Spoil Your Baby Ep 42 - Why Maternal Love is a Neurobiological Craving feat. Kelly McDaniel Transcript

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The body knows that there's an attachment injury that may not have a concrete memory that goes with it, but the right terminology somehow resonates in our body if we have mother hunger.

Mother hunger is a word I came up with that describes a certain quality of yearning a longing for a certain kind of love that we can't quite get our finger on.

And we typically might confuse it with romantic love. We may be searching for this kind love from our friendships, from employers, authority figures, and find ourselves bumping up against the same longing, the craving again and again, just not sure what it is.

But what I have found is that it is a neurobiological craving. Hello, welcome to Spoil Your Baby podcast. I am so, so honored today to have Kelly McDaniel here.

She is a trauma psychotherapist and author of Ready to Heal and also Mother Hunger, which I have right here and I've been devouring over the past few weeks.

Our work is very complimentary and so happy that you're here, Kelly. Welcome. I'm so happy to be here and really love the work you're doing, Greer. How long have you had your podcast?

Thank you. I started my podcast in January. Okay. So it's pretty new. It's a, I think it is about 40 episode. Oh, no, you can't be that far. Yeah, maybe.

Somewhere between 30 and 40 episodes I've recorded so far Wonderful. What's your favorite part about doing it so? These kinds of conversations, it gives me the space to be curious and learn.

Yes. Wonderful. Yeah. It's really a privilege to have that be part of my job. I'm always curious and learning, but I get to explore what I am interested in.

through the podcast too, which is really, really lovely. That is wonderful, wonderful. Yeah, and I followed you for a very long time. And I love the work that you're doing so, so much.

You're helping so many women heal and look at their wounds, help them with all different relational wellness outcomes, right? So I wanna start off with, there's a few really huge points in your book that just really, really stood out to me.

These are all sort of in the beginning where you're kind of introducing mother hunger. Actually, maybe we should just start out asking you, what is motherhunger?

I know what it is, but I don't know if everyone knows. Let's start with that. That's do, that's great place to start. And interesting that, when you say, I know what it is, my experience is that when I say the word mother hunger, if a woman has it, her body recognizes it right away.

There's kind of a pause, there's a moment of silence that almost feels reverent. If someone doesn't have it I get this quizzical kind look like, what's that?

So the body knows that there is an attachment injury that may not have a concrete memory that goes with it, but the right terminology somehow resonates in our body if we have mother hunger.

Mother hunger is a word I came up with that describes a certain quality of yearning, a longing for a kind of love that we can't quite get our finger on.

we typically might confuse it with romantic love. We may be searching for this kind of love from our friendships, from employers, authority figures, and find ourselves bumping up against the same longing, the craving again and again, just not sure what it is.

But what I have found is that it's a neurobiological craving. That's why I call it hunger. It's as important as food. For a certain quality of care, that we associate with mothers, that mothers are uniquely designed to give to their babies and their children in an optimum culture that would allow her to do that.

So many of our mothers didn't have the wherewithal, either from their own ancestry or from the culture they were living in when they became mothers to offer the three things that children need.

And early on in the first 1,000 days of life, the 1st 3 years, those 2 primitive things are nurturing, protecting. Babies need the eye contact, tone of voice, sensitive care with one primary caregiver to form a secure attachment.

This is what you do. I love your work. That involves nurturing. It also involves protecting, keeping a baby safe, but lots of mothers come to motherhood and they aren't safe.

So, protection can be compromised. Nurturing can compromised if a mother doesn't have enough time or primary caregiver is not able to step in and provide adequate care.

And then as we get older, we need guidance. That often is compromised as well. If, as we're growing up, we missed out on the essential elements of nurturing, protection, guidance, We're going to feel it.

We are going feel a craving for that quality of maternal care that we are designed to have because we were little humans. Yeah, I love it, and I know I did feel that instant knowing when I heard the term for the first time.

I was like, wow, you really… You're really describing it perfectly. And when I started to translate this work, I would say something sort of similar.

I used to say, infancy is a time. It was something like, Infancy Is A Time, it's like this one time where we can eat this specific meal. and if we're not fed the meal in infency, then we are starving for it for the rest of our life.

Oh, that is so well said. That is beautiful. I love that image because it captures that this is a biological need. This is Mother Nature's design. Because we're born somehow inadequate that we need to have these things.

And this what we to flourish and build a healthy right and left brain that will be able to pull on. So the fact that it's the meal that needed at that time, so good.

And it's really hard to do the work that you're doing to help people heal from the early years. I have a lot of mothers in my communities who worry about giving the nurturing that they never received.

And I'm curious, would understanding their mother hunger help them? sort of feel more confident about that? What do you think? I don't know if right away it builds confidence.

I think, which is why in the book, I very gently and carefully said, please read this as a daughter, not as mother. Because I mean, we're so hard on ourselves as mothers.

And if we're not careful, we could take that book and use it as another way to be hard on ourselves maybe. So, I have really been delighted that that isn't always, isn' the case.

I think the book is stupid generally. But of course, it's going to bring up questions about if you already have children or you want to have kids, how do you break the cycle of mother hunger?

And I didn't write a parenting book. I'm not, I am not approaching it. Reading it as a daughter. Yeah. And I work with adults. I don't, don´t work. Children.

But I've had the opportunity to work mothers of all ages. Some of the most painful work can be working with mothers who are older, because a lot of women don' that they have the capacity to look at mother hunger until they're much older.

Sometimes their mother's already passed away. Their children are grown. Many of them are struggling with estrangement with their own grown children. And then when they find motherhunger, it's very painful because they realize not only what they didn't get themselves, but what couldn't give.

has passed. The good news is, and what I do tell mothers, it's true, is the neuroscience shows us our brains can change throughout the lifespan. And there's always opportunity to repair and fill in those missing elements.

It won't be the same. We can't go back and have that meal again. I think there is hope in realizing, oh, this is what the pain is. because then we quit chasing other things that it might be.

We settle down, we've got the truth, and I think our bodies are designed to handle the Truth. Yeah. And when you're ready to come to it, you come it in a lot of different ways, right?

Totally. I've seen this happen that Somebody may read the book and realize, this is too much for me right now and put it down. Like, I think Mother Nature's design, the way our bodies are built, is pretty gentle.

We won't get information that our body's not ready to handle. Yeah. I've read books before that. And I go back and read them a couple years later, and I'm like, oh, did not read that part.

My brain was just like, nope, we're not taking that in. You gotta be ready. Have you ever noticed where it could be reading a book or watching a movie?

You can go watch a moving again and suddenly see something that you didn't notice before. Absolutely. Yeah. So that's wonderful. One thing that really stood out to me is that, you mentioned that mothers can be physically present.

but emotionally and psychologically absent. And this is a concept that I do often communicate to parents, right? A lot of times people are like, yeah, baby wearing, bed sharing, you know, breastfeeding, like the baby beads of attachment parenting.

Those are all wonderful and like they help, but there is something more than the physically present. I think a lot times when we do look at our mothering experience.

We do look at the way our mothers… Maybe we'll be like, oh, I was fine. Like, my mom was at home with us. She was always there. Um, can you talk more about what does that mean to be emotionally absent or present?

Definitely. I think to… When I talk about this… I, as a mother, before cell phones, So I still found plenty of ways that I'd be nursing or baby wearing, but not necessarily making eye contact with my little one, not always aware of the tone of my voice.

So that's because, like many parents, I have learned as a child to dissociate almost automatically if I was overwhelmed. Now, most of my clients have this automatic capacity to disassociate when something's overwhelming.

That's another nature's design. There's no problem with that. Until it becomes somewhat chronic, automatic, we don't even know what it is that's bothering us or flooding us.

So we didn't know we're dissociated. And so there are lots of parents who come to parenthood before they've had a chance to heal some of the reasons they need to dissociate.

So it becomes this automatic pattern that can be, it removes us emotionally from the present moment, from our

own bodily sensations, our feelings. And it's been interesting to learn.

I think dissociation comes online obviously when we're frightened and we are powerless. There's nothing we can do in a situation. So we learn to just emotionally go away.

Physically we could go way. What I've also learned is that even when something's utterly delightful, like loving your newborn, that can be so overwhelming for a nervous system that has mother hunger.

that dissociation can happen then too. So there are lots of ways that as we grew up, missing out on the nurturing we needed, the protection that we need and maybe the guidance that needed.

We learned to kind of step outside of ourselves. It was just too painful to have a need that was not gonna be met. Yeah. so we shut down some of our feelings.

That makes it very difficult to attune to ourselves and therefore to our children. So if we're not tuned in here in our own heart, our body, it's really hard to tune into a baby or to a friend or a partner.

Yeah, and it is a really a hard concept to explain, right? To explain what does that mean to be there. you know, really be there. And I'm very aware of this in my life with my son and I know when I like packing his lunch and getting his breakfast ready and all these things, I am physically there and talking to him and, you now, but I always also make sure that I look him in the eyes and be emotionally present with him too and sort of say I see you today.

I love you. I hope that you have a great day, you know, today at school before I say goodbye. And I almost always have that in my mind, that it's like, I'm here, but I am not here.

So I need to come and be here as well from time to time. Yeah. Well, and the good thing is, again, this is your area of expertise. if you think this is not quite addressing what you're saying, but our little ones will let us know when they need us to come closer.

We don't always need to be fully present. And we certainly don' t need o overwhelm them with our urgency to b present, right? If we're paying attention, we'r going to notice their cues to com closer, and it's about responding when t meet us.

we don t have to e constantly on. But if we miss their cues for our presence or our eye contact or a holding because we're busy watching the news or we are busy managing lots of other children or were gone so often that we haven't adequately had time to let mother nature help us bond.

We had so much separation that the prolactin and the oxytocin didn't ignite our bonding instincts. we might miss their cues. And that's what can be disturbing for other ones.

Yeah. I always talk about that balance of like doing and being. So we could be a person doing, we also have to be of person being at times as well. We can get really into the doing.

So much, so much. So I appreciate that as well. And I talk about that too for moms. Like they don't need us intensively connecting, intensive attuning.

That's another thing that it's draining and it not what our babies need. But yes, absolutely being responsive and making sure that you are checking in throughout the day and spending some of that time.

connected and attuned. So I love that. Another thing that you say that I thought that really stood out to me and is really of interest to be lately, you said that mothering is part biological, which we know our brain changes, our bodies change, or hormones change.

It's part psychological, cultural, and also part spiritual. Can you expand a little more on the spiritual aspect of mothering? I think this is such a beautiful invitation for people to learn about.

Well, I feel like I'm still learning that. Mothering an adult child, which I thing is the spirtual nature of Motherin, that if we let ourselves be open to what our child is here to show us, which sometimes our needs things that we don't know how to provide.

They weren't provided for us or our children's love language is very different than our own. In loving the child we have or the children that have, we to learn what would translate to that child.

Sometimes that requires us to grow a sense of our capacity to love. And if that's not the definition of spirituality, I'm not sure what it would be to take.

We have to get in touch with something inside ourselves that is so pure and so defined that we love unconditionally. Meaning, this is not a reciprocal relationship.

we don't love so that they are grateful. They pay us back one day. they make us feel good. unconsciously that desire may be there. But if we're loving purely, it requires us to spiritually stretch into the best parts of who we are.

That's beautiful. I love that as an invitation for mothers because so often we hear about how hard it's gonna be and so many of the challenges, which it absolutely is, but alongside it, there is that incredible opportunity for growth and change.

and connection is fantastic. I love that so much. So you also write in your book, so a lot of people listening will experience some degree of mother hunger and you talk about how our mothers had limitations in their, in so many different domains.

Can you expand a little bit more on that, and so we can understand that aspect. Because I think a lot of people can be, you know, we go through the phases, right?

We could be angry about some care we didn't get or sad, and that's great. But there's also the point where we have to acknowledge that where mothers were coming from and that they really do their best.

I think all mothers at all times really are doing their. So you tell us a little bit more about that. Well, the whole premise of the mother hunger book is, is less about the individual mother and more.

What needs did you not get the need for nurturing the, need protection or the needs for guidance, or maybe you didn't get all three. It's less. Her. And more about which of those needs that we assign to mothers did you not get, chances are she didn't get them either.

Chances are, and what we know now through the neuroscience is that, we're carrying at least three generations in our body of ancestral inheritance. So if our grandmother went through some adversity.

And so much really good research about this is in the book. But if our grandmother went to adversity, that would impact her daughter and would affect us as the daughter.

So some of this cultural inheritance that trauma goes through the body and we can pick up our grandmothers trauma. That can impact whether or not we get those needs met.

So it doesn't have anything to do with love. That has everything to with the culture that we're bringing children into and whether or not we have the capacity to provide those needs when maybe they're not met for ourselves.

So in the book, there's a good discussion of patriarchy and how that can be traumatizing for most women. It impacts our body, our self-worth, or sense of erotic capacity, a sense a safety.

It's really hard to talk about mother hunger without looking at a patriarchal culture that damages women, which, you know, that's going to impact motherhood.

So again, none of these have anything to do with whether or not a mother loves her baby. These things have everything to with the cultural environment that goes against what newborns and toddlers and children need, to set up secure attachment in the brain, so then we can weather adversity.

When we don't have that secure detachment during the formative time, later on in life, when life throws us a curveball, which it will, none of us get by, our brain may not have the bandwidth for some of what comes our way.

I love Mark Wallin's title of his book, It Didn't Start With You. They always give that reminder, right? It didn't start with you. It doesn't with your mother.

Didn't started with grandmother. We're all carrying what we carry. Precisely. Yes. And so I find that lots of mothers that are reading Mother Hunger and not only reflecting about their own upbringing, but children they may have or they already have, these mothers are cycle breakers.

they're breaking an epigenetic inheritance. And that is hard because if you're the first one in your generational line to really see this and want to do something about it, you kind of a pioneer.

Yeah, we can't put that much pressure on the pioneer, they gonna make progress, but then it goes on to the next generation if they choose to have children.

Right. Yeah, absolutely. I was gonna comment on that too, because so many, so, many of the mothers in my communities are cycle breakers and really identify as that and feel like they're really actually healing their mother, their grandmother, or their great-grandmother.

Um… in this beautiful way. And when we talk about epigenetics, they actually are healing a lot of those experiences, um, in their babies. I talk that with my, I felt that was my son so much.

It felt like when he was crying and stressed as a little baby, it was like holding the war experiences of my ancestors and just like all of them were right there and I was just there for it.

Well, you could feel that very powerfully. Wow, how lucky, your son is. Yeah, so sweet. But they are, you know, I felt like I'm definitely a cycle breaker, continuing one that my mom had started.

And so many people are as well. So I wonder, this is kind of like an out there question. It came up in one of my other recent podcasts was, I'm so curious why there's such an explosion of this information right now and so many mothers understanding that they can be cycle breakers.

Do you think there is some sort of safety? Like maybe we've come a certain way with patriarchy or certain certain ways with some self like felt safety that we can explore these things and we break some cycles?

Do have any thoughts about that? I love the question. Yeah. And I don't know that I have a thought right away other than kind of something kind obvious.

I'm more curious what you think about this, but I was talking with a sociologist the other day who was starting out here in America. We're young compared to places in Europe.

places who have been through hundreds of years of cycles where there had been adversity in the form of war and annihilation. And here in America, we have adversity that impacts us, that is a mix of patriarchy, racism, poverty.

But we haven't had some of what Europe has had. I wonder if we some safety that comes from being young as a nation. But I'm not a sociologist. I really don't feel like…

I have given that enough thought to give it a good answer. Have you? Yeah, no, this really just came up for me today. I was like, oh, I wonder, we have, definitely had scientific revolution, genetic revolution neuroscience revolution of the past 30 years that we're still in the midst of understanding all of this.

So there's that part. And there is also just this really amazing, you know, focus on, like, reclaiming the superpowers of being a mother and the impact of the healing powers of a being mother.

And they're kind of coming up together. So, I don't know. I'm going to stay curious as well and see what comes up. It's rewarding to see. I think again, if we look at a socioeconomic way that women were required during World War II to work outside the home, they got a taste of it.

And then they came back and that's around the time in the 1950s when you had television shows popping up that romanticized staying at home. Not carrying your baby and not nursing.

Baby was up in a crib while mommy was, you know, getting ready for dad to come home. I mean, I'm not saying these kids were perfect, but they domesticated a whole generation and made stay at home kind of a thing.

But it didn't teach us how to mother our children. No. So Sophie Brock's a sociologist. She shares that working mothers now spend more time with their babies than stay-at-home mothers did back then.

Yeah. And I just wonder, too, if it's part of the fact that because in our country, we have time to think about our psychology, our ancestors maybe didn't have, they were too busy growing their own food.

We can go to the grocery store. So we've got some time, to really think, about the quality of our relationships and our mental health. And so as we explore that, I think it almost seems natural that we'd be more interested in how to help our children avoid some of that we've experienced.

Yeah, absolutely. Well, thank you so much, Kelly. I know so many people will be really interested in reading your book. Where can listeners find you if they want to know more?

Well the book is on Amazon, and that's the best way to find it. And the feedback I get, which is fascinating, is that people really like the audiobook.

Some people use it to go to sleep. some people listen to it while they're nursing. I think for women who grew up in abusive households, the neuroscience has shown me that it makes it very difficult to read the Mother Hunger book because you hear the voice of your own mother or your voice.

But if you listen to it, it the material will go in. So I have a chapter called Third Degree Motherhunger. It's for adult daughters who grow up with developmental trauma, which is its own category of mother hunger.

I had to create a separate name for it. Most women unilaterally have a hard time reading the book and that makes sense, but they have informed me that they can listen to it and get the information.

That's a really good tip. If anyone in your sphere is dealing with their own early attachment injuries being beyond the spectrum of mother hunger into a category that gets diagnosed as disordered, mood problems and things of that nature.

Anyone struggling with addiction may find that underneath that addiction is some profound motherhunger. And it's sometimes easier to listen to the book.

I don't post regularly on Instagram, but I'm on an Instagram from time to time as well. A need to get better about that. Just finished writing three new chapters that will be part of the new edition.

for Mother Hunger and a new book is gonna come out in the spring of 2026. And there will be- Oh, how exciting. It's exciting because there's gonna be a chapter for parents and I did my best.

Maybe I need to send you that. Then there is going to be chapter of firstborn daughters. The science is fascinating. Wow, I'm a first born daughter. Its fascinating, its fascinating we are very unique sisterhood.

Interesting. I'm also a firstborn granddaughter. I saw some Instagram posts that's like, if you're a Firstborn Granddaughter, First Born Daughter, and something else, you are like a very unique person.

So I am so curious to learn more. Wonderful. Yeah. Amazing. Well, thank you, Callie. Really, really appreciate it. And we'll look out for your next book and I'll invite you back to talk about that.

Sounds great. It's so good to have you here. Thank you for having me.