

Working Parents Are Angry. But What Can We Do?



A psychologist examines the maddening stress of balancing work and parenting during a pandemic.

BY Yael Schonbrun, Elizabeth Corey | AUGUST 31, 2020

On the first day COVID-19 shut down school for my three children, my husband and I (Yael Schonbrun) went into problem-solving mode. I canceled afternoon private practice patients, and he notified colleagues he would be unavailable for the morning. It was frustrating—but that was just one day, right?



Now, it's six months later. With no school or child care throughout the spring and

summer, we figured out a host of hacks: tag in and out to accommodate each other's work schedules, use an enforced rest time to grab a work hour

midday, get work done before kids awake and after they go to bed, and strategically arrange screen time for the children when we both have meetings.

Throughout the summer, I awaited word from our school district about plans for the fall so we could make our own plans. I've now heard plenty of words, none of them good. Thus far, the start of the public school year has been delayed three times, with various models of learning offered in each iterative plan. Current plans offer a hybrid model involving a sum total of eight hours per week of onsite education. It's only possible for my husband and me to both work when all three kids are in school, and I still don't know which hours of the week my elementary school children will be onsite—meaning I can't commit to a preschool schedule for my three year old.

Right now, I'm panicked and profoundly pissed off. Privileged as my husband and I are to have jobs, screens, and each other, our solutions have felt like band-aids for a gaping wound. But with no other salve available, we soldier on.

I wish I could be Zen about the whole experience. Since I can't, I have found solace in the fact that other working parents are feeling a similar, unabating anger. Written early in the quarantine, one powerful essay argued that feminism was falling apart in the pandemic. Because women in heterosexual relationships are more likely than men to have part-time or flexible hours, we've had to

take on the majority of parenting responsibilities, often yielding to our partners' schedules and our kids' needs. Other essays followed suit, describing mothers losing jobs at a higher rate than fathers, doing far more child care and schooling, and still trying to sustain their work lives. I read them all, periodically pumping my fist in the air and thinking, "Yes! This!"

It wasn't just working mothers suffering, though. Life with kids and a job under lockdown has been relentless, pressurized, and sometimes downright injurious for everyone. Employers press for productivity in a faltering economy, employees suffer long virtual meetings with awkward guest appearances by toddlers, frontline workers sleep in tents and garages so as not to endanger their families, single parents hang on by a thread, and most parents struggle with the challenges of trying to educate and entertain kids at home. I read these articles, too, thinking, "Yes! This!" The essays stoked my simmering anger by pointing out that we were all at the receiving end of a deep injustice.

Then, I'd arrive at the end of the essay—and I'd deflate. What could I do about any of it?

I know all too well that it's natural to be carried away by the currents of anger. Sometimes it can even be useful. Anger keeps us safe when our survival is under threat. One of my patients worked in a company that offered little accommodation during the transition to quarantine living. She grew

increasingly furious when she couldn't get time off during the day to help her child who was struggling to adjust to remote schooling and was exhibiting heightened symptoms of ADHD and anxiety. Anger helped my patient assert herself with her boss, shifting vulnerability to empowerment. After she was let go, anger helped to sustain her confidence that it was better to be jobless than to exist inside a company culture that couldn't support her family's needs.

Anger offers the advantage of boosting optimistic thinking, which, to no one's surprise, feels a whole lot better than hopeless thinking. We've also witnessed recent upsurges in political action, blogs and articles, and innovations in approaches to work, all of which are the product of anger activating new efforts. Finally, anger helps us get others on board with our individual goals, which serves us well when we are fighting for a cause. In other words, anger can help us to solve big problems.

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All of this sounds intuitive, even productive, until you find yourself with a problem that has no solution. That's the point at which anger can become destructive. Anger without solutions can quickly become mere complaining—or, worse, a toxic obstacle to change. The righteous anger of teachers who don't want to be put in harm's way drives resentment, not collaboration, from working parents who can't monitor home learning and simultaneously get their own work done. Parents of children who are immunocompromised grow irate rather than sympathetic to working parents who beg for onsite educational options.

It's become clear that administrators, policymakers, educators, and child care providers won't be stepping in anytime soon with help for working parents. We might attribute this deficiency to the obstructions of anger, or perhaps a general ineptitude—there is certainly a case to be made for both. But the lack of an effective response to the pandemic working-parent dilemma may also be inevitable. There are, quite simply, no good solutions to be had. So, here we are: Parents can't solve the problems we face in a pandemic, as individuals, and it isn't likely that we will stop feeling anger and frustration.

What *can* we do? In a word: *Accept*. We can stop fighting the situation, if only in our heads.

facing
until
COVID-19

Read It Now

I can hear it now: Acceptance? *Really?* (Cue the record-scratch sound effect.)

Accepting pandemic realities doesn't mean resigning ourselves to them. Rather, it means that in any given moment, we don't waste energy expecting a situation outside of our control to be different than it is.

“When we talk about acceptance, we're talking about acceptance of our *internal experiences*, not endorsing an external situation with a stamp of approval,” says Jill Stoddard, clinical psychologist and author of *Be Mighty*.

After years in private practice as a psychologist, I've grown accustomed to patients coming to me with problems they want to solve—things they're unhappy or angry about and want to fix. I often tell patients that I don't have any simple answers. And I explain that uncomfortable emotions are like quicksand. The harder we try to resist them, the more our discomfort intensifies.

I'll remind patients that not every problem can be solved. Conflicts with family members may simply persist. People grow old or sick, and die. Children do things we wish they wouldn't. And working parenthood, no matter how well-resourced or strategic we are, involves a neverending tug of war between two demanding roles.

The effects of this pandemic truly seem unsolvable, even as many of the best employers, physicians,

politicians, and scientists are earnestly working to make things better. The causes of this impossible situation are diffuse and complex.

Against this background, we must make choices that require balancing terrifying risks. We want to prioritize the health of our families, but also our own mental and physical health. We want the happiness of children, but also their (and their teachers') safety. We need to focus on own financial stability but also on the financial well-being of our employees and employers. We cannot pretend there is a single cause of the problem we currently face, nor can we realistically expect some entity to swoop in and save us.

But accepting our anger and our circumstances can help us grow more deliberate in our response. "We can get curious about what anger is trying to tell us," says Stoddard. She continues:

If you're angry that you're struggling to juggle work and parenting, it's probably because you really care about both your career and your kids. If you're angry that your spouse is not pulling their weight, you probably care about equality and your marriage. Getting curious about the anger instead of working to push it away can help you figure out what needs your attention and, possibly, what needs your action.

Asking questions like, "What is the real issue here?" and, "If my anger isn't getting me anywhere, what can I do differently?" is a good place to start.

It might also be useful to consider a general truth: For most working parents, the anger we feel right now is not (exclusively) a sign that someone or something has wronged us. Rather, it's a signal that we are going through an exceedingly difficult period.

Our anger indicates that things beyond our control are wearing us out and asking more of us than we can possibly deliver. In one study of patients with

chronic pain, accepting torturous circumstances outside their control helped individuals to redefine normal, accepting the pain rather than being absorbed by frustrations or judgments about how they *should* be feeling or what they *should* be accomplishing.

Finally, and most powerfully, acceptance itself can facilitate change.

A patient of mine recently had an epiphany in the middle of a couples therapy session, asking me, “Is this what you mean by acceptance: That I need to accept that my wife and I will argue? That I *will* get angry?” From the beginning of their marriage she had tried to deny feelings of anger, repeatedly promising herself she would stop getting angry. Her strategy, paradoxically, led to unpredictable eruptions.

Accepting anger, but choosing a more deliberate response, has begun to shift the unhealthy cycle in which she and her wife had been trapped. Working parents, too, can use anger to spur change, such as talking to a boss about realistic work hours, renegotiating home responsibilities with a partner, or getting politically active.

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—Yael Schonbrun, Ph.D.

Of course, choosing a more deliberate and productive response to anger sounds nice in theory, but we need concrete steps for what to *do* when that flash of rage comes on. Two steps can help to interrupt the cycle of anger: 1) calming down our threat system, and 2) becoming more deliberate in choosing action.

It’s important to recognize that anger causes our limbic systems to fire up. That system helps us prepare to fight, fly, or freeze—to protect ourselves from threat. But when this system is activated, our prefrontal cortex—the part of our brain that plans, makes choices, thinks logically and creatively, and manages and processes our feelings—goes offline, leaving us operating on emotional autopilot.

To become more deliberate in our response to anger, we need to first get our prefrontal cortex back online. Here's how we begin: *Noticing*. Notice the kinds of thoughts, feelings, and physical experiences that tend to crop up when a flash of rage is coming on; become intimately familiar with your red flags. Whether it's heat rising in your chest, a flurry of thoughts about injustice, or a tightness in your throat indicating you are about to blow your lid on your kids, know and notice your signs of anger.

Once you notice rage coming, *pause*. In that pause, engage a behavior that calms your limbic system. You can use common grounding strategies like breathing deeply, touching a cold surface, splashing water on your face, calling an understanding friend, or labeling your emotions aloud or in writing. Each of these activities helps to calm the limbic system and gets the prefrontal cortex re-engaged.

Now you'll practice choosing a deliberate response to your anger. Ask yourself, "What do I need most in this moment?" Is it taking political action, engaging compassion, or just taking a few minutes to stare at the wall? Given limitations in what might be available to you, you'll need to reduce your expectations and savor some small piece of what you can access.

Take heart: Locking yourself in your bathroom can be healing if you appreciate the solitude of that one minute; hugging your unhappy kid can be sweet if

you savor the smell of their damp, teary skin; and zipping off an email to an impatient colleague can be satisfying if you take a moment to appreciate crossing something off your too-long to-do list. Being deliberate in choosing action brings small pleasures and has the added benefit of preventing you from inflicting damage on relationships with your children, partner, colleagues, or customers.

The difficulties of the present aren't likely to subside anytime soon. I'm anticipating a logistically nightmarish fall as my husband and I continue to tag-team work and parenting, and I continue to begin my work days at the end of a long parenting day—the dreaded second shift taken to a whole new level. My own anger will continue to come and go, depending on the day's challenges and the latest news. I've been working on accepting that. And so when I do get a rare opportunity to enjoy my coffee, I now make a more deliberate choice. I set down the angry essays in order to savor the moment. Accepting that this may go on for a while, I need to stockpile serenity whenever I can.

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