

Ep #14: Helping Your Children Grieve



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With Your Host

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[The Widowed Mom Podcast](#)

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Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, episode 14, Helping Your Children Grieve.

Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, the only podcast that offers a proven process to help you work through your grief to grow, evolve, and create a future you can actually look forward to. Here's your host, certified life coach, grief expert, widow, and mom, Krista St-Germain.

Hey there, welcome to this episode of the podcast. It feels like a hot minute since I recorded an episode. It's, of course, only been a week since an episode actually aired, but between the last time I recorded an episode and now, I took a lovely vacation to the Rocky Mountains in Colorado with my two children. My dad and stepmom have a cabin there and we went and stayed and it was amazing.

It was also, though, a little bit emotional. It kind of always is when I go there because the cabin and the Rocky Mountains were definitely my husband's favorite place to be on earth and we have a lot of memories there; a lot of memories of hiking in the mountains. Just a few weeks before he died, we hiked a 14-er, Mount Yale in the Collegiate Peaks area. And we just have a lot of good shared memories there, so always a lot of emotions that come up for me when I make that trip.

And what I have learned is that it's okay, that I can just allow all of those emotions to be there. I don't have to argue with them. I can just let them be part of my experience and then choose to think about all the things that make me smile while in there and tell stories about Hugo and think about the fond memories that we made there and enjoy that part of the trip too.

And then, of course, it actually just happened to be that on the day I was driving out there, there was the anniversary, the deathiversary, the day that Hugo had passed. And so, of course, the trip entails driving right by the

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spot on the interstate where the accident happened, which is another thing that I choose to make space for.

And this time it was interesting because, in past times, it's been a little bit worse than it was this time. I think this time it was easier because I've gotten in the habit of choosing to allow whatever feelings come up for me, trying not to control the outcomes so much, and just kind of making peace with the whole experience of it. And also this time, my stepmom was in the car with me and they were talking and it was the first time where I noticed that I actually passed that part of the highway without noticing that it was that part of the highway.

Even though I was ready for it and I was thinking about it, we got talking and I got a little involved in the conversation, and before I knew it, I kind of looked back and went, "Oh wow, so I guess I missed the part where we drive by the spot." So that was interesting.

But through all of it, you know, I'm learning that we just have to make space for whatever the emotions are and not judge ourselves, not expect too much of ourselves, and just decide, on purpose, to be okay with it. So that's what I've been up to.

Kids are back in school. We're back in the school routine, and today I want to talk to you about how to help your kids while they're grieving. Before I do that, though, I want to read a couple of listener reviews. Still doing the contest for the \$100 Amazon gift cards, so if you have not submitted your review, there's still plenty of time. Just go to coachingwithkrista.com/podcastlaunch and that's where you'll find all of the information about how you can enter that competition for a chance to win.

The two reviews that I want to read today, one is from someone who calls themselves JMGMModelStudent and it reads, "I've listened to all the episodes of Krista's podcast and have gotten tremendous value from her

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teachings in grief. I'm not a widowed mom, but I've experienced heart-wrenching grief with my daughter and Krista's teaching and models have helped me to be the heroine of my life." Yes, I love that.

Somebody sent me an email not too long ago and said, "Why do you call this podcast *the Widowed Mom Podcast*? Because it really is so applicable to all types of grief..." And it's very true, it is applicable to all types of grief. So it's nice to know that even non-widows are benefiting from the podcast.

The next review is from someone who identifies as EYDHHR and it reads, "This podcast is great. Krista validates everything I've been thinking and feeling regarding the loss of my husband 14 months ago. She gives great reminders that we are in charge of our thoughts and feelings, so we're allowed to be happy but also allowed to fall apart guilt-free." Yes, yes, yes.

I really do appreciate when you take time to submit a review, not just for me, although I'm not going to lie, my ego loves reading these, but not just for me. It's really so much more about searchability and getting the podcast such that other people who can benefit from it can find it and to make those little algorithms happy. So, thanks for those of you who have done that. I would appreciate it if you haven't yet.

Alright, we are going to talk about helping your children grieve. The reason I'm doing this episode – well, there's quite a few reasons – but I get a lot of questions about how to help children who are grieving. It is, of course, the common parental experience to want the best for our kids. We wanted the best for our kids before our spouse died. It was challenging then. And of course, now the challenge has completely changed.

And I've noticed in my clients especially, so much more doubt and so much more worry on a level that is just so much greater than ever before that they're doing it wrong. We are all in completely new territory and parenting without our person, frankly, feels awful. It was not at all what we planned,

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and so often I see self-doubt and overwhelm and worry and stress and anxiety on entirely new levels as it relates to parenting.

Plus, we are trying to grieve, which is new to us. And we're simultaneously trying to help our children grieve, whether they're little or grown. It can feel like a bit of the blind leading the blind. We've never done this before, they've never done this before. And we put so much pressure on ourselves that we have to do it right. And I see a lot of angst and anxiety.

In fact, I was just coaching a client yesterday and one of the things she said was, you know, "I just feel like her life has already been so hard anyway that I'm afraid I'm going to make it harder if I don't do it right, if I don't parent right."

So if any of those things are familiar to you, you're not alone. This is common. So it's no wonder that the title of this episode probably appealed to you.

So I'm going to get into some more kind of tactical things for you to think about in supporting your children as they grieve, but I also want to offer you some bigger picture thoughts. And the first one I want to offer you is to just relax a little bit.

The mere fact that you are listening to this episode, even to this podcast, is evidence that you care deeply about your children. Maybe you have one, maybe you have more. Maybe they're little, maybe they're grown, it doesn't matter.

But if you're telling yourself you're doing a terrible job, stop it. It isn't helping you do a better job. And let's be honest, the parents who are doing a "Terrible job" probably aren't looking for resources on how to help their children, right? But here you are, trying to do the best that you can do, trying to educate yourself. So I just encourage you to relax a little bit and

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know that, just by showing up, just by looking for answers, that already tells me so much about how lucky your child is to have you as their parent.

Also, I want to remind you that children are so much more resilient than we give them credit for, especially with the right support. And current research shows that bereaved youth usually go on to lead very productive lives. Now, of course, they don't do that in a vacuum. They need support, but it really doesn't serve you or your children to think of them as fragile beings who you need to walk on eggshells around or who you can mess up. Because thinking that will just make you nervous or anxious or worried and we are not at our best when we're parenting from nervousness or anxiousness or worry, so remember that children are so much more resilient than we often think that they are.

I also want to offer, because I see this time and time again in my clients, it's so easy to think your children should be your number one priority, but this really isn't true. Your number one priority must be your own mental and physical wellbeing. It is only when you are physically well that you can take care of your children.

It is actually a disservice to put your children's needs above your own. That's playing a short-term game. We want to play the long game. And I know you've heard this before, but you cannot pour from an empty cup. The flight attendants had it right when they told us that we have to put our oxygen mask on ourselves first. So I want to remind you to do what you need to do to take care of the most important resource your children now have; that's you.

We also seem to live under a little bit of an illusion that we know best for our children and how their lives should go. And I'm not saying that we don't have more awareness of what our children need than most people because they spend so much time with us, but I just want to caution you here.

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When we tell ourselves that we know how our children's lives should go, we don't. We kind of live under that same illusion that we know how our lives should go, but we don't. And how do we know that we don't know what's best for our lives and what's best for our children's lives? Because they never match up.

What we think should happen is so often not what happens. And then we want to argue about it and we want to argue that it should have been different than it was, but it wasn't. So maybe we want to let go of that idea that we know exactly how our children's lives are supposed to be when we notice that they aren't going as we thought they should have gone.

I don't know about you, but I know for sure that it's true for me that when I look back at my life, some of the things that while I was experiencing them were the very most painful turned out to be key steppingstones, pivotal moments, key factors in making me more resilient and more self-aware and more in touch with my priorities. And they taught me and shaped me and made me who I am today. And I can look back on them now and see who I became because of those experiences, even though at the time they were painful and I was thinking it shouldn't be happening, of course I would be thinking that, right? Of course, you're thinking that about your children's lives and your own.

But fast forward, your future self now has a perspective that's different than the one you have right now. She looks back on your life and she sees it from a different lens. She sees how necessary it was for you to go through what you went through so you could be who you are right now.

You have that same perspective now on what's happened in the past. It's entirely available to have the perspective that what's happening now you will someday look back on and realize that you don't really know how it was supposed to go, but you see how what you went through made you who you are. And I want to invite you to consider what it would be like if you

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could just let go of your expectations for how your children's emotional experience should play out. It's so freeing to do that.

So, so, so often I have clients tell me that they think their job is to make their children feel better. I bet you've thought that too; I just want them to feel better. And I want to tell you, the thought that my job is to make my children feel better seems noble, it seems useful, it seems like something lots of other people would agree with. But I want to tell you, it is a bear. Your job is not to make your children feel better. Your job is to love your children, to parent and make decisions from a place of love.

We think that we have the ability to make our children feel better, but we don't. And the reason for that is because emotions are caused by the way people think. Your emotions are caused by your thoughts and your children's emotions are caused by their thoughts. And that's why everyone in your family is having a different emotional response at any given time.

They're thinking different thoughts and you can't control their thoughts, unless you have magical powers. And in that case, please call me, I'd like to chat.

Remind yourself, you are not a wizard. And when you tell yourself your job is to make your children feel better, you just create an unwinnable desire because you can't make them feel better. We also think that feeling better should be the goal, that emotions are problems. They aren't. There's nothing wrong with emotions. Your children are supposed to have every emotion that they have. You are supposed to have every emotion that you have.

How do we know this? Because it's what you have. And to argue with the emotions that your children are experiencing is like arguing with an emotion that you're experiencing. It doesn't work. And what it actually does is, instead of making our children or ourselves more capable of changing our

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emotional state, when we argue with emotions and tell ourselves they shouldn't be there, we actually make ourselves less capable of change and we create more negative emotion. So arguing with emotions, wishing they weren't there, telling ourselves that something is wrong because they're there or something's wrong with us, something has gone wrong, just perpetuates the emotions and creates additional negative emotion.

So if we want to help our children feel better, first we have to learn to stop resisting our own emotions, to stop judging them. We have to learn to feel our own feelings so that we can set the example and show our children how to do the same.

If you haven't listened to episode three, How to Feel Better Now, go back and take a listen to that one because this is what I'm talking about. When you can help learn to feel your own feelings through the process I taught you in that episode, then you can assist your children in that same process. And you have to lead by example here because how you deal with your own emotions shows your children how to deal with theirs.

And the more you learn this skill then the more you'll be able to create an environment where emotions are okay to be felt around others. When you feel your emotions, you don't hide them from your children, then what you're telling them is that it's okay to feel how you feel, that you don't need to go and be somewhere alone, that you can do this in front of others, that there's nothing wrong with feelings.

Everything that applies to your grief, it's useful to think about how it applies to your children's grief. Each grief experience is unique; just like yours is unique, so is theirs. And the emotions that they feel may be very different than the emotions that you feel. The timelines in which they process the loss might not match yours.

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So if you notice yourself wanting to judge your child's "Progress" or perceived lack of progress, resist that urge. Notice how unhelpful it is when you judge your own progress or when you notice other people judging you, thinking your child should be somewhere other than where they are doesn't help them and it doesn't help you. And the same things that you don't want to hear as you grieve, your children don't want to hear either.

If you wouldn't want someone to say it to you, don't say it to your kids. Notice the times when other well-meaning people want to dismiss or minimize your emotions, and notice how you probably have the tendency to do the same thing. We all do as humans.

We think that if our children feel better, then we can feel better. So notice when you want to make them feel better so you can feel better. You probably don't want someone to tell you that your husband's in a better place or offer you a cliché or platitude, and it really can be tempting sometimes to say that to our kids, you know, "Dad's in a better place now."

You wouldn't want someone to say that to you because you don't like how it feels to have your emotions minimized or the situation dismissed, and kids don't like it either. So instead of minimizing or dismissing, I encourage you to just embrace the suck. Like, really, sometimes it just sucks and that's part of the death of someone that we love.

But we can get through that. We can feel all of those feelings. We're strong enough to do that and so are our children. And that's the message that is most useful to your children, is to help them understand that any feeling they feel is valid, even when it feels terrible, and that you understand and you're there for them and you're going to get through it. And allow them to express those emotions in whatever way is useful to them.

Some children don't have the vocabulary to express how they feel, so some benefit from different things than others. Keep going until you find

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what your child needs, if your child needs something extra. Maybe they need art therapy or maybe they need some sort of grief support.

I had a client tell me that she and her son pounded bags of – I don't know if it was bags of flour in the backyard, but you know, just expressed some of that emotion physically, just released it together. And there's a lot of opportunities for ways that you can offer them the opportunity to express emotions in other ways besides using words because, sometimes, depending on where they are or what they're thinking, or maybe even their age or developmental stage, they just might not have the words for what they're feeling and what they're thinking and what has happened.

And just like I have told you how important it is for you to make time for yourself, to rejuvenate, to relax, make sure that you see this same benefit for your children. Make time for play for your children. We benefit from intentional distraction from our grief, and so do they. And play cannot be absent from a child's life. It needs to be there.

Also, children benefit from predictability, so keep routines going in effort to provide that security that comes with routine. Of course, I think flexibility is also your friend here. Find the balance between keeping routines but being flexible. And remember that children often feel very out of control following a loss.

So allowing children to make choices might be helpful. Depending on their age, you might want to give them options, so would you like to do this or that or go here or there or eat this or that? You get to decide, but just know that routine feels secure to most children. Choices can be a way in which they can exercise their own control when they're feeling so out of control.

Another thing I see – and I've got a couple more before we wrap up here – is, oftentimes of course, a child, depending on their age, could be very, very worried that you will die. They've lost one parent and now they're

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worried about the other one. And I want to caution against what I see sometimes, which is people making promises that you won't die. And that's just not fair.

It's amazing to express your love for your child and let them know that others love them and other people are there for them too, but to say, you know, "I'll never let that happen," or, "You don't have to worry about that, mommy's not going anywhere," it's untrue. And it's much more fair to tell a child that, "I don't think that's going to happen, I'll do everything to make sure it doesn't, but regardless, you're going to be okay. You've got lots of people who love you." It's a much more fair thing to say.

I've taught you that there are no rights or wrongs with grief, but there definitely are helpful and unhelpful choices that can be made. So if you suspect unhelpful choices, like alcohol or substance abuse or self-harm, cutting, promiscuity, risky behaviors, maybe withdrawal from social settings, any of the types of numbing behaviors that you might see adults do can also be common with children, especially with adolescents. So when in doubt, trust your mommy gut and ask a mental health professional. Reach out.

Lastly, I want you to think about it this way; you have probably figured out already that your own grief isn't something that's really ever going to end. It's going to change over time, for sure. And you're going to experience it differently as you go through your life. But it's now part of the fabric of who you are. And the same is true for your children.

So, depending on the age of your child, as your child ages and passes through those various stages of life, stages of development, they will likely have different thoughts and different feelings about the loss. So remind yourself that there is no end point or goal line to cross for you or your children. And you will help your child navigate each new life experience, and the loss may show up some times more than others or in different

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ways as they grow. It will always be there, and that's okay. You're both on a grief journey.

It sounds a little cliché, but it's true. You're both walking this walk and the best way to do that is to walk next to your children in that journey. You don't have to have all the answers, how could you? You don't have to take away the pain. That's not possible. That's not your role.

Your job is to love them, to support them, and to just keep showing up every day as best as you can and taking good, good care of the most important resource your child has, which is you.

I want to give you a couple of resources. My favorites, if you're looking for more information, there are so many more granular and tactical types of information out there that you can find, right? I couldn't possibly read all of that to you, but I want to point you toward two of what I believe are really good resources. Probably my favorite is the National Center for Grieving Children and Families. Their website is dougy.org.

They have a wonderful podcast that I would encourage you to listen to. It's called Grief Out Loud. We'll make sure that we link to their website and that podcast in the show notes. It's not just for children. It's for families too, but some amazing resources on their website, some amazing tip sheets that I think are very useful. And so I would encourage you to check them out. Also, the National Center for Grieving Children, their website is childrengrieve.org – another great resource for you.

So I hope that's useful to you. I want to remind you again, relax a little bit. Of course you are doubting yourself. Of course, you want what's best for your children. That's normal. That's to be expected. So show yourself some grace, show yourself some love. Remind yourself that you're an imperfect human doing the best job she knows how to do, even if some days you fall terribly short of your own expectations, keep going.

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Alright, if you forget it, you can email me. I'll remind you that you're amazing and worthy and lovable and all the things. Alright, so I love you, you've got this, I'll see you on the next episode. Take care.

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of *The Widowed Mom Podcast*. If you like what you've heard and want to learn more, head over to coachingwithkrista.com.