

OVERCOME

POWERFUL LESSONS FROM

PARENTAL

THE TRENCHES OF PARENTING

Burnout

DEBORAH BYRNE

INTRODUCTION

The last thing any pregnant woman wants to hear is that her baby has very little chance of survival. However, when I first met with my fertility specialist, while she said the fact I was pregnant was nothing short of a miracle, it was unlikely I would ever be able to hold my baby.

I had recently been diagnosed with Cushing's disease, a rare endocrine disorder that meant my body produced an excess of cortisol. Symptoms included fertility problems, so my appointment with the fertility doctor was originally intended to discuss the possibility of freezing my eggs. Instead, my daughter Grace was on her way.

Much as it was hard to hear an expert tell me it was unlikely my baby would live, I had to face that possibility given the wide range of symptoms I was experiencing. Most seriously, Cushing's had caused me to develop a brain tumour. I was scheduled to have elective brain surgery, which would have a further negative impact on my ability to conceive.

It was yet another blow after two years of fighting with the medical profession to find the reason for all my symptoms. I'd lost almost half my hair, but because I had naturally thick hair, doctors couldn't physically see any difference. Sleep eluded me

and I'd stopped menstruating. I had put on a lot of weight with no explanation, but since I'd been a slim size 6 before, nobody could see a problem with the fact that I was now a size 10, even though my diet hadn't changed.

All my concerns were dismissed as being the result of stress from my job as a parenting coach working with foster children. I was given antidepressants and told to rest. It is true my job was stressful. I got up at 5am every morning to support traumatised children who were in the foster care system. It wasn't unusual for me to come home covered in bites and bruises. At the time, I was working closely with a 2-year-old boy who had been through terrible abuse and his 4-year-old foster brother. That 2-year-old had been through a lot in his little life and his behaviour was highly challenging as a result.

Yes, it was hard work, but nothing I hadn't seen before. I'd been doing this kind of work for years. I didn't see why it would suddenly be causing all these problems now when I'd coped fine before. But all the doctors could tell me was slow down, do less, don't worry, forget about it.

I knew in my gut they were wrong.

Eventually, I went to my GP with a proposal. I'd done months of research and knew that a simple blood test would confirm my suspicions. He'd wanted to put me on medication for suspected polycystic ovaries, so I said if they did the tests and they came back negative, I'd accept the diagnosis and take the pills.

He agreed and when the results came back, I learned I had a brain tumour. That news was hard to hear, but at the same time, it was a real relief to have confirmation that I wasn't depressed or overworked. There was an explanation for everything I'd experienced.

I was referred to a specialist, which is what led to me sitting in the office of a fertility expert, discovering that against all the odds, I was pregnant.

Having a high-risk pregnancy, what should have been a magical

time of joy and expectation was non-stop stress and worry. I had to have appointments with consultants almost every two weeks to track my baby's progress and make sure she was still alive.

I wanted to look forward to meeting my baby when she was born, but I couldn't make any plans in case I lost her. I couldn't let myself get too close. The thought of losing her made my heart ache; I couldn't add to that pain by bonding with my child.

There was another complication. As soon as I gave birth, I was going to immediately have the brain surgery that had been delayed by my pregnancy. My child might survive only to lose her mother.

It didn't bear thinking about.

I'd wanted nothing more than to be a mum. I'd been a parenting coach for years and looked forward to holding my child in my arms. I had a vision of how blissful those first few weeks would be as we got to know each other, days filled with hugs and kisses. It was a real shock to the system when I developed parental burnout instead.

As I started planning this book, I was living in Melbourne, Australia, a city that had incredibly strict Covid restrictions. This was not the world I wanted to bring a child into.

My child should have been welcomed into the world by her loving family, getting to know the relatives who would love her, just as much as I did. Instead, we were on our own, since her father was no longer involved.

Holding my newborn, I wanted nothing more than to cry my heart out. I felt I'd let her down when her life had barely begun. I couldn't see how I could look after her as well as deal with all my health issues.

I felt like a huge failure. I beat myself up all the more because I felt like I should have taken to mothering with natural ease. I was a parenting coach! I'd seen it all! Why couldn't I be the mother my child needed me to be?

With the benefit of hindsight, I know now that my health

problems were contributing a lot to why I was feeling so bad, but there was more to it than my physical issues. I was on a negative, depressing cycle and there were times when I felt maybe Grace would be better off without me. Having those thoughts compounded those feelings of failure because I felt no good mother would ever think that way and so the downward spiral continued.

As a professional holistic therapist, I know suicidal thoughts are a symptom of emotional flooding, but all the theory didn't make any difference to my lived experience.

8th November 2020 is a date I'll never forget. I finally had my brain surgery.

It had been a long time coming. With all the delays caused by misdiagnoses, I'd been put to the top of the waiting list, but then Covid hit, pushing things back even further. It had taken a year for me to go into surgery, one of the worst years of my life. Perhaps one day I'll write about all those experiences but suffice to say my personal life had completely fallen apart and I felt like I had no strong foundation or support. It was a dark time indeed, but now I'm grateful because it shaped me into the woman I am today.

The prospect of surgery terrified me, not because I was worried anything would go wrong, but because I would have to be separated from my daughter for the five days following it. Any new mum will tell you the last thing they want is to be away from their baby and while I tried to focus on the positives and remind myself it was safest for her to be away from the hospital and any risk of Covid, I still hated the idea of not being able to see her for so long.

The surgery went well, so when I came out of the anaesthetic, all that was left for me to do was lie in a hospital bed, staring at the ceiling as my body recovered. With nothing to do but think, I spent five days examining my life from all directions, questioning

why I'd been through all the trials I had, looking for the lessons in every challenge. It didn't take me long to realise I could either continue to feel sorry for myself and fall even further down the well of despair, or I could take this opportunity to start a new chapter with a new attitude.

My parents both worked in the public health sector and if I learned one thing from them, it was that the most precious thing any of us has is time. How you choose to invest that important resource makes all the difference. I'd spent hours sitting with the elderly people my mother cared for and the one common theme to all their stories was they wished they'd spent more time with their family.

My way ahead was clear. Being away from my child for almost a week was a strong reminder of just how much I adored my daughter and how lucky I was to have her when no one thought I'd ever get pregnant, let alone give birth to a healthy baby.

Those five days gave me the chance to discover my life purpose and fulfill the role I was put on this earth to do. Before Grace was born, I had the luxury of going home and recharging after a long day of dealing with other family's challenges. Now I was on call 24/7 and that lack of downtime is a major cause of parental burnout for so many parents. I'd been hit by parental burnout within days of my daughter arriving and I needed to figure out how to overcome it.

Going into surgery, I'd been convinced I'd let both myself and Grace down, but when I left the hospital, I was filled with a new feeling of fearlessness. I knew what I had to do:

- Be the best possible mother to Grace. I might not be perfect, but no mother is. I could still be the best mother for her.
- I was told it would take me a year to recover from my surgery, so I was going to use that time to heal myself on every level. From now on, I would live in the present

moment, move past any feelings of guilt and enjoy every aspect of motherhood, warts and all.

- Support as many parents as I could, no matter where they were on the planet, so they could enjoy strong relationships with their children, cope effectively with stress and avoid suffering from parental burnout.

This realisation is what led me to create the Focused Family Formula. I used to work as a holistic therapist and I had many qualifications in a range of techniques, including hypnotherapy and neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). I drew upon everything I'd learned and combined it with my years of experience as a parenting coach to start working on myself and bring those techniques to others.

I knew the first thing I had to sort out was my time management. Most parents will tell you; they feel like they're constantly rushing from one appointment to another, always under pressure to get everything done, yet never feeling like they've made any progress.

I began to declutter my life. On a superficial level this involved cutting out anything I didn't need to do from my schedule, but I took this process much further. I let go of anything that was out of my control. I had no power over what other people said or did, so I stopped trying to change them to suit me. Instead, I started to embody acceptance, mindfulness and self-forgiveness, treating myself with the same kind of loving kindness I gave my daughter. My journey into motherhood had had a rocky start, but I couldn't change the past. But I could make sure that the future looked very different.

My self-care routine became an essential rather than a luxury. As a single parent to a baby, this could be hard since her needs always came first. But I looked for ways to take care of myself even on difficult days. If there were times when all I could do was curl up in bed and give Grace a cuddle, I gave myself full

permission to do this and enjoyed every moment. The chores could wait until tomorrow. After all, if I had a friend who was recovering from brain surgery, I'd be telling her to take it easy, so I was finally taking my own advice.

Did you know just five minutes of meditation has a positive impact on the brain?¹ On days when I only had five minutes to grab a quick break, I spent that time practicing mindfulness or focusing on my breath to give my brain a little break and recharge it.

I forgave myself for not being the ideal mother I had dreamed of being. There has never been more pressure on parents to be perfect all the time with beautifully turned-out children and a wonderfully clean and tidy house. Newsflash – it's an impossible goal! The second I stopped putting pressure on myself to live up to an unrealistic expectation, I immediately felt much more relaxed.

As a parenting coach, I'd already known all about this stuff, but I'd let it slide because I'd been feeling so burnt out. Now I fully embraced all the tools I'd been giving to families for years. I made more time for myself so I could spend more quality time with Grace. I promised myself I was going to spend my year of recovery to fully step into the woman and mother I was born to be. Being sick forced me to take a break and take stock of my life. I honestly believe if I hadn't taken the time to learn all those essential lessons, my health would have gone further downhill.

Another major change was deciding to change the direction of my career. It was time for me to transition into full-time parenting coach with my Focused Family Formula. This also meant I could help families around the world, thanks to the wonders of the internet.

I've always loved working with troubled families. I get such a buzz from seeing a child turn a corner. Being a small part of their lives, supporting them to grow and giving their parents powerful

tools to do the same is the most rewarding work there is. I've worked with many, many people over the years, dealing with organisations, schools and families, but I've always felt driven to do even more.

My time out enabled me to see there was a lot of repetition to most of my work. I realised I could take that work and pour it into an online parenting course that would have a universal appeal. I might not have had much money and I might not be particularly technologically minded, but I was fuelled by passion, and I got straight into it.

I ended up creating a 12-week online program inspired by all the principles I'd been using as a parenting coach and that I've been following with my own daughter. I knew that course was going to change so many lives for the better, but it wasn't enough for me. I wanted to reach even more people, help those who might not be ready for the course but still needed some guidance.

That's why I've written this book. In the following pages you will learn all about many of the principles that are covered in greater depth in the Focused Family Formula. You'll discover a number of techniques and strategies to help you develop healthier relationships with your children.

Each chapter contains several funny stories from my time as a parenting coach and my personal experiences as a mother to show you the problems you have are universal. You are not alone! Then I'll go into evidence-based methods you can use to solve those problems, giving you practical advice you can start applying right away. I've personally seen the positive impact of what I'm going to share with you and I'm so excited to be able to help you enjoy the same transformation.

The first year of my daughter's life was a difficult one, filled with hard work and self-development. But everything I learned from that year has made such a difference.

Now I'm the proud mother of a beautiful, adorable daughter,

nothing like the burnt-out wreck I was in the early days. We are incredibly close and our relationship goes from strength to strength. I live in the present moment, not worrying about the future or beating myself up about the past. I manage my time effectively, so I have plenty of hours for the most important things in life. I've found the secret to a work/life balance, and I help parents all around the world with my Focused Family Formula.

Since it's so important to me to give back to the community, I work with a number of charity organisations and offer scholarships to families facing homelessness so they can use the Focused Family Formula to support them through those difficult times. In addition, all the profits from this book will go to charity.

I'm so grateful for my health problems now. They were what allowed me to find my purpose. I still have issues with my health, but they don't overwhelm me. Likewise, I know it would be easy to slide back into depression, but now I have an effective plan to deal with negative thoughts if they occur.

I want you to know you can find the same level of inner peace. It all starts with a focused mindset, which is what we're going to examine in the first chapter.

If you're ready to make a change for the better, turn the page and read on. A new life awaits!