

**UFYB 317: Parenthood, Regrets, and Authenticity:
A Conversation with Emmalee Bierly
and Jennifer Chaiken of ShrinkChicks**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to *Unf*ck Your Brain*, the only podcast that teaches you how to use psychology, feminism, and coaching, to rewire your brain and get what you want in life. And now here's your host, Harvard Law School grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Hello my chickens, welcome, welcome. I am very excited for this episode today, I have a lot to say about it and so do my amazing guests, you may have heard from the *ShrinkChicks* podcast, Emmalee Bierly and Jennifer Chaiken, who are both licensed marriage and family therapists. And I'm going to let them each tell me a little bit about kind of why did they even become a therapist, how did they start a podcast, but we are going to be talking about previews. Spoiler alert.

We're going to be talking about anxiety around having children, not having children, whether to have children, being childless by choice or not by choice. And as long time listeners know, I am now a stepparent by choice. I did choose to go into this, but not by plan. So I have a lot of thoughts about this. And this is such good timing because I'm sure you guys both read or if you're not, you should, that article in *The Cut* that just came out about friendships when one party has a child and one party doesn't.

So I feel like this is a very ripe time for this conversation. So tell us about yourselves. Why did you become therapists? How did you end up with this podcast?

Jennifer: We love this question so much. My name is Jennifer Chaiken, licensed marriage and family therapist. As we said, Emmalee and I own the therapy group together, which is a practice made up of systemically trained therapists. The reason why I specifically became a therapist. It's always felt very natural to me. But at the same time I had gone to therapists myself

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and always felt like it was a very clinical experience and really hard to connect with the therapist.

And so becoming a therapist for me meant using my personality as a therapist, being myself, being authentic. And that's a lot of what we have built ourselves, our podcast, our practice is being down to earth, genuine human beings and connecting with our clients on a very human level.

Kara: I love that. Can you clarify, what is a, you said systemically trained. I do not know what that means.

Jennifer: Yes, absolutely. So basically what that means is we see our clients within the context that they're in. That their healing is not linear and it's based on their relationships and how they function in their relationships. And so that is the label of marriage and family therapists. People typically think, you just work with couples and you just work with families. We work with individuals and basically what that label is, is that we are trained systemically and we think about the context that everyone is in.

Kara: Right. Not just a brain in a jar in the middle of a room.

Jennifer: Exactly.

Emmalee: And my name is Emmalee Bierly, I'm a licensed...

Jennifer: We always go right one after the other.

Emmalee: We have a very similar intro. We met in grad school. And we had this experience that we were getting all this messaging in grad school, basically about the exact type of therapist you're supposed to be. And that type of therapist was we were told to neutralize ourselves, don't wear

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anything too feminine or too masculine or too anything. And it really just didn't work for us. And I left feeling sort of worse than I began. I felt like how am I going to be in this field?

Kara: That is so common with graduate school, I feel like, any graduate school, every graduate school people are like, "Yeah, I went in full of passion and enthusiasm, then I came out a broken shell of a human, [crosstalk]."

Emmalee: With a tremendous amount of debt. I am broke and I am broken inside. And so we hire postgrads, we have interns and we say that we're going to do a ton of unlearning. And so that's it, but I had a really similar experience as Jen, that I was seeing a therapist and I just felt like they would always hone in on one very specific thing and didn't really hear me or learn about me. And I also sort of felt like they always brought their own agenda.

Now, I do think that the world of therapy and coaching and all these things has been expanded in such a way and I do think that it's grown. And I'm so impressed with this field of where we've been able to go, but a lot of things I do in my life is out of spite and a lot of my things was out of spite, I could do this better.

Kara: Okay. I love a therapist who's like, "Yeah, I'm operating out of spite. That's my main [crosstalk]."

Jennifer: It's really motivating in a lot of ways, it really motivates you, drives you forward.

Emmalee: I specifically had a male therapist when I was in college, who I was coming in, I was talking, I had a severe eating disorder. I was severely

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depressed. I have a mood disorder and he kept saying, “Well, you’re going out a lot and you’re hanging out and you’re partying.” But those were all the symptoms of what was it, I was drinking because I was also starving myself. There was all this different stuff and I just felt so unseen. And then I was, yeah, I’ll do this better. And I wish I could say that it didn’t work, but it worked out pretty well.

So sometimes your feelings are helpful to follow if you channel it in a healthy way.

Jennifer: Use it productively.

Kara: Well, I like to focus on the results. What are we [crosstalk], if we like the results then who’s to say [crosstalk]?

Emmalee: Yeah. So yeah, so thank you for having us today. This is very exciting. And the podcast we basically just felt, I don’t know, one day we said, “We think we’re kind of funny the way we talk about this. We think other people might like it.” And so we ordered a mic off of Amazon and we saw what happened. And apparently people kind of liked it and it went okay. The plan was never really to have a podcast.

Jennifer: I was very much forced into it.

Emmalee: Yeah, “Jen, we like this.”

Kara: I can tell which of you is the extrovert and which of you is the introvert already.

Jennifer: Can you tell?

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Emmalee: Jen's wasn't fully consensual but coerced in some ways. And that was in 2019. But really our practice is huge and we have all these amazing clinicians. And we love supporting other clinicians, coaches and therapists. That for me is what I was called to be on this Earth. I love my clients, but I don't want people to burn out in this field.

Kara: I love it. I feel like a lot of people come to coaching partially because they have gotten a therapist who had that traditional training, who are very trying to be this white box or this blank slate which number one, is not possible as you're subscribing. You have your own biases. You have your own belief systems. Those are impacting how you treat your clients. And because people want to hear, I mean, I think there's a freedom that some coaches feel that some therapists don't of being like, "Here's how I worked through this. Here's what worked for me. Here's my personal experience."

So I love that you guys are breaking down that kind of faux neutrality because there is no such thing as really being a neutral observer.

Emmalee: Yeah, we're just waiting for them to take our license basically. Basically, every day we're like, "Eventually we're going to get the call and we will lose this license."

Kara: Someone's coming for us, are we allowed to do this?

Jennifer: Every time it's a spam call, we're like, "Is it spam or is it [crosstalk]?"

Kara: We can have a whole other episode about that and about marketing and building a practice, [crosstalk] can't make any money as a therapist. Okay, we'll have to have you guys come back on. Today we're supposed to be talking about being childless. So just I will fill you guys in, my listeners

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know. So I was somebody who was childless by choice. And I had this dream of the partner I was looking for, and I have a fully remote independent life and we were going to travel the world and be dual income, no kids.

Or I would retire him and we would travel the world and work from wherever, in the French Riviera. And then of course I had started out what was supposed to be a casual relationship with a man who had just gotten out of a marriage and was 12 years older than me and had two children. So I was like, "Well, this is fine, totally safe. Nothing's going to happen here." And so now I live in Brooklyn, and there's children in my house half the week. So I went through, people who have been on the podcast have followed that journey.

All my friends with kids and all the coaches I know are like, "I love this for you. I'm so excited to watch this happen." It's not schadenfreudian because it's not negative. There's just sort of this delight that this has happened to me despite my best efforts. But I still in a weird way, partially identify as child free, in that my intention was to be child free for a reason.

So anyway, Jen, I know that you are a child free by choice, and so I'd love to kind of hear what led to that choice. What thoughts did you have? For me it didn't even ever feel really like a decision. I just never wanted them. And I kept waiting to be, it's like looking at the ovaries, is something going to happen?

Jennifer: Yeah. Are they going to churn at some point?

Kara: [Crosstalk] and it just never happened.

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Jennifer: Yeah. And that also was my experience is that I always waited to get to the age where I was going to all of a sudden feel this yearning for children and it never happened. And I met my partner, who also wasn't interested in having kids. And so it was really solidified in that. But yeah, for me, it was never something I thought about in the future. I couldn't picture myself with kids. It really wasn't something I kind of grappled with.

I think that where people really struggle is when they are in between the two decisions, where they're like, "I can picture this but also I can also picture my life without kids." And I think that that makes it a little bit harder, a little bit different from kind of how we're expressing what our experience was is that we were just like, "Our ovaries were never churning." And so we just accepted that. And so for me it was a little bit easier. Of course, people have always said to me, "Do you think you'll regret it?" People love to say, "Do you think you'll regret it when you're older?" It's their favorite question.

Kara: Which you never say to somebody who just had a baby.

Jennifer: Of course,, "Do you think you'll regret it?"

Kara: You're not like, "You have a baby, do you regret it yet? What do you think? Will you regret it in three years?"

Emmalee: No one can ask them because they're already thinking, I kind of regret it. Nobody says it out loud.

Kara: Well, regret's not a static state. There are moments that I'm thrilled I made the decisions I did. And there are moments that I look at my partner and I just say to him while the children are screaming, "You know I could be in Paris right now by myself."

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Emmalee: Right, French Riviera where were you? And so I think that that's a lot of what I talk about is that you can't live your life expecting not to regret something. That's just part of the human experience. And there are probably going to be times where when we're older, and I have friends whose kids are older and they have a relationship. But then I'm going to be like, "That looks nice. I wish that that's something that maybe I could have had." And so I think that that's a big fear that comes up amongst people is that I don't want to regret this decision.

And once again, there are going to be times that you have regrets. That's just part of life. And so to base the decision off of that, I think really it messes with people a lot of the time. Of course, when you have kids, you also might have regrets.

Kara: You have regrets either way.

Jennifer: You have regrets either way. And so I think that because regret is just a human emotion and being able to accept that regret is just a human emotion that we're going to experience no matter what. As opposed to saying, "How do I not feel this?" And we get that question all the time, how do I not feel anxiety? How do I not feel regret? How do I not feel? And all of these emotions are just part of living.

Kara: This is the big bait and switch of coaching and therapy. Everybody comes in, it's not a bait and switch because I don't think we promise it, but everybody comes in to be like, "How do you get rid of these feelings? You're the people who do that, right?" And we're like, "Yes, come in." Just kidding. No, we have to have them all, more. We're having more of them, not less of them.

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Jennifer: Sorry, we're going to accept them, accept them into your soul. Exactly. So I do, I think that that, it's a big mind switch to be able to say, "No, this is part of living. This is part of life and to accept that piece." But yeah for me, I can accept the fact that there might be times that I regret it. There might be times that I look back and say, "This would have been nice." There are pieces of it that maybe I would have missed, but I feel really settled in the decision that I make. And I also continue to make the decision over and over again to be able to say.

And me and my partner talk about it, we say if we go to a birthday party, like, "Do you want kids yet?" And we're just like, "No." I'm like "No." And then that's settled. But we still talk about it all the time. It's still a conversation. And so to continue to have the conversation in your relationship, I also think is a really important piece to be able to continue to hold onto.

Kara: Yeah. I want to hear Emmalee's thoughts on this too, but I want to say something about regret first, which is I think part of what's happening, it's when we regret the path not taken, we're imagining the fantasy idealized version. And we're having some negative emotion now that we want to escape. So your kids are screaming and you're like, "Why did I do this?" And then you imagine, well, if I was free, in this moment, if they weren't here, I'd feel amazing and vice versa, you're lonely at home.

But you're never imagining, well, I had a kid and then it turned out the kid kind of hated me. And now they won't come home to Christmas and so I don't actually have. And when you have a child and regret it, you're never imagining, well, I'm sitting around and I'm bored and lonely. You're imagining some other fantasy life. It's always this fantasy escape. If I just had done this differently, I wouldn't have to have this negative emotion now

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and I'd be living this fantasy alternative life. Your brain's going to do that no matter what, whatever choice you make.

Jennifer: Always this idealized version.

Kara: Yeah. Emmalee, do you have kids or are child free or are looking for kids, look for who you could borrow if you want?

Emmalee: So good. I have a four and a half year old. I have a child that I did try to have, active decision. I always knew that I want to have kids, but here's the issue part, I have an only child. And it's amazing that no matter what you choose to do with your body, someone has an opinion. The fact that I have an only child...

Kara: Being a woman [crosstalk].

Emmalee: It's really great. It's unbelievable what is said to people with only children. "Well, don't you want to give her a sibling? She's going to have to deal with this her whole life. You want her to turn out like an only child?" The things that people will say to me with no, people that I don't know. But here's the other thing I know is that's all of the shit people say, it has so much to do about them and not about you. We hear this time and time again because we talk about this topic so much.

And we talk about what it's like to be incredibly close with someone who doesn't have the same lifestyle choice as you. Jen and I run a company together. We are best friends. I have a child, she does not. And I feel when people are like, "Jen's had this experience, it's really hard for me to hang out with people that only talk about their kids." I had the experience, I went through a tremendous amount, it took me two and a half years to have my

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child and then I had four miscarriages after her. And there is a part of feeling like we want to fit in, every human being wants to fit in.

As you get older, it feels like you start to get pushed out of certain boxes based on the decisions you made. When I'm with people that have multiple children to say things to me, "It must be so easy with one." And it's kind of true, it is. And that's why I'm having one, because I don't want it to be my entire life. And so it is this really complicated thing of other people's opinions. So we have this internal world that we struggle with of what's right, what's wrong? Will I have regret? Will people be upset? What will happen, what if I don't give my parents grandchildren?

Who's going to take care of me when I'm older? We have this whole eternal world. And then you have all the external things that people say to you. And no matter what decision you make, you're wrong because you didn't make someone else happy. And so it's this thing of feeling, people always say, "Well, how do you make the decision?" If I feel so anxious. People that are like, "Okay, I know I don't want to have kids. I just need to deal with the external people and their voices, whatever, we can coach on that."

The people that are like, "How am I supposed to make a decision when I truly don't know?" The thing we start to talk about is first we have to do external voices out. We have to remove that immediately because that is so deep and it's happened for so long. The amount of women we talk to, they're in their 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, that say, "I didn't really think I had a choice."

Kara: Right. That socialization is just that [crosstalk] natural, everybody expects it. You're going to regret it if you don't, as people just do it. They're just like, "Well, I got married then you have kids and now, whoops."

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Jennifer: I was thinking about this before we started this conversation is how incredible it is that we can even have this conversation. Where the generation before us, I've asked my mom, I said, "What led to the decision?" She was like, "It wasn't a decision. It was just what you did."

Kara: Yeah, I think about, one of my grandmothers in particular, I'm not sure she would have had children if she'd been in a context that was. I mean, she actually did a lot of things that were unusual for women in her time. But I think she also had the additional layer of being Jewish after World War 2. So there's this immense pressure to, we have to replace the population. I just don't think that it was ever sort of a question for her, but kind of nothing about her to mean or suggest. I mean she was into having a family, that's what she was socialized to expect. But it was nothing about childcare and child rearing, seemed particularly to appeal to her.

And we accept that so much for men. We don't expect that men are supposed to enjoy child rearing, enjoy taking care of children, enjoy having a baby. I mean, my partner actually talks about how most of his friends had seemed not into the baby stage and he sort of expected to have that experience and was surprised to discover that he actually loves babies. Well, he's the caretaker in our relationship, clearly that he loves babies and loves taking care of them. But that was unusual and contrary to what he'd been socialized to expect about himself.

We just don't have the same expectations. But if a woman, I mean, it's totally legitimate to be like, "I'm not into babies, but I want a family later. So I'm going to have a child and raise it." And men can do that but if a woman does that, that's weird and unmaternal and there's something wrong with her.

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Jennifer: And we talk about this a lot is scripting and thinking about, well, what is the reason why I'm making this decision? And so to think about, well, I am having kids because I want a family. I want to build this family and I want that when I'm older too. And this is the decision I'm making. And I think if you're someone who's really struggling with a decision, something that can be really helpful is gather all of your information. Really understand what this looks like.

And that's, I think, a big piece to part of our decisions is that we really know what it looks like, fortunately and unfortunately, behind the scenes. And what it really takes to be a parent, and what you're putting into it, what it does in your relationship. And so for it to really be a decision that you make as opposed to, well, this is just what I have to do and I'm not going to even think about it. I think a lot of it blindsides you less.

That you're making a decision not just to have a child but also everything that comes with it within your relationship to your partner, your relationship with yourself, your relationship to that child, what it brings out. And so I really think gathering information about what this looks like can be really helpful and supportive of that decision.

Kara: Because I feel women are socialized to doubt their own decisions, we expect from other people. I have found, when I talk about now being a part-time parent to people, I'm like, "All the reasons I thought I didn't want a parent turned out to be true." I was not wrong about any of those. There have been positive things I didn't expect. I think I had a very negative vision. But it is as unrelenting and overstimulating as I thought it would be and it has in no way.

People are like, "Now, do you want your own now?" And I'm like, "Even less." Because I'm so clear that I can do this well three days a week and I

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need that break. That was what I was worried about in the first place was knowing myself and the unrelenting-ness of parenting and that turned out to be accurate. So it's partly also, I think, for women, if you have thought it through, if you have done this work then trusting that decision. Because the thing that I see coming up all the time that I have to coach on is so much FOMO, fear that I won't have this experience.

And there's this difficulty we have I feel especially in American culture, which just tells us it's never too late to do anything, and you can always have everything. But yeah, you have to make a choice. You're always making choices about which lives you're not going to have. I already have the choice of not having the life I would have had if I'd married my college boyfriend and I'm not going to have the life I would have had if I'd stayed a law professor.

And I'm not going to have the life, but we don't think about it that way. And I think for some people, having or not having children is the first time they've really grappled with, I have to make this decision that is in some way irrevocable or as close to irrevocable as we get, basically.

Emmalee: It's interesting because there's also a really huge conversation now about freezing your eggs, which I think is amazing. It's great that if you have the resources to do this, it's talked about now, we want to empower people, you know what I mean? My mom had me at 43 years old. I think it's great, make decisions. But then that's another pressure. If I don't freeze my eggs before 35, yeah, let's give ourselves one more thing to worry about. And so now even the things that give us options also feel like pressure to make a decision.

Kara: And it kicks the thing down the road. It enables you to stay in the space of I'm pretty sure I don't want but just in case I'm going to, so that

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you don't ever have to really grapple with, I need to make a serious decision about what kind of life I'm going to have with all the unknowns that come with that. And all the negative emotion and positive emotion, that's probably going to come either way.

Jennifer: And you mentioned coaching someone having this fear of missing out. And I think that that's really real. And I think it does, as your friends start having kids, it does alter your relationship in ways that there are certain things that maybe you used to be able to connect on. You can no longer connect in the same way. You're just in different parts of your lives.

And so I think that that's another fear that comes up with, we see it with clients, is that not only am I going to make this decision, but it's also going to disconnect me from people who have made a different decision. And I think that it's not necessarily about disconnecting. It's about the fact that your relationships will change and it's okay for them to change. It will just be new and you will have to find a new way of relating to them and connecting with them.

Kara: Yeah, I'm curious in that context of what you all thought of that article in The Cut. So people could be listening to this anytime, but when we're talking today, an article just came out in New York magazine's, The Cut. That was a pretty long piece about what happens when your friends are having kids and you don't have children. But of course, the click bait in the title's, can people with kids and without kids, be friends? And I was like, "Literally all my friends have kids. I didn't have a kid until I just acquired two of them at seven and ten a year ago."

To me it was a little extreme. But the thing that surprised me was how much now, I never felt, that never impacted my close friendships. And I'm also old, and I never wanted to go to a rave at 1:00am that now my friends

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with kids can't. I was like, "Who are these people?" In the article they're like, "I have these one friends who are still cool and go to raves at 11:00pm." And I was like, "I don't ever want to do this, this is not a criteria for me." I've been 80 years old since I was born. I think therapists and coaches are maybe not the biggest partiers.

But the thing that has changed, I just noticed how much, now my conversations with my friends are way more about our kids and parenting which doesn't bother me. I mean to me it's also sort of I'm like, "Well, this is the new thing in my life that I have a lot of thoughts about that I'm figuring out and is interesting to me." So that is the only thing I've noticed has changed and that it's been easier to hang out. It's been nice that my friends already have kids and now we can just all, we can all hang out with the kids. That part feels easier.

That has been surprising because now I'm like, "What did we used to talk about all the time?" I mean, we still talk about jobs and relationships, which I guess is what we used to talk about, but the proportion has gone from me being like, "How are the kids?" And getting a 10% of the conversation update to it being you're really in the trenches talking about it. The only other thing I've noticed that has changed is that it's easier to talk to strangers who are also parents, I find. And possibly because I'm just not a person who normally wants to talk to strangers.

So my partner is an extrovert. He probably notices no difference. He would talk to a stranger anyway. If I'm sitting like we were on vacation, I was on the beach next to a mom with her kids. If we'd been two single women on the beach, I wouldn't have talked to her unless she would happen to be reading a book I read. And I was like, "Oh, that book." But I'd need something, but she had kids. So there was this immediate just within two

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minutes, it's like, "Oh yeah, how are they dealing with going to the restaurant for dinner? Have you tried this game?"

So that's been interesting for me as somebody who generally does not engage with strangers, the sort of we're in this together.

Jennifer: It's almost like when you're on a plane. I don't know if this is a good example, and there's turbulence.

Kara: Right. Now we're all friends.

Jennifer: And you look over, yeah we're all together. I would hold a stranger's hand next to me if we were going down.

Kara: Right. I'm curious to know what you two thought about that article or that just concept in general, that cross friendship issue?

Jennifer: Yeah. And it's so interesting once again because I don't have kids. Emmalee has a child and yeah, I think that there's a natural, once again, change in the conversation. I think there's also an assumption that people assume if you don't have kids that you don't want to hear about their kids. But for me, at least, as a child free person, I like children, I just don't want my own children. It's so cool to watch your friends have miniature versions of themselves. How cool is that?

And to also watch their transformation in becoming parents and what that looks like. I mean also I'm a therapist, so I want to know every detail about your life in general.

Kara: Right. What are you feeling about that? What are your thoughts about that?

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Jennifer: Right. What are you feeling? What are your bowel movements? Tell me, there's no such thing as too much.

Kara: Is that what therapists talk about?

Emmalee: All the time.

Kara: I get that. No wonder I needed coaching, my therapist didn't ask about that at all.

Jennifer: Right. I know, listen, we get in there. We want to know it all.

Emmalee: Yes, we get in there.

Jennifer: We get, no, not a good way to phrase it.

Emma: But it's funny, though, you get moms together, all they do is talk about their kids' shit.

Jennifer: Exactly. Tell me about your kids' shit.

Kara: I haven't gotten to that level. Maybe this is a step mom, mom distinction, biological stuff comes up and I'm like, "That's all you. I will be over here in the corner. No, thank you."

Jennifer: I just want to put it out there and maybe it's not everyone and I think you can gauge it. You can have conversations about your conversations where if your child [inaudible] go to your friends with kids and say, "Hey, I would love to hear about this, tell me about what's happening." I'm asking all of the questions. And maybe there are some child free that

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don't want to hear about it. So I think it's navigating those conversations and those relationships differently.

It's just once again a new way of relating and it's a new way of learning how to relate to one another because you're right, that it does change. When you are with other parents, you're going to be able to relate on things that I won't be able to relate on. And I think that that can feel disconnecting in a way. But just because you can't relate to something personally doesn't mean you can't work to understand it and connect with your friends who do have kids in a different way.

Kara: Yeah, part of that article I was just like, "I think you maybe have some shitty friends." My friend had a baby and I flew to California and made her a brisket in my Airbnb and took it over and fed her and her husband and held the baby. And I didn't have a baby. That was just, that's what you do when somebody's born or dies. So if your friend comes over when you have a baby and starts eating the takeout without you and doesn't offer to hold the baby. I think your friend is just an asshole. I don't think that has anything to do with having a baby.

Jennifer: And then going to a rave. What's happening there?

Emmalee: That's the thing we're talking about here. And I agree with you, that's how I read that, which is, why are you choosing these people? Because I don't know if that person was so awesome before you had kids, either. And so here's the thing I would say to yourself is, chosen family really matters. Who we choose we have. We have research that says that the quality of our relationships directly equals to the quality of our life. If I'm surrounded by dicks it's not going to feel good, it's just simply not.

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And so there's this part here of saying that anything we go through in life is hard. I agree. You choose your hard, whatever that looks like, whether it's that I choose to be child free and there's a fear that I'm going to have as I get older who's going to take care of me or you choose to go through the trenches with your young kids and feel separated. It doesn't matter. You choose your hard.

But people that are connected, people that have done work, people that work on themselves and have vulnerability and talk about their feelings and do this. It does not ruin relationships just because you made a decision about what you do with your individual life.

Kara: It actually reminds me, and now that I'm thinking about it, I think there's a distinction between, sometimes when people get sober, you have friends where your activity was drinking. So yeah, those relationships are probably over now if they can't transition. The same thing, if your relationship is based on going to raves at 11:00pm, well, except for that one couple, then probably your lifestyle has changed. But that's because the friendship was really more socializing. It wasn't a personal bond.

Whereas with my friends, because I'm never a person who has that kind of activity only bond because I don't want to do any activities. I just want to talk about feelings. It's much more, my friend used to have a hobby that I was not that into, but I would ask about, so it was 10% of our conversation. And now we both do the hobby so now it's 60% of our conversation.

Jennifer: Right. If your friend loves knitting and you don't like knitting, you're going to be like, "Well, why do you like knitting. Tell me about it. I'm just curious and maybe I'll get into knitting. And if I'm not into knitting, I'll still be curious about it." Yeah. So I think that that's a big piece of it too. And I think

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it also highlights, similar to getting sober. It does highlight who you're really connected to and maybe who you're not as connected to.

And I think that's scary, there's safety in feeling I'm connected to all of these people. But I think it really highlights who is going to be in your life and who maybe is going to fall off.

Kara: And people also are scared to be vulnerable and have that real intimacy. So you use acquaintanceship as your friendship. You use the sort of shared activity as your way of relating. I want to talk about something else you said. This was kind of an aside where you're like, "I love kids. I just don't want my own." And I feel like that's what society, women have to say that like. Men I feel can be like, "I just have zero interest in this." And people are like, "Good for you. Have an amazing bachelor life."

Because I was always someone who was like, "I don't particularly like kids." I feel more like I like the two that I now raise. And I like my friends' kids, I guess. But I was the opposite. I was always kind of like, "One of the reasons I don't want children is that I don't find them that interesting." I didn't at the time, and I still don't really, honestly. I mean, I like the kids I interact with, but I'm not somebody at the playground being like, "Let me interact with these other five children that I don't know."

Jennifer: Right. And let me clarify, I like some kids.

Emmalee: Yeah. Wait, I was going to say, you're not at a restaurant and there's a kid sitting there and you're like, [crosstalk].

Kara: People are like, "Kids are just people. You wouldn't say you don't like most people." And I'm like, "Wouldn't I? I don't know that I would say that." I think this is perfectly consistent, I don't really want to [crosstalk] people.

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Jennifer: Right. I like small interactions with certain kids, I should say. I'm not gunning to be a preschool teacher.

Kara: Kindergarten teacher, because it looks so weird. I'm like, "Yes, some people love children generally and they choose a career that involves them."

Jennifer: Yeah, that wouldn't be me.

Kara: No, me neither. But that's social expectation. So I feel I just kind of want to give permission for the people listening to be like, "It's fine if you're like, "It's like knitting to me." I don't find that interesting and I don't want to do it. And I will ask to be polite. But I feel some people get so anti kid because there's so much social pressure the other way that they feel they have to rebel against it.

Jennifer: Yes. I have very much also felt that and well, there's also after I got married there was so much conversation, "Well, when are you going to have kids?"

Kara: That's the next question, when, yeah.

Jennifer: That's the next question. And I'm like, "I literally got married yesterday. You're asking me the next day when I'm ready to have kids." But I felt that kind of rebelling piece is that I really felt this need to educate people on the fact that just because I'm a woman, it does not mean that I automatically want kids. So I would be very blunt because we always get the question of, "Well, what do you say to people when they ask you whether you're going to have kids or not?" And I would very bluntly say, "I'm not interested in having children." And I would just wait for their reaction.

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I really would take the time to educate people on the fact that not every woman wants kids. And it's not in everyone's future because I'm a therapist, so I've kind of built a lot of work around responding to these questions. And also, I'm very settled in my decision. So it doesn't hit me. But for those who aren't as settled in their decision, who haven't done the work, those questions can be very hurtful and they can be really hard to navigate. So I felt it was almost my personal mission to point out that that's not an okay question or for those who maybe are struggling to get pregnant.

Kara: But that's just a terrible question to ask in general, because for all you know, someone is trying desperately and wants to be pregnant. They were just trying to eat their cupcake and now, I mean I teach, we're all responsible for our emotions. But you don't need to go out, triggering other people to have to do the work. Did you want to get in on that, Emmalee? It seemed like you were going to say something.

Emmalee: Yeah, but Jen did a great job, I don't know, I'm just shutting down fast. [Crosstalk] I know is when to shut up. I just believe that everyone has this opinion about everyone all the damn time. I just feel one of the best things we can do is just say, "What do I choose for myself?" And I do know that there is just so much discord everywhere you go about all the ways you're supposed to be and you're supposed to. And you're right, I just don't think men have this.

If my husband had a choice, he would have 50 million children. He is the world's best dad. I love my kid, but the first three years of her life were the worst three years to the point that I ended up doing ketamine assistive therapy for a year to get out of my postpartum depression. I wouldn't survive doing this again. My partner, totally different experience, could do this a million times a day, [inaudible]. And so he's allowed to have that.

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It's almost like I am not or it means that I don't love my daughter. I love my daughter more than anything. I think she is the coolest thing in the world. But no, when she was a potato, I didn't feel that way. I just didn't. I didn't, I remember Jen being like, "So you're so in love?" I'm like, "No, I don't feel anything besides I'm in pain and I'm sort of regretting this."

Kara: Also very common with postpartum anxiety and depression.

Emmalee: Exactly. But there is this fear, if I don't say those things, it means I don't love my kid or I'm not going to do this. And listen, I'll tell you this, if you go onto Reddit, the amount of subreddits on parents that regret being parents. And that is really, my mom has said to me a million times, "I don't know if I was really meant to be a mom."

Kara: I think that's so important to be able to talk about that and it's still such a taboo conversation. Women will say it sort of anonymously on Reddit or wherever. But that has to be the case, you can't have this thing that so many people do and not have some level of percentage of people who regret having done it.

Jennifer: And both things can be true. And I think that's the worry is that if I say I regret this, it means I don't love my kid. But you can love your kid. You can be doing your best and also regret it. It can also be really hard and you can also really miss your life before you had children. And so I think that's the fear is if you start talking about, I regret this, that it must mean that I don't love my kid or I'm a bad parent or I'm not going to parent.

Kara: Or you did it wrong. I mean, I think people are afraid of regret because they think it is a diagnosis that tells them they made the wrong decision. And so if we think of regret as like hunger, some days you're going to feel regret and then probably it'll go away and then you might feel

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it again later. It's not that big a deal, but people are like, "If I feel regret that will mean I made the wrong decision." And women are so socialized to doubt themselves, doubt their own decisions, criticize themselves.

We're so terrified to make the wrong decision and then beat ourselves up that even if you do end up, I mean, I don't think that regret really even is, we talk about that like it's an on/off switch. It's either you don't regret it or you do regret it. And now that's your state of being about this decision forever. I don't think that's true. But even if that were true, you don't have to make that mean I made the wrong decision. I did the wrong thing. I fucked it up. My life would be so much better the other way, vice versa. You could be a miserable single person.

You could have had a kid and been like, "Great, someone to take care of me." Then your kid is like, "Fuck you, I'm moving to Croatia. I don't want to take care of you."

Emmalee: There's no guarantee. There's no guarantee.

Kara: There's no guarantees. I coach people a lot who have had one kid. I don't know why this comes up a lot, but it just does. People have had one kid, they're trying to have another kid or they're debating it. And they have all this drama about giving the kid a sibling. And I keep being like, do you know that some people hate their siblings. What is happening? But there's just this assumption that your kid is going to love their sibling. And I'm like, "What if the next one is an asshole? What if it just totally [inaudible]?" You have no idea. You don't know that this is positive or that this will work out in any way.

Jennifer: Yes. And that goes back to idealizing this other choice. Grass is always greener and the thing is we can think like that about everything.

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Kara: Should I quit the job or not quit the job? I should have gotten married. I should have gotten divorced. I should have, whatever, I should [crosstalk].

Jennifer: We have that no matter what.

Kara: Yeah. Every time that I'm like, "Oh, my God, it's so loud in here. I could be in Paris." I'm never imagining myself in Paris who's married to somebody else and having step kids or in Paris fighting. I'm always like, "I'm on the West Bank. It's beautiful. I'm with my husband, Jean Pierre, who has no children and is a billionaire."

Jennifer: Wearing a beret.

Kara: [Crosstalk], now we're having breakfast. I'm never working, I'm never stressed.

Jennifer: All of the stresses are gone.

Kara: [Crosstalk], you're always imagining yourself on the couch at Christmas. The children are beautifully styled and opening presents. They're saying, I love you so much. Well, you're not imagining when your child is screaming that they hate you because they can't have a fourth ice-cream cone.

Emmalee: So when you say that here, obviously Kara, we can sit here and be like, "That's such a fantasy. Clearly, that could never happen." But here's the issue. Then you have a bunch of people that posts the fantasy on Instagram and they make it seem real. And then you fall for it. And so that's the thing, is we could sit here and be like, "What are the chances that you meet Jean Pierre with no kids billionaire?" I mean, listen if that happens, I'd consider it.

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But the reality is then you see all this other information about, well, this person is child free and their life is the best life ever. And this person has kids and their life is the best life ever. And so fantasy has sort of crept into our real life and that is very confusing.

Kara: That's why it's so great to be a coach and a therapist I feel, and that's why I love group coaching containers. Because you're in a container and the woman who's, if you saw her picture on Instagram, I had this with body image stuff all the time. You'd be coaching somebody who looks like a model on their body image and then everybody else in the group is seeing, okay, but literally, she doesn't feel good about. And at first you can kind of cognitive dissonance just dismiss that.

But over and over you start to be like, "I don't know, maybe this isn't." So I feel that's where true vulnerability and friendship comes in, real relationships. Being in a kind of therapeutic or coaching container where you see that, get access to that. I mean one-to-one therapy also, obviously great in different ways. But one of the benefits of a group or just being honest in your relationships and your friendships is seeing the other side of that.

Jennifer: Yes. And we always say that too. It is just such a privilege to be a therapist to be able to see the back end of vulnerability, everything that everyone goes through. To be honest it's very helpful for our own ways of seeing the world too. It's just incredible and it's such a privilege, truly.

Kara: Anything we didn't hit on that you wanted to share about this topic?

Emmalee: I think, well, just for a little takeaway, Jen brought up before, scripting. I wanted to give a little bit more about what this is because I think it's a really helpful tool. So we talk about scripting. So actually Jen and I are

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both trained sex therapists. We didn't talk about it in this topic, but that's one of things we talk about. And we talk a lot about sexual scripting. So sexual scripting is why am I choosing to have sex right now with this person and at this time and what's the point of this?

And that can be very helpful in working on your arousal, working on desire, any of these things. And so we talk about scripting in this sense as parenting scripting is why am I choosing to be a parent? So giving yourself the chance to be like, "Okay, because I want to be one isn't really a great reason." It can feel good, but then it's long term. So okay, I want to go bungee jumping is really awesome. I want to do that. But if I want to do it and then I don't attach myself to equipment, I'm going to die. So do I have a safe place to do it?

Do I have equipment to do it? Do I have a tour guide to help me do it? And so that's what I mean about deeper work in terms of this with a little bit more critical thinking. So if you're sitting here today and you're listening to this episode and you're like, "I don't know. I just walked away [inaudible], I still really don't know." Or maybe I feel validated in my decision and I do know. Sit down and think about the scripting. What am I telling myself this is about?

If I go a little deeper and I say the thing out loud that I don't want to say to anyone or admit I'm worried my partner will leave me if I don't have a child. I'm worried I'll become irrelevant if I don't have a child. I'm worried my parents will be disappointed in me if I don't have a child. I'm worried that all my friends will and I'll be alone and left out just the way I felt growing up. The deeper sense of why we do the things we do can also help break this down a little bit.

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Kara: Yeah, I think that's such good advice. A question I often recommend is if you are going to feel shit 50% of the time, which thing would you do? Which helps short circuit that fantasy thing of I'd rather feel shit with a baby or actually, no, I'd rather feel like shit on the French Riviera by myself. So it's that if you're going to feel bad 50% of the time. So for me when I thought about deciding to parent some of the time, I was not, I don't feel drawn to this.

But I think this is a place where one of the things I teach women is one of the ways to help you make decisions in addition to just assuming, like we've talked about, you're going to feel regret sometimes, you're going to feel good and bad, no matter what is, what are your values, aligning your decision making with your values. Because women are so socialized to doubt themselves. And for me, I think one of my values is just growth and emotional development. And so that is another kind of metric you can use.

We're so used to trying to make a decision based on what's going to feel better? What's going to make me happier? And then of course, you can't know so then you're paralyzed. And people just with children, am I going to be happier if I have a kid or am I not? Is my relationship with my partner going to be better or worse? Who the fuck knows? I don't know. Nobody knows. You don't know. No one knows. But what experience do I want to have, not in terms of feeling great, but in terms of what is growth for me?

So for me, I was like, "Alright, well, I've been single and childless for a while and that has been awesome and fun and I've enjoyed it. But I still had a clearer vision of, well, if I ditch this guy and I find someone who is like that, I have a pretty good idea of what that feels like. I have no idea what this is going to be like, but I'm probably going to have to grow and evolve a lot more if I make this choice."

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And that's not everybody's value. But if that is one of your values that I think is a way to think about it, that doesn't get your brain stuck in trying to predict which will make me happier because that's impossible to know. And it's an impossible question to ask. Amazing. I think that's so good. Thank you guys so much for coming on. Where can people find you?

Jennifer: Thank you.

Emmalee: If you're interested, you can listen to our podcast, *ShrinkChicks* on all the platforms that there are. You can follow us on Instagram @shrinkchicks. If you're interested in working with a therapist at our practice, we're all over the United States. You can check us out, thetherapygroup.com. But thank you so much for having us today.

Jennifer: Thank you.

Kara: Thank you. Alright, my friends, check them out.

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