E11: Advocating for caregiving skills and support in the workplace with author and movement builder Amy Henderson

**Amy:** So I'm a movement builder by background. And I was running an organization that I had co-founded with Van Jones and the Rock Star Prince. When I accidentally got pregnant with my third child. When she was born, I had three under the age of four and it felt like the wheels fell off the bus. I was out on maternity leave with my third child when I had a real crisis. I couldn't figure out why it was so hard to be a working parent, a working mom. And I didn't know if it was just me and my bad decisions and the unique shortcomings that I had, or if it was really just extremely hard to be a working parent.

And so I started interviewing first, just the moms I most admired. And then also dads that were highly admired and I found that it wasn't just me. Almost every single parent I spoke with admitted that they felt like they were regularly failing either at work or at home or both. And I called from a pretty raw place. I shared some pretty rough moments with these people that I reached out to. And I found they were willing to meet me with their own rough moments. Those times that they were most ashamed of the things that they hadn't spoken about to others, or really even acknowledged to themselves. And it was really healing for me. And I've been told by many of these other parents, that it was also healing for them to have the space where we could be honest with ourselves and each other about how much we were struggling and how much shame there was . But the second thing that emerged and it had to come after, we were honest about how much we were struggling.

The second thing to surface was that we were forging ourselves, that we were gaining something and that parenthood possibly more than anything else was forcing us to grow and evolve. And that the ways we were growing and evolving really mattered, not just in our personal lives, but also in our careers. And it was that discovery that kept happening again, and again. I eventually ended up doing over 200 interviews and with almost every interview, it followed the same pattern. First we talked about the shame and the pain, and then we talked about how we were forging ourselves through the journey. And it was that second revelation that we were forging ourselves that led me to keep going.

I eventually left "Yes, we code" the organization I was running, to further explore this, to look into research from other disciplines. I have a tiny bit of a background in neuroscience. So I nerded out on the brain research. What happens neurologically when you become a parent. And I discovered that the greatest potential for plasticity in the adult human brain for both men and women, regardless of whether or not they're raising a birth child, is during that first year of their child's life. And this revelation coupled with everything I discovered in my interviews was this massive aha moment for me, that led me to continue to do the research and eventually launch a business called Tend Lab. With two co-founders, the original VP of HR at Twitter and another community builder and senior HR leader, Kim Rohrer, to really explore how could we help companies recognize and realize the value of parents in their workplace?

**Amy:** I think the first thing was when my first co-founder, Janet Van Huysse, she was at Twitter when I interviewed her. She was their original VP of HR and also their original VP of diversity and inclusion. And after I interviewed her, I said, hey, look, this is what I'm discovering in my interviews. These are the five main skills that parenthood is unlocking: courage, efficiency in productivity, emotional intelligence, enhanced purpose and the capacity to collaborate. And there's some really significant neurological research behind Parenthood's ability to unlock these skills. And she dropped her fork on her plate and she said, Amy, we spend more money than I care to admit training our leaders to develop those skills. And you're telling me parenthood possibly more than anything else develops them? And that was when a million light bulbs went off in my head. And I thought, if this is something that companies value, then they should be putting money behind it. And then I courted Janet and she eventually left Twitter and joined me and we launched Tend Lab to go help companies put their money where their mouth was.

**Amy:** And so I got pretty disheartened with that thinking, I didn't go into this so that I could give somebody a good marketing opportunity. I went into this so I could drive real change. And so I discovered that there were a number of other founders mostly female, but some people of all genders who were also building products and services to make the experience of the modern family better. And together with a few other founders, we started this, what was initially an informal community and has since become a formal network of over 200 founders across the country. We call ourselves the Fam Tech founders, collaborative, who were solving for the needs of caregivers and families. And it has been this incredible experience of finding peers who are slogging against the same challenges and we have collectively come together because we believe that even though we might be direct competitors and there are other people who have offerings that are somewhat similar to what Tend Lab does, the market for our services is vast, and the need for what we deliver and offer is huge. And that if we can come together and shape name and drive the growth in our sector, that we're all going to be better, both individually as companies, but more importantly, broadly as a society. If we can make this part of the national conversation, then we're going to be in a much better place. With the onset of COVID I'm grateful that seems to be happening.

**Amy:** One of the things that I think is important to talk about is my own journey in recovering from post-traumatic stress disorder, because that was the first time I lost my identity. And motherhood, when I became a mom, was the second time I lost my identity and I am so grateful that I had a previous experience with that loss because I had within me the knowledge that I could recover myself and I could use some of the tools and practices that I'd learned in my recovery from PTSD to re-find myself in the wake of motherhood. And I noticed that most of my peers did not have that framework within themselves. They hadn't been forced to develop those tools and practices. And so a lot of the reason that I launched Tend Lab was to bring a voice and recognition to this extreme transformation that occurs with parenthood and the resources and support that are needed to navigate through it with success.

But I think for me, the recovery from PTSD wasn't just therapy. It was a much more expansive look at what does it mean to heal and what can I learn from others who have done it? And someone that has become a very dear friend once shared with me that throughout the world throughout all the cultures that we know of there's an understanding that when you sit in the center of your wound and make peace with it and get to know it, that you increase your potency, that you discover a deeper sense of who you are and what matters to you and what makes it worthwhile to be here.

And I think that's, if anything, at the core of what healing has been for me. And it sounds like also for you. If you no longer want to be here and you have to look at what is it that makes me feel that way and how far back does it go? And within Tend lab, we do these workshops for working parents, these in-depth workshops. And one of the things I talk about is how a diamond under pressure, it cracks along the fault lines and that parenthood in our working culture in America is extremely difficult. And it's not a matter of if you crack, it's a matter of when you crack and where you crack is an opportunity to discover where you are already weakened the need of tending what places within you were not fully healed or not fully developed, or that needed to be acknowledged. And so while the wound or the pain or the challenge, or the, messed up behavior that surfaces in you, it may not actually even be related to parenthood. Parenthood just triggers it and sets it off and makes it visible and available to you in a way that possibly nothing else could. And then you get to look at it and you get to make peace with it and you get to heal it.

**Amy:** Another thing that I've heard consistently in my interviews with particularly moms was this sense that when they became a mother and they cracked at whatever point in their journey, they crack. It made them question what they had been doing with their lives. One woman even said to me that she'd been so busy meeting all the external definitions of success, all the things she'd been told or conditioned to believe she should want to be or do that she'd never really stopped and done the internal. Who do I really want to be? What really makes me feel alive? What makes me want to be here? And she said, and I loved this framing for it, she said she realized she'd been climbing the wrong ladder and that motherhood forced her to fall off the ladder. And then to really look at what will make me want to get up and climb again. And where will I climb? I think it's important to really look at that question. What ladder am I climbing? And does it feel like it's in deep alignment with who I am?

But what I think it does not do is it does not address this specific culture of that company and how well it does and does not support its caregivers more broadly. And we at Tend Lab, as well as some other really great organizations working in this space, such as The Village on the East Coast or WRK 360, which is based down in LA, organizations that are more consultancy based that go in to look specifically at the policies and the practices within the company, we're really looking at how do you address the culture in which these benefits exist? And what I have seen most companies do is they want to throw a bunch of money at benefits, but they don't really want to spend any money addressing the culture of the company and how to make it more modern, how to make it more relevant, how to actually create a community within the company that meaningfully supports, acknowledges, validates and allows their caregivers to thrive.

**Amy:** I think there are two things that need to be done on that front: one is companies need to start tracking the caregiving status of their employees, and specifically they need to be tracking how it impacts hiring retention, promotion, and compensation. There's been a great study that Robert Fuller did out of Harvard in which he found that most companies are not tracking the caregiving status of their employees. And they also think that caregiving status doesn't really impact their ability to perform. What he found is that up to 75% of employees or three out of four employees currently identify as caregivers. And the vast majority of them say that their caregiving responsibilities negatively impact their ability to perform at work.

So there's a huge discrepancy between what employers think and the reality of their employees. And it's time for that discrepancy to be bridged. Employers need to track caregiving status so they can see how it impacts these critical variables. And if they see what we have seen inside companies, when we take a deep look at that, then they will be motivated to take action because they'll recognize it has a huge impact on their bottom line. And if they solve for it, if they meaningfully meet their employees who are caregivers, where they're at and create very simple modifications that can significantly support caregivers that don't need to cost any money. If they can implement some simple measures to start and maintain a feedback loop, where they continue to monitor and look at how are our caregivers doing? What are some blocks that they're facing? What are some challenges that they're hitting? What is making them thrive? If they keep that feedback loop going, if they continue to look and track, then they're going to have the information they need to value it to the degree that it needs to be valued.

So that's the first thing I would say. Track caregiving status. The second thing I would say is that at a broader cultural level, not just within companies, we need to transform the way we think about parenting and caregiving more broadly and its impact on work performance. I am one of the first people that's come forward through this research and book with Tend Lab to say that parenting, neurologically and otherwise, unlock skills that are critical for success in the modern workplace: courage, efficiency, and productivity, emotional intelligence, enhanced purpose, and specifically the capacity to collaborate. Most work today is team-based and an individual's ability to work well in a team is dependent on their ability to collaborate. We talked at the beginning of this podcast about the importance of collaboration in my own life. It's not just me that benefits from it. There is significant research from a variety of disciplines that say that collaboration is the most effective way for an organization to succeed. If we are going to succeed as a company, as a nation, as a global society, with all of the challenges we are facing right now, we have got to learn to work together. And it's about time that we acknowledge and support those among us who are forced to develop those skills by creating workplaces that support us.

**Amy:** It's funny, we started out with Tend Lab focusing exclusively on parents. And then in the wake of COVID, we've really been looking at the importance of caregivers more broadly. But there's an argument to be made that it's really for anyone, for any employee. They need to exist within a culture, not just within their individual workplace, but within their world more broadly where caring for others and themselves is something that is valued and supported, which unfortunately is rarely the case.

I think that's a really important lesson we learned early on with Tend Lab, that it's not about caregivers against people who are not currently caregivers, but are likely to become caregivers at some point. It's about looking at the overall systems and policies and practices in place. Do they care for everyone? Because if you're taking care of your caregivers at the expense of your other employees, that is not a sustainable solution, and it's going to lead to some really significant problems down the line.

**Amy:** I developed a campaign between the E launch of my book, which was in May, on Mother's day and the print launch of my book, which was in June, on Father's day. There were roughly 40 days between those two days. And so we said let's build this what we called the tending to care pledge, where we get employers to agree to track the caregiving status of their employees and how it impacts hiring retention, promotion, and compensation. And we thought it would be an easy ask of employers to do this. And we found that it was not, and there were a number of reasons. First I want to say that there were some really wonderful companies who did agree to do this, but they were very few and far between. The vast majority of companies said, there's no way we're going to do that. Because of COVID, we are now tracking caregiving status of our employees because we have recognized for the first time that it has an impact on our employees, but there's no way we're going to make it available to the public that we're doing it. Because if we tell the public we're tracking it, then we're going to be accountable to whatever we discover. And we either don't want to be accountable or don't know how to be accountable, to solving for what we discover. And they were afraid of the negative backlash they would get.

The second thing we discovered was that the tracking systems that companies use to assess things like caregiver status, they're not yet equipped to even track this data. So the HRIS systems like Namely or Workday or Oracle or SAP, they don't have the functionality to allow employers to even assess this information. So there's a lot of work that needs to be done to enable this to be a possibility. And so we looked at other campaigns that have been successful in getting employers to track demographic data. And I've had some wonderful conversations with the former Senator Hannah Beth Jackson, who made it so that companies in the state of California had to track the data around gender and race and how it impacted an individual's position within their company. And so she created the legislation that required companies to track it, required companies to report on it. And that leveled the playing field, because if everybody's doing it, then there's not a resistance to it because, it's just something that's required. And so we're looking at how can we push for similar legislation to make caregiving status something that we track so that we can have some visibility into it.

Can you talk a little bit more about how this work does relate to the diversity, equity and inclusion? Early on when we were starting Tend Lab, a lot of people felt as though we were asking for companies to take their limited budgets and apply them to parents at the expense of other critical diversity initiatives, supporting women and folks of color. And what we know from the research is that women and folks of color are disproportionately impacted by caregiving responsibilities. And so you actually can't look at these other critical variables, like gender, like race, or even like LGBTQ status without also looking at the intersection with caregiving. And that if you want to meaningfully support the folks who are already the most marginalized in the workplace, you need to be also looking at caregiver status and you need to be looking at the way it impacts the ability of folks from these groups to equally participate in the workplace. For instance folks who are African-American are likely to have more of a financial burden, are likely to spend up to a third of their income covering their caregiving responsibilities at a critical phase in their working life. Which impacts their ability to take risks or to really be pioneers in their work. If they are carrying such a heavy financial responsibility for the people that are their dependents.

**Amy:** There's a couple of things I'm doing. One is we are going to be hiring an executive director to lead and run the Fam Tech founders collaborative that I started. So I'll be supporting her in getting that up and running and getting really deep into expanding the vision of it to be even more comprehensive than it currently is. I'm really excited about that. This nascent sector that is Fam Tech has increased in visibility since COVID and I think this is a great opportunity to meaningfully support entrepreneurs who are innovating in that. And hopefully to connect some of those entrepreneurs to the government focus on this. And I'm hopeful that our current administration is really going to invest thoughtfully in learning from the entrepreneurs who've been innovating in this space for a long time. So hopefully that will happen. I'm also really interested in continuing to get out there with the message of my book and to change and transform our cultural narrative about parenthood's impact on career performance. So I'm continuing to work inside companies and doing lots of public speaking, which I love. And then I think one of my favorite things to do is to facilitate conversations in which these revelations can occur; public conversations, facilitating panels and dialogues in public forums. Where what I've noticed in my work is that when you can see your story reflected in the stories of others, then it helps to validate and give a voice to your experience.

And this experience, there's two things that I talked about in the beginning of the podcast that parenthood does. One, it brings you to your knees and makes you experience a lot of shame. And two, it forges you, especially if you're willing to just sit with that shame and pain and really look at it. And so creating forums for people, from all different walks of life, to be able to articulate their experience with that, gives this experience, gives this whole transformation a voice and gives it validity and makes it visible in a way that it currently is not. And I think we will be much better off as a culture, as a people, as a world, as a nation if we have more opportunity to reflect and consider and learn from the transformation that parenthood offers.

**Amy:** I would go back to where we started in this conversation, which is, I would find a community of peers. I think critically important to find a community of peers, however you identify that, who are striving to really heal and grow through the challenges they're facing, who are capable of being honest, bitching is critically important, but also who are looking to drive towards solutions. So find a group of peers who are also trying to become better versions of themselves and not in a sort of a false positive thinking leads to change kind of way. But in a way that is really honest and heartfelt and deeply supportive. That for me has been a lifesaver. Literally, I would not be alive today had I not found others who could see me where I was.

What we know from research and recovering from traumas, that there's three main things that people who are able to survive and thrive post-trauma have. One is the sense that they're not alone, that they feel seen by others. And I think that's where the talking about the pain and the shame is so critical. The second one is that they have a sense of agency that they feel empowered to take action in their own lives. And then the third one is a sense of purpose that they're part of something and contributing to something that is about creating a better future, not just for themselves, but for others too. And so the three things I would say to any person who's listening to this podcast is find a group of peers who allow you to feel seen and heard. Find a way to take some agency in your own. And then find a way to recognize that you have something to contribute to a greater purpose than just yourself.