

# If Mama Ain't Happy

Why minding healthy boundaries  
is good for your whole family



Rachel Norman

*If Mama Ain't Happy* reads like a letter from a wise best friend who knows you inside and out. Not only does Rachel share her inspiring journey from mom guilt into grace, but her new take on rules as “life-giving, not life-sucking” will put the wind at your back.

**SANDRA R. BLACKARD**, mom of two, author of *SAY WHAT YOU SEE® for Parents and Teachers*

An empowering and practical guide that encourages mothers to set boundaries at home, strengthen their faith, and enjoy the ride.

**JENNIFER L. SCOTT**, mom of four, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Lessons from Madame Chic*

I love Rachel and her deep momma wisdom. As a mom of nine, I know caring for myself helps me love my children well.

**JAMERRILL STEWART**, mom of nine, [LargeFamilyTable.com](http://LargeFamilyTable.com)

Rachel Norman is my favorite parenting expert by far. Her down-to-earth style and humorous perspective are a breath of fresh air!

**ANNA GEIGER**, mom of six, *The Measured Mom*

Finally someone is telling the truth about motherhood. This is the most authentic, commonsense guide to motherhood I've read. You'll find yourself nodding and laughing the whole way through.

**LAUREN TAMM**, mom of two, *The Military Wife and Mom*



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*I am fully convinced, my dear brothers and sisters, that you are full of goodness. You know these things so well you can teach each other all about them. Even so, I have been bold enough to write about some of these points, knowing that all you need is this reminder.*

ROMANS 15:14-15, NLT, EMPHASIS MINE

\* \* \*

*To my precious children, Ella Kate, Judah, Fletcher,  
Owen, and Hobson, who make life worth living*





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*Beloved mama,*

*I see you juggling diaper changes, feedings, naps, bedtimes, drops-offs, and pickups like a pro. I know you count these things as precious and feel privileged to do them. On the outside, you look as if you're coping just fine. But on the inside, you feel like you're going haywire trying to figure out how to do everything right.*

*You may be perpetually stressed, strung out, and exhausted. You may not feel good enough, smart enough, or secure enough. One small thing—like an unexpected bill in the mail or a sudden change in the family schedule—may make your heart beat out of your chest and send you into a tailspin.*

*You have no margin for surprises, problems, or inconveniences.*

*You've put the weight of the world on your shoulders.*

*Occasionally someone will tell you to "show yourself some grace," and you look at them like they are a purple*

*alien from another galaxy. Okay. Sure. Genius idea. More grace. I'll get right on that!*

*I see you because for years I propelled my family forward by the sheer will of my dominant personality. I figured winners never quit and quitters never win. But somewhere deep down, I knew I was losing. My insecurities, inadequacies, and self-judgment drove me at a pace I could not sustain.*

*I was living in a dark prison of best practices and "shoulds" that weren't even mentioned in the Bible. I was a slave to all sorts of things I felt I "needed" to be doing even when they made me stressed, depressed, anxious, and miserable.*

*It's exhausting even remembering that time.*

*Eventually, my wild and careening runaway train came to an obstacle in the tracks that forced it to stop, giving me a lot of time to rest and reflect. All those emotions I'd been burying and avoiding came out. Tear by tear, I unloaded years of baggage, and in those quiet moments God found me. Through various events, encounters, and circumstances, He healed my heart.*

*I began to see that I'd been operating in a black-or-white, win-or-lose world. Either I was busy or I was lazy. Either I was successful or I was a failure. Either I was right or I was wrong. I'd been following tons of "life rules" someone else made up. Rules about housekeeping, child-rearing, and friend-making.*

LETTER FROM RACHEL

*Now I'm on another path. A more pleasant one with some shade and occasional benches. And since I'm not careening down a cliff, I can stop and smell the flowers. Maybe even have a picnic here or there. Same number of kids, same number of chores, same number of meals to cook every day. Minus all the heaviness.*

*And the unrelenting weight of misery.*

*Maybe you are reading this because you want to enjoy your family life more, instead of feeling worn out and weary before you've even gotten dressed in the morning. Or because you want to lay your head on your pillow at night without replaying all your mistakes.*

*Mama, I wrote this book for you.*

*It is possible to stop disliking your life. To craft a home life that doesn't make you anxious, depressed, and weary. I believe you can create a life, day in and day out, that doesn't make you want to run away and escape. And that by discovering and respecting your spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical boundaries, you can have a fruitful private world that isn't choked by the worries of this life.*

*There's no time like the present; let's get to it.*

*Rachel Norman*



## CHAPTER 1

# *Happy-Go-Lucky . . . or Not*

ONE WINTRY FRIDAY MORNING, I helped my five kids (all under age seven) put on coats and rain boots before loading them into our minivan for what I hoped would be a pleasant homeschooling field trip.

To be honest, I love my kids to pieces, but I didn't really love teaching them at home. Most days my heart nearly pounded out of my chest as I tried to help the older kids with their schoolwork while making sure the toddlers didn't destroy the house or run off into the woods. Every day I counted down the minutes until the school day was over. Somehow, it never occurred to me that I could stop homeschooling. I was subconsciously convinced that if I didn't shower my daughter and four sons with attention and care all



day, they would not feel loved. To prevent them from having to deal with rejection issues later on, I could endure some daily misery, right?

Field trips, especially those where wild little ones could run around and make all the noise they wanted, offered occasional breaks. So on this Friday, a trip to the botanical gardens in Dothan, Alabama, was just the ticket. It sounded educational, and these kids needed some education. The hour-long drive from our home in Florida to the gardens in Alabama was filled with happy chatter, and we arrived at our destination in good spirits. But within moments of turning onto the tree-lined arboretum road, I couldn't believe my eyes. Other than a few evergreen trees and bushes, everything looked brown and dead. The kids, who weren't interested in botany anyway, spent most of the morning hopping along the wooden bridges and slides on the grounds. I posed them for some pictures in the tropical plant greenhouse so I could post them on Instagram—with a homeschool hashtag, of course. Then off we went to the indoor trampoline park.

When we arrived home hours later, the kids were tired out and I was in a mood. They didn't even complain when I peeled off their coats and walked them to their rooms for naps and rest time. But as soon as I closed their bedroom doors, I started navel-gazing. A good homeschool teacher would have known that most plants are actually dead in the winter and gardens are basically ugly when most of the plants are dead. A familiar dark and heavy cloud settled on my heart.

To put it mildly, I wasn't a happy mama.

## A FACT OF LIFE

“If mama ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy.”

I used to think women said this as a threat to get what they want. Like if Mama is embarrassed by her kids throwing tantrums in the grocery store, everyone will be sorry. Or if she can’t have a ladies’ night out or get a mani/pedi once a month, her husband will regret it.

I thought “if mama ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy” was a warning. Then I got married, lived in three different countries, had five kids in five years, and was blindsided by a devastating health diagnosis.

And that’s when I learned what that phrase really means. It’s not a threat; it’s what we in the South refer to as “a fact of life.” Nobody’s happy if mama ain’t happy because her attitude affects everyone around her. It’s not a warning; it’s just how it is. If mama is depressed, stressed, overwhelmed, exhausted, frustrated, or irritable, everyone in the home feels it.

And when mom is relaxed, at peace, and content with herself and her life, everyone in the home benefits. She is more patient, kind, and present with those she loves. A happy mom lives her life without constantly trying to escape it.

The trouble with being happy is that it’s dang hard to do. My college pastor always said “happiness

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**Nobody’s happy if mama ain’t happy because her attitude affects everyone around her.**

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is a choice.” I both agreed with him and gave him the stink eye. Have you ever tried to just be happy for any length of time? It works well enough until the kids start fighting, the pipes start leaking, or your jeans won't fit because you've still got the post-pregnancy love handles.

Nowadays, many moms are not only unhappy, we're anxious and depressed at unprecedented levels.<sup>1</sup> We are weary, worn out, and over life by 9:30 every morning. Even the smallest thing, like spilled yogurt on the counter, can send us into an absolute tizzy that scares the kids and makes us feel guilty for days.

Surprisingly, convenience hasn't made us any happier. We can set our coffee makers and washing machines on timers to fit our schedule. Groceries, household necessities, and clothes are delivered to our doorstep in a day or two. I even get air filters delivered automatically every three months to ensure I'm keeping pollutants and allergens out of our home's air. Online banking and telehealth doctor visits . . . it's all there. At our fingertips.

What a life!

Even with all that, do we feel more relaxed? More at peace? More content? Are we smelling more roses? The answer is no—somehow we are not. The smell of roses is not as strong as the odor from our baby's dirty diaper, the laundry that needs washing, and the organic produce in the refrigerator going bad.

Instead of using automation to enjoy life more, we just cross those things off our master list before adding a few

more to-do items to make sure we're doing everything possible to be more efficient, organized, and productive. If we don't, we're lazy, aren't we?

That was my mindset the day of the winter field trip. Do something educational with the kids, check. Take social media-worthy photos, check. Be an exciting homeschool mom, check. I was not prepared for how quickly life could be turned upside down.

### **THE END OF THE WORLD AS I KNEW IT**

While changing clothes after church a few days following our field trip to the botanical gardens, I noticed something odd on my left breast. I hoped it was a friction rub from all the jumping but called the doctor first thing the next morning. I went in for tests, and about a month later I was diagnosed with an early staged aggressive form of invasive breast cancer.

At the time, I thought it was the worst thing that had ever happened to me. Remarkably, in spite of all the pain and grief that followed, that scary Sunday was the beginning of the best year of my life. Certainly not easy, but still the best.

As soon as I was diagnosed, life as I knew it changed. Things that once seemed important felt pointless. Ways I used to spend my time seemed stupid. Worries and anxieties about the future were just too much. I could no longer orient my days toward a future I wasn't sure I would have.

Intuitively knowing it would make me feel better, I stopped scrolling social media. Everyone's fake tans and new

shoes and clean houses seemed so superficial when I was busy sobbing on the floor of my two-year-old's bedroom, wondering whether, if I died, he'd remember me.

My husband came in once when I was in my youngest child's room crying. He had gotten used to this sight since I'd been diagnosed and asked gently, "What are you thinking about?"

Between ugly cries, I said, "I don't think I have any memories of when I was two or three years old." He didn't have an answer.

In fact, my choice to homeschool was largely driven by my desire to show the kids how much I cherished them, day in and day out. My own parents had divorced when I was young, and my dad was never around. As a child, I'd personally created a rule for the universe that said "kids shouldn't lose their parents," so the idea that my youngest child might not remember me was too much to bear.

My husband looked at me with both compassion and sadness and let me cry. I cried so often. "I have spent years with the kids, loving them all day every day. . . but they're so young," I said with a hiccup. "Maybe that love will set them up for a good life even if they don't remember me."

I was learning something important: When you are faced with a crisis, your priorities immediately become clear. All the "extra" activities have to stop, and the first to go are usually those things you've wanted to stop doing for a long time. The things you did out of guilt: Extracurriculars that drain family life with little positive upside. Weekly lessons your

child fights tooth and nail. Or outside commitments you keep up, even though your heart isn't in them and you know others could do better than you.

Once those are gone, you're left with the basics. During my treatment, I couldn't even do those. I'd gone from home-schooling five kids and running a big online business to lying on my California king-sized bed all day, a big, sobbing mess who prayed she'd live. My mom, a retired schoolteacher, did schoolwork with the kids. Which was lucky for them, I suppose. My mother-in-law flew over from Australia. She helped with the kids and did all the dishes and my laundry. The kids started doing more chores. My husband took on more daily household tasks. Families from church and friends brought meals over.

I was forced, by my own physical limits, to stop nearly everything I'd filled my days with before. I took naps when I was tired. I wrote in my journal when my head was full. I texted and called friends who offered encouraging words of life. I read the Bible nearly nonstop, trying to encourage myself and find purpose in the pain.

A funny thing started to happen while I was worried I was dying. I started desiring to live. Not to survive, but to actually enjoy my life instead of just checking things off my to-do list.

I remember going for a walk and noticing the leaves on the trees. I would stop and stare at flowers and think, *These are the loveliest flowers I've ever seen.* Our gorgeous Florida sunsets would bring tears to my eyes. Even listening to the

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**I think happiness may be a natural by-product of wise living.**

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kids arguing seemed precious and special. So much I had taken for granted before cancer (henceforth BC) suddenly seemed important. Lovely. Worth taking time for.

Nowadays, I'm not so certain happiness is a choice. Sure, I can choose to look at the bright side, focus on the positive, and write in my gratitude journal, but if my life is organized in a way that makes me unhappy, it's a constant uphill battle. I think happiness may be a natural by-product of wise living. It comes when our needs are met and we're at peace with our lives.

Even with cancer, I found peace again. Maybe for the first time.

*Lessons I took with me . . .*

During my lowest lows, God met and changed my entire inner world. I repented. I forgave. I felt lighter and more reflective. Because I had time to think and evaluate what my life had become, I started noticing some patterns.

I started paying attention to myself too. I discovered the spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental areas of my life I'd been neglecting. I noticed where I'd ignored God-given limits and boundaries that suddenly seemed obvious to me.

During treatment, I stopped trying to do everything, started asking for help, and no longer apologized when I needed some time to myself. I acted like my life depended on that. In some ways, it did.

I could no longer afford to sacrifice the practices of peace, quiet, rest, downtime, and sleep. I started minding my own limits and realized, with surprise, that I had once thought taking care of myself was selfish. No wonder I'd never done it! It makes sense, really. A woman seeking the narrow path of a godly life wouldn't act selfishly on purpose, so I had abandoned myself in the name of my family. This was a false dichotomy, of course. BC, the idea that I could either take good care of my family or take good care of myself existed only in my head. The more I ignored my needs, put others' wants first, and hustled more, the more selfish I became. The more I ignored myself, the more neurotic, irritable, and resentful I was. And who suffered the brunt of my ill moods?

The people who lived with me, of course.

Refusing to take care of my own physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional needs had made me anxious and strung out. Cancer taught me many things, and this question is one that came up time and time again: *Could it be that taking care of myself is not actually selfish, but maybe, just maybe, responsible?*

. . . *after making myself crazy*

In the early months of treatment, I'd been warned of something called chemo brain, which I'd been told is similar to pregnancy brain. In fact, I felt foggier and less sharp and found it harder to focus. One morning I woke to some weird feelings of déjà vu.

Déjà vu, of course, is the uncanny sensation you get when you feel you've experienced something before, even though you know you haven't. It can feel positive or negative,



depending on the sensation you're "remembering." This particular morning, all my fear and anxiety came to a head, and I started having horrible sensations of déjà vu. Like something terrible had happened and was happening again.

At first this feeling emerged every ten or fifteen minutes, which was already abnormal. Then it started happening every few minutes. Then multiple times per minute. Over and over I had horrible rolling sensations of déjà vu. If that wasn't enough, my upper arm began hurting. Even though breast cancer doesn't really "go to the arm" and there'd been no evidence of metastasis, I became hysterical, convinced that the cancer had spread to my brain and to my arm.

I knew worrying wouldn't add an hour to my life,<sup>2</sup> but I felt powerless to overcome it.

While my mom was reading to the kids to give me some space, I walked to our backyard and called my patient advocate, a two-time breast cancer survivor. I described my feelings of dread and the stabs of pain in my arm. My voice was shaking, and I paced back and forth on the railroad ties in our yard, terrified of what my symptoms could mean.

"I think I have chemo brain or maybe worse, I don't know. I can't think straight, and I am having constant déjà vu. Maybe I'm losing my mind. My arm hurts, and it's making me panic. What should I do?"

In her kind and gentle voice she said, "These feelings are normal. It's okay. Aches and pains can come with treatment, and this doesn't sound like chemo or even cancer. It might be the worry that's causing it all."

In fact, after our phone call, my déjà vu and arm pain went away. Turns out my déjà vu was panic induced, and my arm hurt because my neck and shoulders were tense. From worry. I had been so anxious I had given myself déjà vu, which made me so stressed that I tensed my neck, which made my arm hurt. You can't make this stuff up.

After that humbling episode, I knew something had to be done about my fear and worry. The Bible tells us not to worry or be afraid more than 360 times. Sure, it's normal to worry when you are faced with a bad diagnosis. But I'd been stressed, worried, and anxious my whole life. And a fat lot of good it had done me.

I'd ended up with cancer.

I knew, going forward, for however many years I had left, I could no longer live a life I wanted to escape. If my own daily life seemed too much to bear, something had to give. I was going to believe the promises of God's Word. I was going to pay attention to my mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual boundaries.

My life depended on it.

### **WHAT MY PURPLE CHEVY TAUGHT ME ABOUT LIVING WISELY**

For years I'd read about boundaries. And, honestly, I always thought boundaries were rules you put in place for other people because you thought they needed to change. Like the decision not to talk to toxic relatives so they'd get the hint

and “act right.” Or not to answer phone calls from friends who drained you with all their (easily solvable if they followed your advice) problems. Or to give an addicted spouse an ultimatum to prevent relapse.

Turns out, those are rules. But they aren't boundaries.

Boundaries aren't arbitrary behaviors we decide that we (or others) should or should not do. This is why you can't just adopt someone else's boundaries like a formula. Why not? Because they are personal and person-specific.

Boundaries are, in essence, our limits. They are the lines that, when crossed, result in dis-ease and disease.

You don't really decide your own boundaries; they simply are. If you don't function on less than eight hours of sleep, you can't pencil five hours into your planner and think you'll be okay. You can't decide what your physical limits are; you simply have to respect them.

This is where we've gotten ourselves mixed up. We may decide we're going to get up super early, do a HIIT workout, read our Bibles, meal plan for the day, tidy the house, make a hot breakfast for the kids, do organized activities with them all morning, work during naptime, put the kids to bed by seven, then stay up until midnight with our spouse for some quality time. Just because we make such a plan doesn't mean it is a pace we can maintain.

We can decide how far we want to push ourselves, but that doesn't change when we'll give out. That's a lesson my first car taught me.

When I turned sixteen, my mom bought me a Chevy

Cavalier that was the color of purple orchids. Try getting into trouble in a small town with a purple car. Best of luck.

Well, I loved that car, and to make it more personal, I put a photo of my friends and me on the dashboard. Then one day when I cranked it in the high school parking lot after volleyball practice, smoke began billowing out of the hood. A lot of smoke.

As it turns out, I had cracked my engine block. Because I hadn't changed my oil. Because I hadn't seen the "change oil" light come on. Because I had a photo over the dashboard lights.

What an expensive lesson that was.

There came a point when my car couldn't go on as it was. I didn't decide when that should be; it was the moment it couldn't carry on any longer in its condition.

And that's how we are. We can push ourselves however hard, fast, or far we want. But if we don't mind our own boundaries, we may break down before we get where we're trying to go.

Sounds simple, right? Just figure out your own limits and then stick to them. The problem is, the world sends us a lot of messages about what makes a good mom, a nurturing home, and a successful life. And then those cues are reinforced by social media or even well-meaning friends. Many of these messages are, at best, unhelpful and, at worst, destructive.

Recognizing, and debunking, some of these messages will prepare you to start moving toward a happier and healthier

## IF MAMA AIN'T HAPPY

family life—so that's where our journey will begin. Until you and I begin to name and reject some of these unhealthy messages, all the external voices are likely to drown out the still, quiet one inside of you.