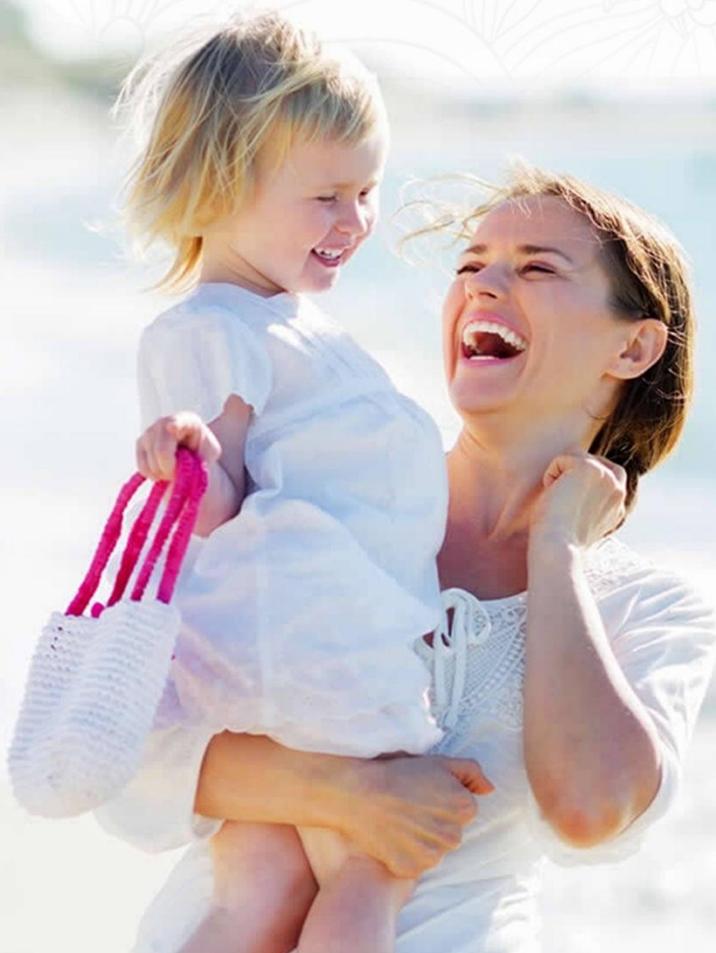


ERIKA BRAGDON

# LESS STRESS MORE JOY

**10** Simple Strategies for Busy Moms



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# Introduction.

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You want a happy home. Happy children. Happy husband. YOU want to be happy. But then life happens and it doesn't go as you planned. Your toddler is in one of those phases where she responds by throwing a massive tantrum every time she doesn't get her way.

Maybe your teen is acting defiantly and you have no idea how to respond. The washing machine breaks when you have a huge mountain of laundry threatening to take over the house.

You desperately need to breathe. You want to love life, not just survive. You want to cherish the little moments that everyone says will disappear before you blink. But how?

Do you ever feel like you start your day off with the best of intentions, but before you know it, it's dinner time and you're not sure what you did all day? You might even feel guilty that you've accomplished what seems to be so little. You love your children, you adore them. But there's no gold star or recognition for changing stinky diapers. There's no "mom of the year" award for being woken up multiple times because your child has bad dreams or growing pains. Not that you want an award or need recognition, but it would be nice to know that all your hard work counts toward *something*.

You know in your heart that you are investing your time, your heart, and your life into raising these tiny people who you hope will grow up and eventually become happy, healthy, responsible adults. But in the day to day struggle? It feels endless.

I have four children, ages 4-12, and I can't even tell you the number of days when I did almost nothing. It certainly didn't feel like it though! I would change diaper after diaper, I would finally get to the bottom of the laundry pile, only to find another pile in the closet. I'd forget to thaw out the meat for dinner and be left with boxed mac and cheese again. And I won't even get started on cleaning! Keeping your house clean with little ones is like walking in quicksand; it's practically impossible.

But have hope! I'll show you some simple strategies that have changed my life. I've learned how to enjoy life *today* and not just "survive." It's rare now that I'm overwhelmed to the point of tears or wanting to give up. I'm far more productive than ever before, yet I'm less stressed. But I don't do it all. I've learned to set limits and be intentional about what really matters without sweating the rest.

By following these simple ideas, you'll find balance and perspective again, learn to accomplish more in a shorter period of time, and you'll find joy in *today*.

# 1. You Can't Do It All.

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While I'd love to think I'm superwoman and can handle everything that comes each day that would be wrong. I can't do it all. Neither can you.

Yes, you know that. But do you embrace the idea or still try to fight it? It took me a long time before I realized that that even though I'd say the words "I'm not superwoman or supermom," I would still try to do it anyways.

Trying to do *everything* is a guarantee for failure. Personally, I'm not a big fan of investing a lot of time and effort into something that's guaranteed to fail. I have too many things to do already! I'm guessing it's the same for you.

Once I realized what I was unintentionally doing, I gave myself permission to *not* do everything. That simple concept was incredibly freeing for me.

I will *not* get everything on my to-do list done today. That's okay.

You will *not* get everything done today. That's okay. Say it out loud. Multiple times if you have to.

Because, you see, in redefining our expectations, we give ourselves a chance to enjoy life. To sit down and enjoy a cup of coffee with a friend. To spontaneously take our kids to the park on a beautiful day. To give our little one who scraped a knee some extra hugs and kisses. To read a book. To watch your favorite TV show. To relax. To laugh. To breathe. To *live*.

## 2. What's Really Important?

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It may seem obvious that family comes before work. That you have to take care of yourself in order to care for your kids. But if you don't identify what's truly important, life will get in the way of your best intentions.

For years, I said that it was important to take care of myself, but I didn't eat properly or get enough rest. I'd stay up late catching up on the latest social media craze because it was for work, but I would be exhausted the next day. I'd say that it was important to spend time with my husband, but other things would get in the way and it wouldn't happen. I would plan to read more with the kids but by the time dinner and dishes were finished, it was easier to just turn on the TV for a few minutes before bed than to gather everyone together for reading time. I had great intentions, but poor results.

A few months ago, I read a book that talked about the importance of priorities and it made perfect sense. With a renewed determination, I wrote out a list with six things I designated as most important to me. That list changed my life. Who would have thought that writing the obvious on a piece of paper would matter so much? But it did!

When you identify and define your priorities, your life will become clearer, instead of a muddled, never-ending rat race. You'll learn how to dedicate time to what's really important and be intentional about it. You'll accomplish more and still have time to enjoy your family or simply relax.

One important thing to remember: you will need to re-evaluate your priorities from time to time. Even the best-intentioned priorities may not always work, so don't be afraid to rearrange your list or even change it completely.

**I stumbled on a list of my priorities from two years ago. (I had forgotten I even wrote that; clearly it didn't work.) It went something like this:**

1. A growing relationship with Jesus
2. Loving my husband
3. Spending time with and loving my children
4. Taking care of myself - exercise, eating right, relaxing
5. Blog
6. Friends

It's the obligatory list of things I should do. But that was just the thing: it was cliché. It wasn't me. It didn't work and I soon found myself back to my old stressed life without much joy. If anything, my list made it worse because it added more guilt!

Now take a look at my current list. This is the list where I thought carefully about what I needed, not what other people would think.

1. My relationship with Jesus
2. My health
3. Nate
4. My children
5. Living Well Mom & my writing
6. Friends & women's ministry at church

Notice how I moved myself from position four to two? It felt wrong at first to put myself before my husband and children, but this move was key to bringing some joy back into my life. I also know that I'm happier and more content when I spend regular time with the Lord, praying and reading my Bible each morning, so I kept this at number one.

While I always knew that it was important to care for myself, I didn't realize just how essential until this past year. My health had declined so much, I was forced to put myself first. I was faced with the fact that I wouldn't have much, if anything, to devote to my other priorities, including my husband and children, if I didn't. But the simple fact is that prioritizing myself trickles down to my family and other things on my list.

So yes, it might mean that I have to tell my husband I can't stay up and watch a movie with him because I need to go to bed early. But I'm a kinder, happier wife the next day. And you know what? My husband goes to bed earlier with me and he's healthier now too!



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It might mean that I have to tell my daughter we can't go to a school function because I'm worn out and need to stay in that night. But it also means that I'll be able to rest, care for myself, and do something special with Emily that weekend because of my decision.

List out your priorities. Think carefully and remember you can reorder and re-evaluate as needed. Remember to be honest and write what is truly important for you, not what you think *should* be your priorities.

# 3. Give Yourself Permission To Say “No”.

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One of the best parts about having your priorities clearly laid out is you can say "no" with a clear conscience to things that aren't as important.

It's not easy to say "no". It's hard to tell your kids they can't do one more after school activity when they want to so badly. Or you can't volunteer for a PTA event. Or help with children's church on Sunday. Or take on another project at work. Or make a meal for someone who's just had a baby when you're struggling to pay your own grocery bills. It might even be something much bigger like deciding whether homeschooling is the right choice for your family.

Sometimes the obvious choice isn't the right one, because we tend to allow ourselves to be guilted into doing things we aren't actually meant to do. It may not even be others putting pressure on us, but us doing it to ourselves!

I can't tell you how often I used to agree to something because I felt obligated or wanted to please someone. But I had no business adding one more thing to my plate when I was already exhausted, overwhelmed, and barely coping.

If you're struggling with a decision, take other people out of the equation. Ask yourself if this is the right choice for you and your family. While it's not easy to say “no,” especially if it's for a good cause or if someone is trying to make you feel guilty, it's absolutely essential that you learn to. Once you start prioritizing *your* life, saying “no” to the non-important things will become easier with time and it will bring immense freedom to your life.

It doesn't always have to be “no.” Sometimes a simple adjustment may be all that's needed. Volunteering for children's church every Sunday may be too much right now, but you could do once a month instead. Pick a different evening to go out with your friend when the one she proposed is already scheduled. Offer to donate a little money to the PTA instead of fundraising.

# 4. Be Intentional About What's Really Important.

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A few weeks ago, I rebranded my site to Living Well Mom. It was fantastic, but I was slightly overwhelmed with just how many things were involved. It wasn't as simple as renaming my social media handles - there were certain sites that were less than willing to cooperate, emails to swap over, and so much more. And these were things I needed to work through somewhat quickly.

After a busy week, one Friday afternoon, I was faced with a decision: I could spend a few hours catching up on work or I could go to our weekly Bible study at church with my husband and kids that evening. If I went to church though, I'd likely have to do some work on Saturday, something I try to avoid because I like to keep weekends for family time.

The obvious answer is that I should have gone to church. God first, right? Yes, my relationship with Jesus is at the top of my list, but that does not mean I must do every event or meeting at church. Don't get me wrong - church is important to me, but it is not synonymous with Him.

In the end, I decided to stay home and catch up on work. It was the right choice and I knew it because I felt peaceful about it. Because of my decision, I was able to spend the weekend enjoying time with my family, instead of stressing over unfinished work.

When you clearly define your priorities and give yourself permission to say “no” when necessary, you'll become more intentional about what's truly important to you. It almost comes naturally!

# 5. Routine, Not Schedule.

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A mother's job never ends, but there is a way to be productive and give ourselves an "end" each day. While planning and time management are part of that, it doesn't need to be complicated.

I've tried many ideas in an attempt to be more productive, including scheduling out my entire day, time blocks, and more. Scheduling helped for awhile because it gave me time limits (I tend to be a perfectionist and spend too much time attempting to get something "just right"), but a strict schedule didn't leave breathing room for life to happen. If a discouraged friend would call and need to talk, I'd be worried about the clock ticking and running behind. If my son got sick and needed extra attention, I'd stress about my "schedule" being off.

I quickly realized that scheduling my whole day wasn't the way to go. But I was more productive when scheduling. So how could I find that middle ground? The answer was in my list of priorities. When I compared my daily to-do list with what was most important to me, I had new clarity and was able to plan my days with that important insight.

I now use a daily routine, which offers the flexibility I need, but keeps me on track throughout my day. This routine involves the whole family and not only am I more productive but, as an added benefit, my husband is too!

A daily routine will help you plan your day more efficiently without the stress of an hourly schedule, which often isn't realistic for busy moms. You likely already have somewhat of a routine, even if you don't realize it, and you may need to simply tweak it to get it to work.

Look at what you already do each day and think about what works and what doesn't. Your morning routine might work well until mid-morning when you get side-tracked on Facebook. Maybe your whole morning is chaotic from the time you rush out of bed late to getting the kids out the door to school. In either case, you need to re-evaluate and change something. You probably can't control early school mornings, but there are small things you can do to make it less stressful, like packing lunches the night before or getting up a little earlier so you can give yourself time to wake up before the kids do.

Try not to change your entire day immediately. It's tough to successfully implement huge changes all at once; you'll be better off picking the biggest problem area in your day and



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working on that. Pick the time that you get bogged down the most - when you're the most stressed or easily distracted.

Remember to give yourself grace, especially if you have little ones. Sleepless nights and colicky babies can take you to the brink of exhaustion and then some. Remind yourself that this is a phase and think of something you can do to be kind to yourself. It could be as simple as allowing yourself time to relax when the baby finally takes a nap instead of washing dirty dishes.

Whatever you do, if it doesn't work, don't give up! Change something and try again.

# 6. How to Stop Dreading Your To-Do List.

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About a year ago, I was tired of feeling like I never accomplished anything. My list of things to do never got smaller and it was discouraging to feel like I never made any progress. I couldn't relax because I constantly felt the nagging of unfinished tasks. I started dreading each new day because it felt like a failure from the start.

My list had become an ugly monster that was sucking the joy out of my life. But a to-do list is meant to help, not make life harder! That realization forced me to rethink how I was doing things and make some simple, yet drastic changes. I learned how to make my to-do list work for me, instead of the other way around.

With everyone and everything begging for your time and attention, how do you pick and choose what to include on your daily task list?

I used to attempt to write down every single thing I had to do each day. Of course there were far more things that I didn't include, but I tried to cover my main bases. My theory was that if I had to do something, I may as well write it down and get credit for it. The problem with this method is that whatever didn't happen sat there staring at me, mocking me for not doing it. Instead of 6 things on my list today where I finished 3, I may have only checked off 12 items from a list of 40.

Your to-do list should not be very long. Limit it to no more than 10 items per day, preferably 5 or 6. This is a more reasonable amount that allows you to focus on what's important and let the less-important things go.

To give you an example, my daily list typically includes 2-4 "must finish" tasks for blogging, 2-3 household tasks (ie laundry, housework, dinner preparation), and 2-3 other things I've deemed as priorities. While there are many other things I do each day that I don't write down, limiting my to-do list to things that are very important helps me accomplish those important items and let the rest go. Now when life happens, I just go with it instead of stressing.

# 7. Most Important Tasks First.

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While it may seem like a no-brainer that important tasks should be finished first, it's tempting to put them aside until later in the day because, after all, you must do them. The issue with this method is that life tends to get in the way. Before you know it, you're rushing to bake those cookies for the school bake sale at the last minute. Or you're writing that blog post late at night when you should be asleep. This mentality of playing catchup will trickle over to the next day and the next and the next. And before you know it, your list has taken control.

You need to prioritize your day as you make your daily to-do list. This will be immensely helpful as you decide what's absolutely essential, what you would like to do, and what can wait until tomorrow. You could even break your list into those three categories to make it even easier.

Each weekend, I take a few minutes to look over both my family and work calendars and plan out my week. I use a free app called, Tick Tick, which allows me to quickly add things to each day's to-do list. I start by adding my "must-do" deadline tasks, then fit in other things based on my remaining time. Every night, I pull up my list for the next day and plan out the next day accordingly. I do this by writing out the next day's list on a small notebook that I keep at my desk. While I can and do refer to the app on my phone, writing it out by hand motivates me.

This is just a personal preference and you can do whatever works best for you.

Don't forget to include yourself. As amazing as you are, you are not superwoman and if all you do is work, work, work, you WILL burn out. (If you haven't already.) It's essential that you regularly plan and prioritize time for yourself to relax and recharge.

Give yourself time each evening when you are done. If you've finished your most important tasks earlier, anything else on your to-do list can wait. Watch your favorite TV show, browse Pinterest (just for fun, no work!), read a favorite book, or even take a hot bubble bath. You will be doing more to help yourself be successful each day by purposefully planning this time for yourself than if you try to check off "just one more thing."

I can picture you laughing now. "Me? A bubble bath? Ha!"

It might not happen overnight, but as you start thinking about what's important in your life, you *will* find time for yourself. Even just once a week can go a long way toward recharging your batteries.



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One important note: It's okay to not finish everything on your daily list, even a short list. I rarely finish everything on mine each day. On the days I do, I celebrate. If not, I don't stress about it, because I've already taken care of what's most important.

# 8. Avoid Time-Wasters.

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What's the one thing that sucks up time like an overly efficient vacuum cleaner?

You might quickly check your email and before you know it, an hour has passed. Maybe it's Facebook, another social media network, reading blogs or news stories, a favorite book, or tv show.

None of those things are horrible, in fact, some of them are wonderful. But if you find yourself consistently spending more time than you want, you need to avoid them, at least until you finish your most important tasks of the day. *Then* if you want to get lost on Pinterest, go for it.

I used to visit Facebook early each morning to promote my latest article. While I had great intentions about it, I would get distracted very easily. I'd see pictures of my adorable niece and scan my sister-in-law's page for more family updates. I'd read about a new plugin other bloggers recommended, so I'd check it out and maybe install it on my own site. I would find a tasty new crockpot recipe, which would remind me that I wanted to do more slow cooker meals and I'd start searching for more. Fast forward 2 hours, my morning would be half over and all I'd checked off my list was promoting my site on Facebook! At that point, I'd be frustrated with myself and I'd spend the rest of my day stressed and far less productive.

I've now learned to avoid Facebook until my important tasks are complete. If, for some reason, I absolutely must do something distracting in the morning, I set a timer and stick to it.

Maybe it's not Facebook for you. It could be email. Reading the morning news on an app. Watching your favorite morning talk show that morphs into another and another.

Identify what wastes your time and avoid it until the more important things have been finished.

# 9. One Thing at a Time.

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Multi-tasking is one of the things that moms are supposed to be good at; it's almost a required skill when you have children. But when it comes to effectively completing tasks, multi-tasking can hinder instead of help.

I used to take pride in my multi-tasking abilities until I finally faced the music and accepted that it doesn't let me accomplish nearly as much as I'd like to think. While we'll always need to juggle some things at the same time, like cooking dinner while supervising Joey's reading homework, etc., many tasks will take more time to finish if we try to multitask instead of devoting our full attention.

I'm a little ADD when it comes to chores. I'll hang up a coat in the entryway closet only to start organizing the whole closet. The summer beach towels crammed in the back corner will need to go in the attic and because it now requires a larger bin for storage, I'll head down to the basement, only to start sorting a mess down there. Before I know it, I have 3 or 4 messes scattered around the house and I still haven't put that coat away!

To counter my scattered tendencies, I give myself a time limit for these tasks. When I only have 15 minutes to put a load of laundry away, I'm less likely to start organizing the entire bureau. I'll allow myself 20 minutes to check email and yes, I set a timer.

I don't allow the timer to rule my life (if I'm in the middle of writing an email, I will finish and send it), but it does keep me focused. When I see something I need to do later (ie put away the summer beach towels), I'll add a quick note to my smart phone to do it later.

When you focus on one thing at a time, you'll be more intentional, productive and happier too!

# 10. How to Tackle the Big Things.

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Your everyday tasks are better managed now, but how do you tackle the big stuff? Things like cleaning out the attic, organizing the toy room, or sorting through all your children's clothes? All those things require time; you probably can't set a 30 minute time limit and expect to be done. It's easy to set them aside until later. But if you're anything like me, they will nag at you until they're finished or you've at least come up with a plan to tackle them. So we're going to do that right now.

The first step is to simply write down the big tasks you need to work on. This should be separate from your daily to-do list.

Here's what my "big tasks" list includes now:

- \*watching and taking notes on a new video series about blogging and photography I recently found
- \*implementing a better system for organizing my digital photos from the past 10 years
- \*painting my bedroom
- \*organizing the basement storage shelves
- \*find a solution to the kids' winter gear in our coat closet

Keep in mind that I've been intentionally tackling big items on my list for months now, so your list may be longer. Don't be discouraged if it is!

Next figure out which items you want to finish first. Once again, you'll want to refer to your priorities. If giving yourself time to relax is important to you, you may want to organize your bedroom first because that will help create a relaxing environment. If you're having a tough time sticking to your grocery budget, you may want to clean out your pantry so you know exactly what you have on hand. A yard sale next month may mean organizing the attic and garage soon so you're not scrambling last minute.



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Look at your calendar and plan time to do one or more of these tasks soon. If there's absolutely no way you can devote an entire weekend decluttering the house, break it up into bite-sized pieces so it's not as overwhelming. Spend 15 minutes every evening organizing one room. If you do this regularly, you will see progress!

***Get your whole family involved too. After all, they probably contributed!***

# Conclusion.

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One final note: be flexible. If something doesn't work, change it. Just because a new routine or to-do list doesn't click right away doesn't mean you've failed. You'll simply need to adjust it to make it work for you and your family. Remember, your priorities, your routine, your to-do list are meant to work for you, not the other way around.

If you apply these simple strategies to your life, you will see a difference. You'll find that you're more intentional about the important things. It will be easier to see the big picture. The smaller things will fade away without the exhausting stress of before. You'll have more time for the things that really matter, like family, friends, and yourself.

***Best of all, now that you've learned to take back your life, your new found freedom will bring you more peace and joy today.***

# About The Author.

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Erika Bragdon is the founder of LivingWellMom.com where she helps moms live life more simply, more naturally, and most all, more joyfully. With a love for Jesus, writing, organizing, and encouraging other women, she stays busy and definitely does not have it altogether.

Erika lives in New Hampshire with her husband, four children, dog, cat, rabbits, and 26 chickens, that her husband insists is part of her grand plan to turn him into a farmer.



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