

Reclaiming Joy

30 Days of Mommy Meditations

By
Christen Hansel



*"My mother had a great deal of trouble with me, but I think she enjoyed it."
-- Mark Twain*

Do you enjoy your kids? Do you have fun being a mom? If motherhood often feels like more trouble than enjoyment, you're not alone.

There is a lot conspiring against our mommy joy. For starters, exhaustion and joy don't go well together, and exhaustion is part of the package when you have young kids. It's not just that you're exhausted, though. You're worried that you won't be a good mom. You feel intimidated that your neighbor's preschooler is already doing calculus while you can't get your kid to keep his clothes on in public. It freaks you out that you won't know for twenty years whether the decisions you are making now are good ones. And the latest book you read told you you're doing everything wrong.

There are many other parts of life that are complicated by having kids. You probably lost some important parts of yourself when you had a baby—things you used to do and love—and that can really get you down, even if you wanted children. You may have lost community or social support, either because your friends are now in a different stage of life than you, or because you find yourself so overwhelmed with caring for your children that you don't have time to be with friends.

What's more, if you're like most mothers, you are struggling with expectations that you just can't live up to. Some of those expectations are from yourself--the kind of mom you think you should be, the activities you feel you ought to be involved in, or the virtues you wish you had (patience, anyone?). Some expectations are from others, and we feel weighed down by not feeling good enough for our husband, mother, mother-in-law, or friends.

Though we all face similar issues and challenges, no one solution will be right for every mom. That's why the heart of these meditations is questions for you to ask yourself. Try to be honest in answering the questions, even if you don't plan to do anything about them. I've also included actions to take and exercises to help orient your brain toward joy. There is space for journaling about your experience below each day's meditation.

I designed this to be used each day for a month, but if that's not practical for you, go at any speed that works. This is not about performance; it's about making this a useful experience for you. If you feel particularly resistant to a day's exercise, you might find it enlightening to ask yourself why—maybe that's more important than actually doing the exercise.

If there is anything you would like to share with me along the way, you can email me at christen@christenhansel.com.

Enjoy!

Day 1

Tonight, tiptoe into your child's bedroom. Sit on the floor or in a rocking chair, somewhere where you can see your little one. Relax your body. Look at that peaceful, little face. What feelings well up in your heart as you gaze at her? Listen to him breathing. Keep listening til you feel good and relaxed. You don't have to think about anything. Just enjoy hearing your baby breathe, and knowing that she's yours. Stay there for 5-10 minutes, just enjoying the quiet.

Day 2

Who loves you? Call up images in your mind of people who genuinely wish you well, whether you know them well or they are acquaintances. Maybe make a list of everyone you can think of that cares about you and wants good for you. Can you picture one person who is a particularly positive association for you? Imagine them expressing their affection and hopes for your happiness, peace, joy, and fullness. What does it feel like to imagine that? Try to call up that image throughout the day, both when you are feeling good and when you need a little boost.

Day 3

Make a list of what you need to be happy. This is a brainstorm, so write it down whether it's a tiny change or a need so big you don't think it will ever be met. Include even things that seem like luxuries. For example, when you can't even sleep through the night, it might seem silly to say, "I want one morning a week to sleep in." Put it down anyway. Remember, this is about what it would take to make you a happy, thriving mom—not just what it would take to survive. You don't need to do anything with the list yet. Just write it all down.

Day 4

Give yourself permission to take care of yourself. Ideally, you would take care of yourself because of your inherent worth and dignity as a human being. But mothers, and women in general, don't always think like that. We can sacrifice our well-being to take care of and please others. There is beautiful selflessness in our way of serving. But there is also a point where we can hurt others around us even while we are trying to help them. We love best—with the most energy, with the most cheerfulness, in the most wholehearted way, in the way that is most easily felt and received by our loved ones—when we are happy, healthy, and taken care of ourselves. Plus, we get more irritable, angry, and selfish when we don't feel good. Taking care of ourselves is one of the most effective ways to love those around us. So give yourself permission. Say out loud, "I give myself permission to take care of myself!" Call up another mommy and tell her, "I give you permission to take care of yourself!" Get her to say it back to you. Keep saying it until you feel some freedom in your heart to attend to your own needs.

Day 5

Pull out your list from two days ago and pick one item on it. Brainstorm ways that you can make that happen. Is there someone you can ask for help? Could you barter a skill of yours for a skill of theirs? Is there money or time that you can save up for this? Do you need to rearrange your schedule or let something go to get what you need? Is there anyone on your list of people who care about you that you could call on for help? Are there ways you can think outside the box to get this need met?

Day 6

Get a full physical. Seriously. Pregnancy and childbirth and the subsequent beating our bodies take have an effect on our whole bodies. And if your body ain't happy, you ain't happy. Our bodies, minds, and emotions are intricately connected. To be a happy mom, you can't ignore your physical needs and well-being. For your sake, and for your kids' sake, get your health fully checked out. Make an appointment today.

Day 7

What are some of your happy memories of your child? Drift back in time and feel the emotion of bringing your baby home for the first time, or the first time she smiled at you, or what it felt like to rock your sleeping baby. Did it make your heart leap when he said, "Ma-ma" the first time? Were those first wet, noiseless baby kisses moments you'll treasure forever? Do you remember him waving bye-bye in those early days? If it helps, pull out a picture of one of those moments that makes you smile. Just spend a few minutes dwelling on the happiest moments with your children.

Day 8

Who are you trying to please? Most of us live under pressure that we put on ourselves to live up to someone's expectations. Maybe it's your mother, or your mother-in-law that you worry about. Perhaps you're living as if you want to make your favorite parenting expert proud of you. Does your social circle have strong opinions about how you should parent? Are there spoken or unspoken rules in your religious community about the "right" way to raise a child? The advice and experience of others can be valuable; making decisions to please someone else can be harmful. Sometimes just noticing who you are trying to please is enough to free you. At other times it will be a journey of persistently noticing yourself pleasing others and purposefully reclaiming your authority to make your own parenting decisions based on what you believe is best for your child. It can be really tough to do something that goes against the opinion of someone you care about, but it will be a step towards joy as a mom to know that your actions match your heart.

Day 9

Evaluate your schedule. How does your schedule make you feel? Are you stressed with all the activities you are trying to keep up with? Are you going stir crazy because you don't get out of the house or have adult conversations? Do you need more people time? More alone time? More activities? Fewer activities? No one can tell you what the right schedule is for a mom with young kids. You need to feel it out, finding the balance that leaves you feeling vibrant and alive. For today, though, just take inventory. How do you feel about the individual elements that take up significant chunks of your schedule or your emotional energy? You may find it hard to be honest with yourself about obligations you feel you have no choice about. But be brave and admit to yourself how you feel about them, even if they never change. Also take note of how you feel about the big picture of how your days and weeks go.

Day 10

Today is the day to make one change to your schedule. Pick one commitment that is draining you to eliminate from your schedule, or come up with one energizing activity to add. Don't put it off—send that email or make that phone call to make the change happen. Remember, you aren't being selfish; you are trying to be the best mom you can be for your kids.

Day 11

Today, make a list of everything you love about your child. Think of everything from the smell of his hair when he comes out of the bath to the way he says, "I love you" at bedtime. Push yourself. Write down as many as you can think of, and then write down 5 more.

Day 12

Make a list of everything you love about yourself. This might be a little harder than the list you made yesterday, but do it anyway. Try seeing yourself through your child's eyes and writing down what he likes about you. Look at yourself as your best friend does and write what she sees. Write down some amazing things about yourself that no one else might know. Push yourself. Try to list as many things for yourself as you did for your child.

Day 13

Write down the one thing that most troubles you or drives you crazy about your child. Take 10 minutes and journal about this issue. What is the specific problem? Is there a predictable string of events? How do you feel when this happens? How do you react (what do you do)? How does your child respond to your actions and emotions? This is all about noticing as many details of the dynamics as possible, not about judging any of the elements as good or bad. Just see what you notice.

Day 14

Look back at the problem you wrote about yesterday. Imagine what it would feel like if this situation were dealt with. Today, take a first step to address this issue. A good first step could be to talk to a trusted friend or mentor about the problem. It could be to spend a little time on the internet researching the issue. Check out a book from your library or identify a potential source of solutions, even if you don't have time to read up on it today.

Day 15

Take 10 minutes and play with your child with no goal except to just be together. Try to choose something that's fun for both of you.

Day 16

Have a gut check. Is there anything you are doing as a parent that goes against your intuitive sense of what your child needs? You know your child better than anyone else. An approach could be sound for someone else, but wrong for your kid. Are you trying to make something work, and you want it to work so much that you ignore the growing feeling in your belly that something's not right? You will feel more at peace as a mom when you listen to what your intuition is telling you and let your brain and your gut work together.

Day 17

Have a control check. Are there things that you are desperately trying to hold together? Are there any round pegs you are trying to hammer into a square hole? This could be about you or a member of your family. It could be about a schedule or a philosophy that is just not working. Why are you fighting so hard to control this aspect of your life?

Day 18

Do you need help? Ok, that's the wrong question—every mom needs help! What specific help do you need? Write it down. Ask someone for help with one item on that list today. When we feel shy about making a request, we may feel tempted to hint at what we want, dance around the topic, or just wish for help without actually saying so. It goes better for all those involved when we come right out and say what we need or want. So summon your courage, be honest and straightforward about what you need, and ask!

Day 19

Today, ask yourself if there is one thing in your routine that you could do more simply or efficiently. Is there a little bit of planning that could save you a lot of time? Something you know could go more smoothly, but you haven't gotten still for long enough to figure out how? Make a plan for smoothing out one aspect of your life. Check out www.flylady.net for ideas of ways to take care of your home more easily. But don't try to do everything! Just pick one thing and do it.

Day 20

Make a list of things you do out of obligation. When you have your list, allow yourself to really question whether you need to be doing each of those things. For each activity ask: Does this bring me joy? Does it contribute to my core values and priorities (not the things you think you **ought** to value, but things that really resonate in the core of your being)? Is this activity in line with who I am? Am I working from my strengths when I do this? Is it integrated with other parts of my life?

Was there anything on the list that you found yourself wishing you didn't have to do? What would be the real consequences of stopping that activity? Can you pick one of these things to eliminate from your schedule?

Day 21

We often talk about our children learning to self-soothe. But how do **you** soothe yourself? It's important for you to know what calms you down when you are angry, frustrated, stressed, hurt, or sad. Think about what you typically do when you feel those emotions. Do your coping strategies work for you? Make note of what you have found effective so you can call on those strategies next time you're upset. Also brainstorm other ideas that you think might help you. Keep these in mind and try them out.

Day 22

What was one of the happiest times of your life? This doesn't have to be a parenting moment. It could be the summer after third grade or your senior year in college. What made that time so positive for you? Try to pinpoint specifics here. Are there any of these elements that you can bring into your life now?

Day 23

Surprise! Today plan a fun surprise for your kids (something that you'll enjoy too). It could be a special outing, a favorite meal or treat, a craft to do together, or playing dress up (all of you). If you can't actually execute your plan today, set it up for later in the week, but take care of the details now.

Day 24

Today tell your child five nice things about himself. Be specific. If your little one is too small to understand, then write him a short letter and tuck it away for later.

Day 25

Are you depressed? Fatigue, hormonal changes, lack of sleep, self-doubt, change in support structure, and loss of parts of our identity all come with motherhood. Many of those new parts of our lives have the capacity to morph into depression. It is especially important to seek treatment if you are having trouble caring for yourself or your kids because of being depressed. But even if it's not to that point, if you think you are depressed, it is worth it to get help. Make an appointment with a doctor or therapist. Also tell a friend or family member so they can make sure you get help.

Day 26

What do you most enjoy doing with your kids? Let's be honest—there are probably a few games that you can't stand. For me, it was playing Barbies. As parents, we will unselfishly play some of those games that the kids love and we hate. But if you have a good arsenal of activity ideas that you really like doing with them, you can offer them alternatives! Know yourself and what you enjoy playing, and suggest those options before the kids get bored.

Day 27

Are you tired? Do you take your tiredness seriously? Yes, being sleep-deprived and worn out is often part of the gig when you have little kids. But that doesn't mean you can't care for your body's needs in the same tender way you care for your child's. Can you clear a spot for a nap, or get to bed 30 minutes earlier? Can you let something go so that you can get a little more rest? How about getting 15 minutes just to relax after dinner or between chores? Be creative and take care of yourself!

Day 28

What refreshes you? Brainstorm a list of both big ideas and tiny ideas—anything that makes you let out a sigh of relief and brings a smile to your face. When might you make space for one of these activities?

Day 29

Are there parts of your life that you repeatedly beat yourself up over? What are they? If your best friend had these struggles, what would you say to her? How would you feel about her? Can you be at least that nice to yourself? Write yourself a note about your weaknesses, expressing the grace, compassion, and kindness that you would offer a friend in your situation.

Day 30

Your challenge for today is to see how many times you can make your kids laugh. Set a goal for yourself and see if you can beat it. Do you know what tickles their funny bones? You might need to experiment, and you will definitely need to get silly. See if you can get them laughing so hard that it makes you laugh too.

Reflections

In 2007, I went through a very dark period and lost my joy in just about everything. When I finally got some help and began to make shifts in my life, the very first joy to pop its head up was joy in being with my kids.

When I first experienced the reawakening of that joy, I never wanted to lose it again. That's not easy, because life isn't static. It's not like finding a radio station you like and then never touching the dial again. Maybe it's more like listening to the radio on a road trip. Every few hours you find static creeping in, and it's time to readjust before you lose the station completely.

Beginning to lose joy is my indicator that I need to readjust. It tells me when I'm doing too much, when I'm not taking my needs seriously, or when I'm living under too many "shoulds."

For me, journaling is an effective way to keep tabs on my joy. Other tools might be scheduling a weekly talk with a friend or committing to checking in with yourself each morning with your coffee. But it's less about what tool you use and more about maintaining an awareness of how you are feeling.

Your last assignment is to make a plan for holding onto the joy that you find. What are you going to do to stay aware of how you are doing?

As I mentioned at the beginning of this course, I would love to hear how this experience was for you. If you would like to share, write me at christen@christenhansel.com.

Wishing you a joyful journey,

Christen Hansel