Episode 673: Words Matter, Talking on Eggshells & Changing Relationships by Changing Our Words
With Sam Horn
This episode is sponsored by Hiya Health, which is my go-to source for multivitamins, especially for my younger kids, before they can swallow pills. Typical children's vitamins are basically candy in disguise, filled with unsavory ingredients and things you would not give to your children otherwise. Most brands on store shelves are filled with sugar, unhealthy chemicals and other gummy junk that growing kids, or frankly, anyone should never eat. And this is why I'm so glad I found Hiya Health. Hiya makes children's vitamins with zero sugar and zero gummy junk and unsavory ingredients. Yet they taste great, and they are perfect for picky eaters. They're also nostalgic and remind me of the children's vitamins I took as a kid, though I probably wouldn't love those ingredients. Hiya is unique because it fills the most common gaps in modern children's diets to provide full body nourishment for our kids, with a yummy taste that they will love and you will not have to fight them over. They manufacture in the USA with globally sourced ingredients that are each selected for optimal bioavailability and absorption. And the best part? They arrive straight to your door on a pediatrician recommended schedule, so you never have to worry about running out. Your first month comes with a reusable glass bottle that your kids can personalize with stickers. So in the case of my kids, with six of them, they never get them confused. And then every month after, Hiya sends a no plastic, eco friendly refill pouch of fresh vitamins. Which means that Hiya isn't just good for your kids, it's also great for the environment as well. So you as a mom no longer have to worry about running out of vitamins, and they will automatically arrive when you need them. You can check them out and get them for your kids by going to Hiyahealth.com/wellnessmama. And you'll also save 50% on your first month.

This podcast is brought to you by LMNT, which is a company that I have had the chance to invest in and have loved since day one. They just released brand new grapefruit flavor on top of all of their other flavors that I absolutely love, including watermelon which is a kid's favorite in my house, as well as citrus, raspberry, orange, and a couple of ones that I really like, like mango and lemon habanero as well. As you know, summer brings warmth and sunshine, and with it, energizing opportunities to all of us to move and play and be outside. But it also brings a fair amount of sweat. And if you are a regular sauna user like me, you know that sweat is part of it, as well as if you exercise regularly. And this is why optimal hydration is the key with the right fluid to electrolyte balance, because it isn't just about getting enough water and fluid, but also making sure our electrolytes are dialed in and you feel the difference when you get it right. So when summer brings the heat, LMNT brings the grapefruit salt flavor to help you enjoy that balance all summer long. You can consider grapefruit or any of their flavors, your ultimate summer salt companion. And I love that they combine sodium, magnesium, and potassium in the clinically studied ratios to make sure that you can stay optimally hydrated even if you are saunaing or exercising or just spending time outside in the summer. Find out more about LMNT by going to drinklmnt.com/wellnessmama. And this is a one time flavor so when it's gone, it's gone for good. I highly recommend that you try it. I also would suggest trying watermelon and mango chili if you like a little bit of a spicy kick. But watermelon, like I said, is the kid favorite at my house and you can find those and all of their flavors at drinklmnt.com/wellnessmama.
Sam is a friend of mine, and she is also the CEO of Tongue Fu!, which is a Training Institute. She's a three times TEDx speaker and the author of eleven books, including Tongue Fu!, Talking on Eggshells and many others. She helps people create intriguing, respectful, and one of a kind communications, and her work has been featured everywhere from the New York Times to Forbes and everywhere in between, and she's presented to hundreds of organizations worldwide, including Oracle, NASA, and many, many others. Sheri Salata, who's the former Executive Producer of The Oprah Show, said that Sam is one of the bright lights and most accessible wisdom sharers in our culture today. And I would agree, after this conversation.

We talk about why she gave away almost everything she owned and became a nomad for a year. We talk about the reason words matter so much and how to get better at the words we use. My parents can replace the word careful and get it out of our vocabularies with our kids, and we go really deep on the topic of words that we as parents should use and words that we should lose. And we do a simple exercise to shift our words in our languaging and parenting, including a lot of words that we can replace and get rid of certain words and replace with others.

We talk about how to have a pattern interrupt language to use when kids are mad or upset or fighting or blaming each other, why not to explain when people complain and what to do instead. Words that can put grievances and grudges in the past and four words that help us keep our cool even when other people aren’t. And many other things. Sam has such a way with words as you might expect, and I really enjoyed this conversation. So let’s join Sam Horn. Sam, welcome. Thank you so much for being here. I’m so excited to get to have a conversation with you.

Sam: Thanks, Katie. I’m really looking forward to sharing some stories and ideas with your listeners.

Katie: Well, I am, too, and I have learned personally so much from you, and I very much value our conversations that we’ve had. And we’re going to get to go deep on a lot of the topics that you have taught me over the years. But first, I didn’t even know this until researching for this episode, that in 2016, you gave away basically everything you owned and you took your business on the road for a year, which I think is incredible. But what led to that, and what was that like?

Sam: You know, Katie we’re going to be talking about our kids, right? About what it’s like to be a parent and so forth. And this idea came from my son. I had just finished a very intensive consult, and he called, and he sensed something in my voice, and he said, what’s up, mom? I said, Andrew, I’m so exhausted. I don’t even know how I get on this plane tonight. I’ve got to fly back to DC two days later, come back to the West Coast. And he was the one who said, mom, you have your own business. He said, there’s something I don’t understand about you. You can do anything you want, and you’re not taking advantage of it. Out of the mouths of 20 somethings, Katie. And so based on that, I did give away 95% of what I owned, and I took my business on the road and I traveled the world.
Katie: I love that so much. In the past year, I’ve internalized what I believe it was Naval Ravikant and Kevin Kelly have both said separately the idea that whatever we own owns a part of us. And I’ve gotten rid of more and more things and gotten down to just a very small capsule wardrobe and very few possessions. And I love that. There’s so much freedom in it. And I can imagine maybe when my kids are grown, becoming nomadic for a little while and really even pushing that farther to feel what it’s like. But I love that you did that. And it sounds like it was an incredible journey for you, for sure.

Sam: It was a journey. And I interviewed people and I asked them, Are you happy? And if so, why? And if not, why not? And I always remember I was interviewing this 30 something dad, and I said, So what’s your dream? And do you know what he said? I don’t dream anymore. It’s too painful. And he and his wife worked full time, had two special needs kids, and he said that he’s just put dreaming on the shelf, that he feels it’s impossible. And I met so many people who feel like they have so many obligations, so many responsibilities. That is irresponsible to do more of what they want. And hopefully I wrote a book called Someday Is Not a Day in the Week, we’ll realize we can do more of what we want now instead of later.

Katie: And I will, of course, link to all your books, for you guys listening, in the show notes at wellnessmama.fm. They’re phenomenal. Highly recommend them and excited about the new one. But I think that’s such a wow, such a profound statement that he made that it’s too painful to dream. Because I’ve realized with kids, it matters what we say, but it also so much matters what we do and what they see. And so if we don’t dream or if we don’t exercise or if we don’t do hard things, we don’t show them that that’s possible. So I love that you kind of took that head on and turned it into a book.

Sam: You know, Katie, as you know, kids don’t want martyrs, right? Is that if we are sacrificing for them, we’re teaching so many lessons. We’re teaching them that we don’t matter as adults, that we put everyone else first. Not a very healthy lesson. We’re teaching them that you work at a job you hate. How many parents tell their kids, well, I’m doing it for you, but they hate their life, and the kids are going, I don’t want you to do that for me. I want you to be lit up and to like what you do or to have time together instead of working 80 hours a week. So you’re right. There’s a lot of habits that it’s so important for us to stop and ask ourselves, are they helping or hurting? And if they’re hurting, to change them.

Katie: And something I’ve learned from you that I feel like is so profound and foundational that I want to talk about as context before we jump into the finer points is the broad concept of just how much words matter, because to me, they’re the beauty in that. And you’ve given me so many examples over our friendship, but we have the ability to get better at that. And you’ve talked so much about how words can profoundly impact our relationships, even, I believe, our relationship with ourself through our inner talk. So I would love for you to just explain a little bit of the foundation of why words matter, and then we’re going to get to go in a lot of different directions with it.

Sam: Katie, you and I are both storytellers, so let me tell a story that shows why words matter, and then we’ll unpack it. Sound good? Okay. I had the privilege of going to visit my son Andrew in New York, and their son Hero was about a year old. And we’re getting caught up in a living room, and Hero crawls across the floor, and
there’s a guitar on a guitar stand over in the corner, and he hauls himself up, and he starts pounding on the strings. Now, Andrew could have yanked the guitar away. He could have said No! Do you know what he did instead? He said one word: gentle. Katie I saw Hero’s face transform in the moment from one of, like, shame or guilt to one of wonder. And he reached back to the guitar, and he went, strum, strum, strum. And there were bells on the window, and he reached up, and he went, ring, ring, ring. And in that moment, Hero made music because Andrew used words that shaped his behavior instead of shamed his behavior.

Katie: I love that example, and I love that instead of careful, which I think I talked about before it gets overused. And I feel like maybe isn’t the healthiest word we can use with our kids. I love that gentle communicated a lot of the same things, but in a positive manner, and he obviously understood exactly what his dad meant and was able to adjust. And rather than that becoming, like, a forbidden thing or something that he would not want to have a good relationship with later.

Sam: See what you just said? As parents right now, let’s agree. Let’s get the word careful out of our language, and I’ll tell you why. A reporter recently asked me where I got my confidence. I said, on the back of a horse. I said, I grew up in Southern California, and even when we were seven and eight years old, my sister and I would be gone on our horses all day long.

Now, it’s interesting, Katie, because our parents did not warn us. They did not think, oh, my gosh, what if something goes wrong? They trusted that if something went wrong, we would get resourceful and we would be able to figure it out. It’s like the bridle breaks, figure it out. Get bucked off? Figure it out. So, Katie, we grew up seeing the world as an adventurous place, not a dangerous place. And when we use that word careful all the time, what we’re embedding and imprinting in children is that the world is a dangerous place, and they constantly have to be alert for what goes wrong. No, let’s imprint that the world is an adventurous place and that if something does go wrong, they can get resourceful and they can figure it out.

Katie: Yeah, I think that’s so powerful. That’s something I’ve tried to keep in mind with my kids from day one, is that communicating to them through my words and my energy, that they are capable. And one of my first principles of parenting is that even from day one, they are infinite autonomous beings. And, yes, they might need my support, especially when they’re newborns, and they do actually need my care, but that if I can keep in mind their autonomy and how capable they are with that kind of as a focus, that they will hopefully believe that and feel that.

And I feel like there are so many beautiful examples you use of this. And I’d love to talk more about as parents, you use the term, I believe, words we should use and words we should lose. And so specific to parenting, what are some of those words beyond just careful? Because I think that’s a perfect jumping in point. But you have so many examples here.

Sam: All right, so now, Katie, unless someone’s driving, I hope they get paper right now. Because what we’re going to do in three words we’re going to show the shift is that on this piece of paper, put a vertical line down
the center and on the left put words to lose, and over on the right put words to use. And then you can post this on your refrigerator. And not only does it help you catch and correct in the moment, it’s going to help your kids as well.

So we’ve already talked about two. Over on the left hand column put the word stop. And over on the right hand column put the word start right. Because Andrew could have told Hero what to stop doing. Stop banging on the guitar or stop throwing rocks or stop hitting your sister or stop running around the pool. And we actually imprint and reinforce the dreaded behavior. Over on the right, start. Now what do we want them to start doing? Instead of stop hitting your sister, give your sister space. Instead of stop running around the pool, walk around the pool. So that’s one, and you just said the other is over on the left is careful. And you use the word capable. Right? If we want our kids to see the world, your words autonomous and adventurous and that they can figure it out, then it’s like I trust you to use your judgment. Look at the difference from I worry about you all the time. I worry no no no no, I trust that things will go well. Big difference.

Katie: Absolutely. And like you said, I think that re-frames their perspective on the world and puts them in a problem-solving critical thinking mindset versus a fearful one, which makes such a difference even as adults in how we approach problems. Not to mention that gives them the ability to try and fail and learn risk and risk management in their own way and let their vestibular systems develop in a lower stakes way than I see many kids who emerge in adulthood having not really been given the sandbox to play in to learn that.

And then they have to figure it out in the adult world in a very high stakes manner. And I know I’ve even had to figure some of those things out in my adult life and have done some of those in therapy even. And my parents were phenomenal. But still, I think of course all of us are going to do things inadvertently that maybe our kids are going to interpret in certain ways and they’re going to work through later no matter how great a parents we try to be. But I think this core concept is so important for the way our kids will view the world as adults.

Sam: You are, so let’s keep going. Let’s follow up on what you just said right there. Over on the left, put the word no, because I’ll always remember there was a single mom. She said, Sam, I have three kids under the age of ten. It seems like all I ever do is tell them no. Mom, can I play with my friends? No, you can’t, because you haven’t done your chores. Mom, can I watch TV? No, you can’t, because you haven’t done your homework. How many times.....And then we often stack, right? How many times do I have to tell you? When are you going to start listening to me? Right? And the riff grows. A lot of times, instead of saying, no, you can’t, because over on the right, yes, you can, as soon as yes, you can play with your friends. As soon as you finish your chores, pick up your room, take out the trash, and you can go out and shoot hoops. Yes, you can watch TV right after you finish your homework. Do your math. Let me have a look at it. And now she was the one who said, Sam, this isn’t semantics. This changes the whole dynamic of the relationship, because when I tell them no, they see me as a big meanie who is blocking them from what it is they want? When I say, yes, you can, right after, or now, who’s responsible for getting what it is they want?
Katie: Yeah. And that’s such another, I think, huge key is to let them have the ownership and the responsibility of their own autonomy, especially in age appropriate ways, as they grow, because then, like I said, they build that skill for adulthood. And I’ve tried to view that with my kids as like, I want to be your partner in you becoming the most autonomous version of yourself. And I’ll always be here as someone you can come talk to and as someone who’s always here for you if you need something, but not in a way that hopefully will take away from their own feeling of autonomy and their own ability to figure those things out on their own. I think that’s such an important distinction.

Sam: Yeah. And let’s talk about what to do when kids make mistakes or do something wrong, right? So over on the left, I’ll tell the example, and then the word and then we’re going to shift to a word that’s actually going to help instead of hurt, is, I have a friend who’s a football coach, and just I’m going to jump to the chase. They’re playing a team that they’re tied with for the championship game. It’s the fourth quarter. The score is tied. They’ve got the ball. They’re marching down the field. Their quarterback throws a perfect pass. Their receiver, who is his son, is racing down the sidelines, and he does something he’s been told 100 times never to do. What does he do? Takes his eyes off the ball. He can’t resist. Sneak in a peek to see how much he beat the defender. Here comes the ball. It goes right through his hands on the ground. He feels terrible. He trudges back to the bench. My friend, the coach, is so caught up in the emotion of the game, he’s not really thinking what he’s saying. He yells at his son. He said, Johnny, you should have kept your eyes on that ball. He said, how many times have I... you had the game in your hands. You blew it. And his son wouldn’t take it anymore. And he stood up and he said, dad, it was a mistake. He said, I never want to play for you again. And that evening, his son got a ride home with someone else. And when he got home, he went right upstairs. He wouldn’t even talk to his dad.

And my friend called me in the morning. He said, Sam, I know what I said just made things worse. What are you supposed to say when someone makes a stupid mistake? And I said, Charlie, do you know anyone who can undo the past? Because if someone makes a mistake and we tell them what they should have done, they will resent us even if we’re right. So put the word should over on the left. You should have been more careful. You should have asked before you went outside. You should have told me you needed a permission slip. You should have asked your teacher for help. So often as parents, we think our job is like to catch our kids making mistakes, tell them what we did wrong.

My dad used to say we can’t make someone feel better, or we can’t motivate someone to do better by making them feel bad. And under that word should, we’re coming across as a critic. They are losing face over the mistake. They will resent us even if what we’re saying is right, because they’re feeling bad and we’re not showing them how to make it better. So over on the right, put the words next time, or from now on, or in the future. Next time, please be sure and ask before you go outside so we know where you are. From now on, if you don’t understand something, please ask your teacher. Look, Katie, now we’re being a coach instead of a critic. Our kids are learning from mistakes instead of losing face over mistakes. And furthermore, we’re showing them how to do it better instead of just making them feel bad.
Katie: I’m so glad you put that word on the list. It’s one I try very hard not to have in my vocabulary, because I feel like even from a self talk perspective, the word should can be so harmful and is often tied to expectations or to more negative emotions like guilt or resentment. And with kids, you’re right, they can’t change the past. And I’ve seen parents, for instance, when a kid spills something or breaks something, say, why did you do that? And realizing as a kid, when I had that happen, there’s not a good answer. The answer is it was a mistake, and I already feel bad about it. Now I feel really bad about it and I can’t change it. And so I feel like that’s such a negative emotional pattern for kids.

Sam: It is. In fact, what we’re doing, Katie, is we are being a pattern interrupt, because so often how our parents talk to us is how we talk to our kids. We’ve never really stopped as you do, and asked ourself, wait a minute, is this contributing to what I want? Or is it compromising it? Is it leading to a better relationship or better results? Or is it actually causing my child to withdraw or retreat? So you want another word to add to the list that’s kind of... because sometimes when people hear the yes, you can, as soon as they’re pushing back, they’re thinking, what if there is no yes, you can. As soon as what if there’s just no way they’re going to do that? Well, guess what? Put the words nothing or no way on the left. There’s nothing I can do. There’s no way I can change it. Hey, I didn’t make the rules, don’t blame me. There’s no way we can afford that.

And here’s one of my favorite stories, is that we had talked about this. And a woman said, I can’t wait to get home tonight and talk with my daughter. I said what happened? She said, she came in yesterday and I’m fixing dinner. She grabs me around the way she twirls me around. She says, Mom, I got it. And she said what? She said, I got the lead in my high school play. She said, Put this date on your calendar. I want you there on opening night. And the woman said, I looked at my calendar and I was going to be out of town for conference. And I said, Honey, there’s no way I can make it. I’m leaving on Thursday. I’m not even coming back till Monday. And her daughter said, mom, you travel all the time. You miss so many of my events. Isn’t there an exception that you can make? And the woman said, Sam, I just stayed stuck over there. Well, you should have told me earlier that this is an option. It’s like there’s nothing I can do. Mom, isn’t there someone else who can? She said, my daughter left the room in tears.

Over on the right, instead of there’s nothing put there’s something. There’s something we can do. Can I ask a friend to videotape that play so that when I get home on Monday night, we can sit down on the couch together? And instead of saying, there’s no way, I wish—I wish I could be there in the front row because I am so proud of you and I would love to be able in the real world, sometimes we are the bearer of bad news. Right. However, when we say, hey, nothing I can do, don’t blame me, not my fault. Our kids conclude we don’t care. When we say, I wish we could afford that. I wish we could have a sleepover this weekend, and then they at least know that we care and we’re trying, instead of we’re just shrugging them off.

Katie: Yeah. And especially with little ones, I’ve noticed that wish language, particularly, is really powerful because they at least feel heard and understood. And so, my little ones, I’ll often say that, I know you really wish you could stay up an hour later, or I know you really wish you could do this. Let’s find a different solution, or let’s find a time when that would work. And I think that’s a really powerful tool as well.
I would love to go through kind of some of the common parenting moments that come up and get your advice for language around them. The first being when our kids are experiencing a big emotion or they’re sad or unhappy or mad, and some of the language that we can use around those moments.

Sam: All right, so let’s have a very specific situation. Let’s say that, well, maybe a lot of teams, I know your kids are into pole vaulting right now. A lot of times, maybe our team loses, right? Or maybe we don’t get the gold medal or we don’t come in first and it’s very upsetting. I’m going to say something, Katie, that flies in the face of what we think, all right? Because most of the time when our kids are hurting, we want to console and comfort them, right? Guess what? Consoling and comforting a kid. Oh, this happens to all of us. You’ll feel better tomorrow. Well, next time we think we’re comforting and consoling them, we’re actually contradicting them.

I’ll give you a quick example, and then we’ll talk about what to say instead. When Andrew was about eight, he needed to get glasses. Now, Tom, he could go a month without combing his hair. He didn’t care. Andrew was kind of the fawns, looking in the mirror, looking pretty good. So he said, I look like a nerd. What did I say? Oh, honey, you look fine in your glasses. They look good on you. Right? And he said, all the kids at school are going to laugh at me. So I said, they’re not going to laugh at you. They’re probably not. And see, I think I’m helping? I’m actually shutting him down. He stomped off and said, you never listen to me. So I think when kids have big emotions, what we do is we paraphrase what they’re saying, using their words. So you don’t like your new glasses? So you’re sad, you lost the game? And you know what they’re going to do? They’re going to grunt. They’re going to go, yeah. Now we come in with wishes again, so that you wish your team had won. Yeah. And you see, when we paraphrase what they say, they often go, yeah, you wish that this... yeah. Now they feel heard and understood and listened to instead of given advice to. So we give our ears, not our advice.

Katie: Yeah. Especially on things like you said that are in the past, that we can’t change. We can’t change who won, and then they at least get to feel like we’re there for them and that they’re understood. And I know another area you and I’ve even talked about is when someone complains, you have your own take on what to do. Instead of explaining or rationalizing or justifying or defending. What do you suggest instead?

Sam: Well, so let’s talk about our partners, right, because we’ve talked about our kids. So let’s go ahead and use an example about over on the left, put complain. When people complain, don’t explain, because explanations come across as excuses. We think if we explain why this went wrong or why this didn’t happen, or why we’re late, that people will understand and forgive us. They actually get angrier because they feel we’re making excuses. So over on the right, when people explain, don’t I mean, complain, don’t explain. Take the A train. Over on the right, put three A’s. A for agree. You’re right. We were supposed to go to your mom’s this weekend. A for apologize, and I’m sorry that we had to back out at the last minute. A for act, and can we call her and ask if next weekend works?

And now, here’s the example. I was giving a workshop on this, and a man went one of these. He slapped his hand to his forehead. He said, oh, I wish I’d known this Friday. I said what? He said, I was going to pick my wife
up after work. We were going to go out for dinner in a movie. I left on time. There’s an accident on the freeway. It’s gridlock. You can’t get off the freeway. You can’t get I just turn off the engine. The phone battery had died. I couldn’t let my wife know what was going on. He said, When I finally got downtown from a block away, I could see my wife pacing up and down the curb. I pulled up, she yanked that car door open. She said, you were supposed to be an hour ago. He said, don’t blame me, I’ve been stuck in traffic. She said, how was I supposed to know that? I didn’t know if you’d forgotten, if you were in some ditch. He said, Get off my case. He said, we didn’t go to dinner, we didn’t go to a movie. We went home and I slept in the guest room.

And he said, Sam, why should I apologize if I didn’t do anything wrong? Because a lot of times people say, wait a minute. Why should I apologize? It wasn’t my fault. However, look at what happens when we take the A train. A for agree. You’re right. I was supposed to pick you up an hour ago. A for apologize. And I’m sorry you’ve ended up waiting so long. A for act. And from now on, if I’m going to try and pick you up on a Friday night, I’m building in a cushion for Murphy’s Law.

Now, see, you’ve heard the you can be right. You can be happy. He could not apologize because it wasn’t his fault. However, they will still end up being adversaries. All an apology is, is commiserating with the other person’s inconvenience and imagining what it was like for her for an hour to not know if he blown her off or he was in a ditch. And when we go first and offer the A train, the other person will often say, well, you couldn’t do anything about it. Now we’re on the same side instead of side against side.

Katie: Yeah. And I think that bringing the partner side into this is valuable as well. And I know another common one is what do we say or not say if our kids are fighting or whining or bickering or if partner or even someone at work? What are some words that are helpful in those cases?

Sam: I love the words. Well, if it’s kids, it’s give each other space because they’re into it. Right. And now we’re into animal aggression, domination, submissive behavior. We’re trying to out shout the other person. We’re leaning into the other person, trying to intimidate them by getting bigger, louder, etc. So when we give each other space, we break that physical dynamic of trying to well, Colette said the better we feel about ourselves, the fewer times we have to knock someone down in order to feel tall. So do you see? Give each other space breaks that physical dynamic. And at work here are just a variety of things we can say. Let’s agree to disagree about this one, or let’s give this ten minutes and then let’s revisit it when we both have a fresh perspective. In fact, would you like to know two words that I think can really put grievances and grudges in the past?

Katie: Absolutely.

Sam: Okay. I’m telling a lot of Andrew and Tom stories today. Right. Because just like you, Katie, I learned these on the front lines. Right. Okay, well, that didn’t help. What could I say instead? So the boys grew up in Maui, and we were very lucky. We lived in Wailea, which is in the lee of Haleakala, so it only rained five times a year. Well, this was one of those days. It rained, and Andrew and Tom got bored and turned our hall wall into a colorful mural. I was not a happy camper. I was letting them know about it. And Andrew had gone to
Montessori. And he kind of circled his foot on the carpet, and then he looked up at me, and he said two words. And do you know what they were? Fresh start? Wow. Fresh start. That’s a pattern interrupt. It gave me an opportunity to think, why am I yelling at my sons? As you said, it won’t undo it. It’s like, yes, we can have a fresh start. So I think that especially if kids are still talking about something that happened last week, or we’re still upset with our partner about something they said yesterday, we can revisit it, and we can say, you know what? I’m sorry I said that, or, you didn’t deserve that. I had one of those kind of days. I took it out on you. Pause, pause, pause. Fresh start? A lot of times it can be.

Katie: That’s a great one. And it seems like it springboards into another common one that I’m guessing you also have good words for, which seems to happen, especially with kids, but in adult relationships as well, where people it’s like the blame cycle and the one upping and with kids, the common one, I hear, is like, well, she did this. No, she did this. And it comes kind of this, like blame tornado. So any words for dealing with a blame tornado?

Sam: I love it. Okay, so what to do if a blame tornado? Over on the left, put the word find fault. Over on the right? Put the words find solutions. And now, once again, we need a physical pattern interrupt, because if kids are getting into it or if we’re in a meeting and something’s gone wrong and the finger pointing has begun, it serves no good purpose. Now, if we try to talk over them, what will they do? Talk louder. The voice of reason gets drowned out in the commotion. So instead, we go like this, hey, time out. Or we put our hand up like a policeman would, and we say, Stop. Or Enough. See, that stops it. It causes a pause. And then we say, we’re here to find solutions, not fault. Or here are two other phrases say, let’s not do this, or say, this won’t help. Because what we’re doing is we’re bringing to everyone’s attention that this won’t help. Instead, let’s talk about this and figure out and here’s a quick example that shows this.

Friends of mine were on a two week vacation. They came home. The place smelled to high heaven. They’re walking around trying to figure out where the smell is coming from. They walk in the kitchen, the refrigerator door standing wide open. My friend Anne said the blaming began. Well. You were the last one in the house. Don’t blame me. You went back for the Pepsi, and she went, Yo. She said, this won’t get the refrigerator cleaned up. Instead, let everyone pitch in, take care of this mess. And from now on, when we leave, someone’s going to be in charge of going around and making sure that everything’s closed down and shut up. So next time people are getting into it, physical pattern interrupt time out. Yo, stop. Enough. And then move to what we can do about it instead of what someone should have done about it.

Katie: And in all of these examples, it seems like the calm starts with us, which is the only person in this equation that we have any control over whatsoever. Like I say, often, even with our kids, we have no actual control over them, and we can’t make them do anything. And people who would argue with that, I would say, remember having a two year old, you can’t physically hardly make them do anything, nor probably is it a good idea. But you have four words in particular that can help us with our own response in keeping our cool, even when other people in this situation aren’t. So what are those words?
Sam: Okay, so once again, first a story, and then we’ll show how these four words can turn contempt into compassion. And by the way, Katie, I know you’re probably familiar with Dr. John Gottman’s research, where he has interviewed thousands of couples, and he can predict which couples are headed for divorce by one thing. You know what it is? Contempt. If there’s any eye rolling—oh, here they go again. He knows that a relationship cannot be sustained in the face of contempt. So how can we turn contempt into compassion? How can we turn impatience into empathy?

Well, I’ll just give you the words and then the example. Over on the left. It’s often how rude or how, like, outrageous, or how this is the outrage. Over on the left is how out of line, how stupid. Over on the left, over on the right, put these four words, “how would I feel?” How would I feel if they were in situation? We may not agree with it or like it. We may understand it. And understanding leads to compassion, which leads to empathy.

And here’s the example. There was a man. He said, Sam, those four words changed my relationship with my mother. He said, she’s in a rest home. And it had gotten to the point where I dreaded driving out to see her every Saturday, because all she ever does is complain. She complains about a roommate. She complains about the food. She complains that we never come to see her. He said, I have to force myself to make that drive. He said, when you put those four words up on the board, I asked myself, how would I feel if I were in bed 18 hours a day, seven days a week? How would I feel if I had to live next to someone I didn’t even like? And she played the TV so loud I couldn’t hear myself think. How would I feel if I didn’t like the food? And I couldn’t get up and go to the refrigerator, get in the car, go to the store. And he said, you also said, instead of complaining about what you don’t like, create what you would like.

I said, if you don’t like your mother complaining, what would you like? And I had said, I want to talk about our good times, our happy memories. I said, Take out a photo album. I said, because Queen Elizabeth said, good memories are our second chance at happiness. And he said that weekend I took out a photo album and one picture of this crazy uncle we had had us laughing so hard, tears are streaming down our face. One picture of this mountain cabin we used to go to every summer brought back a whole hour of memories. So I really believe that when we’re impatient, that the way to fast forward through that frustration is, well, how would I feel if this were happening to me? How would I feel if I really had my sight set on winning the pole vaulting championship and my foot slipped and all those weeks and months of training went down the drain in one split second? I might be a little upset too. It really does move us from contempt to compassion to impatience to empathy.

Katie: Yeah, that’s such a powerful shift.

This episode is sponsored by Hiya Health, which is my go-to source for multivitamins, especially for my younger kids, before they can swallow pills. Typical children’s vitamins are basically candy in disguise, filled with unsavory ingredients and things you would not give to your children otherwise. Most brands on store shelves are filled with sugar, unhealthy chemicals and other gummy junk that growing kids, or frankly, anyone should never eat. And this is why I’m so glad I found Hiya Health. Hiya makes children’s vitamins with zero
sugar and zero gummy junk and unsavory ingredients. Yet they taste great, and they are perfect for picky eaters. They’re also nostalgic and remind me of the children's vitamins I took as a kid, though I probably wouldn’t love those ingredients. Hiya is unique because it fills the most common gaps in modern children's diets to provide full body nourishment for our kids, with a yummy taste that they will love and you will not have to fight them over. They manufacture in the USA with globally sourced ingredients that are each selected for optimal bioavailability and absorption. And the best part? They arrive straight to your door on a pediatrician recommended schedule, so you never have to worry about running out. Your first month comes with a reusable glass bottle that your kids can personalize with stickers. So in the case of my kids, with six of them, they never get them confused. And then every month after, Hiya sends a no plastic, eco friendly refill pouch of fresh vitamins. Which means that Hiya isn't just good for your kids, it's also great for the environment as well. So you as a mom no longer have to worry about running out of vitamins, and they will automatically arrive when you need them. You can check them out and get them for your kids by going to Hiyahealth.com/wellnessmama. And you'll also save 50% on your first month.

This podcast is brought to you by LMNT, which is a company that I have had the chance to invest in and have loved since day one. They just released brand new grapefruit flavor on top of all of their other flavors that I absolutely love, including watermelon which is a kid's favorite in my house, as well as citrus, raspberry, orange, and a couple of ones that I really like, like mango and lemon habanero as well. As you know, summer brings warmth and sunshine, and with it, energizing opportunities to all of us to move and play and be outside. But it also brings a fair amount of sweat. And if you are a regular sauna user like me, you know that sweat is part of it, as well as if you exercise regularly. And this is why optimal hydration is the key with the right fluid to electrolyte balance, because it isn't just about getting enough water and fluid, but also making sure our electrolytes are dialed in and you feel the difference when you get it right. So when summer brings the heat, LMNT brings the grapefruit salt flavor to help you enjoy that balance all summer long. You can consider grapefruit or any of their flavors, your ultimate summer salt companion. And I love that they combine sodium, magnesium, and potassium in the clinically studied ratios to make sure that you can stay optimally hydrated even if you are saunaing or exercising or just spending time outside in the summer. Find out more about LMNT by going to drinklmnt.com/wellnessmama. And this is a one time flavor so when it's gone, it's gone for good. I highly recommend that you try it. I also would suggest trying watermelon and mango chili if you like a little bit of a spicy kick. But watermelon, like I said, is the kid favorite at my house and you can find those and all of their flavors at drinklmnt.com/wellnessmama.

And we might have already talked about a little bit, but I know you have more wisdom around this, too, is like that perspective and how to keep it when we are mad or upset. Because certainly as parents, we feel those emotions sometimes, too. And our kids aren’t the only ones having big emotions, but again, we only have any control over us. So any other advice for keeping our cool in those situations?

Sam: We both are friends and fans of Mary Morrissey, and Mary Morrissey says, hold the vision, not the circumstances. So over on the left, put circumstances. And that is when we react, we react to what’s going on. This is unfair, this is unbelievable, this is outrageous, this is anger. Over on the right is how we want to be no matter what. And so here’s the example is that often toward the end of my Tongue Fu or Talking on Eggshells
workshop, I put up a slide by Eleanor Roosevelt. She said, no one can make us feel inferior without our consent. And I changed the word inferior to mad. No one can make us mad without our consent. And a gruff construction boss stood up and he said, Sam, you’re pulling a Pollyanna with this one. He said, do you mean if someone’s in my face swearing at me, that’s not supposed to make me mad? And a woman stood up and she said, I agree with this, because I’ve lived through it. She said, I’m a surgical nurse. She said, I work with this neurosurgeon who’s the most abrasive individual we’ve ever met. He’s brilliant physician, zip people skills. She said, I was a fraction of a second late handing him an instrument in surgery, he berated me in front of my peers. She said, he humiliated me in front of the team. It took all my professionalism just to continue with the operation.

She said, When I was driving home, I started thinking about what he had done. I got so angry. I got home, I sat down at the dinner table. I started telling my husband what happened. He’d heard this before. He said, Judy, what time is it? She said it’s 7:00. He said, what time did this happen? 9:00 this morning. He said, Judy, is it the doctor who’s making you mad? And with that, he got up and left the table. And she said, I sat there and I thought about it, and I thought it wasn’t the doctor who was making me mad. The doctor wasn’t even in the room. I was the one who’d given him a ride home in my car. I was the one who’d set him a place at my dinner table. And I decided that evening that never again was that doctor welcome in my home or in my head. And that when I got home, I was going to leave him at the hospital, and never again was I going to allow him to poison my personal life.

So I ask people, who do you give a ride home to in your car? Who do you set a place for at your dinner table? And can we get perfectly clear right now that we are going to focus on what’s right in our world instead of what’s wrong? And we are going to fill our mind that we are fortunate to have these kids, that we are fortunate to be healthy, that we are fortunate, like you, to do work that we love that matters. There is so much more right in our world than wrong. And we will shift our perspective to that and focus on that and dwell on that instead of allowing the unscrupulous or unfair unkind people to poison our quality of life.

Katie: Yeah, such a good point. And I think also, it’s so powerful when we realize that if we phrase it as, this person made me mad, we give away our own power to choose our emotion in that situation, which is one of the few things we actually do have complete power around. And for me, Viktor Frankl was one of my teachers in this, and I re-read his book, Man’s Search for Meaning every January because it’s so powerful for me and just re-framing. Like, I can easily get swept into these things that I think are so difficult in my life. And yet here’s a man who, in circumstances far beyond anything I’ve ever been through, was able to really focus on you get to choose your own response, you get to choose your own emotions, and that is something you retain freedom and power over, even in the toughest of circumstances. And I love your approach to this as well. And just, like, helping re-frame that. And you also mentioned your workshops and your book, and I know that you have a new one coming out, so I’d love for you to give us an overview of it because it goes so much deeper than we can in a one-hour podcast episode, and I love learning from your wisdom.

Sam: Thanks so much, Katie. The new book is called Talking on Eggshells. And McKinsey found that rudeness is getting worse and incivility is on the rise. And it seems like almost everyone I talk to has at least one person in their life or if they’re on the front lines or a leader or a parent, several people who are behaving in ways that
are almost unconscionable—the cancel culture, the snark, etc. So how can we think on our feet in those situations and give and get respect and keep our cool in the heat of the moment?

And can I give a quick example that’s one of my favorite? Here’s the thing about talking on eggshells is a skill. We can get good at it. We can learn at any time, any age, any stage. So this is my 84 year old Aunt Kay. Now, even through COVID, 84 year old Aunt Kay volunteered to a local hospital at the help desk. And I asked her what that was like, and she said, Stressful. I said, well, what’s an example. And she said that a woman had run through the two opening doors, and she was holding up her phone. And she said, My daughter’s in the ER. I just got a text from her. She was in a car accident. I have to see her. Well, now, during COVID they had a policy of no visitors or one visitor per day per patient. So Aunt Kay called the ER, and there was someone with the daughter. She had to explain to the mom that she could not get in to see her daughter, and the woman lost it. Is yelling, screaming, making a scene. Now, Aunt Kay could have, as we said, hey, don’t blame me. I didn’t make the policy. Don’t take this or this isn’t fair. She could have reacted to the situation. She could have said, there’s nothing I can do. Instead, she thought, how would I feel if my daughter had been in an accident in the ER and I couldn’t get in to see her? Which gave her the incentive to figure out if there was something she could do instead of shrugging her shoulders and saying, there’s nothing I can do. So she got resourceful. Do you see how we’re tying everything together here, Katie? She got resourceful, and she called the ER. And she said, who is with the daughter? Katie it was the Uber driver who had brought in the young woman. Aunt Kay was able to explain the situation to the Uber driver. Thank him, he left. And the mom was able to be with her daughter. And all of this comes together is that when something goes wrong, once again, we can react, is why you’re blaming me? You’re out of line. All of that makes it worse. Or we can use these words and this mindset and skill set on the right and often we can create what we do want instead of just complain about what we don’t.

Katie: Yeah, such a powerful story. And that mindset shift alone, I think will change relationships if we can keep that in our focus when those things happen. And speaking of books, a question I love to ask on a personal level at the end of interviews, because I get so many great recommendations, is if there’s a book or a number of books other than your own that have profoundly impacted your life, and if so, what they are and why.

Sam: Well, we’re full circle again, Katie, because we talked at the beginning of our interview about growing up riding horses. I used to ride my horse to the library and I would ride my palomino. He had two speeds, a hard trot and an all out run. He never walked and he never loped. And so I discovered Walter Farley’s The Black Stallion series. And I will always be grateful because really, there was 1000 people in our entire valley. There was only 100 people in our school. And his stories about the black stallion series gave me this window on the world beyond our little mountain valley. And it was about the independence and the excitement and the freedom. And so for all the parents listening, if you’re not familiar with the black stallion series, for both girls and boys, it’s worth reading it to them because they want to go to bed so they can hear what happens next.
Katie: I have not read it yet, so I’m going to take your suggestion and order those books and I will link to them as well in the show notes for you guys listening on the go, as well as to Sam, all of your books so people can find them in one place. And lastly, I know this could become an entire podcast series all of its own, but any parting advice for the listeners today that could be related to what we talked about? Or unrelated life advice?

Sam: Well we’ve already talked about words matter and that they can shape instead of shame and coach instead of criticize and people can learn. So let me say something that I haven’t said before, is that Albert Schweitzer said in influencing others, example is not the main thing, it’s the only thing. And Katie, the river that runs through our conversation today is once again, that there are circumstances that we cannot control. And as Viktor Frankl said, we do control how we respond to them. And I believe in going first. I believe in setting an example so that others can follow our precedent. So whether it’s with our kids, whether it’s with our neighbors, whether it’s with our partner, whether it’s with the teachers. What I have found is that when we choose to use what I call proactive grace, it’s not just grace, because grace is wonderful. That’s compassion and empathy. It’s proactive. It’s getting resourceful and figuring out how we can find solutions instead of fault, how we can create what we do want, etc, that when we choose to show up and be an example of proactive grace, that most people choose to respond in kind.

Katie: Well, I think that’s a beautiful place to wrap up for today. Sam, it’s always such a joy to have a conversation with you, and I’m so glad we got to record this one. Thank you so much for being here and for all the work that you do.

Sam: And to you, Katie, you talk about an example. I know that you continue to call people up and help them be the parent that they want to be, and that as a result, there are families all around the world benefiting because of your example and your insight. So thank you.

Katie: Thank you for saying that. And thanks, as always, to all of you for listening and sharing your most valuable resources, your time, your energy, and your attention with us today. We’re both so grateful that you did, and I hope that you will join me again on the next episode of the Wellness Mama Podcast.

If you’re enjoying these interviews, would you please take two minutes to leave a rating or review on iTunes for me? Doing this helps more people to find the podcast, which means even more moms and families could benefit from the information. I really appreciate your time, and thanks as always for listening.