

570: Stop Worrying About Your Adult Kids



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Jody Moore

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If you have adult children, and you're spending a lot of your time thinking about them, wondering how they're doing, worrying about them, thinking maybe you should have done something different in the past, or maybe you should be doing something different right now, or just worrying about what's going to happen next, I want to tell you something. This is not necessary, probably not useful, and today I'm gonna teach you exactly how to stop doing it. Welcome to *Better Than Happy*. I'm Jody Moore. This is episode 570, How to Stop Worrying About Your Adult Kids. Let's go.

Welcome to *Better Than Happy*, the podcast where we apply all the tools of psychology, human behavior, and mindfulness to live our best lives, navigate challenges, and achieve our goals. I'm Jody Moore and I'll be your coach today. Let's do it.

Hey there, my friends. Welcome to the podcast. Thanks for joining me today. I've been doing a new series on Instagram. If you wanna go follow me on Instagram, Jody Moore Coaching, and I call it coaching for my car. And I just have a bunch of note cards with questions that people wrote down when I've gone to speak at live events.

I ask people sometimes, write down one thing in your life that could be better or different, or that's making your life harder. And so I have these really sweet, real life, real people questions and issues. And as I was going through a bunch of them to find one to make a video on for Instagram, I noticed that probably 80% of them have to do with people worrying about their adult children. Things like my children have left the Church, or I'm afraid that my son doesn't really like me, or what if I don't get to be in their lives enough, or sometimes worries about grandkids, or how often we get to see grandkids. Sometimes people saying, if I had done things differently in the past, would something be different right now?

And I thought this would be a really good topic to do a podcast episode on, because I know it's on a lot of your minds, and I do think that what's difficult is that when our children are younger, when we're talking about toddler problems, even young elementary school kid problems maybe, we talk

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about it with each other a little bit more openly. And you go to your friends who are moms or who have had kids that age and kind of talk about what's going on, maybe get advice, get support.

As our kids get older and maybe their challenges become what feels bigger in our minds, and also these are personal issues, we understand it's not appropriate anymore to just be talking to everyone about it. And so I do think it's kind of a lonely place. I think it's difficult to get support and help on, and so we're gonna talk about it here today on the podcast.

So here's where I wanna begin. I want us to start with just a basic definition of worry. I wanna tell you what I mean by it, and I wanna tell you what I think it really is, what I think is going on in your mind, so that you can get a little bit of leverage over it by understanding it a little better, okay? I like to define worry as fear disguised as wisdom. Okay, let me say that again.

Worry is fear disguised as wisdom. So it's fear based, it's coming from some kind of fear. Now let's remember that fear is always about the future. Fear is about something that could happen, that we don't want to have happen, and it's an imagination, a story, a movie we're watching about what could go wrong, right? And the reason I say it's disguised as wisdom is because it feels useful, it feels wise, right?

It feels preventative. It feels like if I think about this problem enough, and I focus on what could go wrong, and I worry about it, then maybe in some way I'm helping to prevent it. And I want to tell you that that is never the case. That worry is not preventative. Fear is not our best emotion by which to be prepared and take proper precautions or make wise decisions.

I'm all for you doing any of those things, taking precautions, making wise decisions, preventing problems. Fear is not the fuel we want to have when we do it. Okay, so I know this feels useful, this worry. It is not. It is fear disguised as wisdom, dressed up in a Halloween costume of wisdom.

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But it's not wisdom, it's actually fear. Okay? So let's talk about prevention for just a minute, because this worry will tell you, if you stop focusing on me, you're for sure not going to fix this problem or prevent this possible disaster. Okay? So prevention, first of all, is usually never a 100% guaranteed thing.

Prevention is what we do in a lot of areas of our lives pretty effectively. Like I can try to prevent illness by eating foods that I think are good for me, by taking vitamins, by trying to get enough sleep, by staying hydrated, by exercising, by doing whatever my doctor recommends, maybe even there's preventative medications and procedures, right, that we go through. Any of those can be useful, they're never 100% guaranteed. I can do all of those things really well and still may end up getting sick or with some kind of illness or injury, right? But of course I would want to do anything I possibly could to prevent it.

We do this every time we get in a car, we buckle a seatbelt, because we know, hey, I wanna try to prevent any serious harm coming to me or anyone else in my car, so everyone needs to get their seat belts buckled, right? By buckling my seat belt, I'm gonna pay attention when I'm driving, I'm gonna be focused. Does that mean 100% I'm not gonna get in a car accident? No. But I wanna take preventative measures to protect people and minimize the odds of that, right?

Now, there's a lot of other things we do, like brushing our teeth to try to prevent cavities, prevent gum decay, prevent problems in our mouth in the future. We might use birth control when we want to prevent a pregnancy. Do any of these things guarantee that we won't have a cavity or a pregnancy? No, of course not. No guarantees, but prevention, good way to live your life, right?

So I want you to think about this with regards to your adult children, right? When you are brushing your teeth, buckling your seatbelt, using birth control, etcetera, there's not fear there, right? We're not panicked, we're not

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doing it because we're scared. We're just doing it because it feels like the wise, right thing to do. Notice the difference.

When you're taking proper preventative steps, it doesn't take up a lot of space in your brain. It's just something you do, you don't think about it for a long time before or after, you don't do it driven by fear, you just do it as more of a habit and a routine. So that's how you will know whether you're worrying or just being preventative. There is not fear involved, it's not a big dramatic thing, it just happens and you move on from it. That's called wisdom.

That's called being preventative. Now, what does this look like with your adult kids? We're going to talk about that in just a minute. I just want you to be onto yourself. Worry is just fear disguised as wisdom.

Okay, so we've talked about the fear part. Now let's talk about why this is not wisdom. And I'm going to give you some questions to ask yourself about what's going on to see if this is wisdom, or if this is worry that is most likely not, okay? So first I want you to ask yourself, is me thinking about this, me watching this movie, me feeling afraid or worried, is it impacting my child in the way that I want? Is it changing them in the way that I hope that they will change?

Either they are making different decisions, they are somehow strengthened in some way, they are comforted in some way. Is me sitting over here being afraid changing my child? I've never had a client say yes. So maybe there's an exception. Let me know if so.

But mostly the answer is no. It's not changing my child. My child is still behaving how they're behaving, or thinking how they're thinking, or feeling how they're feeling. Okay, so it's not controlling the child. Let's get clear on that.

Next, is it bringing you closer to your child in the way that you want to? Is it making your relationship better in some way? I've never had anybody say

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yes to this either. I've never had anybody say yes. Me waking up at night in a cold sweat, or constantly thinking about this, or talking about it, or feeling anxious about it makes my relationship so much better. No, it doesn't do that. It's not necessary to improve your relationship. It's not even helpful, right? Okay, the next question. Is it causing you to show up better by your own definition?

Is it helping you be more of the person that you want to be, more of the parent to your child, or more of just the kind of man or woman that you want to be in the world? You get to decide who you want to be, but for most people, we want to be supportive, we want to be compassionate, we want to be open, we want to be loving, right? Lots of nuances again that everybody gets to decide individually. But is it causing you, by you thinking about this, you being afraid, you freaking out about this, is it making you show up better? Of course not, right?

It actually makes us show up worse. We disconnect, we have to pretend, we have to hide. Maybe sometimes we get upset and lose our temper, or maybe we're just withdrawing and avoiding. None of those are gonna create ultimately what we want in our relationships with our adult kids, so probably not useful. Okay?

And then lastly, is it enjoyable for you? I know this seems like a silly question. Of course nobody enjoys worrying. But we just have to slow down the brain, because this part of your brain that's offering you worry thinks it is useful in some way. So I like to remind myself, it's also not enjoyable.

I'm suffering right now. Now, here's my favorite part of all of this that really helps me get rid of worry, is I remember that this worry, remember, is about something I think might happen in the future, right? And if that thing does happen, because we already established that I can't control it necessarily. Right? There's a chance it may happen.

There's also a very good chance it might never happen, but there's a chance it may happen. So if that thing happens, then I will experience

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negative emotion. I will want to probably. It will be appropriate and necessary and useful for me to experience negative emotion if something terrible happens to my child or regarding my child. Okay?

Now, is me feeling terrible right now going to minimize that suffering? And the answer for me is always no. Let's take an extreme. Let's say I'm afraid my child's going to die. There's something they're involved in, or they're at risk for some reason of death, okay?

And I'm afraid of my child dying. If my child dies, I will need to go through a lot of grief, which will include a whole bunch of different emotions. Me sitting here right now in fear, worrying about my child dying, is not going to minimize my grief if it happens. I'm still going to grieve it just as heavily. All I'm doing right now is pre suffering.

Pre suffering doesn't minimize suffering. It just adds more suffering. It prolongs the suffering, if there's going to be suffering. Okay? So that is the kind of slow down I want you to do in your head to remind yourself, okay, this isn't useful.

Now let's talk about how do we stop doing it. Now I want to make just a little side note for those of you that have younger kids, that don't yet have adult kids, okay? The more we attempt to control our young kids, and the more we do, because when they're young, there are some levers we can pull, right? We can actually, when they're really little, we can actually literally pick them up and move them and make them do certain things. The older they get, the harder they get to control, but we still have levers.

We have consequences. We can take away privileges and phones and whatever else, right? And I'm not saying you shouldn't do that. I'm saying if you're doing that driven by fear, and you're trying to control your child in order to feel like they're going to be okay, if you're trying to manipulate the world around them, if you're the kind of parent that runs around and tells the other parents how their kids need to treat your kid, or you're always in the school trying to control the teachers or the principal or whatever else is

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going on, you're setting yourself up for a lot of pain when you have adult kids. Because as they're younger and you have more influence, more ability to, again, pull levers and control, you fool yourself into thinking that you're responsible for your kid's results, that you can create it in some way.

You even do temporarily create it. The problem is as they get older, that ability to manipulate the world or them becomes less and less. And until at one point they leave your house probably and are independent and you have no control anymore, not to mention the more we have done that to young kids, the more they push back because of how we fight for our agency, and now we have a real power dynamic struggle happening, which will cause you to feel completely out of control. So if you're a parent of younger kids, just keep that in mind. You want to keep yourself in check.

Your kid's supposed to have agency. They're supposed to experience hard things, the world is not meant to acquiesce to them all the time. It's good for them to go through challenges and struggles and trials, and you need to let them navigate it as much as possible. I'm not saying don't protect them, I'm not saying don't parent them, I'm saying think about, is this me driven by fear, or is this me being the kind of parent I want to be? And if you are a parent to adult kids, and you look back and go, yeah, I think I did too much of that when they were younger.

I think I was overly controlling, or whatever you want to call it. It's okay. We can still make corrections now, so don't overthink it. Anything that's in the past is in the past. We're going to leave it there and decide it was perfect, and we're going to grow now from here on.

So let's move on to the second thing I want to teach you today. The first thing was that worry is just fear disguised as wisdom. The second thing is then, well, let's better understand what's creating this fear. Where is this fear coming from? Well, I want you to think about the last time you felt really afraid, like shaking in your boots afraid.

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Was it at a haunted house? Was it watching a scary movie? Because for me, that's the last time I felt that afraid. Thank goodness, because I don't want to be in the mountains, know, coming in contact with a bear. That's another time I might feel very afraid.

But if that happened, feeling afraid would be the best possible thing for me. Fear gives you a surge of adrenaline. It gives you access to these super powerful, wise parts of your brain that will cause you to move faster than you could otherwise move. Gives you strength you otherwise don't have, it gives you wisdom you otherwise don't have access to. So when there is immediate danger, we want to have fear.

When there is not immediate danger, there's just a scary movie, we don't need to feel fear, but the brain doesn't know the difference between this is real danger, this is made up danger. So when we're talking about your kids, why do I call that made up danger? Well, because it's a movie you're watching in your head about what could go wrong in the future. Remember, fear, unless we are in immediate danger and we wanna keep it, then fear is always just about a future scenario, which is a scary movie you're watching in your head. What if is usually the title of the movie.

What if this happens? What if that happens? What if this goes wrong? What if that goes wrong? Those scary movies playing out in your mind are making you afraid. They're making you afraid. That's what's causing your fear. It's not anything real. Now, if that's true, and we're going to double check it with some of the strategies I'm going to give you here, then the third thing I want to teach you is that you need to change the channel. Stop watching that scary movie.

Watch something different. What do I mean by that? I mean focus on a different topic. Maybe you don't focus on your child at all. If it's too hard for you to think about that kid and not watch the scary movie, then maybe you change the channel from thinking about that kid to thinking about something entirely different.

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A different person in your life, a different something that you want to do. Now this is where I love helping people to develop a goal or a hobby or a challenge or a problem that is theirs to own. Come up with something you want to work towards. You are meant to be challenged in this life all the way up until the day you die. So if you don't have enough things challenging you, you need to find something to challenge you.

You need a problem to solve. You need something you can get strategic about. You need something to direct your brain towards. Otherwise, it's gonna try to focus on other people's problems that are not yours to solve. And if you're a mom like me or a dad, the number one place it likes to go is with your immediate family, with your children or your spouse, or maybe it's a parent.

Somebody else who you love, your brain's gonna think, I should focus on their problem. But guess what? Their problem is their problem to own. It is not yours. It is just a scary movie you are watching. I don't care if your kid is addicted to drugs, if your kid is making serious poor choices by most people's standards, it's still not your problem to own. Does this mean you don't care about it? Of course not. Does this mean you wouldn't want to have conversations? Of course not.

But it needs to feel like buckling your seat belt. If it feels like watching a scary movie or running from a bear, you're not ready to do that. Come up with something you can focus on that is yours to own. Another thing you can do to change the channel is just to bring yourself back to the present moment. So every time your brain says, oh no, my son is having this ABC problem, and what if it never resolves, and what if it gets worse?

You come back to like, wait a second, where is my son right now? And maybe you don't know exactly, but take a guess. As far as I know, he's at work, or as far as I know, he's at home in his apartment, or as far as I know, he's in his bedroom, or as far as I know, he's at school. And as far as I know, he's fine right now in this moment. Because guess what?

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Usually everything is always fine right now in the moment, and the rare times when it's not, we want to be on high alert, but we don't need to stop and rationally think at that point, right? You're gonna snap into fight, flight, or freeze mode, and you're gonna get things done very quickly as you need to when there is true immediate danger. And then the last strategy I'll give you for changing the channel is to take that what if question and focus on the positive. We like to talk about it in terms of 50-50, right? Let's say there's a 50% chance that something's gonna go terribly wrong in your kid's future, but there's also a 50% chance that everything will go really great, and that this trial or challenge they're in right now is going to take them to a new version of them.

They are going to have some lessons learned and some kind of personal growth or evolution that is going to leave them better than they were before. So you can play out the worst case scenario, or you can play out the best case scenario. Like they become a whole new person, and they end up doing a lot of good in the world all because of this challenging thing they overcame. So that's another way to change the channel. Answer what if with the positive what ifs.

Okay, the fourth strategy I have for you today to stop worrying about your adult kids is to adapt some new beliefs about yourself and your children. Whatever you're thinking and believing right now, they're just stories, they're just sentences, and they're probably valid. I'm sure you have a valid case for every one of them, and your brain's been collecting evidence that they're true, and that's fine. But if they're causing you to worry and you have a lot of fear, then they're not useful, I promise you. And so you have to try on some new beliefs.

I'm going to offer you some here, but you try on what works for you. This is one I like. How my kids turn out is not because of me. It's not. Whether they're doing amazing and they're thriving and I think they're making great choices and they're happy and they're good people and they're succeeding

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at life, or they're really struggling, and they're in a dark place, and they're making poor choices, and they're living a really hard, awful life.

That's not about me. How do we know? If you have more than one child, you know this to be true. But even if you have only one child, you know people that have more than one child, and so you know this to be true, right? If it were about us, all of our kids would have the same results.

They'd all be living, all of my children who I raised would be having the same life and the same results. They do not, clearly, right? Even if you have twins that you raise together, they still will end up with different lives, different results, because their results are not about you, my friend. They're just not. You're not that powerful. I always say, listen, I don't take the credit or the blame. I'm here doing the best I can. Some days I'm doing a good job. Some days I'm doing it awful, as is the way of it. My kids are not supposed to have a perfect mother.

Otherwise they wouldn't have me as a mother, they wouldn't have you as a mother, they wouldn't have any of us as mothers or fathers. They're supposed to have human parents, Okay? So they're going to have the life experience they're meant to have, and there's nothing I can do to interfere with that. My only job, here's another thought you can try on, my only job is to love them. And that's not always easy to do.

Some days it's very easy, with certain children it's easier, right? But there are times when it's hard to do. That's my work to do. How do I best love them? Loving them is not the same as trying to control them.

Loving them is not me knowing what's best for their life. I don't know what's best for their life. I'm just here to try to love them, support them, be compassionate, be curious, and at the same time, try to love myself. Try to be what feels like the healthiest version of me that I can possibly be. Physically healthy, but mentally and emotionally healthy.

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What does that look like? Those are useful questions for me to be asking. Not how am I going to get my kid to change what he or she is doing, or to feel differently, or to be different. Not a useful line of questioning. Here's another thought I'm going to offer you about your kids that might sound like a negative thought, but actually provides a lot of relief, which is that our kids are supposed to struggle and suffer.

What? This is bad news, right? But it's the reality. Our kids are not here to go on a joy ride through life. They are here to have all kinds of experiences. Beautiful, positive, happy ones, and painful, difficult, challenging ones. That is the way of the human experience. That's how it's supposed to be. So when you recognize this, then when your kids are struggling, you can remind yourself, yeah, that's part of it. That's part of the deal.

And I think what's difficult is we think we know the solution to their struggle and we can just get rid of it. So why wouldn't we just get rid of it? Well because it's not that easy, right? Maybe they need to struggle right now. Clearly they do at times.

So what do we do instead? How do I get to peace? How do I manage my struggle? If I'm struggling about my kids struggling, I can either just decide, of course I am and I want to struggle right now, or I can decide I don't want to, and I can take a look at what I'm thinking, I can get some coaching, I can come to terms with what's going on and process emotion, and there's so many things I can do about my own struggle. What I often can't do anything about is my child's struggle, especially if they don't want the help.

And then here's one final thought I'll offer you to try on, which is their journey is their own journey. It is theirs to go on. It's theirs to own. It's theirs to experience. It's theirs to guide and impact and navigate when they can. And it's not mine. I'm not responsible for it. I haven't created it. And it's not mine to interfere with. They're supposed to go on a journey in this life, right?

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Who am I to interfere with that? I'm going to be over here loving them, supporting them, even being available to offer help or insight anytime they want it. But that doesn't mean I can change or take away their journey. And what it certainly doesn't mean is that I know what their journey should be. Most of the struggling and suffering I see parents having over their adult children is them believing that they know what their kid's life should look like.

They know what they should be doing or what they shouldn't be doing. We don't know, my friends. What a relief. We're not supposed to know, we don't need to know, which means nothing's gone wrong. Again, how do I best love this child, and how do I love and support myself as well?

One other thing I'll say about this before I move on to the last point is that sometimes this means I might need to set boundaries with my child. I might need to say no. There are situations when in order to love the child and love yourself, that might be necessary. But those are the kinds of questions I want you to ask yourself. Who do I want to be, and what do I want to create for my journey?

Then the fifth and final strategy I want to give you to help you stop worrying about your adult kids is to learn to process the clean pain so that it doesn't turn into dirty pain as much as possible. So if you've never heard me talk about clean pain and dirty pain, this is developed by behavioral scientists, and they basically talk about clean pain as being really appropriate and cleansing and expansive. So if I'm watching my child struggle, there's going to be some clean pain there. I'm going to want to feel sad. Maybe at times I even want to feel mad, maybe I want to be confused.

Whatever pain you feel like is going to help you process what's going on and move through the experience to acceptance at some point. Dirty pain on the other hand doesn't move us through an experience, it keeps us stuck in the experience. It tends to be things like judgment. Maybe it's judgment of your child, judgment of your past self and the way you raise them, lots of criticism, lots of what ifs, like if only I had done this differently,

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this would be differently, which we don't even know if that's true, right? So it's spinning in drama and speculation.

It might be guilt and shame, it might be blame, maybe it's blaming someone else for what's going on with your child, blaming their current spouse, blaming your spouse, blaming whatever other circumstances, all of that is dirty pain because it doesn't cleanse you, right? Think about clean pain as like a good cry. We're like, I really need to feel bad about this, and there's going to be times when you need to feel bad about things. Most people are so uncomfortable with clean pain that they jump right into dirty pain, because dirty pain typically isn't as emotional. It often doesn't have tears involved, it just looks like anger.

It looks like storytelling, story fondling with others, right? Talking about it in a way that gets lots of validation and kind of fuels your belief and validates your story. But all of that just keeps you stuck, right? On the other side of a good gossip session, if you will, you don't feel better, you feel a little bit worse. But on the other side of a good cry, where you just cry out, you know, whatever you're feeling and you process it, maybe you listen to sad music, maybe you go for a drive, or you go for a walk, you just have a cry, you feel better.

That's the difference between clean pain and dirty pain. And I hate to say it, but as a parent, we signed up for some pain here. It's worth it, and it's okay. But processing clean pain is not the same as worrying. Worry is dirty pain.

All right, my friends, so listen, I gotta tell you something. All of this is gonna be okay in the end. It really is. If it's not okay, it's not the end yet. Hang in there.

Thanks for joining me today for Better Than Happy, and I'll see you next week on another episode. If you like this, please do feel free to share it with others. I appreciate you, and I'll see you next time.

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