

Revamp



YOUR Mornings

AFTER HEARING SO MANY MOTHERS COMPLAIN ABOUT THEIR HECTIC, HARRIED, UNHAPPY MORNING ROUTINES, LIFE COACH HELEN ABELESZ CREATED A FIVE-WEEK PROGRAM TO HELP MOMS TRANSFORM THEIR MORNING RUSH INTO A CALM, CHEERFUL, RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING TIME

HELEN ABELESZ

Devorah* had the craziest mornings, *every* morning. From the moment she opened her eyes until the kids were out the door, she was racing from one thing to the next in a flurry of non-stop motion. It started with waking everyone up, changing diapers, helping the little ones get dressed, finding matching socks, and searching for the missing shoe. Next, she made different breakfasts for each child and negotiated what they wanted in their sandwiches that day.

Inevitably, there was at least one child in tears about something and another throwing a tantrum. Between resolving sibling arguments and cleaning up messes, Devorah would rattle off demands: “Brush your teeth!” “Put on your shoes already!” “Find your coat!”

She was always late out the door, and just as they finally got going, one of the kids would suddenly remember that he needed to bring something for school that day, or had left his homework on the table. There was no calm, loving send-off. Instead, Devorah would be shouting, “Go! Run! You’re late!”

By the time Devorah dropped the kids off at school, she was exhausted and just wanted to crawl into bed. She’d replay the negative exchanges that took place that morning and wish she could go back and press redo. She realized that instead of blaming her children for their crazy, stressful mornings, she needed to take the lead and make changes herself.

She turned to me. As a life coach who specializes in helping busy mothers, I’ve found that one of the most trying times of the day is the morning rush. So I developed a five-week, one-on-one coaching program — called “Calm Mornings” — where I help clients create a personalized morning schedule for their family.

When I first met with Devorah, I explained that there are six steps in all, and it starts with identifying the daily stressors.

Step 1

TALK IT ALL OUT

At our first session, I asked Devorah to describe in detail a regular morning in her home. Just by talking about it out loud, she was able to identify specific issues and see patterns emerge. One easy technical solution was to think of as many things as possible that could be done the night before, so she'd have fewer things to do in the morning. In Devorah's case, she wanted to make sure the backpacks were ready and that she or the kids would put out their clothes in advance.

Step 2

ELIMINATE STRESSORS AND TIME-WASTERS

In some houses, the primary stressor might be a slow-rising, slow-moving child. A time-waster might be a routine traffic jam at the bathroom sink. For Devorah, a daily issue she encountered actually had to do with herself: If she went to bed too late, she usually had less energy — and less overall patience — for her kids. Consequently, even normal childhood antics would stress her out in the morning. So she committed to setting a slightly earlier bedtime for herself.

As for a "time sucker," Devorah was often monopolized by a particular child who regularly acted up in the morning. Devorah decided that she and her husband would sit down with their son at a time when everyone was calm. In a loving way, without any blame or accusation, the two parents would say that they noticed their son was having a hard time in the morning, and they wanted to help. Together, the three of them would brainstorm some ideas to try out.

Step 3

WORK OUT A NEW ROUTINE

This step is all about logistics and timing. How long does it take the kids to wake up, brush their teeth, get dressed, eat breakfast, and so forth? How many minutes does it take to drive to school (or what time does the bus pick up)? Working backwards, Devorah and I figured out when her kids had to be out the door, what time they had to be in the kitchen eating breakfast, what time the alarm had to be set for, etc. We also calculated what time Devorah had to be up in order to have quiet time before the kids awoke.

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Step 4

CALL A FAMILY MEETING

It's hard to overhaul a morning routine without getting all family members on board. That's why I advise my clients to call a family meeting before implementing any new regimen. This means sitting all members of the family around a table (ideally with nosh to keep the kids seated).

In Devorah's case, she started the meeting by talking about how she had noticed their mornings were very rushed and stressful. She explained that she wanted to make some changes and wanted their help to make it work.

She first asked her kids if they had any ideas, and they made suggestions, such as buying a cool alarm clock for every room. Every single idea was written down. Next, Devorah suggested some ideas we'd discussed, like creating a set menu of which foods the kids took to school each day. Everyone was on board, so she sat with each child separately and came up with an individualized menu, which she hung up on the fridge.

I encourage this because giving kids some control over what they eat isn't only important, it also opens the door to calm communication in the future. For instance, if they complain on a certain morning that they no longer want tuna sandwiches, a mother can reply, "Fine, so take this today because that's what we agreed on, but this afternoon after school, we can make some changes to your menu to make sure you get what you want." The family also talked about preparing their backpacks and school uniforms the night before.

Sometimes, kids balk when they hear about the new routine. For the ones who are simply overwhelmed, you can create visual charts to make the routine easier to follow. For teens, you can stress that the new schedule is designed to make *everyone's* morning more enjoyable. Incentives also help: offer a family prize or tell them, "If we have calmer, happier mornings all month, then on Rosh Chodesh, we'll go out for ice cream as a family."

Step 5

SET SMALL GOALS FOR PERSONAL GROWTH

Many women tell me they can't change. They have a lifelong habit of being stressed or a perfectionist or hard on themselves. But I've seen clients make huge changes in their lives and entirely transform how they feel about themselves. And it wasn't from taking monumental leaps in personal growth; rather, it came from making small, specific changes. Here are the five areas of self-development that I emphasized with Devorah:

Affirmations

If we're always telling ourselves, "I'm always stressed" or "I'm always late" etc., then we'll probably continue to be stressed and late. The words we use are powerful, and the more we repeat these same negative messages about ourselves, the truer they become.

If we flip these messages, however — such as, "I can be calm" or "I can be on time" — we'll be more likely to be able to break free from our bad patterns. It sounds so simple, but repeating affirmations a few times a day can really change the way we see ourselves.

One technical note: The positive messages or affirmations we tell ourselves have to ring true for us — otherwise we won't believe them. That's why the word "can" is so important, as in "I can be on time" (even if I don't always succeed in reaching that goal).

When Devorah heard about this concept, she decided to get up a few minutes earlier each day, and give herself that time to get into the right mindset to have a calm morning. She'd say *Modeh Ani* and really focus on thanking Hashem for another day. Then she'd say some positive affirmations, such as, "Today I will be calm. I'm someone who can have calm mornings." She'd then turn that over

to Hashem and say, "Please, Hashem, help me to not shout at my children today and have a calm morning."

These few minutes had a huge effect on how Devorah started her morning. Stating how she wanted her mornings to progress and asking for help from Hashem set her intentions and reminded her of her priorities.

Goodbyes

Devorah decided to make it a priority for herself to always say goodbye in a loving way: "Bye sweetheart, have a great day," or, "Bye, hope the Chumash test goes well." It wasn't always natural, and she'd sometimes forget, but over time it started to be the norm.

Breathe through stress

Devorah knew that if she stayed calm, her kids would stay calm, and the whole house would run more smoothly. But that was a lot easier for her to understand than implement. So we set one small "stay calm" goal: to breathe down the stress.

Research has proven that deep breathing is the easiest way to reset your mood and counteract the sweaty palms, frantic thoughts, and fast heartbeat that accompany stress. This technique works best when you take deep, slow breaths *before* you go into a stressful situation, or immediately after you notice signs of feeling stressed.

It also helps to practice deep breathing when you feel calm, since it accustoms your body to enter a relaxation state more quickly.

To offset the stress of the early morning, Devorah consciously took a few deep breaths before she roused the kids from their sleep.

Quit

comparing

Many of us moms have an image in

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our heads of what type of mother we'd ideally like to be. Devorah was no different — we spoke in depth about how she felt about herself as a mother and what her parenting priorities were. The advantage of an "ideal mother" image is that it reminds you of what you're striving for. The problem, however, is that our "ideal mother" is often unrealistic. So when we compare ourselves with her, we often feel like we're failing and aren't good enough.

We also compare ourselves to those around us and don't understand how other mothers who have even more children seem to be coping much better than we are. The truth is that we're all struggling and are just trying to do our best. Many women look like they have it all together, but in reality, they're just getting through the day like the rest of us. Instead of comparing ourselves with others or with our "ideal mother," we can focus on all the good we're doing. We may not be perfect (nobody is), but we love our children, and we're trying.

Self-care

You cannot underestimate the impact of self-care on a mother. For Devorah to best give to others, she needed to also give to herself. We looked at her week and tried to find time for her to exercise and do something for herself, even if it was just for 30 minutes. This critical strategy gave her more energy and emotional strength to look after her children.

Step 6:

PUT THE NEW ROUTINE INTO PRACTICE

Even after the big family meeting, it still took some trial and error to get Devorah's new morning routine running smoothly. The kids needed reminders to put out their clothes the night before and prepare their backpacks. But once they saw firsthand that prepping in advance made the mornings much calmer, they naturally bought into the system.

At the breakfast table, there was much less complaining because everyone already knew what they were having and could prepare it for themselves. Instead of negotiating with her kids, Devorah could actually enjoy their company.

Another major change occurred after Devorah and her husband sat down with the child who had previously monopolized Devorah's time. It's not that this son suddenly stopped throwing tantrums or never lost anything again, but he had a newfound sense of ownership over his mornings. Sometimes he'd even surprise everyone and be the first one dressed and ready for school.

Perhaps the biggest shift for Devorah was an internal one. Because she had a few moments to herself every morning, she was able to start the day with a sense of calm. She was also better rested since she went to bed earlier. Instead of instinctively reacting to whatever came at her, she started making conscious parenting

decisions. Yes, she sometimes lost her resolve and would stay up late or skip her weekly exercise class. But all in all, she was operating from a more internally stable place.

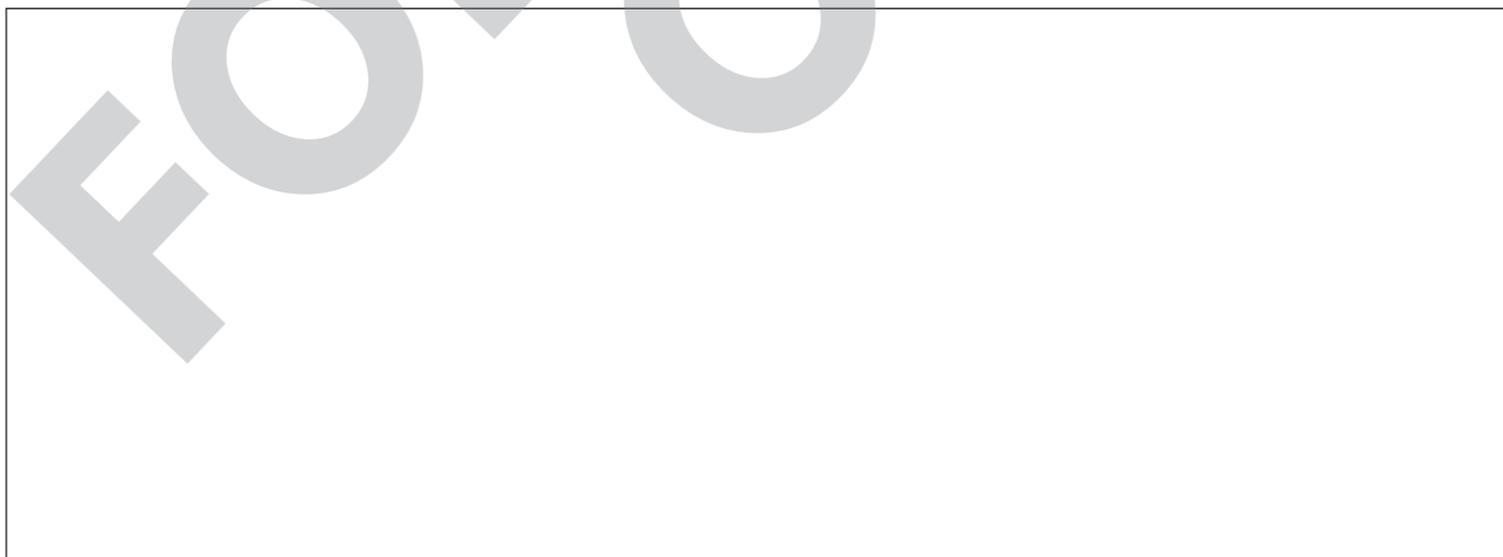
Even when the new routine was firmly established, the family still had setbacks, like when Devorah or someone in the family got sick, or when a relative would visit from abroad and everyone would stay up late and wake up cranky in the morning. But once Devorah recognized the pattern, she knew to expect it and didn't stress about it. She'd simply restart the routine once the relative was gone or the sick family members were feeling better.

She kept reminding herself of something I had told her early on: We're not aiming for perfection, but simply for things to run more smoothly.

Devorah's favorite part of her new morning routine is carpool drop off, not because she's happy to see her kids go, but because she looks forward to saying her goodbyes and seeing her kids smile back with their own goodbyes. 😊

* Printed with permission from Devorah. Names and details have been changed.

Life Coach Helen Abelesz has been coaching since 2008. She specializes in helping overwhelmed moms create routines that allow them to feel calmer.



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