

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #199: Self-Care is Not Selfish! Small Shifts That Make a Big Difference

Monica: Now, in hindsight, I know that I was under cared for and I was overstressed. And in my pursuit to be a good mom, which I thought meant caring for everyone else above myself, I had lost doing so and at all those three levels.

Katie: Hi there. We are The Childhood Collective, and we have helped thousands of overwhelmed parents find joy and confidence in raising their child with ADHD. I'm Katie, a speech language pathologist.

Lori: And I'm Lori.

Mallory: And I'm Mallory. And we're both child psychologists.

Lori: As busy mamas ourselves, we are on a mission to support ADHD parents on this beautiful and chaotic parenting journey.

Mallory: If you are looking for honest ADHD parenting stories, a dose of empathy with a side of humor and practical tools, you are in the right place.

Katie: Let's help your family shine with ADHD.

Lori: Welcome back to Shining with ADHD. I'm here today with Mallory and we're so excited for today's conversation.

Mallory: Absolutely. Today we're joined by Monica Packer, the host of the About Progress podcast, certified habits and identity coach, and mom of five. Monica helps women break free from perfectionism and embrace sustainable growth through practical progress. Her show has millions of downloads and has helped thousands of women shift their mindset around personal development.

Lori: Monica is also a former middle school teacher, sourdough enthusiast, and beginner gardener. And she knows firsthand the beautiful chaos that comes with parenting neurodivergent kids.

Mallory: Monica, welcome to the podcast.

Monica: I'm honestly so honored to be here, so thanks for having me.

Mallory: We really appreciate you taking the time. I think that your expertise is something that our listeners are really going to benefit from. I think they're going to relate a lot to it and I think you are going to have some practical tips moving forward for them. But before we jump into today's topic, can you just tell us a little bit about yourself and how you became interested in coaching women?

Monica: Yeah. As you said, I'm a mom of five. We used to live in the Bay Area, and I was a middle school teacher turned stay at home mom and I got to this point in both my parenting journey and also my personal life, how they kind of butted up against each other where I realized that my own lack of self-development and care and identity was impacting me as a mom. And it was making me a mom that I didn't recognize and that I didn't want to be for my children, who were fortunately still quite young at that time. And I signed back on to therapy, which I had done 10 years prior while I was recovering from eating disorders. And I was really surprised to have my therapist tell me that I was still a perfectionist. Because for the past 10 years, I had been stuck on the sidelines of my life doing next to nothing for myself. Everything for my responsibilities I would take care of and manage and show up for, but myself, I put it on the sidelines because I knew, I thought I knew actually what it required to make progress in the areas we wanted and I thought it required all or nothing. And because of that, I didn't want to pay that price anymore, I paid it in the past. But I actually was, I was paying the price of nothing. I was still a perfectionist. I was still basing my worth on my outcomes, but more my lack of them and my fear of not having the outcomes I wanted was preventing me from even trying.

So that's when I began what became a year's long experiment really of choosing progress over perfection. And as a result, I have grown exponentially. Exponentially more than when I was the stereotypical perfectionist and exponentially of course from what I was the underachieving perfectionist. And along the way I started coaching women like me who needed to work on this part of their lives so they could show up to their responsibilities as themselves and then habits came along for the ride and a whole bunch of other things. It's been, it's been an amazing ride, really.

Lori: I love that from a recovering perfectionist too. I completely understand and it's taken therapy and a lot of just yeah, putting yourself out there and making mistakes and realizing that it's okay. But yeah, I can completely relate to that.

Monica: Glad, it's not just me. And in fact, I know it's not just us. I think we all at some point, we all have been on this spectrum of perfectionism and a lot of women are shocked to learn their perfectionists when they think they're not complete, they don't complete things or they don't start things, but this could be something you're dealing with. Yeah.

Mallory: And I think this is so important for moms, parents who are parenting ADHD to hear this progress over perfection message. Because if you're parenting a child with ADHD, you're not going to be perfect.

Monica: I know, sorry the knowing laugh there. But yeah, not going to happen in this universe. No.

Mallory: Yep, yep. So, parenting a kid with ADHD can be both rewarding and exhausting,, right. Both of these two things at the same time. And you talk a lot about the importance of self-care. So, can you share a little bit about what self-care looks like to you? Especially in the context of parenting neurodivergent children?

Monica: Let me start by giving a quick definition and then I'll go back to how I learned this I think the hard way, which is sometimes how we learn the most important lessons. I would actually say probably oftentimes this is how we learn the most important lessons of our lives. I think when we imagine the word or the phrase self-care, we think of another word and it's probably pampering. You know, that we do bubble baths or we go get our nails done or we go to girls' nights out and, you know, all of those things do matter and we don't need to dismiss them at all. But self-care goes so much both more practical and deeper than a lot of us are realizing. And there are three big levels of self-care. There are the basic ways we take care of ourselves, there are the deep ways, and there are the indulgent ways. And all of them work together to redefine what it looks like to practice self-care. It's the deep respect and care that we have of honoring our own wants and our needs. And if a lot of women are frustrated with self-care, it's likely because they think it's just the pampering kind and the pampering kind, again, it's important, but they act as band aids to a bleeding wound if you aren't practicing both the basic and deep forms of self-care. And I'll share how I learn this, and then

we can break down the levels a little bit more, if that's helpful. I told you all that one of the biggest reasons why I got into this work was because of how I was not showing up to my kids. And there were several moments like this, but this was perhaps the most defining one and it's shortly after the birth of my third child. My husband worked in San Francisco, and we lived far from there, so he had a long commute, we weren't around family. I had, quote unquote, retired from being a middle school teacher to stay home with them. So, I was essentially on my own all the time. For two years my oldest child called my husband by his first name because that's what made sense to her autistic brain. You know, he's Brad because he wasn't around very much, which fortunately has been able to change. But I was in the backyard with my three very young children at the time, just trying to be an involved mom. They were playing bubbles, and, you know, the oldest two were blowing the bubbles, and my oldest somehow tipped over her little bottle. And, you know, I really congratulated myself by staying calm in that moment and just getting out the hose, no big deal, and spraying it off while holding my newborn. But then I heard a scream, and it came from inside the house. And I ran inside and I saw my daughter not just holding a small bottle of bubbles, she was now holding a giant bottle, the kind that you used to refill the small ones. And she was holding it sideways because it was too heavy for her to lift. And of course, the lid was open and it was pouring its contents all over our wool rag that covered our ancient wood floors, both of which we couldn't afford to replace or to fix. And that was the moment, it's kind of like a spilled milk moment where my reaction to that did not match what actually happened. And I went into like wailing and gnashing of teeth is the only way I can describe it. And while I'm trying to scrub these bubbles, I mean bubbles grow, they lathered and they just got bigger and bigger. And that's when the despair tipped over for me. And I'm pretty sure the things I was screaming were things like, you know, it's only me. Like I'm the only one that can fix this. It's all on me. No one can help me. And that's when I look to the doorway to see my two oldest kids looking at me, watching me have this mommy tantrum. And I saw their faces get really scared and run away. And that's what I'm like, Monica, who are you? Like this isn't you. And the way you are acting is not only not you, it's scaring your kids. But really, now in hindsight, I know that I was under cared for and I was overstressed. And in my pursuit to be a good mom, which I thought meant caring for everyone else above myself, I had lost doing so and at all those three levels.

And so that's why this work has mattered. I mean my life basically looks the same now, but I feel like myself showing up to these moments. I mean my toddler just spilt a whole bowl of

yogurt that splattered across the entire kitchen before I supposed to come up for this interview. And I was like, ha. I knew what this interview was about. I'm like, look at this. Like I'm like oh, oh dang. Like I didn't enjoy it, but it wasn't like a freak out moment. It was like, oh, I guess those cabinets needed to be cleaned anyway, let's clean it up and then move on with our day. So, I think that exemplifies what a lot of us get to that that moment of being like, oh, who's this? And I've got to find her again. I got to take care of her so that I can show up as myself to these kids who really need me. They need the real me here.

Mallory: Yeah, I think that a lot of parents can relate to that, especially moms in early childhood. It feels like the noble thing to do to put everyone's needs above your own. And like in the moment it feels good, like, okay, I've taken care of everyone, everyone's happy, I've done all the things and it feels noble and it feels right. But then like you said over time, when you're not really practicing true self-care...

Monica: Burnout, resentment, anger, depression, like those are the signs that you are in desperate need of deep caring.

Lori: Yeah. Well, let's talk a little bit about if you can break down some of those kind of levels of self-care for our listeners to let us know kind of what you learned and what was helpful for you.

Monica: Well, one of the reasons that I got to that breaking point is because of my misunderstanding of self-care. I truly thought it was like going out for dinner with friends. I had friends do that in the town that we lived in shortly before that. They're like, let's have a girl's day, let's go get our nails done, let's get lunch, let's go to get ice cream after. And I was like, one, can't afford a babysitter, two can't afford the meals, three, can't get anyone to do like watch the kid for me for free...and you know, it just grew from there. So, let's, let's back up to like what really matters. And I talked about basic self-care. Yes, basic self-care are the ways that we take care of the practical needs of our body, essentially. You know, making sure that we have hygiene, which is often one of the first things to go when we're in a season of survival, right. Is not being able to shower, brush our teeth or wash our face, or put on clean clothes. But also, it can just be as simple as feeding ourselves. Making sure we're moving our bodies a little bit. Like I'm just talking about the basic ways that we are nurturing our bodies. Which we know, and I know you guys know this professionally too, has such a direct correlation to how we're doing with our minds. And I had this woman on my podcast early on

and her name is Natalie Norton and her life has been full of trauma after trauma. So, I'll just leave it at that, you'll have to listen to her story. And I asked her like how did you get out of this? She said it started with I began to make sure I showered every day. And so, it may seem like I have a fire, so why are you telling me to go get like a thimble full of water and splash it on something? But that basic form of self-care is not basic. It is that, you know, it's reflective of caring for ourselves. And again, it doesn't have to be to the extreme ways of getting ready for prom every day, it's about ensuring that you have a wet wipe to like clean off your pits or you know, put on some clean undies for the day to show up. So basic is one of the most important things because it's the first to go. Deep...these are the things we do for our soul, for our mind and for our spirit. You know, so it can be things like spiritual practices, it could be things like meditation, it could be things like journaling. And it can also be things that are maybe require some other support like getting therapy, or hiring a coach or joining this membership. Like whatever will help you in the deep things that are, that you're lacking in your spirit. One of the things I like to focus on with women is prioritizing daily fulfillment. And that means feeling full of yourself in a good way. Like you feel like yourself. So, it may not seem like deep on the outside. Maybe your deep form of reconnecting with yourself is sketching or writing poetry. So, it can be deep that way too. And then finally we have indulgent. And that's the fun stuff. Those are the sprinkles on top of the ice cream sundaes. Those are the girls' nights out and the pedicures or watching reality tv. I mean you get to decide. And this is the great thing about all of these levels, none of it can or should be prescriptive. It needs to be about what helps you individually. So, it's less about going on Pinterest and finding an A to Z plan and following it and it's more about learning to trust yourself again. Which is vital to true self care because if you're going to deeply respect and care for your needs and wants, then you need to know what they are and that's part of what this is it's that reconnection. It's that rebuilding of self-trust along the way.

Lori: Yeah. I love that because I think I myself and I'm sure other people are like, I don't have time to be doing the indulgent stuff frequently, but it's like you need more of a daily thing that helps you and helps your mind and your body and all those things. So, I love that you have kind of options of things that isn't just that indulgent self-care that a lot of people really, that is, that is hard to get a sitter sometimes to watch your kids, especially when you have ADHD and not everyone is going to be willing to watch your kids.

Monica: I've had that too. Yeah.

Lori: Yeah. And it's hard to find sitters that are going to come back again, you know. And so sometimes if we think of self-care kind of in those terms, it feels very like limiting, like I can never attain this. So, I think that's really helpful.

I have a question as far as like, you know, somebody's passions. Like maybe my passion is golfing or my passion is like doing something physical or it's not necessarily writing or journaling. Like where would that fall in kind of the self-care categories? Is that indulgent? Is that a deep kind of self-care habit? Like, what do you, where would you place that?

Monica: So, there's definitely Venn diagrams for these. I describe them as levels, but they're almost not like pillars stacked on top of each other, they're more like Venn diagrams where there's going to be some crossover with it. So, for example, like one of my deepest forms of self-care is getting up early and getting in movement. And it's mostly because in order for me to deeply be taken care of, I need time to myself.

Lori: Yes.

Monica: And one of the ways that helps me mentally because I've struggled with depression in the past and it's something that still pops up, is movement helps me a lot with my anxiety and my stress management. So, combining those two things together to me is both the basic and the deep. So, the answer is yes.

Lori: Gotcha. There's overlap between the two.

Monica: There's definitely overlap.

Lori: Yeah. And I feel the same way as like even I remember when my kids were, I just had a new newborn baby and it was like putting my makeup on and getting ready for the day, even if I hadn't taken a shower and working out, even if that was for 10 or 15 minutes. Like I had to do those things for me to feel like a normal human being again.

Monica: Yeah. And that's actually something I had to do. I had my fifth baby at the beginning of 2023 but it had been a five-year gap between my last two and it was like starting over. I mean I knew cognitively what it was going to be like but my body forgot. And I had to take it back to the most essential basic habits that were there to support me and like do away with all the others. But they were enough to just get me through that time and one of them was to just

even you know, get ready for the day. But I'm talking about clean clothes was my baseline. And it may seem indulgent but you're re like no, it's not, got to do that.

Mallory: Yeah. I feel like we were kind of alluding to this and we know that a lot of our listeners they feel maxed out. So, what would be your advice of how can these already maxed out super busy parents even begin to incorporate more of these self-care habits into their lives without just adding to the overwhelm?

Monica: I would say and this with love, don't go for the January joiner mentality of doing all the things all at once. I actually love January joiners. That's how I began my work on progress outside of perfectionism and how I started my work with About Progress was January.

Lori: What is that? Can you, I don't know what that is.

Monica: I thought you'd ask because it's good. It's good. You know I don't know if everyone knows that. A January joiner is someone who joins in on January. So that's why the gyms get super busy during that time.

Mallory: Like a New Year's resolution basically.

Monica: Yeah, yeah. It's the New Year's time, people all jumping on the bandwagon. So, it's good to try for of course like go for it. But I would be more realistic because what we're often going for, we think it's simple but it's actually not, it's complex. We think it's just a few things but when you look at them and if you're not doing them already, you're asking for something that's going to require a tremendous amount of energy, physical, spiritual, mental energy to do. So instead of doing all the things at once, I would start with one and I would start with one that is the most essential to you. And that was sleep for me. For other people it may look like something you're like what that's your thing like getting ready or meal planning or if there's something that is really causing a lot of friction in your life, you can start there. Or if there's something that's just going to make life easier, you can start there too. So don't, don't do all the things. Start with even one thing. And with that, don't start with the ideal version. So much of what we do with behavior design is dependent on energy. And that word is actually synonymous with willpower. What we think is willpower is actually energy. So instead of starting with the ideal version, that's going to require a lot of it, you need to have

what I call a baseline version. And the baseline is the smallest and simplest version, of your ideal, the kind that you can do on your worst of day. So Lori, when you describe getting ready, like, you know, maybe it's not showering, but maybe it's clean clothes and some makeup. Like, you get to decide what that looks like. For my movement after I had my fifth kid, it was 10 minutes of stretching was my baseline. And what's so good about that is people think, well, I don't want the baseline, I want the ideal. But what you're missing out on is the baseline has power. It gives you more energy, it gives you strength, it helps you feel like yourself, and it also enables you to be consistent. Because you don't only have the perfectionistic standard of that ideal beating against your head, you're able to be flexible for your day. And I still use baselines with all of my habits. So now my movement baseline is 20 minutes of movement. So, it's more than it was after I had a baby during the survival season. But it's still there for me on a day where like last week my first grader woke up with a full body rash from head to toe that I'm like, oh, we got to get you to the doctor ASAP and there goes the morning and that's okay. You know, so I still have that baseline way of making sure I'm taking care of myself. And another thing about baselines is they build momentum. It's just like when a ball is in motion, it stays in motion. The laws of physics, it's the same thing with baselines. They create energy, they create momentum. So oftentimes you're able to do even a little more than your baseline. And is there no better feeling than telling yourself, I'm just going to go on a 10 minute walk and you do 15 and then you're like, look at me. I like, I'm a rock star, pretty much. So, there's so much power in the baseline I could probably talk to you about for that, for an hour, but that's what I see one of the biggest hurdles in addition to redefining what self-care is and what it can look like. And giving yourself your own descriptions is lowering the hurdle to make it so you have more possibility and likelihood to tackle something in ways that are actually realistic and flexible to match your life that demands flexibility from you.

Mallory: I'm seeing so much parallel between what you're describing parents do and what we're all the time telling parents to do for their kids. To help them with their executive functioning, to help them get started on tasks that are challenging, to take one step forward to kind of addressing a tricky behavior in the home. We're talking a lot about baby steps, progress, building that momentum, getting your foot in the door with starting a task and then it becomes easier. I mean, there's just so many parallels. Parents are starting to learn and understand these things conceptually when it comes to helping their child with ADHD and so much of that they can take and apply it to themselves too, and helping themselves get started

with the practice of self-care. And again, so much of what you're saying is coming back to that progress, not perfection. Because those January joiners, they're going in with that perfection mindset, all or nothing. And that doesn't work for very long.

Monica: Yeah, there's a price to be paid for all. There's also a price to be paid for nothing. And so, if you're living either of those, and you know it's time to do something different, and you know, it takes courage to do it like it takes courage to do a baseline when you think the ideal is supposed to be the only way or that you should just be better or have enough willpower in quotes. But I've seen time and time again, and this isn't just anecdotal, this is with literally the thousands of women who I have both coached and taught, personally and with my programs, that this is the way to change and to make progress. And it also accounts for more, you know, you talked about this earlier Lori as a recovering perfectionist, that you have to change your relationship with failure and a little bit of this grace you're giving yourself, you are allowing yourself to shift that relationship where mistakes, where messiness is part of the path. It's not about avoiding them or out working them or just skipping over them. It's now all part of the path.

Lori: It's an expectation that you'll make mistakes.

Monica: Yeah.

Lori: Yeah, I know. Even in the last year, for some reason, like, in my mind, if I don't have 30 minutes to work out, then it doesn't count.

Monica: Yeah.

Lori: Like, where. Where did that come from? I have no idea.

Monica: Health class in eighth grade.

Lori: Yeah. I feel like it's just some idea that I created in my own mind. I don't know what it is, but in the last couple years, I'm like, no, maybe I have 10 minutes to go lift weights, and that's okay. Like, 10 minutes is better than nothing. Like you said. Like, why would I dismiss 10 minutes as, like, not enough? Like, I'm still getting movement in that I wasn't. And a lot of times I would just be like, well, if I don't have half hour, I just don't do it, right. And that's like a silly kind of mindset where it's like, oh, I got 10 minutes. I'm going to go work out.

Mallory: I've noticed that shift in you, Lori. Just, you know, between our meetings and things like that, you're like, okay, you know, doing a quick workout session. I'm like, good for her because we're meeting in 15 minutes.

Lori: That's my time blindness of, like, I thought I had 15 minutes when I actually have zero, and I'm just going to be 15 minutes late for meeting.

Monica: That can happen too. You know what's interesting, though, I had this woman who wrote to me on Instagram because she learned this whole baseline concept, and she's like, life changing in all caps. I'm like, whoa, tell me what changed your life? And she's like, your baseline concept changed my life. I have been wanting to journal for literal years, but I always thought it had to look a certain way. And she described that to me. And then she said, I decided to just start out with your baseline of just five minutes writing in my journal a day. And she's like, not only have I now kept this habit consistently ever since, a habit that I've been wanting for years but never been able to do, I also have discovered the baseline is enough. That's all I need, because it has that power. It's still worthy, it's still supportive. So that's where we can prove ourselves wrong. Find out. Find out.

Lori: Yeah, let's talk a little bit about where you suggest parents start. So, let's say, for instance, because we do have a lot of like single parents who are parenting kids with ADHD that are having to work all day and then they're with their kids at night. Like where would a person like that start? Like where would you recommend that they start to begin caring for themselves a little bit?

Monica: Well, first I want to acknowledge the fact that there's a lot that needs to happen societally and even culturally to shift how we better value the people who are caretaking and whether they're working inside of the home or not. Like just the amount of toll that takes on anybody is exorbitant. So, I want to validate it first. Because they're not making it up. It is really hard and it can seem like really out of touch advice to say take care of yourself. But really these bigger changes, even in a family, let's say you just are going to start with your family trying to make changes and to spread the load better. And let's say you have a partner to help you do that. That's still going to take time and we don't have that luxury. So, I want to both validate but still push those listeners and to do so in a way where you, you kind of take on that saying of if not, if not me, who if not now, when? And it's more of like how can I start by putting myself on the list? We have that analogy of put yourself first, like put the mask on

first. That doesn't work for a lot of women. So instead of putting yourself first, what if you put yourself on the list? And to do that, I would think of one small thing that would help you feel like you are even just on the list. Now for thinking categories, if I were to say the top two habits that women want to work on with me that are related to the self-care piece, it's typically sleep. But actually, most of them don't think that they think they're coming for another habit and sleep needs to be the habit they prioritize first. Or movement. But I'll say the third that people tend to forget a lot is time to yourself. So those are three suggestions. Not start there, start with those three. It's which of those three would almost act as the positive give a mouse of cookie to other habits that you that would make other things easier in your life. That's where I would start. And if it's something fun, all the more power. Like if it's, one of the fun ways that I got into sleeping better is I subscribe to People magazine. Which was a no-no in my household growing up, so it kind of felt a little rebellious. Subscribed to People magazine. Put it on my nightstand. And every night the habit I had to look forward to was to sit down or to lay in bed and to read my People magazine. So, it doesn't need to look super deep or time intensive to be something that gives you that moment to yourself, that helps you feel more like yourself. Because that really is the goal of any habit, is to help you feel like yourself.

Lori: I love that. Monica, this has been such a helpful conversation. Where can our listeners go to learn more about you and the work that you're doing?

Monica: I would direct them to just search for me in the app they're already and listening to this podcast. Search for About Progress and follow there and listen in there. I'm also on Instagram at About Progress. And you know, to help answer that final question about where they should they start, I do have a resource that could be helpful for them. It's called the Sticky Habit Rainstorm. And it's where I do the brainstorming for you on potential habits you can select from. And I rain down habits on you. So, there's just different categories of either times of day or like movement or journaling and a bunch of examples underneath that of one thing they can just choose from that list and start with so they don't have to use the brain power in deciding that. And they can find that at aboutprogress.com/rainstorm. And that's one word like no hyphens or anything.

Lori: Okay, great.

Mallory: I need that!

Lori: Yeah, I know, I was thinking the same thing. I'm going to go do that right now.

Monica: It's just a printable. It's a free printable.

Lori: Yeah, that's great. We'll link that in the show notes for the listeners too. So, you can get that there.

Mallory: Monica, thank you so much for joining us today, sharing your expertise with our listeners about how they can care for themselves more and how self-care is not selfish, it's essential. And hopefully our listeners can take one step forward in really prioritizing that. Thank you so much.

Monica: Thank you for having me.

Lori: Thank you.

Katie: Thanks for listening to Shining with ADHD by your hosts, Lori, Katie, and Mallory of The Childhood Collective.

Mallory: If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review and hit subscribe so you can be the first to know when a new episode airs.

Lori: If you are looking for links and resources mentioned in this episode, you can always find those in the show notes. See you next time!