Episode 679: Repairing Attachment Wounds, Fixing Relationship Insecurity, and Finding Your Voice With Adam Lane Smith
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Katie: Hello and welcome to the Wellness Mama Podcast. I'm Katie from WellnessMama.com and this episode is all about understanding attachment theory, attachment wounds, how this impacts our relationships, how to fix relationship insecurity and find your own voice. And I'm here with Adam Lane Smith who is a licensed psychotherapist who now focuses on attachment theory, his specialty. And through this role he helps people build a foundation for their life by fixing attachment issues at their core, which helps transform relationships in marriage, dating, work, friendship, and family. And we go deep on this today, especially related to how we have attachment related to our kids and how to help them form healthy and secure attachments for their adult life.

And we touch on topics like his own story of attachment issues and how he got into this work as an adult. What attachment theory is and how attachment styles impact our relationships. How our attachment styles can shift throughout life and at different phases of life. How having kids can change the attachment styles of the parents and why this often can lead to issues in relationships. We talk about anxious attachment that can come from not getting enough oxytocin in childhood and how this can lead to seeking partners who are avoidant in relationships. Steps from shifting from anxious or avoidant attachments into healthier patterns. How we can create strong attachment styles in our children, approaching these things with curiosity and not judgment.

How to build what he calls a self-correcting family system. And I think this is a really fascinating concept. Ways to help our kids communicate with us with non-judgment and curiosity. How men adapt to problems and change for circumstances, not for relationships and how women often do the opposite by constantly adapting and iterating. Why men are more stressed and depressed in today's world and how are some ways we can support men in relationships and our sons as they get older and a lot more so very, I think impactful episode get into a lot of deep topics. I hope you will learn a lot. And let's join Adam Lane Smith. Adam. Welcome. Thanks so much for being here.

Adam: Thank you for having me. I've been looking forward to this conversation.

Katie: Well, me too. And I think it's a very, very relevant topic to parents and to all humans in general. And we're going to get to hopefully go deep in a lot of directions. Before we jump into attachment styles and relationships and everything else we're going to talk about. I have a note from your bio that you have a dog named John Wick and I would just love to hear what kind of dog, because the guy who trained the dogs for the movies in John Wick actually lives very close to me and I've gotten to meet him, so I thought that was a cool connection.

Adam: That is wonderful. So it's a little corgi. And my daughters know that I love the movie John Wick and so they were just absolutely desperate that we named the dog John Wick. So now I get to hear, dad, John Wick has peed in the house. I get to hear that about every single day now.
Katie: That's hilarious. I bet that leads to some fun stories. And speaking of kids, I know that you are a father of four and people know listening that I have six kids and as something I've learned, not until I was an adult was actually about the concept of attachment styles and realized some aspects of that that I certainly needed to work through as an adult. And it sounds like you might have had a similar experience, but I would love to hear a) your background with that and also b) if for people who aren't familiar with the concept in a broad sense if you could define what attachment styles are so we have that context going forward.

Adam: Absolutely. So my own personal story of how I became the attachment specialist really quick sum it up. I grew up with attachment issues myself out in a magical place called California where a lot of people have attachment issues. As it turns out, most of my friends had attachment issues and I ended up trying to take care of a lot of them when I was growing up. Difficult family, expanded family system, my whole extended family network, people were struggling with this. And I reached a point when I was about 20 years old that I said, I have to fix this. I can't keep living my life this way. It's awful to be insecure, to constantly worry what other people are thinking, to always be terrified in your relationships, to be overthinking things all the time. I just did not want to live that way anymore.

So I forced myself to do the very things I was most afraid of and that started fixing the process. It was hell doing it by myself. And I said, I want to learn how to help somebody else do this. But I didn't know the words for it. I didn't know what attachment was. I just knew I had kind of done the work and sort of fixed the problem. So I went to school. I got my master's degree in psychology, emphasis marriage and family therapy. I become a licensed marriage and family therapist. That was a nine year process with schooling and apprenticeship. And I started teaching in the field and teaching other healthcare professionals about this sort of idea. But attachment was not much covered in graduate programs. And what I've learned is that other therapists across the United States, Canada, Europe, they also don't really get taught attachment theory much at all either.

Attachment theory is just the idea that as we grow up as little children, we're one, we're two or three years old. The way our parents treat us, take care of our needs, give us attention, whatever they require from us or expect from us, or if they hurt us or walk away from us. We form an idea that either we don't deserve to be loved or that other people are incapable of love and we have to manage them. That's the two ways that we can really break. There's also a way to break in an even worse way that is both of those at the same time. You don't trust yourself or other people, but this leads to you as an adult growing up and saying, I don't deserve love. So I have to earn approval from people. I have to be perfect. I have to constantly overthink everything. Every social interaction is a threat. I'm always scared, and I always am afraid I'm going to be abandoned and found out for being a fraud. So I have to make people like me. And this forms a lot of codependence, right? A lot of chasing approval.

The other side, though, is that avoidance side of, I can never be close to people because I can never trust them. I can never open up. Feelings are useless. Connecting to people is useless. It's all scary. So I'm going to stay away from other people, maybe even manipulate them. And a lot of times, these two couples will chase each other, so they'll form a relationship, a marriage. They may even have children. A lot of fathers are avoidant, and a lot of mothers are anxious, approval seeking. So it's this ugly dynamic. I fixed it in myself. I
became specialized in it. I started training other healthcare providers about it. Now I talk about it all over the Internet, and I get to coach people on every continent except Antarctica. So far, that one's still coming.

Katie: Yeah, I hear there aren't a lot of people there, so I'm sure not yet. They still have some attachment things that they could be helped with, though, so I'm sure that one will.

Adam: Yes. Or maybe some really depressed penguins. I'm hoping for that too.

Katie: Oh, that would be a fun one, for sure. Well, and I love this as a broad concept, and I love getting to delve deeper into each of these styles. It makes me curious as well. I would guess the answer to this question is yes, but can attachment styles shift over time? Because as you were speaking, to be just very transparent. We're welcome to use me as a guinea pig. I can recognize, for instance, in early marriage, I think I was very anxious attachment style. And then at some point, I think we actually sort of switched places and he became more anxious and I became very avoidant. And now being somewhat aware of this, I've tried to shift to becoming a more secure attachment style. And we'll talk more about this later, but helping my kids have the foundation, hopefully, for a secure attachment style. But is that possible that we can have different phases of attachment styles throughout phases of our lives?

Adam: Certain things can change it. So let me ask you if I may, did your shift occur around having your first or your second child?

Katie: I think so. I think I was definitely very anxious style before that. And also it was resonating with those things you said about not deserving love. Even things like playing games felt very high stakes because I had internalized that my only value was an achievement and all those kind of things. And then at some point, I think it switched and I became more avoidant after having kids.

Adam: Absolutely. Was there a period maybe where you were a little bit resentful of your husband or you felt that he wasn't putting enough attention into the children? Did you maybe form like a pocket where you had to pull them together and make him interact with them differently? Was there any time like that?

Katie: Yeah, absolutely.

Adam: Yeah. So one thing that I've identified with a lot of couples where the mother is anxiously attached initially and the husband is avoidantly attached initially. Those are the two. Men tend to be more avoidant. Women tend to be more anxious if they break. Usually they get along just fine until they have kids. She'll chase his approval, he'll pull away, she'll have a lot of needs. He'll kind of try to work it out. They'll generally be okay. But once the mom has those children, there's a couple of things that happen.
Number one, she becomes this protective guardian over the children of I want these children to not hurt the way I have hurt. I want these children to feel loved. I want these children to have better than I had and to not chase approval like this. I want them to be loved. But what happens is she looks at the father and says, you aren't doing the things that will make these kids feel safe, secure, loved, approved of, worthy of your time and attention. But there's also a hormonal shift that happens is a lot of times when women have anxious attachment style, they do not get the oxytocin bonding that they need in childhood. So they go into the relationships oxytocin deficient and this makes them really susceptible to bonding with avoidant men because avoidant men will give you oxytocin at the beginning of the relationship through a process usually called love bombing. They make you feel incredible and overwhelmed with approval and love and it floods you with oxytocin but then you start chasing that it becomes an addictive chase and that usually keeps you in the relationship. If he's maybe more really avoidant or abusive or even that's stuck.

But women at birth lot of oxytocin, overwhelming amount and then through breastfeeding, huge amount of oxytocin. That's actually what oxytocin largely is for, is for lactation, some moms, I don't know if you had any challenge with milk supply early on. Moms who are anxious often do you don't have enough oxytocin to allow the letdown to happen. The baby can't drink, the baby will get jaundiced. Mom will feel like even worse of a mother, her stress levels go up - nightmare. But if you can get through that, you build the oxytocin bond.

Now your child becomes an overwhelming supply of oxytocin for you. You become even more addicted to your child and bonded to them but then you're even more protective of them. All of this turns around unfortunately and makes dad into a bad guy. When dad has had no hormonal changes, very likely, dad is just continuing the way he's always been and you went from loving and adoring him and wanting to have babies with him to you are now public enemy number one. You're hurting the kids, you're not giving them the love they need and he's like what did I do? I haven't changed at all. And he will start perceiving that you're crazy, you're pushing back like what's wrong with you? And this forms a huge division between the parents. Mom will often burn out after a period of time and become functionally more avoidant where she pushes back on him and he has to become approval seeking to even maintain the marriage at that point it's a really ugly dynamic. Can 100% be fixed? But yes, those changes, those are just some examples of how a person's attachment style can change sometimes negatively through difficult challenges. You can also change them positively through experiences that you have.

Katie: Well, I definitely want to talk about how to change it in a positive direction. I'm also curious before we jump into that, how those attachment styles on behalf of the parents impact the kids early attachment styles. Because obviously if I've learned one thing in parenting is that kids are incredibly perceptive and pick up on the energy of everything. So I'm sure that the kids must understand that on some level or at least perceive it. So how do parents with these different attachment styles impact kids early attachment style development?

Adam: It gets handed right down. So fathers who are avoidant often will raise children who don't feel worthy of his love. So they chase his love continuously. They'll often pick up that anxious attachment style themselves, daughters and sons. Sometimes though, if there's hard discord in the household, a lot of fighting,
a lot of mistreatment of various people. It doesn't have to be full out, necessarily physical abuse, but various screaming matches, arguing. The kids can pick up, hey, other people are crazy and there's something wrong here and I'm not ready for this, get away from me. And they keep people at arm's length. That's the avoidance. Often though, if there's attachment issues in the parents, it really comes down to the kids. Every relationship becomes a performance, whether they're performing for themselves or for the other person, they are performing endlessly in every social interaction and it's just exhausting to connect to other people.

Katie: Okay, so you mentioned that even when these patterns develop, it is possible to change them and move them in a more positive direction. So maybe let's start with the parent side because those are the two adults interacting in a relationship. What are some of the factors that come into play with parents? Being able to shift from those more seems like polarized attachment styles into a healthier dynamic.

Adam: Absolutely. So I have all kinds of couples come into my coaching with this exact problem. I wrote a book on this topic. It's called Exhausted Wives, Bewildered Husbands, about the wife who is exhausted and the husband's bewildered about what the heck the problem is. How I usually help these couples is this. We begin by figuring out, do you guys have the same goal? Do you actually both want your children to feel loved and safe in this world? Almost every parent will say yes. Okay, now we can at least align on the same goal. Now we can talk about how you guys are different in your approach. What do you actually believe is going to get you there? What challenges right now are in the way of your children meeting that goal? What do you feel is the issue? Most wives at that point will say, it's him, he's not giving them the love that they need. And he will say, It's her, she's crazy and she's dividing me from my kids.

This right here, the problem is context. Context is missing and not enough questions are being asked and the couple doesn't understand each other. They are seeing a behavior and they are imparting some sort of reasoning to it and saying, you are doing that because X, instead of saying, I see you doing this, what is that doing for you? You're avoiding, you're running away, you're dodging. What is that doing for you? Why do you do that? Well, I'm afraid to get the dad might say, if he's calm enough, I'm afraid to get close to people. I don't know how. I just never have learned that skill. Guys will usually cry at this point because they want to get close to their kids, but no one's ever asked them like, hey, why do you stay safe from other people? Why are you so scared to connect to people? Why are you so scared to be bonded to them? And he'll say, It's her, she's crazy and she's dividing me from my kids.

Wives, same thing. The husband can turn around and say, what is it that's making you attack me like this? She sometimes won't know. She'll just say, I don't know what made me shift. I just want the kids to be better. Sometimes reading my book or talking with me and just understanding the process I just described, they can both go, that makes sense. She's trying to protect the kids, but he never experienced the change. Understanding context conversation, absolutely crucial if you want to start fixing this process.

Katie: It reminds me actually of a scene from my favorite TV show, Hands Down, which is Ted Lasso, where he quotes Walt Whitman and the quote of curiosity, not judgment, and how if we can approach everything in life
with curiosity instead of judgment, we end up getting much better answers to questions. And so it made me think of it the way you just explained that. How do couples go through that process of then I'm sure it must be a learning process, learning a more secure attachment style and building that together.

Adam: Well, what you said was great there. So curiosity is absolutely important. Learning to be curious about your partner instead of assuming that they're a jerk, instead of assuming that they're a monster who's working against you and is going to destroy everything, asking questions. So I'll ask you, how often do you if you see your husband do something that's frustrating, how often do you stop and ask him why he's doing it or what it is that he's without the tone, what are you doing that for? Without saying that. How often do you stop and say, hey, I see you doing this. What's going on?

Katie: Well, I haven't actually talked much about this on the podcast, but in the interest of being completely candid, my husband and I are no longer together, though we actually are in a much better place as co-parents. And I would say, ironically, we might have the most secure attachment related to each other that we've ever had. But I can admit, certainly, especially in those phases where things had gotten really tough, that I was not good at approaching things with curiosity. And that even though right now, for us, the answer is that we love each other better, not married, I do think we've both gotten better at that.

Adam: Wonderful. Learning to co-parent effectively like that is often a bond that I'm not going to say this is you, but many couples do get pulled back into the relationship once they form that separation, and then they learn to co-parent more effectively than they build that teamwork. It very often does pull them back in because you've relearned how to love each other and how to trust each other. That is, it is learning to ask those questions.

So when I do help co-parenting not couples who are not together, what I often ask is exactly that when you see them do something that frustrates you. There's a famous quote from B. F. Skinner who is a behaviorist, and he said, the organism is always right. Which just means this if a creature is doing something repeatedly that something is doing something for the organism, it's benefiting them in some way. So if you see your former husband, if you see him avoiding interacting with somebody, it's doing something for him. Usually it's making him feel safe. So when you see somebody doing something hurtful or stupid or foolish on your regard, asking them, hey, I see you doing this, it seems to me like it would be causing this issue over here. But putting that aside, what is it that that's doing for you? Is it making you feel safe? If so, how can we make you feel safe in a way that's more effective, that also isn't going to have this other consequence? Learning that and being able to do that early on before the screaming starts, that's a huge piece of that relationship puzzle for parents. And turns out that's really important for parenting too.

Katie: So let's go deeper on that side, because I would guess almost universally in the parents that you work with and the parents who are listening, we all hope, like we talked about, that our kids are able to reach adulthood with a strong foundation, with good attachment styles and with kind of good emotional stability to be able to enter into whatever relationships they enter in their lives. And as we've already talked about, I'm sure many kids pick up on these things from parents who are trying to do their best, who inadvertently sort of
create the circumstances for these patterns to happen in the not optimal way. So to flip that, let's talk about the positive side, which is how can we, as parents, like what is within our ability to help nurture strong relationship patterns at our kids?

Adam: So I'm assuming all of your listeners here at home are probably listening to me talk and say, oh crap, I've already screwed up and there's no hope. Right? I hear that a lot. There is absolutely hope because perfection is not required. Most people with attachment issues, they go instantly to perfection. And if there's not perfection, if perfection isn't available to them, if it's not possible, then they lose all hope and it feels like everything's a disaster now. My kids are going to be ruined for life. No, perfection is not required. It's not even possible. Right? We all have our circumstances. It may be that we have traumas. It may be that we're challenged in some ways. Maybe we're split up and we have to co-parent in separate households. Every family has challenges like that. It is not required. I'll say it one more time. It's not required to be a perfect parent. You do not have to do that.

What you need to do is build a self-correcting family system. This is what I train people for in my coaching practice, build a self-correcting family system. You can even do this in two separate households. The challenge with two separate households is that it's usually a self-destructing family system, and it prevents issues from being corrected. Even in married homes. This can happen. Instead of trying to be perfect, here's what you do. An issue comes up. You go to your children, you train them to communicate with you about the issue with non-judgment, with curiosity, and say, hey, I noticed this is happening. Talk to me about this. Tell me what's happening. Tell me what's happening. I do this. My son is my oldest child is almost seven years old and very, very big personality. And he makes a lot of mistakes as children do. I go to him. I say, look, buddy, this is a frustrating point. You hurt your sister, you hit her in the head with a block. Again, whatever it might be, we need to talk about this. But first, talk to me about what happened. Tell me your side of the story. This tells him other people are going to listen to him and give him a chance to talk. Then I listen and say, okay, here's the challenge I see with your story. Here's where it went wrong. Do you understand that that's really going sideways? Yeah. Okay. Here are the consequences to relationships. If you continue doing that, this could happen. This could happen. And between you and me, this frustration, okay, dad? And I say, now, here's what you and I need to do together to fix this problem so that we don't go through this in the future. Doing all of this. And I walk him out. I walk him through the process of talking, of repairing things with a sister. If I have to discipline him in some way, I walk him through that. There's no yelling, screaming, abrupt discipline that makes me feel better as a parent. It's a long tiring, granted, but tiring process of working with him through the difficulties cooperating during conflict.

This is the biggest piece if you can train your children that you will cooperate with them during conflict. They learn to expect other people to cooperate with them during conflict. Then if a conflict hits and someone isn't cooperating, they don't blame themselves. They don't fall apart into people pleasing. They don't run away. They trust other people. And if other people are weird and not great, then they will find somebody else who's better building a self-correcting family system through. That means they can come to you when there's an issue. They can correct you, gently. They can ask you about problems. They can help you fix things. Even as adults, if something doesn't go great in childhood. They can come back and fix it as an adult. They can fix it with their partner someday. They can fix it with their friends. A self-correcting family system is one where the parents and family will work together to correct challenges as they come up. That's what you've got to build. And you and your former husband can build that same thing together in your separate households. Self-
correcting family system which things are worked on together in good faith and in cooperation. That is the absolute best thing you can do for your children.

Katie: Yeah. So many important things I want to just touch on from what you just said that I think are so important to highlight. The first being, it seems like as parenting, this is a recurring theme is that what we model is so much more important than even what we say. And so even those times where we feel like we failed as a parent or like times I feel like I’ve lost my patience. It seems like there’s actually so much benefit, even maybe more so than if I never got impatient. To me apologizing to them, letting them hear me say that, letting me show up imperfectly in a relationship and giving them the permission to do that as well. And you touched on that not being perfect and allowing space for that, which also then allows them to feel that they have space to be themselves without having to be perfect.

I know in therapy and just throughout looking back at my life, I’ve seen over and over the repeating pattern of when I look back, the hardest things in life actually became the impetus for the most lessons and the most growth. And so I went through this progression of realizing like, oh, I am now grateful for those things, even to looking back and seeing the most severe traumas I’ve had in my life and going if I could time travel, I would not change those things. And now being able to say I am intensely grateful that that thing happened. Which led me to realize that means I can actually be grateful in the moment when hard things happen because I know that whatever comes in the future, it’s going to be exactly as it should be and exactly perfect. And I think that mindset has helped me to be more present like you talk about in those moments of imperfection.

And I think also touching on showing up. It sounds like you’re saying, like, really learn to listen with an intent to understand, even from our kids, even from a young age. Not with an intent to respond or to discipline at first. But truly that curiosity to understand it seems like that actually in any relationship is a tremendous step towards secure attachment.

Adam: Absolutely. And you said something really important in there is that we need to model for our children more than we need to say anything. Let me exhibit why so let me ask you this. I was talking to somebody the other day. We were trying to decide on a paint color, and they suggested I use the color Soft Whispers without knowing anything about Soft Whispers. I'm sure maybe you do know. What shades do you think Soft Whispers is?

Katie: I would guess something in the light, like either whites or grays or bluish pastels, but very soft.

Adam: I thought so, too. No, apparently it's green.

Katie: Interesting.
Adam: Okay, now here's the challenge. You have never seen the color called Soft Whispers, and I asked you to envision it in your head. Please. Envision soft whispers in your head you had three other shades completely in different directions from green over here. This is what happens in childhood if we don't model healthy behaviors for kids, and then they grow up, then they get into a conflict with their spouse and they say, Wait a minute, let me picture Soft Whispers. And they've never seen it before. This is them saying, Wait a minute, let me cooperate with my partner. Wait a minute, let me solve this problem together with them. If you've never modeled that for your kids, solving problems in a loving, cooperative way, they are desperately trying to picture how and they will beat their head against the wall for three years until they get a divorce because they do not know how to do it. That's the process right there. That's why we have to model it, so that they see it well.

Katie: And maybe this will touch on another question that came up in the prep for this interview that might really springboard from this, which is kind of the idea of what are the reason? That seems like there's kind of points in relationships where we see an increase in divorce. And I would guess some of it goes back to these attachment styles. But are there specific triggers at different times that are leading to this that people can be aware of ahead of time to sort of be proactive about?

Adam: Absolutely. So, first of all, is seven to twelve months into a new relationship, whether you're dating or even married, seven to twelve months in the avoidant person usually cannot hold up their end of the making you feel good anymore. So they stop trying. They pull back, they start withdrawing the anxious person. Your oxytocin addiction then kicks in and you start chasing them obsessively for approval. I work with so many women who've been in the same relationship for eight years without ever getting married. They've got two or three kids together. She's waiting for him to talk about marriage, and he never will. It's because of that process right there. He will pull back and he will what's called breadcrumb. He will only distribute enough connection throughout the years to keep her chasing him. That's a big piece right there.

But having kids, the mom typically shifts around having children, and she becomes more aggressive in a good way. About Mama Bear protecting the kids and getting their attachment going. That can either lead to a huge, huge, disruptive fight in the first year. Often. Sometimes the husband, if he's massively avoidant, will actually have an affair after she has that first child. Six months after having the child, he'll start having an affair because he's not getting his needs met and he doesn't understand how to just ask for them. So he just seeks them elsewhere.

Sometimes 20 years in, I work with so many couples that are 15, 20 years into a marriage, multiple children, and she's just been waiting, marking time like a prison sentence, waiting for the marriage to conclude because she has tried so hard to make him try and he won't.

One really quick thing to throw out here is that men only change for circumstances. Men don't change for relationships. Men adapt to problems that they see. If they see that the problem is fixable. Women micro adjust themselves continuously, typically into the relationship to be as close to their partner as possible and to fix problems before there are really problems. They expect men to do the same if they drop hints, if they try to
ask for help, if they do multiple things. Men don't change. Men change for circumstances. Women only usually apply circumstances when they threaten divorce or when they're ready to when they're totally done. Totally done. That's the only time they do it. So that's the dynamic you usually see when the man finally is willing to start after divorce has been already filed.

Katie: Yeah, well, certainly I've seen that play out in my experience. And I can see in the early patterns, too, how this has actually been an important journey for me, is realizing it's easy, of course, when you enter a conflict to see what the other person did that caused that conflict and then to have the layer of going, oh, I certainly was complicit and helped co create this. And then to be able to go, oh, no, I can take full responsibility for having created this dynamic, even if there were factors that the other person contributed.

And I can look back and say, I certainly had that anxious attachment style in the beginning, and I did absolutely do everything for him so that I felt safe. It was self serving, but I felt safe by making sure he was happy all the time and chased his attention and all that. And then we had kids, and then now I'm doing that for these kids. And of course, he feels upset because this thing that he had is now being directed at the kids. And I think that was kind of the early root of a lot of our problems.

Adam: Absolutely. Now, you said something in there which was great, which was you have to be able to identify the parts of you that went into the problem. How can a person do that if they have no idea that there's even a different way for them to be acting, though. What do you think?

Katie: That's a great point. As we talked about in the beginning, many people don't even understand the idea of attachment styles. It certainly wasn't something I understood when I was in the early stages of that. It's one of those it's easy to look back and be like, oh, that's what that was and this is what this was. It's much more difficult, I think. And you have blind spots when you are in that moment and you have these emotional triggers that are keeping you safe. I know.

For me, one thing was I journaled a lot and tried to get very honest with myself of the parts that were within my control. I really kind of laser focused on I'm only in control of my own actions, emotions, thoughts, etc. So understanding that, what do I actually have the ability to shift? And there were some uncomfortable moments in realizing all the parts of it that I had contributed.

And so I would say it was a journey and an unwinding. But I do think that process is invaluable because it's allowed me to show up even more authentically for my kids and ironically, in relationship with my ex-husband, even though we're no longer together, I actually feel like I'm able to show up more authentically as a co parent and a friend to him now.

Adam: Wonderful. Now, along with that, most people begin this journey not believing there is a better way to be. They start blaming the other person because they say, I can only adapt this way, but you're supposed to
adapt a different way. What was it for you? What was the catalyst that made you realize you could change your own reactions to be that way?

Katie: It kind of was a perfect storm of ironically, like, physical health things lining up with relationship struggles. Lining up with it was a seemingly insignificant moment, but it became huge for me where I had thyroid issues for a lot of years. I was very uncomfortable in my body and I realized how much mental bandwidth that was taking up and the amount of dislike I was pointing toward myself every day. But I was able to just kind of brush that away and internalize it until I saw my daughter see me look at myself in the mirror and I saw it register on her face the way that I was looking at myself. And I realized she had never occurred to her that a person would look at their body with disgust. And now that this idea had entered her mind, because I had modeled it and so I resolved, whatever it is, I'm going to change this.

And I had no idea the journey I was undertaking at the time, but it became that pain of staying the same became greater than the pain of changing. And so I resolved to change and realized I could only change me, so how do I change me? And I think I probably read 100 books and talked to like nine therapists and it was a very long process, but one. I'm so grateful that I had that really painful moment to force me to undertake it.

Adam: That's so important. That's why I do these podcast interviews and I talk because half of the battle is just getting a human being to say, hey, maybe I don't have to be reacting the way I react every single time. Maybe I have more power and leverage. You in that moment, you changed in that relationship for your daughter. You said, hey, I've got to be different. But the idea there, the idea that was planted was: I can be different. That's so important. That was the beginning of your attachment. And that's the beginning of most people's attachment when they hear me talk, it's not, oh, Adam is so smart. It's usually this. This man is telling me that I can be living a different way than I'm living. And the mechanism is something I can understand called attachment. And it broke when I was a kid. I just have to change that and all my relationships will be different. That's exactly the key to fixing your attachment. That's half the battle right there.

Katie: Wow. That's extremely profound. And I think it led to two pieces of advice that I would give. Whether people are remaining in a relationship or especially if they're navigating like I am, the shifting of a relationship is I think two things that were invaluable to that process are that I realized since I only have the ability to impact my own part of this equation. I will focus on that. And I will not let him make an enemy out of me. So I'm not going to make him the enemy, nor will I consent to being his enemy.

And I realized I had been really terrible at boundaries up until that point. And I had sort of internalized this idea that boundaries were selfish and harmful and mean to the other person. And what I learned slowly was not only can boundaries and love and kindness interact, they absolutely must. They only can exist together. So those are the two pieces of advice I would give to anybody who maybe is entering that journey of navigating any of this or unraveling any form of thing from your past. If you can keep that focus and realize, like someone once said, boundaries are loving yourself and the other person at the same time. And so I would just give those as advice. Not that I'm by any means doing it perfectly, but those have just been very helpful benchmarks for me as I've gone on that journey.
Adam: Sure. Have you firmed up yet for yourself what the equation is to build your boundaries? Have you done that or are they still a little bit nebulous?

Katie: They are. I would say they're in the healthier place than they've ever been. I think a lot of things exist sort of in a pendulum while we're learning. So I went from no boundaries and no hard conversations and I was avoidant didn't want to have hard conversations to realizing the benefit of those things and then for a while going too far in the other direction and having ironclad boundaries and wanting to have every hard conversation. And now hopefully getting closer to the center point of realizing like hard conversations with loving kindness are very beneficial when both people are ready.

Boundaries are very important, but they can always be enforced lovingly and that boundaries also. I only have control of my part of that, which I think is an important context for parenting as well, not just romantic relationships. I can't force my kids to do anything. I can only have a boundary around my action in the situation. So even with kids bedtimes, for instance, I can't force them to go to sleep, but I can say I'm only available to tuck you in until 8:30, at which point I'm going to go get ready for bed. So if you'd like me to tuck you in, you need to be ready by then so I can tuck you in. And so even those little shifts I feel like, have been profoundly impactful in how I show up with my kids, even.

Adam: And I love what you just said there, I am only available to this time if you want this work with me. That right there is the heart of cooperating during conflict. That's what you're doing. So you're modeling a self correcting family system to your kids. In that moment you're saying, look, I want to work with you. Here's how we can work together. If you want to work with me, let's do it. How often do they bite on that bait and do that versus how often do they fight back against you and try to demand their own way?

Katie: Now? I would say most of the time they cooperate and it's because I also give them the freedom of like if you want to stay up in your room and read till one in the morning, especially in the summer, go for it. But I'm not going to stay up to one in the morning to wait to tuck you when you're ready. I'm happy to give you a hug and a kiss at 8:30 when I go to bed. And they have adjusted to that. And I love seeing again to the point of modeling. It's like the things we say to our kids do get across, but the things we model really get across. And so I've seen them start to lovingly enforce boundaries with each other instead of fighting. I've seen even my youngest, who's seven, when her sister was upset, asking her some of the questions I've asked her when she was like, hey, is this actually true? What else could be true? What would it be like if that wasn't true and just sort of asking those questions of each other. So I just am again and again reminded as a mom the importance of modeling.

Adam: Isn't that wonderful when you start seeing them loving each other, not just interacting, but loving each other? That's what you want right there.
Katie: Yeah. And I think I'm very grateful to have so many of them because I feel like they have their own little tribe to play out and learn these dynamics with each other in a lot of different ways.

But it brings up another point as a parent. So I have now three teenagers and a couple of them are starting to not quite yet, but get to that phase where they might be thinking about relationships in the near future. And so I've been thinking a lot about, obviously, all the things we've talked about modeling this, hopefully learning my own better boundaries and attachment styles to model that for them.

But as parents, are there other additional ways we can guide them, whether it be through conversation or through additional modeling to help them enter relationships in a more secure way? Make sure that they have, I think for my daughters a lot with my own history, make sure they have clear boundaries when they enter relationships and that they feel comfortable speaking their boundaries. Are there any other ways that we can help really just give them a good foundation of secure attachment as they enter their own romantic relationships?

Adam: Absolutely. So the worst way that I see this happen and the way that most parents jump to and think they have to do it, is to sit your kids down in the living room and have a one on one, face to face, six hour conversation about boundaries. Absolutely not. It should not be a lecture hall. Don't do that.

It actually turns out that the world is full of inspiring moments for us to turn into teachable lessons. It's also full of a lot of resources we can experience together with our children. Experiences together that you can then put context on is absolutely key. So it could be as simple as watching a movie. It could be as simple as watching John Wick and saying, hey, look at this relationship. Look how this is acting and look how they are not acting. And what was missed? This would have prevented a gunfight. You could say something that simple. You could watch a romantic comedy together, watch a TV show. You can go out and about and see people. There can be people in your life that you both know are not healthy. And you can frame a conversation around that doesn't have to be blaming or gossiping. You can simply say, say, hey, we had this interaction here's, this person in our life. What do you think they could do different? Do you see them being stuck? What do you think they are doing that's contributing to them being stuck? What do you think might help them if they were open to it? What sort of questions might help them that can even be helpful.

I have a lot of couples and a lot of parents come in and they ask me, Adam, what resources can I use with my teens? I have a video course, the Attachment Boot Camp, watching that course together or a similar course and then pausing the discussion videos, pausing them and having discussions afterward and saying, what does this mean to you? What did you pull out of this? Why was that interesting to you? Being curious about them taking resources together and learning together, that is phenomenal because then you’re building a culture of self improvement inside of your family and a culture of renewal. Instead of the family just being settled in and smothering individuals, you’re working together to make the family better and better. All of those experiences that you can have, that's the key to working with your kids. Like especially teens
Katie: That makes sense. So sort of meeting them where they are in a way that they're willing to have those conversations, I think of music as well. That's happened a few times with my kids where we'll have music on in the car, even like Taylor Swift songs and I'm like, OOH, what do you think of that relationship dynamic? And even now they'll be like, OOH seems really codependent and probably not great. And then we can be like, well, what would be a healthier way to approach that relationship? Or maybe are those people, do they look like they would have even been a match in the first place in a relationship? And those kind of things.

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This episode is sponsored by BiOptimizers and specifically their Mag Breakthrough product, which I am a huge fan of. I've talked so much in the past 15 years about the importance of magnesium and I really like their specific formula. We probably know that magnesium is one of the most important minerals for all aspects of health and that having low levels of magnesium can cause all kinds of issues. Magnesium is necessary in over 600 different biological reactions in your body. Yet over 80% of us don't get enough of the minimum amount of magnesium we need from diet alone. This is partially because our soil lacks magnesium. It's been depleted over the years. So we're simply not getting as much from food as we used to. And as I said, magnesium deficiency can increase risk of all kinds of diseases and keep you from performing optimally.

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rhythm as well as to lower cortisol levels and keep stress hormones in check. Like I said, I'm a huge fan of magnesium. I think this form is one of the best on the market and you can save 10% on it by going to bioptimizers.com/wellnessmama and using the code Wellness Mama to save 10%.

I think two other things I've tried to do as a parent that I hope will help with secure attachment, the first being, ever since they were born, I've tried to make it always a safe place to have that curiosity and ask questions. So from the time they could talk, I've told them to question everything. And at only just two years old, my oldest looked at me in the eyes and he goes, Even you? And I told him even and especially me. Question everything. Because if you can't question it, it probably doesn't deserve to be believed. So question everything.

And then also from very young ages, respecting their physical boundaries. And I know this gets talked about a lot, but not forcing them to hug relatives that they don't feel comfortable hugging, not forcing them into any physical interaction that they're not comfortable with so that they can hopefully keep that intuition around their own physical boundaries and have, even from age three, the ability to say, no, thank you. If someone wants to hug them and they don't want to. Things like that. I think those are small things that hopefully build that confidence over time.

Adam: Absolutely. Oh, that's wonderful. How often do you see them interact positively versus they take that self-independence and spiral off and get really weird about it. How often do they do the right thing that you would consider like the warm, loving thing?

Katie: I would say much more and more or they'll at least have conversations around it rather than I've even seen the little ones. Even at ages four or five when there's those inevitable little spats amongst friends groups just decide that they're going to take themselves out of the situation for a little while and calm down versus saying something mean to the other person. And this is something else that plays out often in our house where especially if we're in a heated discussion, me and one of the kids, rather than back to that I'm only responsible for me, rather than me put them in time out, I will model it for them and say, you know what? I can tell we're both feeling upset right now. I'm feeling big emotions too. I'm going to go in my room and breathe for a little while and then I'm going to come back when we can have a calmer conversation. So I hope that it gives them permission that if they need to take space, even from me, they can always say, I'm going to go away for a little while and then we're going to come back and talk about it.

Adam: Absolutely. That's awesome. Modeling internal discipline instead of external discipline and regulation, that's awesome. That's the second time in this conversation, though, that you have said in a good way, my kids are modeling these things more and more and more over time and that's great. That's a huge sign that you're persevering as a parent. So many parents want fast results, not because they're selfish, but because they want better for their kids, like right now.
And a lot of parents, they forget, you probably know this, that the first couple of weeks of a new behavior, your kids will fight you tooth and nail and they will test to see if they can go backwards and they'll figure out if you really mean it. If you can get past three weeks, it becomes a habit, but then they'll continuously test anyway. Consistency is so important. How hard has it been for you to stay consistent during your stressful times?

Katie: Oh, extremely. And I think you're right, it's very much the long game with that. But also it touches on that point of I want them to still feel safe experiencing the big emotions. And we have lots of conversations around the emotions themselves are fine, and everybody has big emotions. And you don't have to judge yourself for feeling angry or impatient. However, you also at the same time have complete control over your actions, even if you're having a big emotion. So trying to get them to think of those as two separate things, one of which you can control, one of which you can't always control. And that's okay. You don't have to judge yourself for not being able to perfectly control your emotions all the time either.

Adam: 100%. That's one thing I train parents on when they come to me, and it's something I have to do myself. And you have to do is taking ownership of your own mistakes and even apologizing to your kids when you are inconsistent, when you don't do right that itself, apologizing to your kids. You don't have to throw yourself on the ground and grovel. You don't have to completely give them authority in the relationship. But being able and willing to say, hey, you know what? I messed up. I'm sorry. That was not acceptable, what I just did. How can I make it up to you? What is the right thing here? What would make you feel good? Can I offer some suggestions?

Modeling that for them so that they don't feel like it's a fight. They don't have to fight tooth and nail to make you admit that you were wrong. They can just prompt you and say, hey, mom, that made me sad. You could say, oh, gosh, okay, let's talk about that. Is that challenging for you? It's challenging for me sometimes as a parent

Katie: Absolutely but to your point, I think it's one of those things that gets easier the longer it becomes a habit where it's not as much effort and willpower now it's more of a pattern. And so, if anything, it's just in the moment I'll remind myself, like, deep breath, and now I can respond calmly, and so it becomes easier over time. It's like the benefits of compounding with anything in life, not just finances. Those things add up over time.

Adam: Really quick. What if you had a whole week where you just let it all go? You were spiraling out, you were stressed, you were awful. What do you think your kids would do? How do you think they'd respond at this point?
Katie: Yeah, that would be really interesting. I would guess they would actually use a lot of these responses on me at that point. I have been very aware of trying not to just because of my own parenting dynamics growing up, not to ever make them my therapist or put my emotions on them and hold space for theirs. But I actually think they would like, if I had a nervous breakdown, I think they would actually respond in the way that we've built a family culture around responding.

Adam: Self-correcting family system. That's what that is. That takes years to cultivate. Not that you don't get benefits for years, but it takes a long time to cultivate in the right way. You got to fix the attachment. That's what I mean, a self correcting family system where if even you start falling apart, the kids come back. Have you ever seen those families where the mom dies and the kids just start fighting and bickering the adult kids, and they just scatter and it destroys the family because she was only holding them together.

Katie: Yeah, absolutely, yes.

Adam: You are preventing that. You are building the system where when you pass away someday they will actually bond closer to each other. They'll take care of each other, they'll be still a family and you aren't going to be the one on top trying to police everybody when they're grown ups and stop the drama. They will be taking care of it. So you will have a great second half of your life as you get to relax and enjoy your kids loving each other as adults, which is fantastic.

Katie: Well, and my hope and of course, it will be up to them and their adult lives, but my hope is that if we can build these things into our family culture when they're growing up, that will also become their expectation in a relationship. So if they initially enter a relationship with someone who doesn't have these things, they're at least aware of it. Not to say that person can't do the work together and build a very strong attachment style together, but if someone's immediately from the beginning not respecting their boundaries, not able to take ownership for any of their own mistakes, hopefully it'll at least stand out to them because they've seen a modeling of the other side. So that was my hope with them as they get older and enter relationships is that they'll have that awareness and that they can find that in a partner, hopefully from the beginning.

Adam: 100%. And you're turning your children into culture changers because as they interact with every system they go into work, friendships, relationships, everywhere they go, they'll be spreading that information and guiding the willing people, guiding the people who are open to it into better relationships. So other people who didn't grow up with better, your kids can model it for them and say, hey, you seem kind of stuck in this. Can I help you? Can we do this together and be friends? And the other person might go, uh sure. And then guide them into that. That's a culture change. That's the culture change we're all looking for to make the system better over the next couple of generations. That's it right there. It's raising healthy kids now so that they impact the world everywhere they go.

Katie: And we've talked a lot about the kids in this, which I'm so grateful we did, and also the moms quite a bit. And the majority of people listening are women but also are in partnership with men or raising men. And I
know that there's also a dynamic of the man side of this and how this is impacting men in relationships. There's certainly no lack of talk about how men are especially suffering emotionally in today's modern culture. We're seeing rising rates of mental health problems in men and it seems like not an ability to as easily talk about those problems for men. So I would love to touch on why are we seeing this in men? What are some of the ways that women can show up in partnership with men and for our sons as they get older to hopefully be supportive and help address these things.

Adam: I'm well known for attachment, but on Twitter and YouTube, I'm very well known for male depression, working with it, male Insecurity, the male side of it, it's a conversation that needs to be had because not many people are really open to having it. Even men only change for circumstances. And then what that means is they only change when they see a problem and when they see that the problem can be fixed if they see that there's really a problem, right? It's not just that somebody's complaining, but there's a legitimate problem with a clear outcome that they don't want. And if they believe there's an alternate way of being, they believe there's a better way to have the relationship that avoids that negative outcome. Most men will change. It's just that they don't reach that point because they're never pressed to that point. And they have built the only adaptation they understand.

Going back earlier, they've never seen soft whispers of the color, so they've only seen red. So everything they paint is only red. And that's horrifying that's their whole world is just red, red, red. That's the only color they know. They don't know any other colors.

Helping men to see that there are other solutions and then helping them figure out how to apply those solutions to themselves in their life, absolutely critical. Most of the men who come to me for coaching, they've had very few male interactions in their life with healthy men. Their dad didn't teach them solution skills, their dad didn't teach them bonding. This interestingly, is why moms go so hardcore on dads who are avoidant is because they raise completely destroyed kids, especially sons who have no idea how to live or connect to other people. Giving men solutions and showing them that the problem exists and really a problem and then showing them that the solution is possible and helping them troubleshoot it, that takes care of the vast majority of problems. It's just that men don't understand, or they don't believe.

Katie: That makes sense. And I've also heard it talked about in the US. But also especially in countries like Japan, men are having even more trouble than ever finding relationships and partnerships. Women are too, certainly. But it seems like that dynamic is still a little easier for women just with the typical supply and demand dynamic that plays out. And so for those of us with sons, for instance, are there any other tools or foundational things we can give them as they enter those ages or emotional availability or tools to help them navigate that?

Adam: So for the vast majority of human civilization and even up until the 1990s, men and women found their dating partner the vast majority of the time through family and friend connections. Now that is, about 12% of couples meet. Through family and friend connections. About 65% meet through dating apps. Now they're meeting strangers on dating apps that they have no information about. The reason isn't that all of a sudden
family and friend connections are no longer helpful. The reason is that most people don't know they can go through family and friend connections to build relationships or to have help finding the right person or to find somebody that they'll have pre vetted information about.

Most people are trying to find strangers and those strangers are out there with broken attachment. If you train your children to go through family and friend connections, not just for dating, but for everything to network better, to connect better, to be confident in their relationships, to ask for help, to build those connections so that they will be valuable to the people they meet on the world. So other people say, hey, you should meet if it's a young man, you should meet my great female cousin. She's really quiet. She's totally just at home all the time. She wants to get married so bad and you would be a great fit for her. Why don't you guys go on a date? I'll set you guys up. That's how it's supposed to work for the quiet women who are loving and caring and want to build that healthy family. That's usually how it works. They're hidden away. They can go out at any point and build a dating app, a dating profile, and go date anyone they want. Men, not so much. They're looking for those women and those women are hidden away. Teach people in general to connect better. Teach people to go through their network. Teach people to socialize, teach people to build value and their relationships will take care of them for life.

Katie: And are there any specific questions we can prepare our kids for? For sort of like that early phase of trying to figure out if they are in a relationship with the right type of person or what the other person's attachment style is? Are there any early signs that they can conversations they can have, questions they can ask, or signs to look for?

Adam: Absolutely. What is their long term goal? What are you dating for? Are you dating for fun? Are you just dating because you hope magically it will work out? Are you looking for a family? So you want to get married? Do you want to be married for your whole life? Right? What is your goal in dating? Dating should have a purpose. Relationships should have a purpose. If the purpose is just absolute fun, okay, then you need to make sure you're connecting to people who have that same purpose. Asking the other person what their purpose is, what their desire is, what their connection is. Or do they want a long term commitment? Asking them this earlier in the relationship than year eight.

So many couples do they wait till eight, five, eight years in having that discussion on the first date or the first couple of dates as you're getting to know somebody that should be part of your compatibility test. is do we both desire the same thing and do we both have the skills to get ourselves there? Then you check. Does that person cooperate during conflict? Right? If you've talked about this, you're raising your children to cooperate during conflict, in bedtimes and various other things. Does the other person cooperate during conflict? Are you connecting and having potential conflict by having difficult discussions earlier in the relationship to see if you can break up, to see if they can cooperate during a difficult conversation? Are you testing that in them? You should be. Don't wait until you're married and then finally have your very first conflict. Don't do that. Have the conflicts early and see how they act. That will tell you so much about their attachment right there.
Katie: And I know you have a lot of other resources available related to this and more to help people really understand their own attachment styles and to work through any issues that are being as a result of that attachment style. I'll make sure we link to all of this in the show notes for you guys listening, that's wellnessmama.fm. But where can people find these resources? Online? I know you even have a lot of just free resources people can delve into immediately.

Adam: I do. So Adamlanesmith.com is my website. It has every resource on there possibly available. I also have my YouTube channel at Adam Lane Smith. I have a ton of guides on there. People could watch them with their teens and then build conversations around that. I am also on Instagram @attachmentadam. I have so many reels, so many static guides. I have my free attachment styles guide linked in the bio in my Instagram account. I have every resource you can imagine. You're welcome to reach out to me.

Katie: And like I said, those will all be linked. If you guys are listening on the go, like I know many of you are. And a couple of last questions I love to ask at the end of interviews. The first being if there is a book or number of books that have profoundly impacted you personally, and if so, what they are and why?

Adam: One of my favorite books I like to talk about is No More Mr. Nice Guy by Dr. Robert Glover. I've talked with him over emails. He's a fantastic guy. He also is in this attachment space, which is fantastic. His book has been around for, I think, 20, 25 years now. That book that really spawned the conversation in psychology about attachment being a thing we can even talk about with adults. And I love to say that I leapfrogged after his work and started taking it mainstream and helping out that way. There's a lot of us starting to get into this space and we all have our own unique blend and that book was really helpful doing that for me.

Katie: And lastly, any parting advice for the listeners that could be related to attachment styles and what we've talked about or parenting or entirely unrelated life advice.

Adam: Three pieces, I'll say three key pieces here. Number one, the research shows that up to 65% of adults now have an attachment issue. So if you're listening to this two thirds chance that you have an attachment issue or that your partner does. Number two, that will bring the most relationship misery out of every factor. If you can fix the attachment, you can usually fix the marriage. If you fix it in time, you'll get there. You'll also avoid all that heartache and stress on you and your kids if you can. Number three, you can absolutely change it. You just need to know the mechanisms to do it. You need some steps, you need some help. Reach out to me. Reach out to somebody else. Get some help fixing that attachment. It makes everything so much better in your life.

Katie: I love it. I think this has been such a beneficial conversation, certainly for me personally, hopefully for many of the people listening as well. I love that this is entering the conversation more, and it's so encouraging to see so many parents understanding these things and caring about them and being very intentional with their kids. I have a lot of hope that we are actually raising a generation of people who are going to create
change on a lot or scale through, I think, first and foremost, their relationship. So I'm very grateful for the work that you're doing. Thank you so much for your time and for being here today.

Adam: Thank you for having me.

Katie: And thanks, as always, to all of you for listening and sharing your most valuable resources, your time, your energy and your attention with us today. We're both so grateful that you did, and I hope that you will join me again on the next episode of The Wellness Mama podcast.

If you're enjoying these interviews, would you please take two minutes to leave a rating or review on iTunes for me? Doing this helps more people to find the podcast, which means even more moms and families could benefit from the information. I really appreciate your time, and thanks as always for listening.