



## **Strength Training in Pregnancy & Motherhood**

Guest: Molly Galbraith

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**Heba Shaheed:** Hello and welcome. This is the Pregnancy and Motherhood Summit. And I'm your host, Heba Shaheed, from The Pelvic Expert. And today, we're joined by a pre and postnatal fitness specialist, Molly Galbraith. Hello, Molly!

**Molly Galbraith:** Hi, Heba! Thank you so much for having me!

**Heba:** Thank you for joining me. So Molly is the cofounder and owner of Girls Gone Strong. She's also the creator of the Coaching and Training Women Academy, which is the world's first interdisciplinary, evidence-based, body positive online academy, offering women specific certification.

She's also the contributor to the Coaching and Training Women Academy pre and postnatal coaching certification. Which is currently being used by students and graduates in over 40 countries to better understand, connect with, serve, and empower their pre and postnatal clients and patients.

So, thanks Molly for joining us. It's so exciting to have you, because we know that so many women, especially in pregnancy and postnatally, and all throughout motherhood. They don't know what they're supposed to do in terms of strength training. They don't know what type of exercise they can be

doing when they're pregnant. They don't know when they can get back to exercise after they give birth.

And even within motherhood, if they're experiencing a lot of issues, they don't know the benefits of strength training. So I'm so glad to have you sharing your world of expertise in this area.

**Molly:** Well, thank you so much. I totally appreciate you having me. And absolutely, strength training is such a fantastic choice for women who are trying to conceive, pregnant, post-pregnancy, and like you said, throughout motherhood. Because there are so many different benefits for women. So I'm really excited to dive in a little bit and talk more about the benefits of strength training for these women.

**Heba:** So let's talk firstly about that. Can you go into the benefits of strength training? Particularly for women in pregnancy, for women in postpartum period, but even beyond that into motherhood. What benefits can women see and expect to achieve in those times in their lives?

**Molly:** Absolutely. So strength training is a really fantastic option for women. I kind of joke when I talk about Girls Gone Strong. When we started 7 years ago, we started as an organization that kind of wanted to preach the gospel of strength training for women. We were like, "Women should strength train!"

As we've evolved over time and started to really appreciate and honor women's autonomy—so women having the choice to do what they want their bodies—we're now like, "Women should do whatever they want with their bodies; but we hope they strength train because it's really awesome!" So we love touting the benefits because there are so many physical, emotional, psychological benefits for women.

So in pregnancy, first of all there's a myth that you can continue doing whatever you were doing pre-pregnancy during pregnancy. And then there's another myth that you can't start anything new in pregnancy. So both of those things are actually not true.

First things first, that you can continue doing whatever you were doing prior to pregnancy in pregnancy. It's not quite that clear-cut. For example if you were participating in HIIT training (high-intensity interval training) prior to pregnancy, that's actually contraindicated during pregnancy. And for women who weren't strength training prior to pregnancy, they actually can start strength training in pregnancy. They can adopt a strength training program. The caveat is they need to maintain a low to moderate intensity.

So physically, strength training in pregnancy is really good for building or retaining lean mass. It's fantastic for helping women gain or maintain their muscular strength. It can be fantastic for improving a woman's alignment. It can help reduce aches and pains in pregnancy. Increasing and maintaining lean mass can help with insulin sensitivity. So it's possible that it may reduce the risk of gestational diabetes in some women.

It helps women have a sense of control, or agency, over their bodies in pregnancy, which I know can be really challenging for women when they feel like their bodies are changing and there's not really anything they can do about it. So it can be a really fantastic emotional and mental escape for them to be able to feel like they have some semblance of control over their bodies during pregnancy. It can be fantastic for all of those things.

So building and maintaining muscle mass. Making sure they gain a healthy amount of weight during pregnancy. So obviously there's a range based on what your pre-pregnancy weight is when you get pregnant for what a "healthy" amount of weight is during pregnancy. But it can help make sure that they gain a healthy amount of weight during pregnancy. And it can be such a fantastic emotional and mental outlet or escape for women so that they feel in control of their bodies.

So when it comes to postnatally, obviously you want to take things a little bit slower returning to exercise. So generally for the first six weeks, we recommend first things first that women get checked by a pelvic health physio during and after pregnancy because that's super important. Make sure everything is functioning the way that it's supposed to be functioning. Make sure they're not having any issues. Certainly during pregnancy, things like incontinence, or maybe heaviness in the pelvis, pelvic pain, stuff like that can be common symptoms that women experience.

So making sure that they're being checked by a pelvic health physio to make sure everything is functioning the way that it's supposed to. Make sure that their pelvic floor is able to fully relax, especially for labor and delivery. That it's able to contract as much as it needs to for the task at hand is really important. So you don't want your pelvic floor to be partially contracted all the time. So that stuff is really important. So making sure that you're working with a pelvic health physio, that you don't have any contraindications for exercise in pregnancy or after pregnancy. All of those things are very important.

When it comes to strength training post pregnancy, generally, for the first six weeks we recommend that women do breathing exercises. That they go see a pelvic health physio to make sure everything is functioning the way that it's supposed to. And that they're cleared to return to more strenuous exercise after the first six weeks.

We recommend women do some gentle body weight stuff that's no more strenuous than tasks of daily living, but certainly they can get back to things like glute bridges, clamshells, body weight squats, things like that that are gentle but help them get their bodies moving again.

Then after six weeks, we generally recommend about another 6 to 12-week period that we call the return to exercise phase. This is when women might start incorporating more strength training back into their program. They might start doing some loaded movements and kind of start upping the intensity of their program that their doing.

The issue with strength training in pregnancy is the general recommendations have been so conservative for women during pregnancy and have been almost too relaxed for women post pregnancy. We're telling women, "Only walk and do yoga during pregnancy because you don't want to hurt yourself. You don't want to hurt your baby. You shouldn't be exercising intensely or vigorously during pregnancy."

So we tell women to be too careful in pregnancy, and then we're like, "In six weeks you're good to return to whatever you want." And that's actually ...

**Heba:** Which is terrible.

**Molly:** Yeah!

**Heba:** Because really, women are more capable of doing certain types of exercise during pregnancy. And in the postnatal period, we have to be really aware of what's happened to their bodies after they've given birth. We have to treat birth, or birth injury in particular, as like a sports injury. And you have to have that kind of rehabilitative phase where you don't just throw them back into whatever intense exercise whether it's HIIT or CrossFit or whatever, running. I completely hear you.

I think there is a lot of outdated and misinformation about what women should be doing in the pre and postnatal phase. Can we talk more about this

and what's available to women, and to health and fitness professionals, as well?

**Molly:** In terms of the information? The lack of information?

**Heba:** Yes. The lack of information, and the outdated information. What should women be aware of? If they're hearing something from a certain person about what they should be doing in pregnancy or after birth, what should they keep in mind? What should they be aware of? Because women essentially have to take autonomy. These days, we have to kind of know and learn what's good for us. So what should women be aware of in that time?

**Molly:** Absolutely. I'll start with a brief little story. I've been in fitness since 2004. I've been working with clients online and in person since 2005. And it wasn't until 2012 that I even realized the specific considerations regarding women during and post pregnancy and exercise.

So I was in the field for eight years as a woman seeking the best information I could possibly find, learning from fantastic physical therapists and strength coaches and chiropractors and all these people. And I didn't even realize that there was—I thought, "Don't let women overheat. Keep them hydrated. And their ligaments are going to be a little bit more relaxed." That's literally all that I knew. No one ever mentioned pelvic floor. I'd never heard pelvic organ prolapse. I thought incontinence was normal, right? Like, it was just something that happened to women after they had babies.

So to be clear to all of the women listening, there are so many health and fitness professionals who care deeply about helping women and are doing the best that they possibly can to know how to help women, and they still don't have this information. It's like Heba said. It's really important. I'm so glad that you're watching this interview and listening to this summit because you're really going to have to learn some of the information for yourself, and become an advocate for yourself.

So some of the misinformation includes pregnancy and exercise, again, that you can't start anything new in pregnancy. So if you weren't strength training before, you can't strength train now. That's not true. It's also untrue that you can continue doing whatever you were doing pre-pregnancy all the way through your pregnancy. Certainly in the first trimester before your belly has grown, when there's less downward pressure on your pelvic floor, you might be able to get away with some higher impact exercises, exercises that are in the prone position, where your belly is facing the floor. Things like that.

As you get farther along in pregnancy and your belly grows and there's a bit more downward pressure on your pelvic floor, you might want to be mindful of those exercises. Some women can continue doing that stuff far along in their pregnancy. For other women, they're just not as comfortable. They don't feel as stable or safe in those exercises. Or they feel a lot of pressure or pull on their belly. So that stuff is really important to pay attention and keep in mind.

If someone says you shouldn't strength train at all in pregnancy, and you should just do walking or yoga, that's kind of a blanket recommendation. That's also false. Strength training is a fantastic exercise for women in pregnancy for all of the reasons that I listed above. You'll hear other recommendations that aren't necessarily wrong. They're just not as clear or straightforward.

For example, there are some health professionals that say you should never lie on your back after X number of weeks in pregnancy. But there are actually varying recommendations for that. I remember when you were helping with our pre and postnatal coaching certification, you were talking about that a little bit, right? I think Sports Medicine Australia maybe said you shouldn't do it for prolonged periods of time, but they don't actually define that.

**Heba:** Yeah. There's actually no evidence that I know of; actual evidence that suggests that lying on your back is harmful. A lot of it is based on things that we've carried on from the past based on where the heart lies and where the vena cava and so on.

Actually, when I was working in practice and I was teaching exercise classes to women in pregnancy, we were doing exercises on their backs. And we must have seen thousands of pregnant women. And there was only a handful of them who were just genuinely uncomfortable lying on their back. And those women, because they were uncomfortable lying on their back, that's why we said, "Don't on your back and do your exercises."

So it's not necessarily that you can't lie on your back. It's more based on your own personal comfort levels when you're pregnant. So yeah, definitely. But yeah, keep going, as you were saying.

**Molly:** And I think, it's understandable that when it comes to women and exercise during pregnancy that there's not a lot of research because there are some ethical considerations. Like, "Let's have this control group do this, and let's have this experimental group of pregnant women do this thing that may

or may not be harmful to them and their babies.” It makes sense that there’s not a ton of research.

But the problem is that’s kept the recommendations so conservative for so long. And from my perspective, is just another way we show women to stay really conservative during pregnancy and exercise while the baby is inside. The baby is what’s most important; who cares about mom because as soon as the baby is out, post pregnancy, yeah you can get back to doing whatever.

So from a larger, kind of global perspective, I’m like, “Oh, ok.” We’re saying that the baby’s health is more important than the mom’s. Because we’re willing to be really conservative while she’s pregnant, and then who cares? Let’s just throw her back into intense exercise post.

So there are certainly some really conservative recommendations for strength training in pregnancy that, like you said, are not necessarily true. They’re just kind of carried along from past recommendations. For example, the heart rate during pregnancy. They used to say, “Don’t allow your heart rate to get over 140 beats per minute.” But for some women, that happens when they walk up the stairs, right? It just depends on what your heart rate is, how much you’re exerting yourself when you do that. So they’ve switched to more of a rate of perceived exertion for most women, to use that RPE to determine how intensely they can be exercising during pregnancy. So that’s another myth.

And there’s another one that you can’t do any core training during pregnancy, that you’re supposed to let your abs get as soft as possible, when in actuality core training can be fantastic for helping mitigate some of the aches and pains that happen during pregnancy and just staying active in general. But you certainly aren’t looking to let your abs get as soft as possible during pregnancy. That is not a benefit to women. You actually want to have a strong trunk with your growing belly, to help support your growing belly. So those are some big myths that a lot of women who come to us, seeking exercise advice in pregnancy, have concerns about that we help them kind of bust.

**Heba:** It’s interesting how you said that sometimes women are told not to strength train in pregnancy. And certainly, that was the fact for quite some time. Even when I was working in private practice in my physiotherapy practice, there were a lot of women who would come, and they were terrified. They just stopped completely going to the gym as soon as they found out they were pregnant. Or they just completely stopped their exercise and just started doing walking or prenatal yoga. And even then some of them wouldn’t even do that. They would just do walking.

And suddenly they were coming with all these pains. They were having back pain. They were having pelvic pain. And they didn't have so much of that pain in the early part of their pregnancy when they didn't know that they were pregnant. But when they learned that they were pregnant, they were suddenly developing all of these pains. The first thing I said to them is, "What type of exercise are you doing?" And it's like, "Well, just walking. I'm not doing anything intense."

When actually, we need to strength train. Because we need our muscles to provide the support to our joints, and our ligaments, and our bodies basically. That now because we're pregnant, we don't have as much of.

So in terminology, we say something called form closure and force closure. Form closure is when you have stability and strength because of your joints, and because of your ligaments and your connective tissue and your fascia. But when you're pregnant, that becomes a bit lax, and so you lose that. So force closure is when you use your muscles.

So we need more of those muscles. We need to strength train, because how do you build muscle? You do it through strength training. And it can be body weight strength training, or it can be weight based. So it doesn't really matter.

I think a lot of women, they're surprised because the first thing I say to them is, "You need to do strength training. You need to exercise. You need to do some squats. That's what you need. You need bridges. You need clams. Build those glutes."

**Molly:** And I think that for some women, maybe their perception of what strength training is, is a little bit—they think it has to be maxing out with a barbell on their back. They don't realize that there are so many other variations of squats. They can do a body weight squat. They can do a goblet squat. They can do a dumbbell front squat. There are all of these other variations of exercises that might feel more comfortable for them in pregnancy, where they're still getting stronger. They're still getting to participate in the strength training. But they're not having to maybe push their bodies to that absolute extreme.

Because that's kind of the pendulum that always swings back and forth in the fitness industry, right? Everybody is talking about, "Women shouldn't strength train during pregnancy." And then there's whole pendulum that swings back, and it's like, "Look at these women who are 8.5 months pregnant doing these max squats. Women's bodies are amazing and strong and

capable.” And yes, that’s absolutely true. Women’s bodies are strong and amazing and capable.

The woman who was able to squat that way in pregnancy is probably a bit more of an anomaly. She’s someone who was super fit and super strong prior to pregnancy. And that’s probably not what the majority of women in pregnancy should be doing. So nothing against her as an individual, but we can’t take examples of these women who might be in the top 1% of these elite athletes, and what they’re doing in later stages of pregnancy, and apply that to women across the board.

**Heba:** That’s right. There’s a difference between an elite athlete and the everyday woman. But if an everyday woman was doing strength training pre-pregnancy, then there’s no reason why she should completely stop that. She can continue, of course. There can be some contraindications where she may have to stop that. However, she should be able to continue through, maybe modifying a little bit here or there. But generally she shouldn’t have to give up any type of strength training in pregnancy.

What about in the postnatal period? Let’s talk about that. What are some things that women need to look out for? And for how long? What would you suggest is a good buffer time before they can get back to what they would love to get back to before they fell pregnant.

**Molly:** Yeah. At Girls Gone Strong, we kind of break it down into these different phases. We have the zero to six-week rehab and retraining phase. And again, that’s where a woman is doing a lot of her connection breathing. So really focused on helping relax and contract her pelvic floor as she breathes. Just helping get that mind/muscle connection back with her core and pelvic floor that she may have lost a bit during pregnancy. And then doing some of the more gentle body weight stuff. Like, clamshells, glute bridges, body weight squats, reverse lunges. Things like that, again, that are probably not much more strenuous than kind of activities of everyday life. Like picking up other children, or picking up stuff around the house. Or things like that.

In that 7 to 18-week phase, we call that return to exercise training. That’s when a woman is generally starting to add more external load. She may be doing goblet squats, seated cable rows. Generally, kind of full body training. Kind of super setting maybe upper and lower body exercises. Four to six exercises. Two to four sets of eight to 12. So moderate volume. Strength training two to four days a week based on how she feels. Most women are going to do well with two to three, and if you’re a new mama who is not getting

a whole lot of sleep, then you might even be breaking those workouts up into 10 or 15-minute segments throughout the day. Whatever you can fit in. So generally we take that 7 to 18-week phase post pregnancy for women to start what we call returning to exercise.

And then the next 24 weeks, we call it the bulletproof your body phase. That's when a woman is really starting to ramp up her exercise. Again, focusing on strength training. Walking on a regular basis. Around that time, around week 18, 19 for most women, they can start incorporating more high intensity stuff back into their training. If their pelvic floor is feeling good, they might start including more high impact exercises.

And then around week 42 is when we're like; we feel like if a woman has followed this rehab and retraining, this return to exercise training and this bulletproof your body, around week 42 we feel pretty confident that most women, if they're feeling good, they're not having pain, they're feeling strong and stable in their body, they could return to basically whatever exercise they wanted. Whether that's marathon running, or obstacle course racing, or powerlifting, or CrossFit, or whatever. If they follow that type of program, what we've found is that most women can return to whatever activity that they love that they were doing prior to pregnancy.

So it's not forever. It's not years and years and years. But it's also not jumping back into the really intense stuff immediately. It's the same principles of strength training. It's starting slow. It's adding volume and frequency and loads and things like that over time and gradually ramping up the intensity to where your body is at a point it can handle more intense exercise and making sure that your core and pelvic floor are functioning and responding the way they need to to be able to respond to the more intense or higher impact exercises that you might want to get back to.

**Heba:** I think that is such a powerful thing to keep in mind. In about 12 months' time; so 12 months since you give birth, you should be able to get back to a similar level, if not the same level of fitness that you had pre-pregnancy, given that you don't have anything else going on.

We know there are going to be a few women who kind of fall out of that general rule. Maybe they had some significant birth injury. Maybe they just weren't able to keep up with the fitness throughout those 12 months. But it is about pacing. It's not about just jumping in. We can't just jump into the deep end when it comes to postnatal fitness. We have to do that pacing. Just do a little bit, and a little bit more, and just gently build up so you don't have that

burn/bust kind of thing happening. You don't injure yourself. You're still able to look after yourself and your family in that time.

And we know that a lot of women; it's not just fitness that's happening. There's a lot of issue with sleep. Looking after other children or looking after the family, looking after a baby. So we do have to be gentle on ourselves. Make sure we do come in and give ourselves permission to take our time and not have to get back to everything. Like maybe you've seen your friend or someone on TV get back to whatever it is. Generally, it takes time and you have to give yourself that good 12 months. So I really like how you're able to break that down into that 42-week period.

**Molly:** Yeah, 42. And I think that is important. Like you said, there's a lot of psychological stuff that might be going on. Women might be dealing with postpartum depression or postpartum posttraumatic stress disorder. Like you said, they might be recovering from birth injuries.

I want to be really clear that that 42-week mark is not necessarily a magic mark where if you haven't been doing anything up until 42 weeks, you're like, "Yeah, now I'm 42 weeks, I can just jump back into it!" That's not necessarily how it works. It's what you've been doing for the last 42 weeks to prepare yourself to get back to that.

So it's not like there's some magic timeframe where all of a sudden your body is ready to go. It's that your body needs a period of time to heal. It needs a period of time to ramp up exercise. Start adding load, frequency, intensity, things like that. And then slowly progress that over time.

One thing that we didn't get to touch on earlier that I think is really important that a lot of women that I've worked with or talked to have mentioned in terms of strength training is the judgement that they get when they have an obvious belly, or they're obviously pregnant. And they're in the gym strength training. They're getting looks from people. They're getting comments about their body. Maybe their grandmother or someone who has got a little bit more of an old-school mindset is like, "You really shouldn't do that. You're going to hurt the baby. You're delicate, you need to rest, put your feet up," things like that.

So a lot of women, we already know women are dealing with so many comments, and so much judgement about their bodies, and the choices that they're making once their pregnant. A lot of women have fear about what people are going to say if they're in the gym strength training because they're nervous about getting comments. If they don't feel confident that strength

training is ok for them, they might be extra discouraged by these comments that people are making about their bodies.

Or if someone has experienced maybe a miscarriage or multiple miscarriages leading up to it. If they were exercising intensely, a lot of times they're searching for the reason why the miscarriage happened. And they're like, "It must have been my fault. I was exercising intensely."

I don't know if you've had patients or clients like that who have that fear, either related to miscarriage or the shaming comments they've gotten about their body and strength training in pregnancy.

**Heba:** Definitely. And not just in the gym, but a lot of the time—because in Australia, where I'm based, there are a lot of different cultures. There are a lot of different cultural attitudes towards any type of exercise in pregnancy and postnatally, especially in the 40 days postnatally. We have a lot of cultures here from various backgrounds. From all over the world. From Asia, Europe, everywhere. Especially in that first 40 days, it's like, "Don't do anything. Just lie in bed or stay in the home."

So if they're out there exercising or they're going to a Pilates class or they're going to the gym, they're definitely getting a lot of judgment and body shaming.

What can women do? What can women do in terms of that body shaming that occurs and the judgment that happens? Can you give any recommendations on how women should take it, and how they should feel, and how they should behave, as well, when it comes to that?

**Molly:** Yeah, absolutely. I'm of the school of thought that if it's something that you're really uncomfortable with, being really clear and direct with someone. You don't have to be unkind or rude, cuss them out or tell them off or something like that. But just saying something really clear like, "Yeah, actually I'm not comfortable with the idea that my body is up for judgment or commentary. So if we could just..." Change the subject.

**Heba:** Just be direct.

**Molly:** Yeah, just be super straightforward. If someone is like, "I can't believe you're exercising so quickly post pregnancy." Or, "I can't believe you're exercising this far into your pregnancy. Isn't that bad for you?" Just be like, "No, actually it's not bad for me, and I don't really subscribe to the idea that

what I do with my body when I'm pregnant is up for anybody's commentary or judgment."

**Heba:** I guess you could use that as a time to provide a bit of education. But then, yeah, make sure that you close the discussion and change the subject. It's your body, and other people don't have the right to comment on it.

Of course, it can be a little bit different when it's your family, if it's a close family, or something. So I think there is a bit of a balance that needs to be taken.

**Molly:** Totally. And obviously, I haven't been pregnant myself. But I've had to deal with comments about my body from my family. And again, I know that they're either trying to make conversation, or they're trying to compliment me sometimes. You'll hear, "You don't even look pregnant. You look so amazing." They're trying to say something; they're trying to make a kind comment.

But I find that it's really easy to just say, "Hey, I get that you're saying this because you're concerned about me, but I just want you to know that I've done my research. I'm super clear on the stuff that's safe for me during pregnancy, and I'd really appreciate if the things that I do with my body during pregnancy aren't part of the conversation."

So that first really short, "My body is not up for commentary," is maybe something that you'd say to a stranger or an acquaintance. But when it comes to family, "Hey, I get that what you're saying to me is coming from a place of concern, but I want you to know that I've done my research. I've learned from really smart people. And I'd really appreciate if the choices that I make with my body during and after pregnancy aren't part of the conversation."

**Heba:** Perfect. So let's talk a little bit about the pressures that women feel after birth to get that pre-baby body back. How many times do you hear that? Honestly, in my clinic, when I was working, so many women would say things like, "I just want to get back to my pre-baby body." Even sometimes when you're talking to women online, it's almost like this thing that we put inside ourselves, in our minds. Even when we're doing marketing sometimes. Like, oh yeah, that's what women want. They want to get their pre-baby body back.

But what can you do to change that language and change that conversation? And let's be realistic. You're not going to get your pre-baby body back, right? So let's talk more about that.

**Molly:** Yeah. Absolutely. So as a health and fitness professional, it can make me a bit upset when women are saying that because I understand where it's coming from. I understand that it's coming from companies who want to prey on women's insecurities about the way their bodies changed during pregnancy.

It's all about fear mongering. And it's all about saying, "Your body is not ok as it is, so here's how you get it back." Because that's the feeling that a lot of women are having. They're like, "I want the body that I had before I got pregnant." So they use this "pre-baby body" terminology.

But like you said, once you've had a baby, you don't get your pre-baby body back. And that doesn't mean that the body that you have; that there's anything wrong with it, or that it's less than. Less beautiful, less worthy, or not as good as the body that you had pre-pregnancy. It's just different. And that's totally fine.

You've got a new set of challenges. You have a new set of limitations. And you have a new set of incredibly amazing things that your body has been through. Your body has created life, right? So it's really important for women to realize that getting their pre-baby body back and that kind of idea is not necessarily going to happen. But it doesn't mean that they have to be dissatisfied with their body or feel discomfort in their body forever.

So as a fitness professional, when women say that, it is a little bit like, "Oh, man." I know where this is coming from, and I empathize with the way that they're feeling, because I haven't had children but I do know what it's like to feel completely not at home in my body, to feel like I don't recognize my body. I have autoimmune disease; I have an autoimmune thyroid disease and polycystic ovarian syndrome and a couple of other things. So I know what it's like to look in the mirror and feel like I don't recognize my body and to feel like it's completely out of control and to feel like it looks and feels so different than it has in the past.

So while it's not the same necessarily, as pregnancy, I can empathize with that feeling of just wanting to get back to where I was before I was diagnosed with all of those things. So I empathize with that. And I think it's important as a fitness professional, it's easy to be like, "Ugh, not this thing again." Right? Like, another woman asking about getting her pre-baby body back. But the thing is, we have to approach those women with empathy. Because what they're really saying is, "I'm not comfortable in the body that I'm in right now. And I want something to be different."

So I think that empathizing with women, getting really curious about what that means. So when you say you want to get your pre-baby body back, what does that mean to you? Does that mean that you want to feel strong and stable again? Does that mean you want to lose a certain amount of weight? Does that mean you don't want to have excess skin or you don't want these stretch marks? What is it that you're really seeking when you say that you want your pre-baby body back? Do you want to feel independent and capable and all of these things?

I think that first things first. As fitness professionals, it's really important for us to empathize with where women are coming from, and to figure out what pre-baby body means to them because it might mean something different for everybody. And for women who have had children, and fitness professionals as well. I think it's really important for us to show realistic photos, for women who are comfortable showing their bodies, of what a post-baby body looks like because right now, for the most part, what we see are celebrities who have done everything in their power to whip themselves back into shape in four, six, eight weeks post pregnancy. They're rocking a six pack and a bikini on the beach in six weeks, and that's just not going to be realistic for most women.

I think women sharing photos of themselves or stories of what their postpartum journey was like is really important. I think the more different types of bodies that we see, the different shapes, sizes, ages, races, ability levels, all of these things. The more variety of bodies that we see, the more we can begin to appreciate all of these different postpartum bodies. Instead of seeing a really select number of celebrities who have, like I said, tried to whip themselves back into shape in four to six weeks. I think women seeing what's more common, or more normal, for a postpartum body is really helpful and goes a long way in helping women kind of give themselves a little bit of grace in terms of what their own personal postpartum journey looks like.

**Heba:** And it's not just the postpartum body. Your body has changed as soon as you've had children. It's not just in that first 8 weeks after birth. You're changed for life. Your body has changed. You've given birth. You've had this miraculous thing occur where you've given life.

So a lot of women do carry on these beliefs and these shames; all through motherhood well into their 30s, well into their 40s, well into their 50s even just right through. And they can really hold onto these things. And I think it's important that we start to change that language.

And yes, there are celebrities that come out looking like whatever it might be. A lot of fitness professional Instagrammers and so on that come out looking like how everything is back to normal.

But actually, what you see on the outside doesn't reflect what could be happening on the inside. So many of these women are secretly having pelvic floor dysfunction, and they don't even know it. Or they aren't communicating it. So many of these women might be having incontinence. If you're struggling with incontinence, or you're struggling with prolapse, or you have back or pelvic pain. So many of these women; just because they haven't said that they haven't doesn't mean that they don't.

Because we know realistically that pelvic floor dysfunction occurs in at least one in four women having some type of pelvic floor dysfunction. So celebrities and Instagrammers and all these women that you see out there straight after birth; they're not exempt from this either. It's just that we don't know what they're going through.

Before we finish up, you already talked about pelvic health. And pelvic health for me is really, really important, especially in pregnancy and in motherhood. One of the biggest takeaways that I want from this summit is that women start to look at their bodies in a holistic way. Look at everything that goes into living that healthy, happy, strong life. Looking at their fitness is definitely important. Looking at their nutrition. Looking at self-care, emotional health, all of it.

So pelvic health is definitely up there. And I just wanted to, before we finish up, talk a bit about why you are so passionate about that interdisciplinary approach where you're working with all these different specialists in different areas—pelvic health, nutrition and everything so that we can give women that best possible life. So why are you so passionate about that?

**Molly:** Yeah, absolutely. Again, my area of expertise is strength and conditioning, fitness training, and I've been in the industry for almost 14 years now. And I've begun to realize how important it is for health and fitness professionals, or personal trainers, to kind of stay within their scope of practice and their lane because there are so many other health and fitness professionals on a women's health care team that can tackle the other really critical parts of women's health.

So there's strength training. There's nutrition. There's like you said, psychological health. For me, going to therapy has been; when people ask

what the number one self-care thing I've ever done for myself is, it's going to therapy, no questions asked. I've been going for 8 or 9 years now. I went twice a week for long time, and then weekly. And I go about once or twice a month now. That's been really, really important for me. Again, those self-care practices. Having regular trips to other healthcare professionals like physios, chiropractors, OB/GYNs, internal medicine doctors. Things like that.

Women's health is about so much more than squats and carbs. Right? And that's what so many of us have been taught to boil it down to, when it has to do with our sleep, our self-care, our strength training, or exercise, or movement, our stress management. Getting enough sunshine. Positive interactions with friends and family. It has to do with sexual health. It has to do with so many other things.

So I feel like it's so critical for me, when we're putting information out on Girls Gone Strong or producing the certifications in our Coaching and Training Women Academy to have all of these incredible health care professionals work together to provide that interdisciplinary approach.

If we're going to educate a woman about pelvic organ prolapse, for example, can we get input from a psychologist, who can say, "Hey. This is probably the best way to deliver this type of information to this woman, in a way that helps her understand what it is, and that offers her the adequate support for the challenge that we're presenting her with."

If you're going to tell a woman that she has pelvic organ prolapse, how can you present the information and then make sure that you're explaining it to her adequately and also offering her the support that she needs for receiving that information?

There are so many different areas of health and fitness and so many different health and fitness professionals that can be part of a woman's health care team. I think it's really critical if we can all understand what our roles are, what our scope of practice is, and make sure that we're referring to one another.

If I have a client that has incontinence or pelvic pain, and the adjustments that I'm making to her exercise regimen aren't helping her feel better, then she probably needs to go see a physio. That's outside my scope of practice. She can come see you for X number of sessions, start feeling better, and then get referred back to me. So I think it's really critical for a woman's overall wellness

and long-term wellness to have a healthcare team that she's working with who understands all of the different aspects of her holistic health.

**Heba:** Absolutely. I completely ear you on that. I feel like it's true. We can give you as women the best possible life, healthier, stronger, happier if we all work together. And also you are your own advocate for your own health. So you know who can help you where because sometimes the first, after we give birth or in pregnancy, particularly in motherhood, we go and see our personal trainers. And our personal trainers are telling us to do all these exercises. And sometimes it's making some of our symptoms worse. Like maybe we're having a bit more back pain. We're having more incontinence. And sometimes we just push through it.

And sometimes, our personal trainers tell us, "Oh, that's normal. You've had a baby. Just keep going." And just come back into yourself and remember that it's not normal if you're having any discomfort or strange symptoms while you're working out. You can get it checked out. You can fix it. And a lot of it is just knowing how to exercise. A lot of it has to do is making sure that your pelvic floor is working well. And Molly, you advocate for that a lot. Making sure the pelvic floor is working while women are exercising.

**Molly:** Hmm-mm. And I love recommending that women go see pelvic health physiotherapists as kind of a first line of defense because in my experience, pelvic health physios—it's so clear to them when to refer to someone else like an OB/GYN, or a urogynecologist or something. But maybe the OB/GYN's and urogyn's and stuff aren't always referring to pelvic health physios when they could.

So from my perspective, I love sending women to physio first because we know that that's the first line of defense against a lot of these things. We know that incontinence and prolapse don't necessarily need surgery. It doesn't necessarily need these big interventions; these surgical interventions. When so much of what a physiotherapist could have a client or patient do can help ease their symptoms and help fix whatever is going on.

So for me, that's always my first line of defense, sending a woman to see a pelvic health physio because if a pelvic health physio isn't able to help that woman get the results that she wants, then they will refer out. Whereas some of the other medical professionals don't always—sometimes they're like, "I can fix this." And they don't always say, "Why don't you try this other treatment first, this more conservative treatment." So for me, I think that's super

important that women see pelvic health physios if they're having any kind of issues like that.

**Heba:** Absolutely. So yeah, working as a team is super important. Thanks so much, Molly. Honestly, this talk has been amazing. We've touched on so many important points from strength training to body shaming to working together as a team, which is super important. And so thanks so much for sharing all your wisdom with the women who are listening. I'm sure all the women who are listening are going to feel really empowered and become those advocates for their own health and fitness.

**Molly:** Well thank you so much for having me, Heba. I love that you put this summit on. I really appreciate you having me. And thanks again. We'll talk soon.

**Heba:** Thank you. So you're watching the pregnancy and motherhood summit, where we are trying to inspire you in pregnancy and all through motherhood, whether you're a new mom, a longtime mom, or a mom to be. So join us in the next interviews, as we explore other issues on nutrition, fitness, self-care, and more. Bye for now.