

Meditating mom has message for 'hot messes'

By Jaimy Jones

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Photo: Marie D. De Jesus, Staff

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Ali Katz is a certified meditation teacher, self-care coach, a mother of two sons and the author "Hot Mess to Mindful Mom." As a meditation teacher Katz helps her clients achieve a balanced life decreasing ... [more](#)

We may not all have a "Zen den" in our home, a space devoted to reflection and relaxation, adorned with soft pillows, healing crystals and pictures of [Deepak Chopra](#) on the shelf, but [Ali Katz](#) is convinced that we all can live like we do.

Katz, who is in her late 30s, is a certified meditation teacher and mindfulness coach in Houston, and the author of

"Hot Mess to Mindful Mom," a book she wrote to help people improve the quality of their lives. Although the title refers to parenthood, her advice, she says, is relevant to everyone.

In her book, Katz writes of her own childhood trauma and how she came to terms with it through meditation.

Growing up in suburban Philadelphia, life at home was dysfunctional, she said. She bounced back and forth between living with her mom and dad and at times found herself sleeping on friends' sofas. Her father was incarcerated for a while but was released when she was a senior in high school. Katz lived with him for a while, until his girlfriend decided she didn't want her around.

When it came time for college, Katz earned some scholarship money but primarily racked up student loans and worked her way through studies at George Washington University. In 1998, she landed a job with [Enron](#) in Houston, where she met her husband, Mark, a financial adviser.

More Information

Learn to meditate

Ali Katz's tips to go from hot mess to mindfulness:

Meditation: Make time for meditation daily. Start with five minutes and slowly increase over two weeks.

Spiritual reading: Find a daily affirmation book that speaks to you, and focus on a piece of spiritual wisdom each day.

Practice gratitude: Keep a gratitude journal, or spend a minute each morning finding something new to be grateful for.

Spend time in nature: Appreciate the nature around you, whether it's on a hike or a walk with your dog.

Mindful breathing: Slowly inhale for a count of four, hold for a count of four, then exhale for a count of four. Slow, deep breaths can hit the "pause" button in stressful situations.

About Ali Katz: atozenmeditation.com

About the Integrative Medicine Center at M.D. Anderson: mdanderson.org

About St. Paul's United Methodist Church: stpaulshouston.org

'Hot Mess to Mindful Mom'

By Ali Katz

CreateSpace Publishing, 218 pp., \$14.99 (paperback)

It was meditation that led her to realize she carried emotional scars. "I didn't know I was a hot mess until I wasn't anymore," said Katz, a mother of two sons.

Mindfulness and meditation are words used in self-help circles, but Katz thinks there are misconceptions about the practices.

"Mindfulness is being truly engaged in your experience in each moment, without judgment," she said, noting that it's about releasing "stored emotion."

It's not just some New Age mantra, either. Mainstream religious denominations practice it. St. Paul's [United Methodist Church](#) in Houston in 2011 installed a labyrinth on its front lawn - an intricate circular path of cobbled

bricks that you follow as you meditate.

"You enter the labyrinth with a question or seeking in mind," said the Rev. [Eleanor Colvin](#) of St. Paul's. "Quite often you may recognize what you need to know by the center."

It's open to people of all faiths, including those who have no religious affiliation. In July, nearby museums held a "Peace Day" and the church invited people to walk the path in honor of the day - 60 to 70 came to walk, meditate and pray. Colvin said the labyrinth is a tool that taps into the natural rhythms of human physiology and slows the busy mind to create a sacred space.

She said church members often walk the path before services to quiet their minds and prepare for worship.

And there are experts who agree with the notion that meditation can produce unexpected results.

"It gives you more spaciousness, said [Alejandro Chaoul](#) of [M.D. Anderson Cancer Center's Integrative Medicine Center](#). "It opens you to more possibility," he said.

Chaoul brings the practice of meditation to cancer patients and their families to help them deal with grueling treatments and mental suffering that comes with their diagnosis. He said it can address anxiety and sleep problems as well as improve cognitive ability and decrease stress.

He believes that the focus of meditation can even impact physical well-being. "One patient said on a scale of 1 to 10, her pain level was an 11. We did a meditation, probably 20 minutes, and she said, 'I can't believe it, my pain is a 2,'" he said.

Another patient told him that meditation left him feeling like he'd had a full-body massage.

Chaoul, a Buddhist, meditates daily as a practice of his faith. He said that Buddhism recognizes 84,000 types of meditation, all of which harmonize mind, body and breath.

"Intention in Buddhism is to achieve enlightenment, enlightenment being that state of mind that you're totally connected to yourself and everyone all the time," he said.

The result, he said, can be transformative, as it was with Katz.

One way that happened for Katz was her urge to write, and with that boost to her confidence as a writer, she set out to expand her thoughts in longer form for a book. "It's not about having a different life, it's about having a better life," she said.

Katz said that until she found meditation, she always had "this ball of anxiety in my chest." But one day, while walking her dog, she became aware that the ball of tension wasn't there.

There were other, more obvious, changes, too. She'd become more patient with her kids, less critical of herself when she made little mistakes, and she wouldn't lie in bed at night replaying stressful conversations from her day.

Using meditation not only to move forward from painful experiences but also to learn from them - Katz likened the process to dating oneself.

"You start out by spending a little time with yourself, then you spend more time, and then you fall in love with yourself," she said.