

Episode 47

Feeling Lost After Kids? How to Rediscover Yourself in Parenthood | Matrescence | Patrescence | Ep. 47

You know that moment, the one where you're standing in the kitchen, packing lunches, scrolling on your phone, and suddenly it just hits you. "I don't even know who I am anymore."

Maybe it happens when someone asks, "What do you do for fun?" And you hesitate because honestly, you don't know. Maybe it's when you walk by a store window, see a reflection and realize that you don't even know what your style is anymore. Because for years, your choices have been about comfort or practicality or just whatever gets the job done the fastest.

Or maybe it's when you finally get a moment alone and instead of feeling relieved, you feel empty. That quiet moment where you suddenly realize you don't recognize yourself anymore.

It's a moment that almost every parent faces, and if you've ever felt that way, I want you to know: you aren't the only one.

And that is exactly what we're talking about today: how the person that you were before kids starts to fade in the background.

Hi there! If this is your first time here, welcome to The Parenthood and Relationship Podcast.

I'm your host, Markella Kaplani, a Psychologist, a Parenthood and Relationship Coach, and a parent myself.

Together we explore the transformative journey of Parenthood and its profound impact on our relationship with ourselves, our partners, and our children, so that we can be present and show up as we envision without having to do more.

Let's get into today's episode!

This episode is part one of a three part series on rediscovering yourself in parenthood.

We are going to talk about why this happens because it's not just you that's experiencing this. We're gonna talk about how to recognize the symptoms of losing yourself so that you can know if this is happening to you and the hidden causes behind the identity shift that we're talking about. Most importantly though, we are going to discuss some actionable steps so that you can start reclaiming yourself without guilt because you don't need to wait for someday to feel like yourself again.

We can start to feel like that now. And if you want to dive deeper, I've put together a guided journaling exercise that can pinpoint just how this shift happened so that you can start reclaiming parts of yourself today. You can grab that in my newsletter. I'll let you know more about that at the end of the episode.

All right, so let's dive in.

Let's break this down.

What Does It Mean to Lose Our Identity in Parenthood

What does it actually mean to lose yourself in parenthood? What does this identity crisis entail? Because here's the thing, when people hear this phrase, they might assume that it

means that you don't like being a parent; that you regret it, that you wish you could go back to your old life.

But that's not it at all.

Losing yourself doesn't mean you dislike being a parent. It means that your sense of self has been overshadowed. It means that the version of you that existed before parenthood, the version with passions and interests and dreams and a strong sense of who they were, has slowly faded into the background.

And this is normal, parenthood is consuming. It takes over our thoughts, our time, our body, our emotions, our energy. It reorients our world around something bigger than us, our children, and that's beautiful, but it is also overwhelming and it's easy to lose touch. Many parents wake up and realize "I've become someone that I don't fully recognize." And when the realization hits, it brings a wave of questions that feels almost too big to answer. Sometimes, it feels very shameful to even have these questions.

You may have had one of these types of thoughts.

"I love my kids, so why do I still feel this emptiness?"

Or,

"Why does my partner seem fine while I feel like I'm disappearing?"

Another one is,

"Am I just ungrateful? Other parents seem so happy."

Or

"Is this just a part of parenting? Does it ever get better?"

These questions, they don't mean something is wrong with you. But they do mean that something inside you is asking to be seen again. And that is important because the

biggest mistake that people make is dismissing this feeling, assuming that it's just exhaustion or stress or something that will go away if they just power through.

But this isn't about just being tired. This isn't about just needing a break. This is about an identity transition that almost every parent goes through that we need to acknowledge and that no one prepares us for. And here is what I want you to take away from this. You're not failing if you feel this way.

This is not just something that you have to accept. This is just a moment of awareness. And awareness is the first step toward change.

Symptoms of Identity Loss

So now that we've named it, let's go a little bit deeper and see how we can actually know if we have really truly lost ourselves. What are the signs?

Losing yourself in parenthood doesn't happen overnight. It's not like you wake up one day and suddenly you don't recognize yourself in the mirror or you don't know who you are. It's a gradual process.

It happens in such a subtle manner that most of us don't even realize that it's happening. Well, until one day we do, and when that day comes, it can feel very confusing and very overwhelming. So how can we know or can we know that this is happening before it gets to the point where we just feel shocked by this utter sense of loss of self?

Well, there are some signs that we can start to look out for. The first sign is that your world is entirely revolving around others' needs. When was the last time that you did something just for you? Not something practical, not something that benefited your family, but something that made you feel alive?

Many parents find that even when they do get free time, they either feel guilty for using it or they're too exhausted to do anything meaningful with it.

There are a lot of memes out there that show moms who are all of a sudden left with free time and they just don't know what to do because they don't have a sense of self anymore. They don't even know what would interest them.

And it either gets too overwhelming to choose from the many things that you have in mind and you've put on hold or it becomes this question of what do I even like anymore?

Consider this. If I handed you two free hours right now, how would you spend them? Would you even know?

A second sign is that you can't easily answer the question. What do you do for fun? Before parenthood? Maybe you loved reading, traveling, painting, dancing, playing an instrument, or going on spontaneous adventures.

But because of parenthood, all of that took the backseat.

Feeling disconnected from your own interests is a major sign that your identity has faded in the background.

A third sign is that your self-care is purely functional. Instead of doing things that bring you joy, you only do the bare minimum in order to get through the day.

Showering, exercising, or sleeping even don't feel like things you get to do. They feel like chores. You might even find yourself rushing through these basic acts of care because there's always something more urgent to handle.

Think back to a time when self-care wasn't just something that you squeezed into your day. When was the last time that you did something just because you enjoyed it?

Another sign is that you feel resentment, even though you obviously don't want to. You love your kids, but part of you misses your freedom and that feeling makes you uncomfortable.

Maybe you'll look at your partner and feel envious that they still make time for themselves.

Maybe you feel annoyed when you hear friends going on trips or doing things that seem impossible for you right now.

Resentment isn't a sign that you don't love your family or that you would go back. It's a sign that a part of you is asking to be seen again, to be rediscovered. This is especially hard to admit because no one wants to feel resentful. We have associated that feeling with such negativity. But it doesn't mean that you're a bad parent, it just means that something inside of you is craving for attention and it deserves to be heard.

Moving on, another sign is when you feel emotionally drained or numb. Instead of feeling engaged in your own life, you start to feel like you're on autopilot. You do everything that needs to get done, but something just feels like it's missing.

It's not necessarily sadness or frustration, it's just nothing. It's disconnection.

Have you ever had a moment where you just sat down at the end of the day and thought, what did I even do today? Not because you sat around, not because you weren't busy, but just because nothing felt like it belonged to you. That is what I'm talking about.

Take a breath. Do any of these resonate with you? Have you noticed yourself fading in the background of your own life? Maybe you relate to just one of these signs. Maybe you relate to all of them. Either way, awareness is the first step. And if you're unsure whether this shift has happened for you, I've created a guided journaling prompt that you can use to help you figure this out in this moment. And you can grab that by signing up to my newsletter.

So if this is so common, why does it happen? Why do so many of us, so many mothers, so many fathers, people who wanted this life wake up one day and realize that they don't recognize themselves? We don't recognize ourselves anymore.

And let me tell you, it's not because we're not trying hard enough to upkeep with everything. It's not like we weren't prepared. It's just because this is a process of identity shift that is bound to happen, and we don't talk about it enough and we don't acknowledge it. Because most of us were not told to expect this, it slaps us in the face.

4 Reasons Why We Lose Our Identity in Parenthood

So let's break down the four main reasons why we as parents lose ourselves. The first one is psychological.

The identity shift. Most people think that parenthood is just an extra role, like starting a new job or moving to a new city or learning a new skill. But it's so much bigger than that.

Parenthood is not just a role that we take on. It's a biological and emotional, a psychological, a cultural, a sociological evolution, transformation. And there's a name for it. It's marescence for mothers. It's patrescence for fathers, just like adolescence, reshapes our brains and our bodies and our emotions as we transition into adulthood, matrescence and patrescence reshape our brain, our body, and our emotions, as well as the world around us. As we transition and journey through parenthood. We take birthing classes, we research baby sleep, we figure out how to install a car seat. But no one tells us that, hey, your entire sense of self is about to shift. Your brain will literally rewire itself to reprioritize everything, and because of that, you might start to feel like a completely different person.

So when this happens, we just assume that there's something wrong with us or what we've done. We think, "Why am I struggling with this parenthood thing when other parents seem just fine?" But it's not you failing. It's biology. It's your brain and your emotions and your priorities that are restructuring themselves around caregiving.

And if you don't recognize yourself anymore, it's not because you're disappearing. It's because you've shifted into a new version of yourself that you haven't fully met yet.

The second one is the all or nothing parenting mentality.

We lose ourselves because we are taught to believe that being a devoted parent and prioritizing ourselves are completely opposite things. It's either that you're in it fully as a parent or you are selfish. You either give everything to your kids or you are neglecting them, and that is the biggest lie that has ever been told.

Somewhere along the way, we internalized the belief that if I focus on myself, I am taking something away from my child. But here's the truth. A well-rounded, emotionally healthy parent is the best gift that you can give your child because what do our kids need the most? They need to see parents who take care of their emotional and physical health.

They need to see parents who have passions, who have friendships, and a sense, of who they are. They need parents who show them through example, what self-respect and what balance looks like. Think about it: Do we want our kids to grow up thinking that adulthood means losing yourself completely? Or do we want to show them that being a parent can include joy and passion and self care?

Because the honest truth, your kids don't need a martyr. They need a whole person that doesn't instill guilt in them. So if you've been telling yourself that focusing on you means that you're taking away from your child, I want you to challenge that belief today. Because the best thing that you can do for them is that you make sure that you don't disappear.

Number three, we're talking about the loss of external validation. Before kids, your sense of self was reinforced by external factors.

For a lot of us, at least our careers gave us a sense of competence and of identity. Our friendships, they gave us a sense of connection and fun. Our hobbies gave us a sense of personal expression.

Our accomplishments, big or small; they gave us a sense of progress and growth. But after kids, these things fade. We don't get to do that as much anymore. Suddenly we're not getting promotions or work validation because maybe we're on maternity leave or we're cutting back on hours. We don't get to have these deep conversations with friends because we're too exhausted to text back or meet up.

We don't get to accomplish big goals because our energy is going into keeping these little humans alive. And then one day we look in the mirror and we think, who am I without those things? We live in a world unfortunately, that praises milestones, achievements, and productivity. So when your daily wins become things like getting a toddler to eat broccoli and finally getting six hours of sleep, you may start to feel like, you're failing at life, but you're not.

You're in a season of shifting priorities. And the fact that your validation sources have changed doesn't mean that you don't deserve to feel like yourself anymore.

The way that parenthood works, well, we don't get to be validated externally at all often. And for every one validating moment, we get another five where we question whether we're even doing a good enough job in the first place. It's this kind of job where you get validated, where you get praised way later down the line. And we have been taught to depend on praise, to achieve things, to hit milestones, to make deadlines, in order to feel like we are worthy. And so part of why we feel like we are losing ourselves has to do with the fact that this is missing.

But this is a challenge. This is one of the things that I talk about - that matrescence and patrescence - this shift that's happening. On the one hand, it's pushing us to feel bad because we don't get this praise. On the other hand, this push, well, it's an opportunity for us to learn to lean on internal validation, to work on our own self-confidence, on our own self-esteem so that we can fuel ourselves so that we don't need that external validation.

Okay. And reason number four, societal expectations and guilt tripping Society has spent decades telling parents, especially mothers, what we should do and who we should be. The message out there is that good moms sacrifice everything. Your kids should always come first. Taking time for yourself? "Wow, that's selfish!"

For fathers, it might be a little different, like dads provide and mom's nurture. Your role is to support your family financially. If you struggle with parenthood, well just tough it out.

We have been taught that being a good parent means putting ourselves last.

So when we start craving time for ourselves, we feel guilty. And guilt is the number one reason why we as parents stay stuck in self neglect mode.

So if you've ever felt guilty for wanting to take time for yourself, I want you to know something. This is the result of messages that you have absorbed over time. And today, I give you the permission to start unlearning them. Because in reality, reclaiming yourself is not selfish. It is survival.

Steps to Reclaim Yourself Today

Okay, so now that we understand why this happens, let's go on to talk about how we can change it. I wanna give you concrete steps so that you can start reclaiming yourself today. Without guilt, without shame, and without feeling like you have to do something to earn it. I don't want you to wait for someday when the kids grow older to start feeling like yourself again.

I wanna help you do this now, But how do we do it now when the day is running and the chores and the time is taking and the kids need us?

Because let's be real. If we're waiting for that perfect window of free time, a weekend, a retreat, or a major shift to suddenly make space for ourselves, we'll be waiting for a long, long time. The key is not in finding time. The key is in taking it; not in a way that feels overwhelming, not in a way that disrupts your entire life, but in small, intentional steps that you take that remind you that you exist outside of being a parent or a partner or a caregiver.

Here are three things that you can start today in order to reclaim yourself.

The first step is to identify which parts of you have been lost. Before we can rebuild, we need to know what parts are missing. When you look at yourself today, what's different from the person that you used to be?

What parts of you have faded since becoming a parent? To help you pinpoint this, I want you to think about four categories. The first one is hobbies and creativity. What did you like doing before parenthood that you never make time for anymore. Did you love writing, painting, making music, dancing, or doing DIY projects maybe just for the fun of it?

The second is social connection. Who did you use to spend time with that you've lost touch with?

Are there friendships that you miss? Conversations that you wish you were having? People that you drifted away from? Another thing to consider is personal growth and self care. Before kids, what did you do to take care of you? Maybe you worked out regularly, not for fitness, but because it just made you feel good.

Maybe you used to love long showers, journaling or sitting in silence with a book.

And the fourth thing to consider are your dreams and your future goals. What's a dream that you had for yourself before kids that you have put on hold? It doesn't have to be something big. Maybe you wanted to start a blog to learn a new language or to go back to school. So maybe it could be big, but. Take a second. Consider which of these categories moves you the most? What is the first thing that came to mind when I asked what parts of you have faded?

If this feels hard to answer, I promise you that my journaling exercise on my newsletter is going to fill that missing gap for you.

So don't hold off on signing up. You can get there by going to markellakaplani.com/newsletter. And the link is also in the show notes.

Once you've identified what's missing, let's move on to bringing it back without however, feeling like you have to overhaul your entire life.

Step number two, figuring out the minimum viable you. One of the biggest reasons that we as parents stay stuck is because we think that getting back to ourselves requires making a massive lifestyle change. I don't have time for hobbies. I just can't take off and go on a trip. I don't have hours to spend on self-care. What I want you to think about is: "What is the smallest version of me that I can integrate back into my daily life again? A minimum viable you. The tiniest version of things that used to bring you joy.

Let's consider some examples. If you used to love traveling, for example, you don't need to take a 10 day vacation. You can plan micro adventures in the city or wherever it is that you live.

Start by taking a different route home. Visit a new cafe. If you used to love deep conversations, you don't need a long night out with friends. Schedule one intentional Check-in with someone who truly gets you. Or even just a phone call. If you used to love reading, you don't need hours to read an entire book to make up for what it is that you've lost.

Just spend 10 minutes a day before you go to bed in order to bring that back slowly, but manageably, without stress and without guilt.

This is not about going back to who you used to be before. It's about integrating who you were then with who you are becoming now. And how do we do that? By starting small.

Going into step three. Let's talk about the biggest mindset shift that will help you make this sustainable.

Many parents get stuck in black and white thinking, especially when it comes to parenthood and identity. I can either be a devoted parent or I can focus on myself. I can either give my kids everything or I can take time for me. But this isn't an either or decision. It's a both/and. You can be a deeply present parent and have personal passions. You can prioritize your kids' needs and honor your own. You can love being a parent and miss old parts of your life.

And so the key in making this shift is reframing the way that you think about time and effort and identity.

Reframing Obstacles to Self-Connection

So let's do that together. Let's reframe some common excuses that you may be having. Like "I have no time for hobbies." Well, instead you can say, "I can start with 10 minutes doing something that I love."

Or "I don't have energy to have deep conversations. What are you talking about? I'm sleep deprived..." to, "I can send a text or a voice message to a friend and get this going."

Or "I don't have the freedom that I used to." Well, instead, you can say that "I have small moments to sprinkle some adventure into my life."

These may seem small, and so they may seem like they won't do anything, like it's pointless to even try. That it will be disappointing if you do them because you will have to stop at 10 minutes, for example, because it won't be the deep conversation you wanted, because you won't feel fulfilled in that moment. But this all compounds over time. It truly is better than nothing.

So I challenge you to try it and stick with it for a few days, for a week, for a couple of weeks before you decide that it's not worth it. Okay?

Over time, these have the capacity to rebuild your sense of identity and confidence and joy. And the most important thing is that they remind you and everyone around you that you exist besides what it is that you do for others.

So here is what I hope that you will take away from this. You don't have to wait for the perfect moment to start reclaiming yourself. Small steps, tiny, consistent acts of self connection can add up over time. And you don't have to choose between being a good parent and having a life where you get to be you. You can have both.

In my newsletter, I analyze this a little deeper and I give you a journaling prompt. So if you are that kind of person that wants an actionable step, that wants something to write down, to be able to think about, not for a whole hour, but just for five, 10 minutes, that can be your one thing that you do for self-care, then I've got you.

So sign up at markellakaplani.com/newsletter and you'll be pleasantly surprised.

Next week in episode two of this series, we're talking about something that makes dealing with this identity shift even harder; the loneliness of parenthood. Because even though you might be with the kids all day, even though you may be surrounded by a lot of people like your partner or friends or family, you may still feel completely unseen. And so in the next episode we're going to talk about why parenthood can feel so isolating even in a loving home. As well as how relationships, like friendships and partnerships and family relationships, how they change and how we can rebuild the connection that we used to have.

So make sure that you are subscribed so that you don't miss it, and you get notified when it's out. If this episode spoke to you, share it with a friend or on social media. You never know who might benefit from it.

Thank you for being here, for spending time with me on the Parenthood and Relationship Podcast and if you're loving this podcast and you wanna support my work, please give me a review on Apple Podcasts. It means the world and it helps spread the word.

Thank you again for being here, and I'll see you next Sunday. Bye-bye.