**Navigating Parenthood: Support, Self-Care, and Overcoming Anxiety S5|EP132**

Today we're talking about one of the most significant transitions a person can experience and that is becoming a new parent. It is a journey that brings immense joy but also some incredible challenges and in today's episode I was joined by Carly, a psychologist with a passion for supporting new parents. She's created a course that helps parents navigate this huge transition and also to cope with the challenges that come with it.

So in the episode today we talk about how the arrival of a new baby can be a complete shock to the system and how our identity and our relationships and our whole sense of self is completely turned upside down and also how for some parents this leads to completely overwhelming anxiety, stress and potentially even postnatal depression. So we talk through all of these different topics and then towards the end of the episode we go on to talk about the type of support systems that really do make a difference and that's really what this episode is about, exploring the importance of support, self-care and community and then we do a deep dive into Carly's course which is really really worthwhile attending. So yeah, don't go away, it is an awesome episode.

Welcome to Sense by Meg Fora, the podcast that's brought to you by ParentSense, the app that takes guesswork out of parenting. If you're a new parent then you are in good company. Your host Meg Fora is a well-known OT, infant specialist and the author of eight parenting books.

Each week we're going to spend time with new mums and dads just like you to chat about the week's wins, the challenges and the questions of the moment. Subscribe to the podcast, download the ParentSense app and catch Meg here every week to make the most of that first year of your little one's life and now meet your host. Welcome back mums and dads, this is Sense by Meg Fora and I am very excited to have you join us here today on what will be a very interesting episode around maternal mental health.

Today we have got Carly Abramovitz with us and she has been on before and I'm really excited to have her. She does some incredible work in Cape Town, South Africa and she has an Instagram page called On the Couch with Carly and she works a lot with mums who are going through the life stage change of matricence and becoming a new mum. So Carly, with that a huge welcome and I'll hand over to you so that you can introduce yourself.

Thanks Meg, I'm very excited to be here. So I'm Carly, I'm a clinical psychologist and a mum of two and I work a lot with new parents. I've sort of carved out this niche for myself simply because when I became a parent I was dumbfounded by how little support and knowledge I had in the huge experience of becoming a parent for the first time and of course a lot has changed in the last six years and it's a very much more well spoken about thing, phenomenon but I think what's really important is actually providing the support for new parents and being there and being part of a new parent's network of support.

So that's what I feel very passionate about. Yeah, it's incredible how it seems to be the best kept secret that it's just going to be really, really tough like nobody tells you that or maybe they do and you can't hear them in pregnancy but it is, it's a massive challenge and you know I often interview mums on the podcast and across the board when they look back historically they go, oh my gosh that was hectic. So I'm completely on your page and during lockdown I think it was you started the course on the couch with Carly, is that correct? So I started I think what you're referring to is the course Oh Baby WTF.

I did, I started that, it was actually started in 2018 but it was more in the form of a talk. I used to offer this talk that I would do with a friend of mine who helped create the project from the beginning and then because of lockdown we created this online version which was more like a workshop where we kind of process things with people together and they were you know and then I took it further and have made it a bit more of like, yeah it's got more sort of workshop-y feel in the sense that you are getting the information but then you're also going to process it through your own life experience. So and now I haven't really been running it very consistently because I also had a baby, was it last year? Yeah last year.

And so yeah things get derailed but I'm very excited because I've actually just partnered with a practice so to speak called Sprout. They're a group of doctors who and a nurse who have come together to create like a support network for new parents and I'm in their network of practitioners so they refer to me when their patients' mothers or parents need support and then through working with them we've just been chatting about what else we can do and this is now the very first workshop that I'm offering in collaboration with them at their practice which is in Rondebosch. It's called Victoria House.

It's where Dr. Jessica Smith works from, where Tasha Perard from Well Mother Baby Clinic works and Raveena Manga. So that's where we're going to be doing the workshop on the 26th of October. Amazing, so this is then the first live workshop since lockdown it sounds like.

I did actually do a collab with another pediatrician practice in, it's called the Atlantic Children's Practice. That's with Raf Kossu and and her partner's name is Kate Brody and she's an allergist. I'm sure you would have come across her.

So I've done a once-off thing with them but it was one of those things that was time-valued. It was like in December so very few people could attend and I didn't really promote it enough. So yeah, I'm really trying to like promote it this time so people get to understand it because no one's going to come if they don't know what it is.

So that's really what I'm keen to get people to understand now. So for Cape Town moms who could attend, it isn't going to be online at all, so this is just for Cape Town moms. No, there'll be a live stream version as well.

So anyone can attend on that same day, at that same time. There'll be a Zoom link if you want to pre-book that. So it's the 26th of October from 9am to 11city, either on Zoom or in person and it's for moms and dads.

It's definitely not just for moms. Even though we talk about matricence and we talk about the experience that happens to moms' bodies, I really do believe dads need to be aware of this as they are the first port of support. They're the first person that supports moms in the system.

So you need to know what's going on with mom. We keep the couple relationship in mind a lot and so a lot of it's about matricence and about what happens to mom and her identity but it's also about what happens to the couple relationship and how difficult it is to maintain connection to your partner in that first year when you have a baby and things are so fraught. It's so interesting because the focus then is all on almost what you call the soft stuff, which is actually the really important stuff.

I think when you're coming up to being a new parent, you're so focused on buying the right gear. Am I going to breastfeed? How do I get my baby to sleep through the night? How am I going to give birth? It's all the kind of the practicals of the survival stuff but what actually layers on top of that, which is the emotional stuff or maybe lies underneath it, the emotional stuff is often neglected and that's what you guys are going to be talking about. Absolutely, that's exactly it.

So for me, it was like I got to the point where I was, I don't know, four months postpartum the first time around and I was like, cool, I went to these antenatal classes. I'm a psychologist. I'm steeped in knowledge of how child development works and I understand how to do connection and attunement and all these things that you read about but that has not equipped me to understand what it feels like on the inside.

What is actual experience of being a new parent? What do I have to come into contact with in my own self that makes this experience hard? Because sometimes it is about how hard babies are and some babies are even trickier than others but also about that you're navigating all of that stuff, which can be a steep learning curve in and of itself but you're navigating that alongside these massive identity shifts, these massive emotional and psychological challenges of confronting things that we haven't anticipated. So what are some of the things that we do or what are we confronted with? I mean, obviously, there's a shift in relationship but what else is there? Well, you know, I think there's a lot. I think it starts with the fact that your life changes so much.

I think there's a lot of loss that we don't anticipate because also we're having babies later in life now so we've got more life under our belt. We've also now got, you know, women are very much in the workforce. We've got, we are career, we are, you know, we have careers, we have professions, we've accomplished things, we've gone out, we've got degrees and we've got an accomplishment so we're in the workforce and we are people in the world.

We know pretty much what it's like to live as a man. If you had to tell someone from a hundred years ago, you know, how women are living, you know, we're pretty much living like men and then we have a baby and suddenly from literally from one day to the next everything changes and you are, it doesn't matter what degree you have, it doesn't matter how professional you are, it doesn't matter how you put yourself together out in the world as a certain person, that is no longer applicable in some ways. You suddenly are at home, sometimes often just in your pajamas, no makeup.

For a lot of women that's really hard. Constantly attached to an infant who is a hundred percent dependable on you. You don't have time to yourself, you don't have your body to yourself, you're also recovering from an, you know, a huge experience which is sometimes extremely painful and even traumatic which could be no matter how you give birth and then you're expected to do this really hard thing almost entirely on your own.

There isn't, you know, for a lot of people their partners go to work soon after they give birth and then they're at home and on their own in this experience and I just think that that's a recipe for feeling isolated, for feeling alienated from yourself, for not feeling like yourself anymore and not knowing what to kind of hold on to. There's nothing solid yet to hold on to in this new role. You're growing into it, you're really a freshling, you know, in this experience and so you don't know yet who you are in this new role and it's okay, you're not supposed to know yet.

It's a very very long unfolding process but if you don't know that you're not supposed to know then it feels like you're doing it wrong and I think that's what I really hope to impart to people. Absolutely, one of the things that I remember that really rang true with me when I'd had my first was the phrase weight of responsibility and that was, you know, like it was just I was responsible for this life and I wasn't equipped for it, you know, and nobody taught me how to do it. My village was very nuclear and it was me and my husband and I mean my mum came down for the birth but my mum and my mum-in-law lived in Gordon's Bay at the time and I just felt so isolated and I was like, geez, are they mad? Why are they leaving me with this responsibility? Because it's the biggest responsibility of my life but I'm completely lost and my experience in the months of or the weeks after James was born was quite extreme anxiety and it was quite interesting.

I had two experiences that are very different and I think it's a good segue into my next question. My one experience was that within a couple of weeks after he was born, could even be days, I had the most horrific depression in a very small amount just at night. So it would come as I was going to bed, he was down for the evening, I'd be getting into bed and I'd get this like utter sense of dread, depression, a dark, I couldn't see, it was like I was looking down a tunnel and I can remember on the second night that it happened and it was gone by the next day and the next night when it happened I said to my mom, it's happening again, it's this terrible feeling and she said to me, you're tired, you need to get into bed and it only happened twice but it was very extreme and then the other thing that happened which was much less severe but much more long-lasting was the anxiety which I was overwhelmed by anxiety.

So you know, now understanding what I know, the one probably was a postpartum anxiety which is very prevalent and the other one I'm not sure, it was very dark, it was very short-lived and it was very deep but could you use those two scenarios to just kind of sketch out the possibilities and kind of the almost kind of the different types of emotional experiences moms can have after their babies are born. This episode is brought to us by ParentSense, the all-in-one baby and parenting app that helps you make the most of your baby's first year. Don't you wish someone would just tell you everything you need to know about caring for your baby? When to feed them, how to wean them and why they won't sleep? ParentSense app is like having a baby expert on your phone guiding you to parent with confidence.

Get a flexible routine, daily tips and advice personalized for you and your little one. Download ParentSense app now from your app store and take the guesswork out of parenting. Could you use those two scenarios to just kind of sketch out the possibilities and kind of the almost kind of the different types of emotional experiences moms can have after their babies are born? Yeah, absolutely.

So how many days were you postpartum when you experienced those two It was super short, it was probably within the first 10 days. Yeah, so we talk about baby blues as a phenomenon and you know I remember being taught that in my international classes but it was like a throwaway line sort of like at the end where it wasn't really given much. I didn't really understand it truly but really what it is is that there's a huge hormonal fluctuation that occurs after birth and particularly when your milk comes in and I mean I'm not a doctor so I'm not that well versed in all the hormones and what they do to your brain and everything else but I know that physiologically there is a real experience that occurs almost across the board for all mothers around the time their milk comes in and depending on what else is happening in your life at that time you will feel it to a lesser or greater degree but it can result in those very, very, very extreme feelings of sadness or as you said a sense of dread.

It's normal, it's actually a normal part of the process. I think of how to compare this to anything else but like you've essentially been put on a mountaintop with a backpack and no map and you're told to reach the summit and it's like there would be a moment in that process where you would go oh my gosh can I do this like that is and that would be an understandable experience. You wouldn't believe that you would just get on get into that situation and be a hundred percent confident and be able to manage.

It's a big daunting experience so I think the fact that your mom was there is great because I think in that situation all you really need is someone to hold your hand and be like I'm here and it's it will pass. It's just a momentary sort of jolt to the system around this is happening, it is huge, my body is having a total extreme experience inside of itself and I'm responding to that appropriately. The postpartum anxiety which is a bit more long-term, we would need you to have it for at least two weeks consistently before we even gave you a diagnosis, is actually very common these days.

We see a lot of postpartum anxiety and again for me it's like an extreme version of a normal response to a very difficult situation. I think that being a parent is anxiety provoking, it is a big responsibility, there is a lot to think about more so now as modern parents than ever before. We've never had as much information at our fingertips, we never had so much conflicting information, the internet can be a very divisive place and we get these images and these messages in these ways that can feel very high stakes, that you either get it wrong or you get it right and that's scary.

Any situation we put ourselves in where we feel like your choice is either to get it right or wrong or to succeed or fail is anxiety provoking and we're doing this to mothers. We're putting these messages out there consistently saying get it right, get it right or else, and that's going to create anxiety. If we have that anxiety over a course of time and there isn't anything to modulate it, there isn't a very compassionate voice that is also in our head that is telling us it's okay, we're not expecting you to get it right, there is no getting it right, there is no such thing as perfect parenting, we're all fumbling our ways through this, your children do not need you to be perfect, you are not expected to know how to do everything, it's okay to make mistakes, your children will be there and forgive you the next day, it's all good, take it easy, ask for help, it's okay.

If we don't have those voices, I think that's when the anxiety gets compounded but there's also other things like personality traits that will, you know, A-type personalities are more likely to get to have anxiety disorders, people who had existing anxiety disorders are more likely to get postpartum anxiety, you know, sometimes it's about a family dynamic, so if you've had a fraught relationship with your significant caregiver then becoming a parent can be very triggering because suddenly you're confronted with your own childhood wounds and that can also be exacerbating. So there's a range of things that contributed to but essentially it's okay to be anxious, it's that we want to also have something that dilutes the anxiety so that it's not a consistent, constant feeling in us. Yeah, absolutely and I mean I did get the sense, I never felt like I was in a space where I needed some sort of diagnosis or medication but I can tell you right now that there were certain lifelines in my life that if they hadn't been there, if those support networks had not been there, I would have needed a lot of help, it would have been dangerous and those networks were number one, my husband and my mum and my mum-in-law were just unbelievable, so that support network and the other one interestingly was I had made, and I lived in Noordoek at the time, I had made my way across for some unknown reason to Pyrmont or Newlands to Lady Buxton to have James weighed, I mean who goes to a clinic that's like half an hour's drive away to get weighed, but anyway I did it and I came across Cindy at Lady Buxton and I became part of one of their kind of parent groups which I think later on became known as the parent circle, but at the time it was the Lady Buxton and we used to sit around in a circle on a Thursday morning and I swear to you it was my lifeline because there were women with babies at the same age as me feeling as lost as I was and I just felt okay when I was there, so you know I think one of the big problems with our modern world is that our moms are so isolated and there's a lot missing because we don't have a village, now you've worked a lot in private practices and in hospitals, what do you think is missing in our current support systems and does your course step in for that or where do moms find it? Yeah, so I think exactly what you're saying is so true, it is unnatural to expect a mother to parent and to learn about parenting and become a mother and go through the transition of matricence, of becoming a mother on their own, that it's unnatural.

First of all we should be so well versed in this by simply being part of the community already, so by the time you have your own children you've seen your older sisters and the neighbors giving birth and having children, you've watched breastfeeding for hours on end, that isn't happening anymore, so when you have your first, you have your own baby, it's maybe the first time you've seen breastfeeding, you don't know what it looks like, you don't know how it, you know it's all so new and confounding, so having those people around you is so important and then when you're in it to have that support like you said, it's just to not be alone because it can be lonely and you're not with an adult, you're with a child, you're with a baby who can't speak, who gives nothing, who's meant to be needy and dependent and it's a very asymmetrical relationship to be in relationship to a baby, you know they then start smiling and as they get cuter and cuter and talk more and more, there's more to engage with, but in the very beginning they don't give you anything, you know, they're just other than the optitose and high that you get from having them close to you, which is good, but like it's not enough, it's actually just not enough, it's we need to be with other people and sharing in just, you know, even if it's just about saying I'm thinking about this right now, should I do this, should I do that, should I do that, even if no one says to you, you should do that and they just say, ah yeah, that's a big decision, that's enough, it's just having that person there with you to share in that process, they don't have to tell you what to do, they don't have to do the thing for you necessarily, it's just that you're not alone in your processing of all of these things because there's a thousand things to process all day long. So okay, my thing is I think we need support, what does support look like? It's not necessarily giving advice, it's not necessarily being prescriptive and saying, and of course there are times in which like a well baby clinic, we do know that mothers come not knowing anything and they do need to have some guidance on how to do a latch for the first time or maybe they don't understand how to cut fingernails and they need that shown to them, whatever, there are things we do need help with, assistance with or being told how to do it, but I think there's a lot about parenting that is just about us figuring it out for ourselves and I think what mothers really need is the space and the time to process their own experiences so that they can come up with their own way of doing things in a supported way so that their ideas are supported, their thoughts, their feelings, their gut instinct is supported and of course when you start out, you don't know if you even have a gut instinct and that's okay. I remember feeling so anxious about the fact that someone would say, you know, just follow your gut and I was like, they would say, what are your parenting values? And I was like, oh my god, I'm like one month postpartum, I don't know what to do.

It's okay, you don't have to know, but actually, if you had to like zoom out and look back, you would see that you are knowing things and you are figuring things out and if you asked yourself sort of three months postpartum, do you know your baby's cries better now than you did when they were two days postpartum, you'll realize you do, you actually do, you have figured some stuff out, you've learned that baby and it's so beautiful to get that sense of accomplishment, but you sometimes just need someone else to reflect that back to you, to be like, gosh, look how attuned you are to your baby, look how well you know your baby and it's so nice when you get that recognition and I think that's what as a supportive network we need to do for mothers is to really offer them the space to figure things out and then recognize them with what they're doing, that they're doing it, you're doing it. So yeah, that is what I hope my post does, is A, give you the idea that that's the framework, is that this is a learning process, don't expect too much of yourself and then I also provide a list of resources of who can you go to for support and when you're not feeling okay, you know, you should be speaking to a therapist, even if it's not a disorder, you don't have to have a clinical disorder to go speak to a therapist, you can just go and have a relationship with someone who you check in with and who you share with and process, you know, where you're at and I think that's useful. Yeah, absolutely, lots of fabulous nuggets, Carly, thank you so much and your course will be absolutely invaluable, sounds like two and a half hours or two hours very well spent, is it a two-hour course, 9-11? Yeah, it's two and a half hours, we've given it two and a half hours, it's generally just over two hours but there's a little short break as well and we've actually got this amazing product called Full Circle Food, who are these guys that are bringing sort of postpartum nourishment and nutrition to moms in Cape Town, they have like a delivery service where they make you these beautiful meals and you can buy it as like a, I think it's an amazing baby shower gift for people to like put in money for a voucher for Full Circle Food, so they're going to be there and they're going to have some eats for for the moms and dads who attend, so it's just will be like a nourishing environment where we can all sort of just share in the process together and yeah.

Wonderful and how much does it cost? Oh, that's a good question, as far as I know it's 700 and something on the Sprout website, so you actually can buy tickets online on their website, I'm not sure, I think that's early bird price, I'm not sure what it is in its full, I should know this, this would be a good question for me to know the answer to, but it's something like 700 and something round at the moment and I think that's per couple, so you pay for the, you know, you and your partner come as with one ticket, as far as I know that's how it's set up and I'm not sure what the price will be when it's not early bird, but it's not going to be much more than that, yeah, I'm sorry, I should have, I should have the answer to this question. No, that sounds really good, so it's towards the end of October, it's on a Saturday morning, it's two hours, there's going to be food involved, it's for both members of the couple, both parents and it will be just a wonderful experience, Carly, I know the quality of your content and I think nobody should miss it, so thank you very much and thank you for joining us today and giving us a couple of nuggets of wisdom as well. Oh, thanks so much Meg, it's thanks for having me on and for spreading the word and yeah, people can get hold of me, even if they're not sure they want to come to the event and they just have questions, please get hold of me and ask me questions, there is also online versions of this course on my website, so if you can't attend the live event, there's a pre-recorded version on my website, which you can always access at any time, which isn't, it's like a little bit cheaper than the event, so the event is really affordable, but yeah, would be great if people come and if they are not, if they're not sure when is the right time, like who are the right people that should come, it's anyone who's pregnant, it's anyone who's got a very small baby, but even if you have a baby in the first year, I would say this is still applicable to you, so if you feel like it's something you want, just to get the support and get part of a network, it's worth it.

That's wonderful, I think those tickets are going to sell out, so moms get on to it, because it does sound like something that's wonderful, so thank you very much Kylie. Thank you so much Meg, it's so nice chatting. Thanks to everyone who joined us, we will see you the same time next week, until then, download Parentsense app and take the guesswork out of parenting.