

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Finding Steadiness

When Love and Fear Have Become Hard to Tell Apart

A gentle, honest guide for the parent living on watch — checking, bracing, rehearsing, trying to stay one step ahead of something she cannot control.

"You may have started by trying to help. Somewhere along the way, you found yourself living on watch."

This isn't about becoming a perfect parent, and it isn't a replacement for the therapy or treatment your family may already be in. It's meant to sit alongside that — five short movements to help you recognize the fear response, see how it moves through a family, and return, again and again, to steadiness.

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ONE

What if I Miss Something?

Maybe your day begins before you even get out of bed.

You're already thinking about breakfast. The appointment. Whether your child will eat. Whether they exercised yesterday. Whether you should bring something up — or leave it alone.

Maybe you've started checking things you never used to check.

A plate. A bedroom door. A workout. A tone of voice.

Maybe you rehearse conversations before you have them. Or say nothing because you're afraid of making things worse.

I know something about this kind of fear.

When someone you love is struggling — with an eating disorder, anxiety, or compulsive exercise — a parent can begin living on watch without even realizing it.

Your body begins to organize around the possibility that something could go wrong. You scan. You brace. You anticipate. You try to stay one step ahead.

This is part of how the nervous system protects us.

But over time, living on watch can change the way you show up — with your child, your spouse, your other children, and even with yourself.

This isn't about becoming a perfect parent. It isn't a replacement for the therapy or treatment your family may already be in — it's meant to sit alongside that, not instead of it.

You need somewhere to be held, too.

TWO

The Ways Fear Tries to Help

None of what you're about to read means something is wrong with you. It means you've found ways — some quiet, some loud — to protect what matters most.

What you may notice	What may be happening underneath
Checking repeatedly	<i>"If I stay vigilant, maybe I can prevent something bad."</i>
Managing everything	<i>"If I let go, everything may fall apart."</i>
Going quiet	<i>"I don't know what to say without making this worse."</i>
Snapping	<i>"I have been holding too much for too long."</i>
Feeling numb	<i>"Feeling everything right now may be too much."</i>

These reactions are not character flaws.

I often think of them as ways we have learned to protect what matters most.

The checking part of you may be terrified.

The controlling part may be trying to prevent catastrophe.

The part that goes quiet may believe silence is safer than conflict.

These responses are not the whole of who you are. But they may be carrying more fear than anyone realizes.

Take a moment: Which of these do you recognize in yourself this week? You don't need to fix it right now. Just notice.

THREE

How Fear Moves Through a Family

Fear doesn't stay contained to one person. It moves through a house.

One parent starts asking more questions. The other starts asking fewer.

One wants to talk after every appointment. The other says, "*Can we please just have one normal night?*"

A mother watches the plate. A father watches the clock. A sibling learns that now might not be the best time to bring up their own problem.

Everyone is trying to help. And slowly, without anyone choosing it, the family begins organizing around fear.

Sometimes parents become afraid to ask the question they most need to ask.

What if I make it worse?

What if bringing it up causes a fight?

What if treatment is working and I interfere?

What if this really is just a phase?

So we wait. We watch. We rehearse. We walk on eggshells.

I understand why.

No one sat down and chose this pattern. It often grows quietly around a family that is trying very hard to survive something frightening.

FOUR

Before You Enter the Room

Most parents don't need one more thing to do perfectly. They need something to return to when the room feels tense, the conversation is going sideways, or fear is beginning to take over.

Steadiness is not something you master. Sometimes it begins in a single moment.

Before a hard meal, a difficult conversation, or any moment you feel yourself bracing, try this:

1 Notice what is happening in you.

What am I afraid will happen in the next five minutes?

Not "calm down." Not "regulate." Tell the truth.

2 Find your body.

Feel the floor. Unclench your jaw. Let your exhale lengthen slightly.

3 Choose how you want to show up with your child.

What do they need from me in the next five minutes?

Presence? Firmness? Warmth? Silence? A boundary?

Steadiness does not always mean being soft.

Sometimes love is quiet. Sometimes love is firm. Sometimes love says, *"I know you're angry, and I'm staying."* Sometimes love says, *"I can't let fear make this decision for us."*

FIVE

Returning to Steadiness

For me, steadiness is also spiritual.

There have been moments when I could not think my way out of fear. Prayer did not always make the fear disappear. But it gave me somewhere to bring what I could not carry alone.

At the end of the day, you might ask:

Where did fear lead me today?

Where was I able to love freely?

What am I still trying to control?

What do I need to place back into God's hands tonight?

You do not need perfect answers. Just honesty.

Steadiness is not control. It is the growing capacity to remain present — to yourself, to your child, and to what love is asking of you now.

You will not do this perfectly. You may still snap. Check. Overthink. Push too hard. Go quiet.

Steadiness is not a state you finally achieve.

It is a place you learn to return to. Again and again. And every return matters.

This guide draws on my training through the CatholicPsych Institute (CPMAP) — you can learn more about that formation at catholicpsych.com/steph-strick.

If you'd like support putting any of this into practice — someone to walk alongside you in the actual hours between appointments, not just in a guide — I'd love to talk.

You can book a free consultation at accompanymehealing.com/book-a-call. No pressure. Just a conversation about where you are.