

Matt (host): Welcome back to the Nimble Youth Podcast, where we explore the realities of raising kids and teens in a world that often asks more of them than they're equipped to give. Today's episode is one I know will resonate deeply with parents who feel like they're constantly walking on eggshells or maybe standing too close to an emotional wildfire. My guest is therapist and author Katie K. May, whose new book, *You're On Fire, It's Fine*, offers a compassionate, practical roadmap for parenting highly emotional teenagers, kids who feel everything intensely and often don't yet have the tools to manage that intensity. Katie Kay May is a licensed therapist and founder of Creative Healing Teen Support Centers in the greater Philadelphia area.

As a national speaker and trainer, she empowers parents and professionals to radically shift teen emotions and behaviors through proven and practical coping skills. Katie is a board certified self harm specialist and an expert in DBT, the gold standard treatment for life threatening behaviors. Katie is committed to helping teens feel accepted for who they are while teaching them skills to build a life they love. Katie, welcome to Nimble Youth.

Katie K. May: It is good to be here, Matt. It's a tough time of year for teens right now. We call it crisis season. So it's really timely that we're having this conversation.

Matt (host): Yeah, absolutely. I think it's a tough time of year for a lot of people, but certainly teens included. So let's start at the beginning in the intro to your book and throughout you describe your own struggles during your teenage years and later becoming the parent of a child who is now a teenager. Is your own personal journey what inspired you to write a book specifically for parents of highly emotional teenagers?

Katie K. May: I'd say my motivation for writing this book is twofold. One is yes, I absolutely struggled as a teen and I was raised by a single father who didn't have the right skills to parent a teen like me. And the other side of that is the gap that we noticed in the counseling center that I lead, where parents also needed these skills to support the teens that we were working with. And so I took my personal story and my professional knowledge, and I blended them in a book that gives parents the skills to support a teen with self destructive behaviors, but also tells them the story of what I went through and where I am to give them hope that it can get better.

Matt (host): Yeah. So what do you see parents getting wrong a lot? Because not because they don't care, but maybe they didn't have the language or framework to address those concerns.

Katie K. May: Yeah, I agree with you. Parents are always doing the best that they can and they can get it better and they can learn new skills to do more. What I see parents missing the mark on is they see the behavior that the teen is engaging in as a problem. And it is. It's a problematic behavior or a harmful or a self destructive behavior.

But what they're missing is that for that teenager, it's also a solution. The way that I look at it is when an individual is overwhelmed with emotion, the brain comes up with a strategy to escape that emotion. And oftentimes, it's a self destructive behavior, a lashing out behavior, an escape

behavior. So our job is really to decode the message of that behavior rather than taking the behavior at face value.

Matt (host): So in the book, you describe sensitive kids and teens as fire feelers. And I love that phrase. Can you explain what you mean by that and why it's such an important reframe for parents?

Katie K. May: When a teenager is biologically sensitive, and what I mean by that is they experience their emotions as big and deep and intense. And oftentimes, these fire feelers, as I've termed them, they also are your zero to sixty and ten seconds flat kids. They're also really easily set off, and it takes them a long time to come back to baseline or to calm down again. So when I talk about a fire feeler, I'm talking about someone who has that predisposition to be biologically sensitive. And the reason I talk about it as a fire is because I look at it as if the teen is on fire with their own emotions.

They have these big, fiery, overwhelming emotions that are burning them up inside. And when we think about it that way, it can make sense to an adult brain why they would do anything to make that fire go out, including engaging in a behavior that may ultimately be harmful in the short term.

Matt (host): Yeah. And so many parents often with the best intention, they try to calm their teens by saying things like mood swings are normal, relax, everything's fine, or you know, you're just tired, sleep it off. And certainly when I was raising teenagers, they're young adults now, but those are things that I would, you know, say basically. And why are these responses actually counterproductive for emotionally intense teens? And what should parents say instead?

Katie K. May: Yeah. If we think about this teen has this big fiery emotion inside and a parent is saying, just take a nap, go use your coping skills, go take a walk. They're implying that there's some simple solution to this big fiery emotion. And so if we stick with this metaphor for the teenager, it often feels like a tiny little squirt gun or a little drop of water trying to put out a really big fire. So instead of it landing as helpful for the teenager, it often gets received as this message, If everyone around me is saying that it's easy to make these emotions go away, well then there must be something wrong with me that I can't do this.

Matt (host): Yeah. And another thing that you point out is that logic often fails when the child's emotions are dysregulated, right?

Katie K. May: Yeah. So when we're in this activated state, I look at it almost like a scale. So zero to ten and ten is we're completely dysregulated, completely overwhelmed with our emotions. When anyone is in a state where their emotions are completely overwhelming or activated, the brain goes to all or nothing. This is terrible.

I'm never going to get out of this situation. Everybody hates me. And so the brain loses the ability to be logical in those instances. Our job is instead of trying to change someone's mind,

help them calm their body down using skills like maybe taking a brisk walk, splashing really cold water on your face, something that's going to calm the body down before we try to problem solve.

Matt (host): Yeah. So another, sort of cornerstone of your book and something you cover is, something you call radical acceptance. And that's what you describe as a cornerstone of parenting teens with big emotions. So what is a greater definition of radical acceptance and why is it so powerful, especially for parents?

Katie K. May: It's one of my favorite things to talk about as a parent and as a professional, because I do think that it's critical to practice radical acceptance to stop suffering. The definition of radical acceptance is accepting what is without continuing to try and force a situation that is not reality. So, for example, for a parent of teenagers, for a parent of a teenager with mental health concerns, oftentimes they're in these situations where teenager is self harming, teenager is running away or lashing out. And there's a lot of grief that comes with this. When you held your baby in your arms for the first time, you didn't consider, My child's going to grow up and hurt themselves one day.

It's not a part of the mental image or the story that you had for your child. So as a parent, when you're in this situation, there's a lot of wishing it was different, wanting your child to show up differently, wanting your day to day life to look different than it is. And the more that we focus on what we don't have and what we wish is different, the more we struggle, the more miserable we are. So the idea of radical acceptance is how do I grieve the life that I have is not the life that I expected. It's not the life that I want, but this is the life that I have.

And once I can accept that, then I can problem solve. Then I can find the right support group. Then I can process my feelings. So accepting reality as it is allows you to move forward rather than stall out and spin on what your life is not.

Matt (host): Right. And following up on that, so how is acceptance different from approval?

Katie K. May: Just because I can accept life as it is, doesn't mean that I approve of all of the parts of it. So if we go back to the idea of parenting a child with mental health concerns. I accept that this is my reality. I accept that this is my life, but I don't necessarily say that I love all of it. I don't say that, check the boxes, this is exactly what I want in life, but it is the life that I have, and acceptance is the only way to move forward.

Parents may resist the concept of radical acceptance because it's human to want things to be different. And I think because of the power differential between parents and teenagers, it's easy to say, You learn how to cope. You learn new skills. You go to therapy to change. And of course, that makes sense conceptually.

If you're the one who's struggling, you go to therapy. But I'm also struggling with how you're struggling. And so when we think about the task of parents, it's not to look to their child to say,

you need to get it together so that I feel better. It's I'm going to deal with my stuff so that I can show up better for you. I always say parents go first, which means that it's a parent's job to learn how to regulate their emotions.

It's a parent's job to learn how to respond to their teen's feelings. And it's a parent's job to shift the structure in the home environment to make it healthier and happier, even if a teen resists that all along the way.

Matt (host): Yeah. So let's talk now a little bit about escalation. Those are the moments where emotions spiral fast and everyone ends up saying or doing things they regret. And what are some practical strategies parents can use to help stop emotional escalation before it gets out of control?

Katie K. May: We always want to try and head off that emotional escalation before it hits the crisis point. The first step in that process is understanding where you are along that crisis spectrum. So, is not a passfail, a yes or no. It's often tiered and escalates. We want to be mindful of what that looks like.

For parents, I call this the parental stress meter. It's that zero to 10 scale. Where am I on the scale, and how do I notice the red flags of that? For example, if I'm a four to six out of 10, I might notice that my blood is boiling, that I'm getting a little bit more tense. If I can recognize those signs and I can take the dog for a walk or go drive to get gas to get out of the house for a few minutes, those are ways that I can block escalation before it gets to that crisis point.

And similarly with teenagers, we want to understand what escalation looks like every step of the way. So we know what it looks like when our teenager is calm or when they're in a good mood, but we wanna recognize what does it look like when that starts shifting? Maybe they get a little bit more irritable. Maybe they're isolating more frequently than they used to. We want to notice those signs sooner and not wait until the crisis before we step in to try and change the story.

Matt (host): One thing that I think a lot of parents do is, they'll look at a situation and say, here I'm teaching my child a lesson. And in the book you mentioned that, you know, method, teaching a lesson, never really works.

Katie K. May: Well, when I think about discipline and disciplining a teen, I think there is a component of that that is punishment is going to teach them a lesson. So if they roll their eyes at me or slam the door or call me names, I'm going to take their phone away because they were disrespectful to me. And that kind of punishment doesn't work because it's not a natural consequence. It in fact creates more resentment between parent and teenager and ruptures the relationship further, and that makes it harder to get back to a point of connection, communication, and harmony. I do think natural life consequences can be very helpful teachers for our teenagers.

For example, if you stayed up too late and you didn't study for your test, no, I'm not going to call you out of school tomorrow. That is the grade you're going to get because that's what you worked or did not work for. So that's teaching a lesson in what happens when I do or don't do what is expected of me, but it's not an off the wall, I'm going to take the car keys or I'm going to take the phone just because I don't like something that you did. That there's no A to B connection there.

Matt (host): Yeah, that makes a lot of sense, sort of naturalistic consequences, right? So another thing in the book you explained that when teens engage in self destructive behaviors, it's things like self harm, substance abuse, avoidance, or explosive reactions. It's often because they're trying to escape overwhelming emotional pain. And can you help parents understand what's really happening beneath those behaviors?

Katie K. May: I call this the skills breakdown point. If we go back to teens are feeling on fire with their emotions, they're so big, they're so overwhelming that the brain would come up with any strategy to make those emotions go away. So it makes sense that they're thinking about self harm or suicidal ideation or drugs and alcohol to numb out or binging in front of the TV and scrolling their phone. So they're numbing out and don't have to feel. All of these behaviors are ways to either escape pain or numb from pain.

So if we think about that as the message under the behavior, what we really want to do is understand, what is my teen struggling with? What's happening for them? How do I understand? How do I validate this idea that if this is what you're doing, then you must really be struggling. You must really be hurting inside.

So that's the idea behind that skills breakdown point is if they don't have the skills to manage that big and overwhelming emotion, if they don't have a template for how to deal with it, their brain is going to automatically default to how do I make this go away as quickly as possible?

Matt (host): Yeah. And so teens, another thing you mentioned is that teens aren't necessarily choosing chaos. They're choosing relief when they engage in these behaviors, right?

Katie K. May: I don't think, well, I don't want to say I don't think anyone's choosing chaos, but yes, I don't think it's a conscious choice when a teen is engaging in these behaviors. Over time, it can become a pattern, and that becomes the response any time that painful emotion shows up because it's worked by history. That's what reinforcement is. It worked before, so I'm doing it again. So that's basic behaviorism that's biologically based, but it's not necessarily a conscious choice that I want to hurt myself or make my life harder.

It's more, this is big and painful and overwhelming, and I need this to go away right now.

Matt (host): Right. And that leads nicely into the next question. One of the most hopeful messages in your book is that emotional dysregulation develops over time. And that also means

that it can improve over time. So can you talk a little bit about how biology and environment interact here and why it's never really too late for parents to make meaningful change?

Katie K. May: Yes. The way that emotion dysregulation develops is that we have this biologically sensitive child, this fire feeler, and they're in an environment that unintentionally invalidates them frequently. So this could be something like we talked about those simple solutions of you're fine, just get it together. It could be telling them that their emotions are too big or too much or wrong, or it could be not noticing lower levels of emotion until they reach a crisis point. For example, all teenagers are moody, you're fine.

And so a teenager has to continue to escalate before that emotion feels, quote unquote, heard for them. So it's not just that this happens one time, it happens again and again and again. And that frequent interaction creates an individual with emotion dysregulation. So that's how it's developed. And the good news in that is that because it is the interplay of biology and environment, we can change that pattern.

Parents have a tremendous influence to change the way that their teens interact, to change that the way that their teens respond. And it starts with shifting that invalidation to validation, to being able to communicate to a teen. I see you, I hear you, you matter what you're saying and feeling makes sense. And I'm here to listen to you. But again, we have to do this over and over and over, over time for that shift to happen.

It's not a one and done deal.

Matt (host): Yeah. And another thing you mentioned is that these shifts, these changes don't have to be dramatic. Often times these very small shifts can really matter, right?

Katie K. May: Absolutely. I don't think there's any zero to a 100 change that can happen. It really is these small shifts over time, noticing how you feel, not reacting, leaving the room if you have the urge instead of just be present with your teen, knowing to validate them rather than invalidate them. These are these micro moments that you're having with your teen every single day. It's not a big grand gesture.

It's these everyday little steps that you're taking.

Matt (host): Yeah. So I want to talk a little bit now about, a couple of things, which you've mentioned before, the power of validation, but also something you called good enough parenting, which I really love. I love this concept. So you write that emotions can be like a wildfire and that validation is the water that keeps it from spreading. So what does real validation look like in everyday parenting and how can parents practice this without feeling like they're walking on eggshells?

And then once you explain that, you can also talk a little bit about the idea of the good enough parent.

Katie K. May: Yeah. Validation is the idea that you can tell someone that their feelings make sense, even if you don't agree with it. And it's conveying to someone that they matter to you, that their experiences make sense in their life. So an example of this with teenagers is, I understand why you wanna stay out until 2AM, and that is not the rule of our family. I totally get why you would wanna stay overnight at someone's house after the prom, and we need to sit down and talk about that first.

So we can understand why a teenager wants to do something, or I really get why you came home so sad after school when your friends left you out of the lunch table. You have a long history of feeling rejected and left out, so I get why that stung for you. It's showing up and showing that you understand your teenager's experience, and you're not just saying, plus teenage problems, I went through that too, you'll be fine. It's communicating the message that it matters so that they stop doubting their own experience. Because if we go back to a teenager who is on fire with their emotions and people are telling them it's easy to make those emotions go away, they start to doubt their own emotional meter.

They start to think, well, do I have a faulty emotional meter? Am I too much? Is everyone else right? And this is easy and I'm wrong. So we need to restore that balance and help them understand that their emotions make sense when they are valid so that we can help them regulate.

Matt (host): Yeah. And so, let's talk a little bit about the good enough parents. I like this concept because you say that perfection is not only unnecessary, but it's often harmful, right?

Katie K. May: Yeah. When I was in graduate school to become a therapist, my child at that point was about 18. And I remember one of my graduate professors talking about how it's always the parents fault and it's always the parents that are going to mess up their child. And that was her belief. And so I raised my hand timidly and I asked, does that mean that I'm definitely going to mess up my child?

And then she softened and she shared the theory of the good enough parent, which says that we really only need to get it right 20% of the time. And it's how we repair harm and respond to the mistakes that we made in the other 80% of the time that build the relationship, that build trust, that make us good enough parents. And so perfection should not be expected from us as parents as much as it should not be expected from our children. So we're all fallible. We're all going to make mistakes, but it's how we come together to communicate and repair that makes the relationship stronger.

Matt (host): So many parents listening right now, they're thinking, well, this all sounds great, but my relationship with my teen is already strained. So if things have been rocky in the past, where can parents start rebuilding trust and connection?

Katie K. May: Yeah. As with anything, we want to remember there are no quick fixes and that's why I developed the hierarchy of connection. It's a tool to help us move along from no connection to strongest connection, understanding that there are small steps along the way. The first step in the process is being in the same room as your teen and that going okay. So this might be, I'm putting away groceries.

They're watching YouTube videos on the TV. We're not talking to each other, but there's also no tension. There's no arguments. There's no criticizing. We need to be able to master that.

So if you're a parent who's listening, and anytime you're in the same room as your teen, there's an argument, we need to just be in the same room together before we take it to the next step. The next level is side by side engagement. And what this is, is doing something together, but not necessarily interacting. We're watching The Office together on TV. We're both doing something together, but we're not interacting with each other.

We're driving in the car and we're listening to music. So we can share space, we can do the same thing, but we're not necessarily interacting at that deeper level yet. Some people need to be at this stage for a very long time. Some people never get beyond this stage because this is where their capacity is. The last step in the hierarchy of connection is the interactive communication.

This might be having a conversation together at a deeper level. Maybe it's playing an interactive board game where you have to go back and forth with something, but we want to build up to the point where we are having these trusting conversations by building trust at each of those steps along the way so that your teen's nervous system is prepared to have the deeper conversation. There's already those bricks of trust there.

Matt (host): So Katie, this has been such a grounding and hopeful conversation. Before we wrap up things, what's one thing that you want parents of highly emotional teens to remember, especially on those days, the hardest days where you think you just can't do this anymore?

Katie K. May: Parents go first. So we've talked a lot about how parents need to regulate their own emotions so that they can support their teen. And I think that's the number one step, noticing how you feel, noticing when you need to step away, noticing when you need to seek support so that you can show up fully for your child and also noticing how hard it is and that you do need support to get through these hard times.

Matt (host): Yeah. And so for our listeners, Katie Kay May's book is called You're on Fire. It's Fine. It's a practical guide for parents. It's now a bestseller on Amazon.

So join the party and get the book. It's great. It's a powerful reminder that intense emotions are not a problem to fix, but they're a signal asking for understanding, skill, and compassion. Katie, thank you so much for being here on Nimble Youth today. And if you found this conversation helpful

Katie K. May: Thank you so much for having me.

Matt (host): Sure. And if you found this conversation helpful, please consider sharing it with another parent who might need it. And don't forget to rate and review Nibble Youth podcasts wherever you listen to podcasts. It helps us reach families who are feeling overwhelmed and alone. Until next time, I'm Matt Butterman.

Take care of yourselves and please take care of your kids.