

## Thriving after a baby

**Guest: Amy McMahan**

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### **Meagen Gibson - [00:00:09]**

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Relationship Super Conference.

Today I'm speaking with Amy McMahan, a licensed marriage and family therapist located in Seattle, Washington. Amy is trained in the Gottman Method of couples therapy and specializes in helping couples navigate the transition to parenthood and supporting women with perinatal mood disorders. She's a Bringing Baby Home educator and uses both her personal and professional experience to help couples stay connected and manage conflict during a difficult, yet meaningful time in their lives.

Amy McMahan, thank you so much for being with us today.

### **Amy McMahan**

Thank you for having me.

### **Meagen Gibson**

So what does the research say about relationship satisfaction after having a baby?

### **Amy McMahan**

Yes. Let's just jump right into this.

So just to give you a little background about the Gottman research. So John Gottman has done over 40 years of research working with couples and determining what makes couples happy. He's also done a lot of research around the transition to parenthood and what happens to relationship satisfaction after having a baby.

So I think the first thing to talk about is just the recognition that becoming parents is a new beginning. For most couples it's a time of hope, anticipation and excitement. The secret to successfully managing the transition to parenthood is really just prioritizing the couple relationship.

The research is clear that the effects of prevention are far more powerful than the effects of intervention. So, what that looks like is, really bolstering and fostering the connection with your partner prior to actually having the baby show up is really important, and that's the most significant thing that you can do to maintain or even improve relationship satisfaction after having a child.

The research by Gottman has shown that a happy relationship equals happy children. The strength of a couple's relationship directly affects a child's cognitive and social abilities, and also relationships and conflict are known to cause problems for children, including cognitive delays for kids and antisocial or withdrawn behavior.

So as far as the numbers here, 67% of parents experience a significant drop in relationship satisfaction after the birth of a child. That's huge. That's like two thirds of couples who are really struggling in their relationship after they have a baby.

For mothers in a heterosexual relationship, they usually experienced the drop about 4 to 6 months after the baby is born, and that can go all the way through the end of the first year. For fathers in a heterosexual relationship, that drop occurs a little bit later on. So it occurs later in the first year, and it continues to, throughout the second year.

And again, the key to happiness after having children is to make your relationship a priority. That is the best predictor for whether or not a couple's relationship will be satisfied. And it goes against some of the things that our culture focuses on, which is like, it's a very child focused culture.

You have all these opportunities during the prenatal period to do birthing classes, hypnobirthing classes, breastfeeding classes, all of these things that really focus on the baby being there. And the couple relationship up until really, I think the Gottman method was the founder in making sure that the couple relationship gets attended to. Before that there was really no research or no education or workshops around helping the couples figure out how to stay connected during that time.

So it's hugely important. It's so significant and makes a profound difference.

### **Meagen Gibson - [00:04:25]**

And are there any specifics around what that connection looks like when it comes to strengthening a couple's relationship before baby arrives?

### **Amy McMahan**

Yeah. So to back up a little bit, the Gottman Institute offers what's called a Bringing Baby Home workshop. And so here in Seattle at least, that workshop is offered at a lot of the hospitals where you would be delivering a baby.

So in addition to signing up for a lactation class and a birthing class, you can also sign up through Swedish Hospital for a Bringing Baby Home workshop, and that's where you and your partner are there, and they're walking you through a very structured process in figuring out how to maintain the connection and how to do this process in a way that won't damage your relationship.

So that resource is available. You can look on The Gottman Institute's website to find Bringing Baby Home workshops that are done virtually now.

There's also a book that John and, I don't know if John and Julie both wrote it or if it was just John, but he wrote a book called *And Baby Makes Three*, and that talks a lot about the research around what happy couples do, what those one third of couples are doing differently to maintain their relationship satisfaction after having a baby.

But the whole foundational theory of the Gottman Method is based on what's called The Sound Relationship House. And if you wanted to bring that slide in I can just jump into talking about the foundation of the method in general.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Okay, there we go.

## Amy McMahan - [00:06:04]

Lovely. So as you can see, the method is really based on, they've created this image to show what the method looks like. And before I jump into all of the different floors here, just a quick summary of what the method looks like is, there's a huge focus on the connection piece. So the connection between the couple is foundational. It's so significant and pretty much required for the method to be able to get to a place where you're managing conflict effectively.

So they really focus on fostering that friendship and connection, building trust and intimacy, knowing your partner's inner world. All of these things are extremely important for you to be able to get to the top layers of The Sound Relationship House, which is where you're managing conflict and navigating conflict.

So the very first floor of The Sound Relationship House is that Building Love Maps, which basically means knowing your partner's inner world. So what are your partner's likes and what are their dislikes? Who's your partner's best friend? What's an embarrassing story that they had from their high school days. It's really just focused on knowing who your partner is.

And a lot of the time these are the conversations we have when we first start dating someone. But as time goes on and you stay in a committed relationship, you kind of forget, you just don't have as much time to invest in those conversations. So they basically are saying this is foundational, and it's so necessary and required for the relationship foundation.

The second piece is Sharing Fondness and Admiration. So that is basically vocalizing the characteristics about your partner that you really appreciate. So it's just being overt about the things that you enjoy. It's like, if you have small children, using that positive affirmation to get them to repeat behavior. I use that a lot with the couples that I see that have young kids. It's just like your kids, your partner, your friends, everyone wants to hear how they're doing it right. And we forget to do that sometimes, especially when you're sleep deprived, we tend to get critical, have a short fuse, we forget to say the things that we appreciate about each other, and that's actually so important to continue doing, especially when you're experiencing all of the external stressors that bringing a baby into the world entails.

The third floor is Turning Towards. So this is basically when you need attention, support and comfort from your partner, you're likely to say something or make a gesture to elicit a response from them. So that's what the Gottman's call a bid. So a bid for connection can look like, hey, I had a crazy day at work today. If you're turning towards your partner, your partner is saying, this person that I love and want to be with has expressed something to me. They want me to respond to them. So when you turn towards them, you're saying, oh yeah, tell me what happened today. What was the stressful thing that happened that you mentioned earlier?

Consistently turning away or turning against a bid spells disaster for a relationship. When you're recognizing and turning towards each other you're really creating a safe space for both of you to express yourselves and your needs.

One other thing I wanted to say about the Turning Toward piece is, I don't know how much time we have to dig into this, but after having a baby, often, there's a real change in sexual intimacy between a couple. And a lot of that is so physiological and biological. All of the changes that are happening to the female, especially after delivering a baby and just like your body is all of a sudden not yours anymore. You're just kind of re-evaluating who you are as a person living in your body after you have a child.

So one of the things about Turning Towards is that the research has shown that those small bids for connection are really the secret to romance and intimacy. So this piece is especially, I think, significant and important for those couples where they're trying to re-evaluate what their sexual relationship looks like after having a baby. This piece is pivotal for that.

### **Meagen Gibson - [00:10:46]**

Yeah. I was going to say that, I can imagine that connection between couples and there's so much, if there were a child that was given birth to as opposed to, families are made in a lot of ways, people adopt children and things like that. But even with that context, there's so much of what happens for the primary caretaker of a baby that the maybe secondary caretaker does not relate to or doesn't have direct experience with, and so it can be such a separating experience in that turn toward thing, especially when you don't understand something.

I always like to think of sports. I am definitely sporty, but have trouble hearing endless connected stuff about golf. I have to remind myself that turning towards does not mean that I have to know or understand the thing that they want to share. What it means is that I'm just getting curious about the thing that they want to tell me about, right?

### **Amy McMahan**

If you're just acknowledging it. Yeah. And that's actually, I like that you brought that in because they taught, John Gottman when he does his Art and Science of Love workshop, he talks about the examples from the footage that they have of couples where someone responds to a bid for connection.

So what that looks like is they have these couples, just to give you a little background of what the research actually looks like, they had these couples come into this apartment on the campus or near the campus of UDub, and they recorded them just for a weekend. They would have these couples staying in this apartment, just going about their lives.

He always jokes, he's like, it was totally normal except we had them hooked up to all sorts of physiological monitoring. We checked the level of cortisol in their urine, but other than that, it was totally normal. It was a very...

### **Meagen Gibson**

Completely normal.

### **Amy McMahan**

So there's this example he uses of bid for connection where this couple is sitting there, I think it's a heterosexual couple. The male is eating a bowl of cereal or something. The female is looking out the window, and I think they're looking at the canal, which has some boats that are going down it. And the females like, oh, look at that boat. That's such a beautiful boat. And he just is like eating his cereal, doesn't respond. And then she says it again. She offers the bid again. She's like, hey, look at that boat out there, it's such a beautiful boat, what a beautiful day. And he just keeps eating his cereal.

So there he's like, he's not turning against, he's just turning away. He's not responding to the bid. What it would look like for him to have responded would simply to have looked up, nodded his head, made some sort of acknowledgement, like, yeah, that is a nice boat, and gone back to eating cereal. It doesn't have to be something huge. It can be something really small. But it's important because over time, if you're not responding, you become disconnected.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely.

**Amy McMahan - [00:13:59]**

Yeah, I like that you brought that into, that was a good segue into really understanding the bids because they're so important. They make up, responding to the bids for connection is pivotal in a satisfied relationship.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Yeah. I just love to give some context, because I think so many times people think that they have to really deeply understand intimately something that really matters to their partner. Really all you have to do is just respond, engage and let the other person know you actually hear them.

**Amy McMahan**

I know you exist over there looking out the window.

**Meagen Gibson**

Right.

**Amy McMahan**

Okay. Sure. Yeah. I mean, obviously you don't want to respond to every bid that way. There are some bids where you want to be like, yeah, this is a really important thing that you're coming to me with, and when you're in pain or when you're upset about something, I will attend to it.

That's a really pivotal piece of the method, too, is just when my partner is hurting, whether that's physical or emotional, the world stops and I turn to them.

But you can't do that with every single bid for connection. But you have to recognize which ones are those important bids as well and respond to them maybe a little bit differently.

**Meagen Gibson**

And I imagine it's only by practicing engaging with those bids that you learn to recognize when the important bids are coming up and what those bigger things are that you want to talk about.

Is she bringing up the houseboat because she's truly just noticing something out the window? Or is this some deep seated desire to always have lived on a houseboat that she's bringing it up, right.

**Amy McMahan**

Is she saying that she wants to quit, they want them to quit their jobs and buy a yacht and sail? Yeah, there's actually going? Is this just you're making conversation, or is it something deeper? Yeah.

Just to get to the next floor here of The Sound Relationship House.

**Meagen Gibson**

Let me bring the graphic back up. I just didn't want to leave it up too long for people watching at home.

## **Amy McMahan - [00:15:59]**

I know. It's kind of a long, I mean, this is like the entire method, so it's there's a lot here. There's a lot of content here, but I'll summarize it.

For the fourth floor the method really says that once you have these really foundational pieces here, where you're knowing your partner's inner world, you're sharing fondness and admiration, you're turning towards them, you're automatically in a place that's called The Positive Perspective of the relationship. So that's when you give your partner the benefit of the doubt, you can't fabricate that feeling. That feeling comes as a result of being connected.

So, for example, when your partner rushes out the door and forgets to kiss you goodbye, a positive perspective means that you give them the benefit of the doubt that they were absent mindedly preoccupied rather than intentionally neglecting you. And the piece that I think is the most important here is that you cannot fabricate that positive perspective. It comes as a result of this foundation, like really being fostered.

Which leads me to the fifth floor, which is Managing Conflict. And I'll summarize this one. Basically, once you're in that positive perspective of the relationship it's so much easier to manage conflict in a healthy way because you're not resentful, you're not angry, you're talking to each other, you know each other, you feel like your partner understands you. And when you can get to that place, you can learn how to navigate conflict a lot more effectively.

And there is a recognition, too, that the conflict is, most of the conflict that you and your partner have is not going to be resolvable conflict. It's going to be manageable. And that's especially the case after you bring a new child into the family system. There's so many external stressors. You have to figure out parenting styles, that's a thing that my couples come to me all the time with is, we don't agree on how to discipline. We don't agree on boundaries with family, like in-laws, and we don't agree on so many of these things that we never had to talk about before because they didn't come up.

But once you get to that place you can really figure out how to navigate the conflict differently and go through some really helpful understanding around conflict. And usually when there's a gridlocked conflict, there's a dream within the conflict. So there's something really important about this thing that it's hard to uncover unless you have some support or know how to navigate or have conversations around the gridlocked conflict. And that's something you can also get out of the Bringing Baby Home workshop is very structured ways to navigate perpetual problems in gridlock conflict.

## **Meagen Gibson**

So when you're in, either a stalemate or a cycle of patterns where you just keep repeating the same patterns over and over again.

## **Amy McMahan**

Yeah. Which, who doesn't do that? I think about, we have the same fights over and over and over again with our partners. That's just the way it is. And often it's because those fights are not resolvable. You have different world views, you come from different family systems, it's a cross cultural relationship, whether there's ethnicity differences or not. You're coming into this into this relationship with a whole different experience of what it's like to be in a family. So it makes sense that a lot of those things are not resolvable.

And I think that sometimes that feels hopeless to a lot of people. But to reframe that, it's kind of like hope inducing because you don't have to come up with a solution every time you have an argument. Sometimes it really just means, okay, I understand why this is a thing for you, but I still don't agree. And we have to figure out a way to compromise from here on out on how we go about doing this.

## **Meagen Gibson - [00:20:13]**

Right.

## **Amy McMahan**

Yeah. I tell some of my couples that, I'm like most of the problems you have you won't be able to solve, and they're like, what! Why are we here? I can't solve your problems but we can work through and figure out the dreams within the conflict.

## **Meagen Gibson**

Because it's really never about the actual conflict. It's not about the way you put the forks in the dishwasher. Or it's not about the fact that you didn't bring milk home when I asked you to. It's about the deeper things that are those levels on the graphic that you are talking about. Knowing our love maps and being able to share admiration and fondness for each other and being able to lean in and turn towards one another's bids. All of those things, it's almost like the conflict is a signal that those things are missing or disconnected.

## **Amy McMahan**

Yeah. And Gottman's research also shows, he says, the number one thing that couples fight about is nothing. It's like, the content is not what it's about. It's the pattern and a lot of it's attachment. It's the pattern of the conflict. And it's the dreams within conflict. And sometimes we don't really know how to express that to our partners without a little bit of help or structure around it.

## **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. I mean, I think most people watching have experienced the thing where they're fighting with their partner and they're 20/30 minutes into the fight and they don't remember why they started fighting in the first place, they're just fighting. And they're like, what even started this? How do we get here? I mean, I've definitely had that experience. I do it a lot less often now, but definitely at the beginning of my relationship.

## **Amy McMahan**

Yeah. I have couples who will come in and be like, oh, we had a big fight about something, and then they're like, we don't remember what it was, but we were both really upset. And I'm like, yeah, I mean, the content sometimes, it's not always content based. A lot of the time it's like we've had this fight before. I will say a lot of it that I see with couples, too, is division of labor and figuring out, which we'll get into, I want to talk a little bit more about that. But division of labor, figuring out who's responsible for what household duties, the invisible load, that comes up a lot as well. And those are things that you really can resolve. You just have to have some structure around it.

So yeah, certainly a lot there to talk about. I'll just summarize the rest of The Sound Relationship House. The 6th floor here is making life dreams come true. So the beauty of good companionship is that you have someone who will not only encourage you and your goals, but also help you to reach them.

This is actually a good place to go when you do bring a new person into your family system. You can talk about, how do we want to raise this child? What do we want them to be like? How do we want to parent them? This can actually be, all of those conversations that sometimes lead to conflict can be a really good way to make your life dreams come true, create shared meaning, which is the next level of The Sound Relationship House.

It's understanding your inner world as a couple. So it's going from me to we and recognizing we are doing this parenting thing together. This is something that we will align on this because we know how

to talk about it because we know how to express what we need. We know how to be vulnerable with one another, and we know how to say, I'm scared, I don't think I'm doing this right. It's developing a culture of symbols and rituals that express who you are as a team.

So there are some really cool rituals of connection that you can talk through. What does it look like to celebrate birthdays? How are we going to do holidays with our new family? What do we want our child to grow up thinking about Santa Claus? Like, all of these things are things that you can do to create shared meaning together as a couple.

And then the last two pieces of The Sound Relationship House are those weight bearing walls. So the pillars of trust and commitment. In a healthy supportive relationship two people make the decision to have faith in each other and stick together. And so that's where those pillars are. They can't hold, the whole relationship house can't stand up without the pillars of trust and commitment to the relationship.

That's a summary of the whole method. Which the whole Gottman method is based on that visual there.

### **Meagen Gibson - [00:25:04]**

And I can really understand why that's so important before you actually bring the baby home, because it's the old adage, like, you don't know what you don't know. And the time to start building the trust and commitment and start finding those things out about each other is not when you're sleep deprived and hormonal and hungry and have been forgoing your own needs for hours and days and months at a time.

And so I think what you said at the beginning about, something about couples that could do that before and didn't come in crisis.

### **Amy McMahan**

The prevention.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Prevention as opposed to intervention, I think was how you phrased it. The education and the building of all of these pieces before that wrench gets thrown into the whole mix.

### **Amy McMahan**

And also recognizing we're fighting a lot, we're having so much conflict, what's missing here?

I have a lot of couples who will come to couples therapy and be like, we just see that, they want to hash out conflict every time. And I'm like, this isn't going to get you anywhere. You have to strengthen the foundation.

I'm not going to sit here and be your referee. You can pay anyone to do that. So really fostering, recognizing we're feeling disconnected, we're arguing, we're in conflict because we're feeling disconnected. And figuring out a way to reprioritize that diad, the couple diad.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. I think it's a common misconception that couples go to couples counseling to, whoever initiated it believes that when they get there, that the counselor is going to be like, you're right. Your partner is wrong or bananas about this. They're completely misguided. You're right. Let's double team. And really, it's always, every time I've been in couples counseling, people are equally responsible. And let's figure out how you guys can communicate better and be on the same team.



**Amy McMahan - [00:27:01]**

Yeah. And that's for a healthy, non-abusive relationship.

**Meagen Gibson**

Obviously.

**Amy McMahan**

Sometimes it's like, well, actually, this is like an unsafe, manipulative place and you really are right and they're not right.

But in the case of functional, healthy relationships, yeah, it's a pattern, it's a cycle, there's no beginning or end. It's like, yeah, maybe this person got upset because of something that happened earlier. It's not linear. No conflict is linear. It's much more complex than that.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Okay. So with our Sound Relationship House, let's circle back to what you were talking about in gender roles and relationship satisfaction. Because nothing flares up gender roles like adding a child to the mix of a relationship.

**Amy McMahan**

Yes. Yes. So I want to just start off this by saying in the book *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, Dr. Gottman reports the findings of a long-term study of 130 heterosexual couples, and he said, I quote. "Even in the first few months of marriage, men who allowed their wives to influence them had happier relationships and were less likely to eventually divorce than men who resisted their wives influence. Statistically speaking, when a man is not willing to share power with his partner, there is an 81% chance that his marriage will self destruct".

Yeah. And he's like, he's a self declared feminist. He's like, you just have to, there has to be more of an egalitarian situation here for marriages to really work.

And that's not even, he's talking about in the first few months of marriage. Who knows if there's kids involved at that point in time. So this is without the external stressors that having a child brings into the family system. There's more external stressors due to sleep deprivation, figuring out maternity leave, paternity leave, roles, gender roles. Just traditionally speaking, it's really helpful to have, in a heterosexual relationship, for the male to be able to accept his partner's influence.

And what that looks like is not necessarily saying you get the final say on all these decisions. It's saying, okay, I'm not sure if I like where you're going with this, but explain to me why you think this is a good idea. It's like you're not just immediately vetoing your partner's idea. You're saying, tell me why you think, tell me how you got there. How did you get to that process? I want to understand why you think this way about this thing that I completely disagree with you on. It's curiosity.

So there's that. And then as far as just gender roles, one of the things, like I said before, that shows up a lot for the couples that I see is the division of labor. So let's say both partners are working outside the home, and they also have a child. You come home. There's a lot of research that shows that women in a heterosexual relationships tend to take on what's called the second shift. Which is you come home from work, or you come out of your home office now, and you see the state of the house and you start thinking, okay, I've got to plan dinner, I've got to get all the stuff done, we got to prepare, well, that's actually a little bit different. It's doing most of the work. The second shift.

So cleaning the dishes, cooking dinner, getting kids in the bath, getting kids to bed, reading books, packing their backpack for school the next day. It's all of that stuff.

And then within that, there's also what's called the invisible load, which in a heterosexual relationship, really tends to fall on the mother. So the female tends to be the gatekeeper for medical stuff. So let's say you're bringing your baby home, who's going to remember to schedule that well visit exam? Often it's the mom. Who's going to remember that you need to schedule dental appointments in 6 months to get your teeth cleaned? It's often going to be the female.

And just the recognition that that exists and that that can be so draining. But people don't see it because it's invisible. It's all up here. You can't actually see that that's happened. When you come home from work you see maybe the house is a wreck, but you can't see that your partner has called the insurance company, figured out this medical bill, emailed the teacher back about your kid's homework.

So just the recognition that there's such a huge disparity there for a lot of couples. You have to be aware of that for it to change and for you to be able to say, I'm overwhelmed, this is too much for me, and I need you to take some of this on my plate and take ownership over it. I see that all the time. Just with the invisible load of managing things.

It's also, the little things like, you open the refrigerator and you realize, oh, shoot, I need to throw out all this food. I'm going to clean out the refrigerator now. These things that people don't see, they don't know that it's happening and it takes up time and it takes up mental space.

So one of the ways that I encourage couples to navigate that is to write out a list of what are all of the things that you feel like you're responsible for on a daily basis, on a weekly basis, on a monthly basis? And do it in an Excel spreadsheet and just look at it and say, I'm making sure to pay the babysitter every time they leave. I'm making sure that I'm the one to follow up with the teacher about this report that the kid is doing. Having that all listed out so that you can actually see it, can make a big difference.

And then you can say, what can you take ownership over and what can I take ownership over? And when you allow your partner to take ownership, you have to let them do it. Which is hard for a lot of people. It's like this dance, you have to take a step back so that they can take a step forward. And you have to let them do it.

### **Meagen Gibson - [00:33:30]**

Their way.

### **Amy McMahan**

In a way that might not look like your way. Yes.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. I've had this experience myself personally. I recently had the experience where my children and my spouse both requested that I make an effort to be more fun. And I took that in stride. But then I made a list of all of the invisible load stuff that I carry around.

### **Amy McMahan**

All the things that make you not fun.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Four pages long.

## **Amy McMahan - [00:34:04]**

Yes.

### **Meagen Gibson**

And I said, I would love to trade some of this out and make some more room in my mental space for opportunities for me to seek out or join in on fun. And this is what would help. That's been an ongoing conversation in my house and something that we're working towards. So I completely understand.

And even in households where they're not dual career couples or dual working couples, it feels like, instead of a second shift, it's just a never ending first shift with the invisible load. Anybody who's ever been on maternity leave and then returned to work knows that work is easier.

### **Amy McMahan**

I know. My husband and I have that conversation all the time. It's so much easier to work than it is to stay here.

No, I actually have some friends that, she stays home with the kids full time. He works full time. He's like the sole breadwinner. And they still divvy up their weekends where each of them, one day, gets a 4 hour block of time away from the kids, doing whatever it is that they want to do. And then the next day the other partner gets that 4 hours. And I'm like she needs it just as much as he does. They both need it, in different ways, but they both need that space to decompress no matter whether you're working inside the home, outside the home, doing both. It's just so needed.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Alright. So what advice do you have for couples to maintain or improve their relationship satisfaction during this transition?

Obviously, if somebody's catching this before they become a parent then they know exactly which courses to take and where they can find them. But let's say your post partum or you're within that first year or you're on your second child and you're just noticing that there's going to be this uphill climb. You know what's coming this time, but you still don't know your way out. What's your advice?

### **Amy McMahan**

Yeah. I actually have a few clients that I'm seeing now where, one of my clients is like, I am doing this preventatively because after I had my first, I was so anxious and my relationship just suffered so much and I want to prevent that from happening again.

But I will say with the research of the satisfaction, that's not just the case for one child, that's the case for, this sounds so negative, that's the case for every child that you have. There is a transition that happens, no matter if it's your first or your fifth kid. You're figuring out how to do this, how do I have a new family system, you're adjusting roles and expectations. So this is something to be mindful of, no matter if it's your first or your fifth kid.

But I think the prevention, so you can take the Bringing Baby Home workshop even after you've had a kid. You can also do, there's some really great workshops that the Gottman Institute offers. There's The Art and Science of Love, which uses a lot of the skills and tools from the Bringing Baby Home workshop. It's just not quite as time sensitive to bringing a baby home. So some of the exercises are a little bit more broad. And then therapy, like couples therapy can be really helpful. Just getting a little bit of extra support.

I will say, just to summarize a little bit of what we talked about before, just the recognition that your relationship will change I think is really important. Like having a radical acceptance around the fact

that this is going to look different. We're probably going to struggle. How do we have some conversations about maybe our expectations, about what this is going to look like? What are we going to do if this is our second baby? Who's going to be responsible for bedtime for the older kid? How is this going to work? What are we expecting this to look like when we're on leave? Just really having some overt conversations about the expectations is really important.

And then fostering that connection. Prioritizing the two of you even if you feel like you're so exhausted. Sometimes what I tell couples with younger kids is, you have to throw out the idea of date night because by the time 7pm rolls around you're exhausted. You don't want to go anywhere. You want to put your sweatpants on and do nothing.

So maybe it looks like being a little bit more creative with what that entails for the two of you to connect. Maybe it means you do a weekly lunch date when both kids are in school or in daycare, and that's your date day. Or maybe it means you get brunch together. Or maybe it means you go out and drink coffee on your deck while the baby's napping on a weekend. It doesn't have to be a big weekend away. It just has to be intentional connection where you're saying, I am turning towards you and I'm prioritizing you as my partner, even amidst the chaos that our lives are at this point in time.

### **Meagen Gibson - [00:39:10]**

Absolutely. And I know that, one of the things that you deal with is the perinatal mood disorder so I do want to talk through that because that's obviously an aspect of bringing a baby home. And how can we identify those?

I know that when I had, my children are a little bit older now, but when I had my children, all that we knew about was postpartum depression. There wasn't really more than that. And there is much more than that. And I actually, definitely experienced what I now understand it was postpartum anxiety. So I do want to talk through all those things for people that maybe aren't parents yet, but are looking toward parenthood.

### **Amy McMahan**

Yes. And I think that this is such an important piece of the couple relationship as well. And I also want to say I'm making a lot of assumptions here. This whole talk is based on if you actually have a partner to help you do this stuff. This would be a completely different conversation if we were talking about single parenting. I can't even imagine the difficulties that that would entail.

But let's assume you're in a relationship and you have a partner and you're struggling with postpartum depression, anxiety, psychosis, that's where it might end up. That's worst case scenario there. It's not only impacting you, it's impacting your bond and attachment with the baby, and it's impacting your whole family system and your connection with your partner. When you are struggling with your own mental health it's impacting everyone around you.

So it's something that we need to attend to within the couple relationship as well. So I'll just give you a little kind of information about perinatal mood disorders. They're related to mood and anxiety symptoms that occur during pregnancy or up to 1 year postpartum. So that's kind of like the criteria for at least the diagnosis for postpartum depression.

Of course, there are people who struggle with depression and anxiety after that 1 year mark, and that doesn't mean they don't have postpartum depression, but the specific criteria for the diagnosis is up to that 1 year postpartum.

And also, I think it's important to recognize, I said there's an impact on the whole family system, but in a heterosexual relationship, the male partners are more likely to develop paternal postpartum depression if their female partner experiences perinatal mood disorders. That's significant. We don't talk about the men who have paternal postpartum depression, but it's not like non-existent. I think it's

about, I have, okay, so 8%-10% of fathers, and that is the highest prevalence is within 3 to 6 months postpartum, but most develop over a year rather than 4 weeks postpartum.

So what that looks like for men is irritability, indecisiveness, restricted range of emotion, lack of connection to the baby. So it's important to recognize the impact that it has. If your partner struggling, you're more likely to struggle as well.

And then as far as, a question I get a lot is, when do I know if this is postpartum? When do I know if this is like a real thing or if it's just like the baby blues?

And so baby blues are a really normal thing that a lot of new mothers experience. You experience a huge depletion of hormones right after delivery, and it's insane. It's actually insane what happens to a woman's body after having a baby and the way that the hormones impact emotions.

So it's really normal to have mood swings for those 1 to 3 weeks after birth. It's about 80% of new mothers experience this. And some of the indicators are those mood swings. So you're swinging quickly from happy to sad. 1 minute you're really proud of the job that you're doing, the next you're crying because you don't think you're up for the task. You have a loss of appetite, like your appetite changes. You don't feel like eating or taking care of yourself because you're exhausted. You feel irritable, overwhelmed and anxious. Those symptoms typically resolve by that 3 week, at the longest, mark.

Indicators of more severe perinatal mood disorders like anxiety and depression would be something that about 10% of women experience. And I wonder if it's even more than that, because I think it often goes undiagnosed because you don't even recognize it's happening sometimes until you look back and you're like, oh, that wasn't normal. That was me really struggling.

#### **Meagen Gibson - [00:44:07]**

That was for sure what happened for me. Yeah. I was deep in it and was so high functioning that I had no idea that that was actually going on until I could reflect a couple of years later and be like, oh, that's clear now.

#### **Amy McMahan**

You get in your head and you crawl out of the hole and you're like, yes.

Okay. So what that looks like is, and I will say, you're more likely to suffer from postpartum depression or anxiety if you've had bouts of depression or anxiety or if it runs in your family.

So what it can look like is feeling hopeless, sad, worthless or alone all the time. Crying often, that's like the stereotypical idea of postpartum depression.

But other things that can be indicators are, not bonding with your baby. So I've had clients say, I feel like I'm taking care of someone else's baby, like, this baby, I know it's my baby, but there's nothing about how I feel about it that makes me feel like it's my baby. I just feel like I'm taking care of someone's kid.

That can also look like not being able to have a bright affect when you're looking at your baby or talking or engaging with your baby. Maybe your face is kind of flat. You can't eat, sleep or take care of your baby, because of you're overwhelming despair. I've heard a lot of clients talk about dread, this overwhelming sense of dread. So the thought about, oh, no, we're nearing bedtime routine, we're nearing dinner time. This is when babies usually get a little bit more active and harder to take care of. They have the witching hour. They go through those phases of just not being consolable sometimes when they're really fresh.

And so just a sense of dread that doesn't go away. Almost like feeling homesick. I've heard people describe it that way. I feel like I'm homesick. It's just this deep feeling of discomfort and just not feeling content at all. Anxiety and panic attacks, especially for the anxiety. And I will say part of anxiety also looks like intrusive thoughts sometimes. Which I'll give an example, my own personal example.

I remember driving, my son was about 2 months old, and we were driving, we drove over this really big, beautiful bridge in Washington. It's called Deception Pass, and it's like this beautiful breathtaking view, but all I could think about was him falling over the side of this bridge as a tiny baby. And having that intrusive thought over and over. I wasn't going to throw him over the bridge, but I was like, all it would take would be me just.

And there's a huge difference between having those thoughts and actually harming your child. But those thoughts are really big indicators of anxiety that you need support with. Yeah, those intrusive thoughts, those fears of is my baby going to drown in the bathtub? Some of that's normal, but when it's intrusive and you can't get out of your mind, that's not. That's where you need to get a little bit of support.

And then the last thing that I wanted to talk about, that I don't think we talk about very often because it's so stigmatized, is postpartum rage. So anger. When you're depleted, when you have no tolerance or no bandwidth, you are so susceptible to just snapping very quickly.

And we don't really talk about this. We talk about postpartum depression as like sadness and just like crying. But sometimes it looks like anger, and that's because you have no ability to regulate because you have no bandwidth. So that can be an indicator as well. Losing your temper, getting really really upset and dysregulated.

**Meagen Gibson - [00:47:54]**

Or out of proportion anger to the situation that you're dealing with. I would imagine.

**Amy McMahan**

Right. Exactly.

**Meagen Gibson**

Well, I learned something I didn't know anything about postpartum anger, so I'll stick that in my rolodex.

**Amy McMahan**

Yeah. I wish we talked more about it because I think that, people don't talk about it because they're ashamed. And I think that if new moms and dads knew that this is a sign that you're struggling and there's nothing wrong with you, you need support, then maybe it would be easier to talk about and not have to feel ashamed about it.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Well, I imagine obviously you're somebody that can help people with that support.

So if people want to find out more about you and your work and the Gottman training that you have, how can they find out more about you?

**Amy McMahan - [00:48:47]**

Yeah. So you can find me on social media. I think it's @amymcmahantherapy on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).

And then you can access my website. It's [amymtherapy.com](http://amymtherapy.com)

So the website and then Facebook and Instagram are pretty much the primary ways of being able to follow me at this time and connect with me.

**Meagen Gibson**

Amazing.

**Meagen Gibson**

Amy McMahan, thank you very much for joining us today.

**Amy McMahan**

Yeah. Thank you so much for having me. It was a fun conversation.