The Stress Cup Theory: What's Really Behind Your Child's Meltdowns Transcript

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Meltdowns as a Stress Cup Overflow

Your child's meltdown didn't start when they screamed. It started hours earlier, and most parents only see the final drop that spills into the cup. A mom once told me her daughter had a full meltdown because she got the blue bowl instead of the pink one.

I think we've all been there screaming, crying, door slamming. The mom kept saying, it's just a bowl. And she was right, but the bowl wasn't the problem.

It was simply the moment the stress cup overflowed. And so like, we always think, why did these meltdowns just happen? Like it came out of nowhere and my child was fine a minute ago.

Why aren't they reacting like this over something like I don't get it. What's happening? She's asking, why are they reacting over something so small? But nervous systems don t explode randomly.

Stress builds layer by layer. over time, right? That cup just fills up. Each demand, each emotion they feel can trigger it and eventually the brain runs out of regulation capacity because we don't have unlimited capacity.

You can't just pour and pour into a cup. It can only take so much. When that happens, the nervous system spills over and that spill is what we call a meltdown.

big reactions or a tantrum. That's what a nervous system spill is. And when the stress comes, it's one of those simplest ways to understand dysregulation because it helps us visualize what's really happening to your kid.

How the Nervous System Builds Stress

So imagine your child's nervous system like a cup, and every stressor adds a little bit to it. Some drops are big, some are tiny, but the nervous everybody's stress cup comes in different sizes.

I have a girlfriend who we talk all the time and her stress cap is probably about 10% of mine. i'm not even exaggerating and i love her and she's amazing but she just doesn't have that same capacity that i do and it's the same for kids you know it because you see it in your own house for those of us that have more than one kid some people have three kids or four kids and It's very dependent on what their nervous system perceives and as well as what's their capacity and what they're taking out to create more capacity.

But eventually, you know, keep putting these things in without clearing some of them, the cup is going to fill. And when one more drop lands, And the nervous system starts overflowing and the overflow is these meltdowns and big reactions.

And that's what really is what nervous-system capacity is. Your child's brain is constantly scanning the environment for signals of safety or stress. A part of the brain called the amygdala acts like a threat detector.

When stress begins stacking up, the Amygdali activates the body's stress response. And each person, again, in my example between me and one of my besties, we have different ideas of what stress is, and we'll get into that.

I certainly spend a lot of time regulating, so does she, but she's got other issues. And so there are things like stress hormones and cortisol and adrenaline, your heart rate, they all get jacked up the moment the amygdala turns on the safety warning and the nervous system shifts into survival mode.

Brain Regulation and Sensory Triggers

At the same time, the prefrontal cortex, thinking brain, starts losing its efficacy. That's the part of the brain responsible for impulse control. emotional regulation, problem solving, flexibility, perspective taking, and we need that.

And so that's why you say to yourself, like, wow, this kid can do math, but you ask them to change their clothing and they're freaking out on you because that child might have a nervous system that is more prone to dysregulation from sensory.

There's just different components. I use sensory because it's very real. For so many of us, I lived through it. And I remember Max one time just sitting, bawling his eyes out, because he had to wear a different pair of socks.

We just sat there and we held the space for him. But man, it was real. So real for him. It was tough. He did learn and yes, he's still particular about certain things and that's okay, but he has learned to expand.

When stress becomes too high, the prefrontal cortex really truly can't regulate the emotional brain effectively or at all. So reactions become faster, emotions become bigger, And the pause between feeling and reacting gets smaller.

And that is why we have these blow ups. Here's the part that changes how parents really understand meltdowns. Because the melt down you see, again, is really about that moment.

Sometimes we see your brother smacked you and you get upset. But most of the time for our dysregulated kids, we're perplexed. I mean, this is what I've been talking about for 30 years with people.

And what it's about, it is about the stress that has been building in the nervous system that is unique to each person.

Homework, After-School Collapse, and Hidden Load

I'm going to give you a little preview. The more you regulate, the more the Nervous System can regulate. And I talk all about this in my book, The Disregulated Kid.

Please pre-order it. It will send the signal to the Amazon gods, to Barnes and Nobles, and to Target. That's where they're available. that this book is important and then it will automatically push it out more.

So you can go to dysregulatedkid.com and you order it right from there and go Amazon, any of those retailers. And you certainly see in the show notes, but it's going to change the entire conversation about parenting.

I'm really proud and excited for it. and I really created this as a gift for you because we know better, we can do better and guess what? We know better, and I'm here to share it with you.

And I've been sharing it people for 30 years, but I want to make it more even more accessible than what we're doing right here. It's literally a playbook is what it is.

I worked with a family whose son really would almost like explode every night during homework and such a hot big thing for people. And they were convinced that the homework was the problem and they tried consequences.

He didn't care about that. They tried rewards. I didn't really care about that. They tried stricter rules, they tried removing media, all that, nothing, and that's when it came to me.

And then we just started looking at his entire day and really what happened the week. and what was going on. And by the time homework started, what we found, his nervous system was already jacked up.

There were missing things we weren't seeing until we talked to his teacher, who was like, could see that he was holding it together, but most people think you're holding together.

So what, you are holding them together? Suck it up, they're doing fine. But if your kid is like a hot mess at home and has that after school restraint collapse, we got ourselves a problem.

But he came in exhausted, his rest cup was really full and homework was just like the end. It wasn't the cause, it was the last. drop that caused the meltdown.

And once the family started recognizing the buildup during the day, starting from the morning, the nightly explosion started to really make a lot more sense for them.

Why does the last moment always get blamed? Because when the cup finally overflows, we naturally focus on the drop. The sibling comment, homework request, wrong snack, and we assume that moment is the cause.

We often call these kids sensitive, deeply feeling kids. I love Dr. Becky, but aren't these really just kids that have dysregulated nervous systems?

Reframing Behavior Through the Stress Cup Lens

Because when you have a regulated kid, you know they're less sensitive to things, quote unquote, air quotes for those of you listening. The nervous system has already run out of room for these kids, and the trigger just simply revealed the overload.

How about that? When you start looking through the lens of the nervous system, stress cup here, something powerful shifts. And instead of asking, why are they acting like this?

You start asking what has been filling their cup today. That question alone changes how you see behavior because you're now looking at the whole nervous-system picture.

not just the explosion. And that's a big deal because you're shifting your whole mindset. You know what you are doing isn't working. We got to do something different.

That's what this is all about. So we're going to be continuing to talk about this in a series of three videos about the stress cup because parents don't see this and the signs are subtle.

And in the next part of this series, we're going to talk about the hidden stressors that quietly fill your child's stress cup, even when you think your kid is regulated.

Because again, I don't want you to avoid stress. It's about creating capacity to deal with stress, bam, hope that hits you like a thunderbolt. Because our kids were bubble wrapping them.

And at the same time, we're not teaching them how to regulate. Soon as we have a highly distressed kids, We think medication and we think psychotherapy.

Medication should never be the first line of defense. I'm cool with psychotherapy when we're teaching these kinds of things, but we have to change the conversation because what we are doing is not working.

You know that as a parent, I know, that is a therapist, which is why I am doing what I doing and wrote this book. But if we don't look for those hidden signs and address them, it's just going to start really creating more behavior.

And once we start seeing it like this, our behavior makes sense. And you can take action in a different way where you're already doing a lot. Just start working.

How about that? Imagine that. So if you need help understanding why your child's stress cup is overflowing, Take the Solution Matcher to find out why and what to do about it.

It's pretty cool. Go to DrRoseanne.com forward slash help and just know that meltdowns rarely come out of

nowhere. They come from nervous systems that ran out room.

And once you start seeing the stress cup, you can stop focusing only on the explosion and you could start noticing the buildup because when you understand what's filling the cup You're going to start helping your child empty it before it overflows.

How cool is that? And that's the heart of regulation first. So I hope you're really enjoying this stress cup. I know that I've been talking about it for a very, very long time with people one-on-one, which is coming to an end.

And I have found it to be one of the most helpful analogies for kids and for parents. It's more than an analogy. it's a way for you to get your kids who are struggling with dysregulation at some level to start regulating and bring calm back into the home.

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