

Ep #8: Post-Traumatic Growth



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[The Widowed Mom Podcast](#)

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Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, episode eight, Post-Traumatic Growth.

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 everybody. Welcome back to the podcast. I'm excited about this one. I remember the first time I heard post-traumatic growth, the term. I had never heard it before and it was kind of that moment when the record stops, that scratch, and you turn your head and go, what? Post-traumatic what?

I knew about post-traumatic stress, but I had never heard the term post-traumatic growth. And I wonder if you've heard it. Maybe you have, and in that case, I'll give you some more helpful information about it that you probably didn't know. And maybe you haven't, and in that case, you're going to learn something entirely new and incredibly useful to you as someone who has gone through grief.

Okay, before we jump into that though, you know I love a listener shout-out. I am still running the fun competition to celebrate the launch of the podcast where I'm giving away five \$100 Amazon gift cards, and you can find out how you can register for that by going to coachingwithkrista.com/podcastlaunch. All the details are there.

So today I want to read a review from a listener who calls themselves Pho37. I assume that means pho, in which case, it actually is dinner time and I'm kind of hungry. So Pho37, if you are a pho lover, we are friends. We were meant to be friends. So you wrote, "I'm so glad that you have started these because this is what we need to help us through this journey of being widows and creating a new future. Krista has been a live saver

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and just what I needed. I hope others will listen and benefit from her insight."

Thank you so much for that. It really helps people find this podcast when you take the time to rate and review it, so if you love the podcast or if you're getting some use out of it, please rate and review and share it with others so they can get some use too. Alright, let's talk about post-traumatic growth because maybe you know about it, maybe you don't.

The reason you might never have heard about it is because it wasn't something that was really even coined until the mid-90s. The phrase didn't even exist until the mid-90s. There were two specific researchers, of course there are many more who have now started researching post-traumatic growth, but two clinical researchers by the name of Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun coined the phrase in the mid-90s.

And they were basically trying to describe what they were studying, which is how trauma can sometimes be the springboard to greater wellbeing. Post-traumatic growth is the idea that it is possible to grow from trauma. It's the idea that one can not only bounce back to normal after experiencing trauma, but that we can actually bounce forward because of the trauma. And not in spite of it, but because of it, which I find completely fascinating and so useful.

So let's first talk about what is trauma and then we'll talk more about post-traumatic growth. So the first thing I want you to know is that trauma is subjective. Our experience of trauma is completely unique to the individual. What is traumatic to one person is not necessarily traumatic to another. So we want to avoid making blanket statements about what constitutes a traumatic event and what doesn't.

In fact, in the early 80s, when the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder was introduced into the DSM, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, which

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is basically the bible of mental health diagnoses. When it was introduced, PTSD into the DSM, the definition of what kind of event could cause trauma was quite specific.

At the time, it was thought that a trauma-inducing event was an event that was outside of the normal human experience that would cause distress to most people. But since then, we've changed our definition of what constitutes trauma, and trauma is now thought of as largely dependent upon the person's perception of even the actual event itself.

Case in point, the loss of my husband and the car accident and the way that he died was very traumatic to me. I think it would have been traumatic to me even if it hadn't been a car accident though. Obviously, people die every day and as humans, we know that death is a part of our life experience, and yet bereavement, death is one of the common causes of symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress.

So it's less useful to think about an event as traumatic because an event in and of itself may not affect everyone the same way. Even something that we might classify as a happy or desired event can be the source of trauma for some people. Childbirth for example, this has been studied. And for some, childbirth is traumatic. And after giving birth, some women end up with symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

Now, how can that be? This is one of the things I'm going to talk a lot about in podcasts, which is the idea that there are things that happen in the world, they're just part of the human experience, and they really don't mean anything until the human they happen to has a thought about that. And the thought, the interpretation that we as humans have about the events that happened to us are what create our experience of those events.

Our thoughts and our perceptions about what happened are what create our emotional experience of these events. And trauma is no different. So

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there are events in the world, and depending on how we think about them, perceive them, experience them, which is completely individual, that will determine whether or not the event is considered traumatic because everyone perceives an event and its meaning just a little bit differently, and that's okay.

So we don't need to think about this type of event being traumatic and that type of event not being traumatic. We just need to know that we as the individual, based on how we choose to see or perceive something that has happened to us may experience trauma where someone else would not, or may not experience trauma where someone else would. It's not right or wrong. It's not good or bad. It just is.

So, further to that, trauma is definitely something that is unexpected, uncontrollable, unpredictable, but yet a part of life. Trauma has its root in the Greek word meaning wound, and originally, it was thought that that reference to wound meant a physical one, but over time, it's acquired the association with a psychological wound as well.

Trauma is also something that is inevitable. It's just a part of life. Researchers have estimated that 75% of people experience some form of trauma in their lifetime. Maybe it's the loss of a loved one, which is probably why you're listening to this podcast. Maybe it's watching a loved one suffer. It's being diagnosed with an illness, going through divorce or separation, or going through an accident or an assault or a financial disaster, environmental disaster.

All of these types of things, again, depending on how the individual responds to them can be considered trauma. I've read some articles that suggest that one person out of every five in a given year will have an event in their life that is potentially traumatic. So those numbers are high, and what that tells us is that as humans, trauma is going to be part of our lives.

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So if you started this episode and you wondered, have I been through something traumatic? I'm going to guess the answer is yes, but really only you know, and it isn't dependent upon the type of event or thing that has happened in your life, as much as it is how you responded to that event. Again, no right or wrong.

And I also get asked by my clients, by other widows that I interact with, when we're talking about post-traumatic growth, they want to know well, I don't think that I have experienced the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, so does that mean I don't qualify for post-traumatic growth? And the answer to that is no. You don't have to have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder to grow as a result of something that you would consider traumatic that's happened in your life.

But at the same time, post-traumatic growth is not likely going to result from just any sort of upsetting event. Tedeschi, the researcher that I mentioned earlier refers to the types of events that often result in post-traumatic growth as seismic. Things that shake you to your core. He says, "Growth is a rethinking. A reassessment of yourself and the world. You don't need to go through that if everything still makes sense to you. If a person is like a building built to a high standard to withstand an earthquake, if the quake comes and the building is still standing, you're okay. But if the building suffers damage, it has to be rebuilt, and the rebuilding is the growth."

And then he goes on to say, "The challenge is to see the opportunity presented by this seismic event. In the aftermath of the earthquake, why not build something better. Don't just live beneath the rubble. Don't just build the same crappy building that you had before," says Tedeschi. "I think we can do better than that."

I love this. Now, that's not to imply that before your husband died, your life was crappy. I don't think that's what he's saying. I don't think he's saying that anything was crappy before this event happened that we experienced

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as traumatic. I think what he's saying is any time we are so shaken, so fundamentally shaken, our identity is challenged, life as we knew it is challenged, our whole perspective about who we are, what's important, how we want to live, any time that is challenged, we have an opportunity to reassess.

We have an opportunity to really stop living on autopilot and really take stock of what it is we want to get out of this life and rebuild something, if we're going to rebuild, we might as well rebuild with intention, rebuild with the vision of exactly what it is that we want to create for ourselves and live into.

The research that Calhoun and Tedeschi did I find just so fascinating as a widow in that one of the first groups that they studied was widows. And actually, they didn't even start out to study post-traumatic growth. They started studying it long before they coined it. They were just simply interested in taking a different approach to what they had been studying in the past.

One of them had already received his tenure, the other one was about to, and they kind of got together and decided it would be really interesting to talk to "old" people. And just ask them, what have you learned from life that's useful? And what would you like to pass on to others? And so that's what they did, and the first group that they started researching was a group of widows.

And it wasn't anything elaborate, there weren't detailed questionnaires or scales or models. It was really just conversation and listening. And so they asked these women who were older widows, probably 50 or older about their experience and what it was like to lose their husbands. And they were told that many of them said they would cry still every night and they would wake up in the middle of the night and think that they had just heard their husband put his keys in the door.

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But then also, not only were they talking about the sadness and the loneliness and the things that they were experiencing that were "negative" with their husbands' death, but at the same time they were also talking about things that had changed for the better. Ways in which losing their husbands had helped them see how strong they were.

Some of them were having more social experiences, they were valuing things differently, they were growing closer to their children and their family. Some of them were getting driver's licenses after having lived a whole life of never driving, and now had the independence of driving.

So, after studying widows, then they started talking to other people, and they talked with groups of people who had been disabled or who had suffered a major illness or some sort of accident. And they talked with people who had been drug abusers or were paralyzed, and they were consistently intrigued and surprised by what they perceived as positive benefits coming out of events that would be typically classified as negative.

Eventually, they figured out a method to quantify the research that they were doing, and what they learned was that there were basically five different areas that the subjects they were studying were experiencing growth in. And they were increased inner strength, an openness to new possibilities in life, closer and often deeper relationships with friends and family, an enhanced appreciation of life, and a stronger sense of spirituality.

I don't know about you, but the first time I read that list, I thought absolutely. If there is one thing that has happened to me since my husband died, it is an increase in inner strength. I don't know if it made me stronger or if I just realized how strong I truly am, but I absolutely feel stronger than I ever have because I have so much evidence that I can truly do hard things. That a situation can be put in front of me and I can rise to the occasion.

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Now, that might be after crumbling to pieces, but I rise, and I bet you do too. Certainly, I'm more open to possibilities in life now, I value my relationships with friends and family so much more, I think because even though I feel like I knew life was short before Hugo died, there was something about the actual accident and his death that just made it hit home for me on a level it had never hit home on before.

Even when I've lost other people in my life, for some reason, this time I really, really see how short life is and I appreciate it so much more. So those things absolutely seemed very close to my experience, and I wonder if they're close to yours. Now, if they're not, that doesn't mean anything. The purpose of this episode is not to tell you that you should be growing as a result of anything.

No, no, growth is always a choice. Growth is always your option and it is not morally right or wrong. It just is an option. So please don't hear me say that you should be experiencing growth if you haven't.

It was also good timing at the time, late 80s, early 90s that Tedeschi and Calhoun were starting to study post-traumatic growth, even before they called it that in that what was happening in the world of psychology was kind of starting to switch gears a little bit. So for a long time, it was kind of not fashionable to study positive change.

People who were studying things related to psychology were much more focused on dysfunction, and that makes sense because a clinician is largely seeing people who are experiencing dysfunction, disease. And so it would make sense that their goal would be to get them from dysfunction to function, from a negative five to a zero. And it really wasn't until the last few decades that we actually started thinking about studying how do we get people from zero to a plus five. How do we work on functioning and move from functioning to thriving?

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But in the late 90s, we started thinking about things a little bit differently, and a new area of psychology was starting to get some traction. Scientists started paying attention to understanding what leads to happiness, what leads to fulfillment, what actually makes a rewarding life. And positive psychology was that study.

For a while, when I heard the term positive psychology, my assumption was that it was about thinking positively and finding happy thoughts and just happy, happy, happy, and trying to avoid the negative side or that life should only be positive and that that was the goal. And what I have learned since then is that that's not at all what positive psychology is about.

What it's really about is acknowledging that life does consist of the highs and the lows, and we want to understand how those two things work together. And before positive psychology, it was kind of assumed that basically, the goal was not to suffer, that in the absence of suffering, that's the space that we want to be in. But really, the absence of suffering, again, that just takes us from minus five to zero.

Wellbeing is certainly more than the absence of suffering, and at that point, we weren't really researching what constituted wellbeing. What led to true happiness? Not let's ignore the negative parts of life, let's figure out how do we take into account that the negative will happen, the positive will happen, and find that balance. And so with positive psychology, we have new things coming to the forefront related to the quality of our life and emotional intelligence.

And so it was great timing that post-traumatic growth had recently been named, and so I think it's really interesting how the timing of post-traumatic growth and positive psychology and just these shifts in the way that we think about wellbeing came together. That isn't to say though that the idea of transformation after loss was new in that point in time. It just hadn't been studied yet.

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If you go back and think about the great stories that you've read, movies that you've seen, and I mean we can go all the way back to Homer and the Odyssey. All the way back then, and as current as any Disney movie you've ever seen, usually has the theme of loss and transformation. In fact, you might not know this, but the idea of the hero's journey is actually a very common archetype for writing, especially in movies.

Someone named Joseph Campbell is kind of given credit for studying myths of cultures around the world and then documenting the themes hidden in those stories, and basically the idea is that the hero's journey is the protagonist leaving his or her home, oftentimes with the destruction of said home, and then the hero has some series of challenges, usually traumatic or violent, sometimes they take a trip to some sort of underworld, they often encounter a mentor along the way, and then at the end of the journey, the hero returns home and they have avenged the wrongs and they are now changed and enlightened.

Does this sound familiar? I want you to think about pretty much any movie, Harry Potter, The Matrix, Spiderman, Lion King, Lord of the Rings, Star Wars. Luke Skywalker was just a farmer. He was kind of bored living on Tatooine, wishing for something new, and then he gets a call to adventure. R2-D2 gives Luke a message from Princess Leia and she's asking Obi-Wan Kenobi to help her. He gets the call.

But then, he doesn't go because his uncle tells him that he shouldn't go and so he's kind of reluctant to go, but then what happens? His family gets killed. So he accepts the offer, he meets his teacher, Obi-Wan, and on and on. Basically, this loss and transformation theme in Moses and the Buddha, throughout all of our myths and even in our popular culture, it's not new. It just hadn't been studied.

So what does all of this mean for you? I think post-traumatic growth tell us that it's possible that even though we've gone through struggles or are still

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going through struggles, even though we've encountered adversity because adversity is part of our human experience, that we can come out stronger on the other side with a new philosophy on life.

Victor Frankl wrote, "When we're no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves." And of course, we don't have to, but it's our option. Every week I'm on the phone doing consultation calls with women who are interested in coaching with me one-on-one, and what I hear them say time and time again is that they know they want better for themselves, but they don't know how to get it.

They want to move past the things that hold them back and they just need some help. They just need some tools. And they realize more than they ever have before that life is precious. They know what's important to them and they're ready to create the next chapter of life and just looking for support because something has happened that they cannot change, and so they are challenged to change themselves, and this is the essence of post-traumatic growth.

This is why I coach widowed moms to help them grow in this way. So remember, trauma is uniquely individual. What one finds traumatic may not be traumatic to another. And our goal doesn't just have to be to return to our normal baseline. That would be just moving from a negative five to a zero. That would be moving from dysfunction to function.

And if what we went through shook our entire foundation, then it's probably time to recalibrate. Why not move from surviving to thriving if it's our option? Not everyone will grow from trauma, but for most of us, the opportunity is presenting itself. And of course, depending on where you are in response to your loss, you may have some basic needs to meet before you turn your thoughts towards growth, and that's okay.

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We need to make sure that you're getting the help you need if you need help. Whether it's medical or legal or psychological, we need you to be eating well and getting enough sleep and figuring out how to function before we consider growth. But once those bases are covered, growth is possible. And hopefully, it's part of a greater and never-ending journey in your life.

So I hope you enjoyed learning about post-traumatic growth. I'm glad to have you listening and I wish you a fantastic week. Remember, I love you and you've got this. I'll see you next time. 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.