental health challenges aren't new, they're different for each generation. Take bullying—it isn't a new phenomenon exclusive to the twenty-first century. Now, however, children take bullying home with them on their phone, tablet, or computer. No place seems safe. A great expanse of human social interactions has changed with the advent of the technological revolution. These changes have transformed the way many people, including children, perceive themselves and the world around them, which has contributed to increased feelings of loneliness and isolation among all age groups as we spend more and more time online and alone.

The world is changing, and sometimes it can feel like we're barely keeping our heads above water, whether we are parents, guardians, or vulnerable children just trying to figure out our place in the world. These feelings have been exacerbated through the recent pandemic and other major world events, which often

make everything seem worse, further straining our sense of mental wholeness.

When it comes to addressing these issues, we must first acknowledge that we are more than just individuals with individual problems. We are humans in a community, which means we need

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to address mental health on both the individual and the communal level. According to the Mental State of the World Project, countries that score higher in individualism and performance orientation tend to have lower mental well-being metrics, while countries that score higher in group and family collectivism tend to have better mental well-being.³ We cannot think of the child as only an individual; we have to consider the child in addition to the environment they occupy, including how we

as adults manage our mental health and how this can impact our children.

We need to look at how we're teaching our children to process and navigate the new world in which we live. Are children being shown how to manage their mind? Are we teaching our children to navigate the highs and lows of life? Are we helping them understand, from youth, that where the mind goes, the brain and life follow?

This process starts with us as parents: how we manage our mental health is a model for how our children will manage their mental health. Research reflects that the unmanaged stress of an adult becomes the unmanaged stress of the child. So, one of the best ways you can help your child with their mental health is by working on your own mental health.

By implementing the methods in this book, you will learn how to successfully navigate the mental distress that comes from the messiness of life, and, at the same time, demonstrate to your child that it is possible to find peace amid the storms.

Our mind drives who we are: how we think, feel, and choose. Our mind drives how we wake up in the morning and start the day; how we show up throughout the day; how we interact with our family, friends, teachers, and environment; and how we manage the good and bad things that happen to us. Our mind drives how our body makes cells, impacting our biological health and how we absorb nutrition from our food.⁴ The mind controls everything to do with our “aliveness.” We can go for three weeks without food, three days without water, and three minutes without oxygen, but we don’t even go for three seconds without using our mind!

If the mind is the driving force of our “aliveness” as human beings, we should be putting a massive amount of energy into understanding and developing the skills of mind-management to help both ourselves and our children manage the vagaries of life. A child with underdeveloped mind-management tends to be more vulnerable to intense feelings of confusion and be overwhelmed as they attempt to process what they’re exposed to, because they don’t have the mental skills necessary to understand what is happening to them or to communicate what they are going through.⁵ It’s our job as parents, caretakers, and educators to help them navigate a world that can easily feel scary and overwhelming. One of the best ways we can do this is by giving them the gift of mind-management.



In this book, I offer a scientific, evidence-based first step in dealing with the crisis in children’s mental health through mind-management. I will give you easy-to-use, simple ways you can start teaching your child how to manage their mind so that as they grow, they can live their best life. Additionally, along the way you may learn a thing or two about how to manage your mind so that you, too, can live a life of resilience, peace, and joy.

The key to this book is understanding how the mind functions. I talk about how whatever we think about the most grows,

how the brain merges with our environment, and how the mind drives this process. I also discuss in simple ways how you can communicate easily with your child, how an unmanaged mind can create a messy mind, and how this changes the brain through neuroplasticity, which contributes to feelings of fear, confusion, sadness, and being overwhelmed.

The story doesn't end here! The mind and brain can always change through directed mind-management. I have spent nearly four decades investigating how minds and brains work and have

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developed a simple, evidence-based system called the Neurocycle, which I discuss in this book. The Neurocycle works by identifying toxic thoughts and destabilizing them over cycles of 63 days by building up positive, healthy, reconceptualized thoughts. In this book, I teach you how to use this system with your child and give you steps, exercises, and practical examples to help you teach your

child how to expand beyond mindfulness to embrace, process, and reconceptualize their experiences.

As you work through the information in this book, you will learn how to create a safe environment for your child to work on their mental well-being. You will learn how to give them the skills they need to be able to tell their own stories. You won't learn how to solve all their problems or make their pain go away, because this is impossible. You will, however, learn how to help them ask the kind of questions they need to and receive the kind of mental help they require.

When we help our children become more self-regulated in every way, including how they manage their emotions, behaviors, and perspectives, we teach them how to tune in to the messages coming from their mind, brain, and body and to use these to their advantage. As we do this, we create a space for our children to discuss and process what they see and hear both online and in real

life. We help them get comfortable with facing the uncomfortable and teach them how to embrace their emotions and receive the messages those feelings bring them instead of being afraid of feeling sad or confused. In this way, we avoid pathologizing childhood and help them embrace their humanity.

In part 1 of this book, you will learn how to help your child understand the keys of how the mind functions. Part 2 shows you how to teach your child the Neurocycle for mind-management. In part 3, you will learn how to apply the Neurocycle in different situations, such as day-to-day struggles, trauma, sleep issues, and more.

To help you on this journey, I want to introduce you to Brain-ee!



Brain-ee is a cartoon character I developed that walks this mental health journey alongside your child, which will help make talking about their mental struggles easier. Brain-ee is used throughout the book to explain the concepts in a visual way and is a great tool to help your child understand their emotions and what they are going through. You can even get Brain-ee as a toy for your child at drleaf.com to help comfort them and teach them how to communicate when something is wrong and when they need help.

THE KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING HOW THE MIND FUNCTIONS

In the following chapters, I help you understand—and help you help your child understand—the mind-brain-body connection, what thoughts and memories are, and the importance of self-regulation.

1



The Mind-Brain-Body Connection

Whatever we experience with our mind goes through the brain and the body, which is why mind-management is so important. If we don't manage the impact of our experiences, they can affect our mental *and* physical well-being.

In this chapter, I introduce how the mind-brain-body connection works so that you can have a better conceptualization of how to help your child understand the way their thoughts can impact how they feel mentally and physically.

The thing we need to remember is that children are often a lot more insightful than we give them credit for. However, since they're still growing and developing, they often don't know what to do with everything they observe and experience. It's easy for children to feel overwhelmed by the vast expanse of information absorbed through the mind and brain daily.

With or without mind-management, just by virtue of being human, children wire life experiences into the neural networks of their brain and throughout their body *with* their mind. This process changes the mind, brain, and body—it has an impact,

which will manifest itself in how a child functions mentally and physically. We are psychoneurobiological creatures, and the mind, brain, and body are intricately connected.

For example, say your child is anxious. The “thing” that’s making your child anxious is an actual physical thought made of stimulus responses inside memories in their brain.¹ The mind comprises the action of them worrying or being anxious about this thought. The more your child worries about this thought, the more it can impact them on both an emotional and a physical level (the body), including physical illness symptoms such as an upset stomach or heart palpitations.²

If your child has ever had a tantrum, I’m sure you know how this feels. If they are worried about school, for example, and get very upset when you try to get them ready in the morning, this is a warning signal that’s emerging from their thoughts, which, in turn, were built into the brain by their mind based on the way they processed their experiences.

To better understand this, think of a garden. When the garden is messy and full of weeds, it does not look or feel good. When a mind is like a messy garden, it feels like it’s not working, and things quickly seem to spiral out of control. On the other hand, when the garden is blossoming and healthy, a few weeds or a storm may have an impact but do not affect the long-term health of the garden.

Thankfully, there are great systems in the mind, brain, and body that can help us teach our children to build a healthy garden in their mind. When they learn how to manage their mind, they can make the mind-brain-body connection work for them, which will help them deal with the impact their experiences have on them, no matter their age.

This begins by observing the signals sent by the mind, brain, and body. These signals can be categorized into four main components, emotions, behaviors, bodily sensations, and perspectives,³ which I discuss in detail in chapter 3. A big part of mind-management is tuning in to these signals to find the story they’re attached to

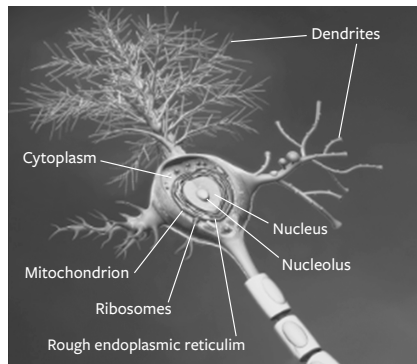
and then changing how this story plays out inside of us *and* in our future. This involves self-regulation, which helps us to stand back, observe ourselves, and monitor how we interact with the world.

Understanding the Mind

Understanding this process of mind-management begins with understanding the mind. The mind is how we think, feel, and choose in response to everything going on around us while we are awake. The mind's thinking, feeling, and choosing work together as a team to "grab" our life experiences and put them into our brain as energy.

This energy results in structural changes in the brain that contain the memories of our experiences, which cluster together into a thought like the branches on a tree. These changes are driven by the mind through a process known as neuroplasticity.⁴ The mind essentially plants our experiences into the brain as "thought trees."⁵ Thought trees are the neurons made of axons and dendrites in the brain.

Here are two images to help you understand this. The first is a drawing of axons and dendrites on a neuron. The whole neuron is the thought tree, and the dendrites are the memories in the thought tree.



Axons and dendrites

This next image is what these thought trees look like inside the brain.



A collection of “thought trees” or neurons

The mind uses the brain to store what it experiences—that is, the events and circumstances of life—as “thought trees.” We respond and react to these experiences while we’re awake and sort them out while we sleep, which is why we have dreams and nightmares.⁶ A thought is therefore the product of the mind-in-action. A thought is a physical thing made of proteins and chemicals that occupies mental real estate in the brain as a tree-like structure of our neurons *and* as gravitational fields in the mind *as well as* in the cells in our body.

This is why the brain is often described as a neuroplastic responder. Each time it’s stimulated by our mind, it responds in many ways, including neurochemical, genetic, and electromagnetic changes. This, in turn, grows and changes structures in the brain, building or wiring in new physical thoughts. The brain is never the same because it changes with every experience we have, every moment of every day, and when the brain changes, the body changes as well.

The mind builds all these daily life experiences into our brain and body and fixes them at night when we’re asleep. The mind is therefore more than a machine that runs nonstop. It’s an incredibly

complex driving force that runs the brain and the body. The mind “shows up” in the brain and the body and becomes our sentience. Our mind is where our identity and uniqueness are formed. It is where who we are is recognized—our consciousness.

In terms of the mind-brain-body connection, the brain and the body are the physical parts made of matter, whereas the mind is the energy part made of electromagnetic waves and gravitational fields.⁷ They’re separate but inseparable, because they all need to work together to function as a living human in the world. This means that whatever we experience with our mind goes through the brain and the body, which is why mind-management is so important. If we don’t manage the impact of our experiences, they can affect our mental *and* physical well-being.

The mind itself has three parts, the biggest of which is the nonconscious mind. The nonconscious mind is massive and never goes to sleep. It’s extremely intelligent, is incredibly fast, and can work on multiple things at once to keep us alive and functioning. It monitors all our existing thoughts and the memories they are made of, and it’s always looking for whatever is worrying or affecting us in some way to help us repair it and restore balance.

When the nonconscious mind finds a thought that is worrying us, it sends it up through the second part of the mind, the subconscious mind, which is like a bridge between the nonconscious mind and the conscious mind. According to my theory, called The Geodesic Information Processing Theory, the nonconscious mind operates 24/7 and is what drives us. It feeds information into the conscious mind that then shows up in our “symbolic output,” which comprises what we feel, say, and do, how we feel in our bodies, and our perspectives.⁸

Unlike the nonconscious mind, which works 24/7, the third part of the mind, the conscious mind, is awake only when the body is awake and is much slower than the nonconscious mind. The nonconscious mind processes about 90–95 percent of everything

we are exposed to at any given moment, but the conscious mind is able to focus on and process only about 5–10 percent.⁹

As mentioned above, one of the main jobs of the nonconscious mind is to scan all the information in the neural networks, root out the toxic stuff, and make us consciously aware of it. This is where the conscious mind is really good at stepping in and grabbing these toxic thoughts from the nonconscious mind, deconstructing them, and reconstructing them so they don't affect our mental and physical health. The more we learn to manage our mind through self-regulation, the more we activate this dynamic interplay between the conscious and the nonconscious mind—our built-in protective mental health system!¹⁰

The Neurocycle

The scientific system of mind-management I have researched and developed, the Neurocycle, forms the basis of this book. It will help your child develop communication between the different parts of their mind and learn how their mind affects their brain and body. It will teach your child how to understand the messages from their nonconscious mind and prevent toxic thoughts and memories from getting stronger and affecting their mental health.

When we learn to manage our mind and change our perceptions, as I observed in my most recent clinical research study, we can change our brain's response, our physiology, and our cellular health, which play back into our mind because of the feedback loop between the brain and the body.¹¹

Mind-management is one of the most effective ways to build up a child's resilience because it teaches them to focus less on what happened to them and more on what they can do about it. It helps children contextualize their life experiences instead of just diagnosing them and giving them a label based on a vague set of symptoms. It goes beyond the current system of biological

mental health care to address the whole child: their biology, their community, their psychology, their individuality, and their story.

Our life is the product of our experiences, which becomes our individual life story. When we give children the mental tools to meet their needs, we give them the tools to tell their own stories. We can teach them that although we can't always change what happens to us, we can change how it impacts us and plays out in our life.

Your Child's Innate Resilience

This involves actively learning how to see things from our children's perspective. They are the experts on who they are and the lived experiences they have, and it's our responsibility as the adults in their life to validate their uniqueness, support them, and help them embrace, process, and reconceptualize their own narratives.

Indeed, given that perils and strains in life are natural, unavoidable, and inevitable, parents, caretakers, and teachers have a responsibility to help children develop their innate resilience—to teach them to grow and learn from diverse life experiences. Yes, we need to protect our children as they grow into adults, but we also need to give them the tools to manage failure and painful experiences, because these are an inevitable part of life.

I would go as far as to say that protecting our children means teaching them how to manage life even when we are no longer there to safeguard them. If we immerse our children in messages that failures and hurtful experiences will do lasting and irreparable damage to them, we will negatively affect their ability to develop resilience. As Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt note in their book *The Coddling of the American Mind*, we have developed a “modern obsession with protecting young people from ‘feeling unsafe’” that, in many ways, is inhibiting their ability to feel able to meet life's challenges. This is possibly “one of the (several) causes

of the rapid rise in rates of adolescent depression, anxiety, and suicide” that we observe in our world today.¹²

Similarly, in his book *Antifragile*, Nassim Nicholas Taleb discusses the concept of *antifragility* as a way of understanding resilience.¹³ In the same way that our immune system builds defenses against disease by the *presence* of disease in the body, humans need the presence of challenges to repair, learn, adapt, and grow. Without challenges, our natural, inbuilt antifragility (or resilience) can

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become inflexible, fragile, and inept. We aren't helping our children's mental health when we try to protect them from everything bad that can happen. Given that risks and stressors are natural parts of life, we should help our children develop their innate capacity to grow and learn from their life experiences.

Fortunately, we live in an era where it is increasingly common to speak about mental health issues. More and more people are aware that it is normal for children and adults to struggle mentally and that we all need help at times. This has opened the conversation and turned something that has often been hidden and misunderstood into something that can be understood and managed.

Every day, we are learning more and more about how we function as human beings and how, when it comes to the mind-brain-body connection, there is always hope. Regardless of how young or old we are, we have an immense capacity to change.