

Ep #47: Why We Numb and How to Stop (Part Two)



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With Your Host

Krista St-Germain

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Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, episode 47, Why We Numb and How to Stop, Part Two.

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 back to another episode of the podcast. We're going to talk more about why we numb and how to stop today. We're going to get into part two. And this, quite frankly, is about the third time I have recorded this little intro. But I'm not going to rerecord it anymore. Whatever happens in the background is just going to be a window for you into my life, which probably like yours means right now that it's a weekday and my kids aren't at school

Well, actually, my kids are at school, but school is now in my house. And so, there are kid noises in the house that aren't usually here when I'm recording a podcast. So, sorry not sorry. Listen, we're all in this together. It's weird, I know. We've had school cancelled in the state of Kansas since mid-March. Our governor just said, "Hey, we're out, we're done."

And I kind of appreciated that because it helps me plan. I know, for the rest of the country, it seemed to kind of roll out just a little bit more gradually. But anyway, you might hear kids in the background. That's just where we are. All the more reasons that a lot of us are having feelings right now that we might want to numb and get away from. And so, we're going to talk about all of that today.

I also wanted to give you just a little bit of an update on my dating, the boyfriend, because I told you that I would. I'm much better about doing that in email, so if you're following me on my email list, some of this you might

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already know. But there's nothing like a pandemic to add a really interesting element to dating.

So, I started dating in early February and it was before all of this Covid-19 stuff blossomed. I don't know if that's really the word that is most accurately describing what has happened, but we'll just go with it. So, we started dating and going out on what would be considered normal traditional dates; restaurants and public outings and such.

And then the world kind of shut down, which has been fascinating because it's limited the types of things that we can do. And it's made us think much more creatively about how we can date. But it's also really sped up the speed at which we've been dating.

So, we went from normal life, with kids that have activities and vacations planned and, you know, things that were already on our schedules, to none of it. His trip to go see his parents over spring break got cancelled because of the Coronavirus and my daughter's trip to Denver for her big volleyball tournament got cancelled and then all of the volleyball tournaments got cancelled, all the practices got cancelled. No school, no music, no activities, no track, no anything.

Everything just got cancelled, which means our schedules just completely freed up. So, it's been really kind of fun, in a way, because we've had so much time to invest. And we've just kind of decided that while we are doing social distancing with other people and not really going anywhere – I haven't been to a store in three weeks. I don't even know. It feels like forever.

But you know, all the groceries are being ordered online and it's really just only as needed, truly needed shopping, as opposed to just going out and doing things. But we decided that our social circles would be me, him, his kids, and my kids. So, basically six of us. And that's it.

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So, we have spent a lot of time together and done a lot of things around the house and projects and cooking and boardgames and all kinds of stuff. But it's been really fun, and there is no one that I'd rather be experiencing a pandemic with. So, I'm so glad that we met before this all started.

And I just want to encourage you, because I have a few clients that are dating right now and are starting to date right now, even in the middle of this pandemic. If you're having thoughts that you can't date because of Covid-19, that's not true. It's not true at all.

In fact, if you open your mind up a little bit and you decide to see it creatively, you might find that now is the best time to get to know someone that there has ever been because people have more time to invest. You don't actually need to see someone in person to get to know them. You can just spend more time having conversation and getting to know who they really are and what they want and what's important to them.

And so much of that can be done through technology or online. And if you're in the early stages of a relationship, be creative in the way that you spend time together. That's what we're doing. It's been a lot of fun. It's been interesting. I can't wait to share more of it as it unfolds. But anyway, that's what's going on with my life, maybe more than you wanted to know.

Okay, so listen, let's talk about numbing. I want you to be reminded first that I am not a medical doctor and this is not medical advice. So, if you identify as an alcoholic or a drug addict or you're struggling with any sort of compulsive behavior in the clinical sense, then I want you to seek help from a licensed medical professional. So, there's my little disclaimer.

And if you are jumping into this episode and you have not listened to part one, please go back and listen because, in part one, we discussed what numbing is, why we do it, and I asked you some important questions. They build on one another. So, I don't want you to listen to this episode until

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you've listened to part one. So, it's okay if you need to push pause and go back and listen to part one and answer the questions there, learn what you can there, and then come back.

So, I'm going to assume, if you're still here, that you have listened to part one. And you'll recall that, at the end of that episode, I asked you to think about numbing, which of course is any behavior that we use to escape an emotion that we don't want to feel. Remember, it's not good or bad. It's not right or wrong. It's just the design of our most primitive brain at work, helping us get away from feelings that we perceive as icky, undesirable, by dulling them down.

And we do this with substances. We do it with behaviors, like shopping, or new relationships. A lot of us are doing it with social media right now, Netflix binges, distracting ourselves with any sort of project, or even sleep, trying to use sleep to numb the feelings so that we don't have to feel, or exercising so that we don't have to feel. There's lots of ways to do it.

So, at the end of the last episode, I asked you to make a list of what you're doing to numb. And once you did that, I asked you to think about the impact of each of those behaviors on your life so that you could determine what changes you actually want to make.

Do you want to keep doing any of these things? And to what extent? Maybe you want to stop doing something entirely. Maybe you want to keep doing it, but do it less. But I asked you to think those things through. So, hopefully you know the answers to those questions. If not, pause and answer those questions.

And I also asked you to consider whether you were feeling shame or judgment around any of those behaviors. And I want to promise you that if you are, you're not going to make a lot of progress until we clean that up, until we get rid of the thoughts, the way that you're thinking about those

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behaviors that is creating shame or judgment for you. And I don't say that to make you feel bad. I just have to be honest.

We don't make a lot of change when we're in shame or judgment. It's just a total change-blocker. So, if that's something that you need help with, we're going to want to address that first. So, I'm going to assume that you've already released that shame, you've already released that judgment, if you were experiencing it in the first place.

And this is something that's probably not going to be solved in a podcast. Of course, these are the kinds of things that I coach on all the time, so come to me, I'll help you if you're still stuck in shame or judgment.

Alright, so moving on, now that you know what you're doing, what the impact on your life is, and you've given serious consideration to whether or not you want to keep the activity and to what extent, we want to decide and become aware of what are the emotions that you're trying to escape in the first place? What are the emotions, the feelings that you're trying to numb out on? What do you want to get away from?

It's going to be different for every person, but it's really important that you understand for you what the emotions are that you're trying to get away from with these behaviors. So, it might be overwhelm. A lot of us right now are feeling very overwhelmed.

Dealing with the kids all day, there's not the same amount of time that there used to be for us, and what time there used to be for us might not have even been very much, let's be honest. But a lot of us are trying to manage schooling from home, work from home. We're just in new uncertain territory. And that may be complicated with grief in the background.

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So, it could just be overwhelm from grief. But I'm guessing, if you're anything like a lot of the women that I'm helping every day, you've got some overwhelm happening with the pandemic.

Maybe you're trying to escape loneliness. You don't want to feel that. Maybe it's sadness. For me, hopelessness was one of the ones I was trying to get away from, boredom sometimes, and we probably have a lot of opportunities to experience boredom right now.

Maybe it's stress. Maybe it's anger. Maybe it's guilt, resentment. I don't know what it is. Do you know what it is? That's what matters. Look at the activity that you wrote down, the one that you want to change, the one that you either want to get rid of or you want to do less of. And ask yourself, what is the feeling I'm feeling that I don't want to feel? What am I used this activity to get away from?

And you have to know what that is first. So, do you know? If you don't, I want you to push pause and I want you to think about it and come back to me when you do, okay. So, figure out what the emotions are.

There might be more than one emotion that you're trying to get away from. This is not something that has to be an exact science, but I do want you to give some consideration to what it is that you really don't want to feel because, guess what, in order to stop the behavior, in order to change, we're going to have to be willing to feel. You might not like that answer, but I'm just being honest with you.

So, now you have it. What is the emotion I'm trying to escape? Emotion or emotions, okay. Now, remember, emotions – and I use that word interchangeably with the word feelings – are just vibrations in our body caused by our thinking. They're really nothing more than that.

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So, when we do this work, it's important that you understand that – again, not from a shamey blamey place – that any feeling that we're ever feeling is just a product of our thinking. We've not done anything wrong because we're feeling it. It's part of our human experience to feel it. But it isn't caused by something outside of us. It's always caused by something that we're telling ourselves, and so, we're creating those feelings.

So, I say that only to remind you that, of course, in parallel you can also change the way that you think so that you can create a different emotional experience for yourself. But I don't encourage that in the beginning, especially with urge work or numbing work, because it really kind of misses the point.

The real benefit of this work is figuring out how to allow a feeling to be there, how to allow an urge to be present in your body and go unanswered. And I would much rather you spend your time and energy doing that work than I would having you just change all your thoughts to create all happy feelings. Because frankly, that's not the way that humans operate in the long run.

We're going to have thoughts that create negative emotion because we're humans and we want to. We honestly don't want to be happy all the time. Imagine how weird it would be if you were just happy that your husband died. I think it would be weird. I don't think you want to be happy that he died. I know I don't want to be happy that Hugo died.

And so, it's going to be more useful to us to not just always try to make rainbows and daisies out of everything, but to really develop the skill of how do we deal with negative emotion so we don't have to hit the escape button. So, keep that in mind.

Alright, so now you know the emotion that's creating the desire to numb, you know the emotion you're trying to get away from with your numbing

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behavior. The next thing that I want you to do is I want you to decide how much and how often you want to do the behavior in question.

Maybe it's never. That's okay. But maybe it isn't. Let's say you're using food to numb out. Well, you're going to need to eat if you want to live. So, not eating is really not a practical option for most of us. We have to eat.

So, it's not like you're just going to say, "Well, I'm never going to eat again." No, you're going to eat again, you just want to try to do it without eating your feelings. You want to do it from a genuine place of physical hunger instead of emotional desire.

Or maybe it is shopping. You're still going to have to shop. We need things to live eventually. But maybe your shopping is you want to shop on budget, but you're still going to do it.

Now, maybe it's something that you don't actually need, like drinking alcohol. Maybe you decide, "I just don't really want any alcohol in my life," and that would be a fine choice. Or, maybe you decide, "I just want to drink less than I currently drink. I don't want to have a hangover," or, "I don't want to use it as an out on that weekend when I'm lonely."

So, what is the activity, how much, and how often do you want to do it? And I want you to write that down. So, if you're using Netflix as your escape. Maybe you're okay with using Netflix for one hour every night, but you've been using it for four hours every night.

So, which hour do you want to use it? Is it 9PM to 10PM? Is it 6PM to 7PM? Decide how much, how often am I going to do this activity? Maybe you've been sleeping more than you want to sleep and now you want to sleep less because you know the reason you're sleeping is to avoid feelings.

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So, maybe you've been sleeping 12 hours a night – and some of you are probably laughing hysterically at that because you can barely get the amount of sleep you need, but stick with me, everybody's life is different. Maybe you're sleeping 12 hours a night and you want to cut it back and sleep only eight hours a night because you know that you're sleeping more than your body needs, trying to get away from your feelings.

So, pick. How much, how often? And then I want to make sure – because what we're doing here is, we're going to create a plan. We're going to create a plan of how much, how often, and when. And we're going to follow that plan.

So, before we create a plan, I also want to make sure that you're not putting anything in it that you're really not committed to doing. And only you know this. Oftentimes, especially if you have a perfectionist brain, like I do, I love making a plan. There's something so rewarding about beating myself up for negative behavior and then swooping in to save the day with my plan of perfection of how it's all going to be different tomorrow, or my very favorite on Monday because all good things start on Monday, right?

This never works. This never works at all. But I do know the pattern because I have done so much of my own self-work on it. So, I know that I have a tendency, and I know that a lot of my clients have a tendency to make this perfect amazing plan that we're not really ever committed to, but that gives us a lot of pleasure in its creation.

So, let's go back to when I was trying to lose weight. And I struggled with my weight for years and years and years. I would eat terribly. I would go from very little – let's just use water consumption as a great example. I would say, "Okay, today I drank three glasses of water. But my new plan is that I will drink half my bodyweight in ounces of water."

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I would go from very little water to water consumption perfection. And I wasn't really committed to doing it. It just felt good to tell myself that I would do it. And I don't want you to do that.

So, whatever plan you create, I want to make sure you're really committed. So, if it were going from three glasses of water and I was trying to increase my water intake, I wouldn't go from three to half my bodyweight in water. I would go from three to four, or wherever it was that I felt I really was committed to doing it. If I was drinking four glasses of wine, instead of just saying, "Well, now I'm not going to drink any glasses of wine," maybe I go to three glasses of wine or three and a half glasses of wine; something I'm truly committed to doing.

Now, commitment comes from our thinking. So, we can generate thoughts that create commitment. But for this purpose, I don't want you to have to stretch. I want you to put only the things in your plan that you really do have confidence that you'll do, that don't feel like a huge stretch to you. Because if you create a plan and then you don't follow it, guess what we do to our integrity; we just sabotage it.

Then we start not trusting ourselves to follow through on our plan, and then our plans become meaningless. So, we can't come out of this with a meaningless plan that we don't trust ourselves to follow. We have to come out of this with a plan that is very clear, we're very clear on how much, how often, we're very clear on when, but we're also really committed to doing it and it's not such a stretch that we don't believe that we'll actually do it. We don't just create a pretty plan to make ourselves feel hopeful and optimistic, secretly knowing that we're not really going to follow through on it.

Are you following me? Are you with me? I want to do little steps at a time because that's what works. And I know we all want it to just presto, poof, push a button, take a pill, everything magically changes overnight. And if that were possible, I would definitely teach it to you. But I don't really find

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that it is. I think that small gradual changes that we're truly committed to over the long haul actually get us to where we want to go much faster than perfectionist fantasies that only make us feel good for the short term but we reject by day two once we stop following them perfectly.

So, now we know, how much of the thing? How often? And it's something you're really committed to doing. And I also want you to consider when you're going to do it. So, let's just say you want to reduce the amount of alcohol that you're consuming, and on a typical night you're drinking three glasses of wine.

So, you're going to decide that your plan is going to be two glasses of wine, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. It doesn't matter, but you see how I'm doing it, like, two glasses of wine, Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and you're going to consume them between the hours of 6PM and 8PM. That's your plan. You now have a plan for how much you're going to drink.

Or maybe it's a plan for how much money you're going to spend on items you don't need but you want. Maybe that's where you're over-shopping. So, you create a budget and you decide that this week I'm going to spend X amount of dollars on stuff I want but don't need, and no more than that.

And you can pick when you're going to do the shopping, what day, and what time. You decide in advance. The reason we're being really specific, the reason I want you to make these decisions in advance is because you're going to be able to access a logical part of your brain when you're not making decisions that are driven by urges.

When we have emotions that are high, our logic is very low. I'll say that again. When we have emotions that are high, our logic is very low. The same part of our brain that's creating the emotional rollercoaster for us blocks our ability to make logical decisions. So, we want to take this

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planning process and do it in advance, at least a day in advance of the behavior.

So, if you want to change what you eat, and you don't want to eat your feelings tomorrow, then today you're going to make a plan for exactly what you will eat tomorrow and you're going to write it down. And then tomorrow's going to come and you're going to have thoughts and feelings.

And you're not going to want what you wrote down. You're going to want to eat other things. And that is the miracle, that is the opportunity, that is the goodness that we're going to explore. The easy part is making the plan. And believe it or not, the easy part is following the plan.

What's not easy and what we need to take a look at is all the feelings that are left when we follow the plan. Because if I just ate whatever was on my food plan, no problem. It's not hard. I could plan it out in advance. I could have all the food ready. I could just eat the food.

What's hard is when I want something. What's hard is when I have a feeling and I don't want to feel it and then I don't allow myself to go to the pantry to solve that feeling for myself. When I have to sit with that feeling and actually allow it to be there and I don't have an escape button that I can press, or I don't allow myself to press that escape button.

So, that's why the plans have to be super-specific and they have to be done in advance. Because we don't make very good decisions when our emotions are high and we don't make very good decisions when we're responding to urges. And I get that it might seem weird to make a plan to do something that you want to stop doing.

I get it. "If you don't want to do the behavior anymore then why would you want to make a plan to do it," might be what you're thinking. But I promise you, long-term, if you want to remove this behavior for your life or really

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change your relationship with his behavior, a plan is the surest way to get there. So, go with me, alright. You can push pause if you want, or you can do this later, but I want you to write down, how much am I going to do of this thing? How often am I going to do it? When am I going to do it?

And then, make sure before you give the final stamp of approval on your plan that you're really committed to it. If you could rate this on a scale of one to 10 where 10 is high, I want you to be committed at, like, seven, eight, nine at least. Probably no lower than an eight, if we're honest. Like, be firmly committed to it.

Let it be something you're so committed to that if you didn't do it, you would give money to a politician in the party that you don't love, you would give money to a charity that you're vehemently opposed to. Let it be really something you're committed to doing. And if it's not something you're committed to doing, then don't put it in your plan.

Okay, now we have a good plan. We know how much, we know how often, we know when, and we're actually committed to following it. So, next comes the hard part; the feelings. Because here's what we're not going to do. We're not going to use willpower.

Willpower is never a long-term solution. And most of us try really hard, right, because this is what we know. We only know how to get through things with willpower. But remember, willpower, it's limited. There's only so much of it.

And so, when we use willpower, we're really in a state of resistance. We're really fighting our way through something. That's not going to work long-term. So, we're not going to use willpower. We're going to use allowance. We're going to use acceptance. We're going to process those feelings.

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And remember, if you've not listened, go back and listen to How to Feel Better Now, a podcast I did very early on, episode three in fact, I just checked for you, episode three.

So, the time will come, we will have made our plan, and other thoughts and feelings will show up in our mind. We're going to have an urge to do something else. We're going to feel that emotion that you've identified, that's the one you're trying to get away from. And your brain is going to offer you that that behavior that you want to change is the solution; the food will make you feel better, the wine will make you feel better, the shopping will make you feel better, "Just go to sleep, you'll feel better. Distract yourself with a project."

Whatever it is, your brain is going to offer to you that that is the solution. And listen, your brain wants to be efficient. Your brain is good at this. Your brain does not want to burn more calories and change. It just wants you to keep doing what you've been doing. So, you're going to have to be ready for your brain to offer you that the solution is in that same old behavior. You're going to have to be ready.

And when that happens, the answer isn't happy, happy positive feelings. The answer is to allow that feeling that you don't want to feel, to name it. what is that feeling? Is it sadness? Is it loneliness? Is it overwhelm? Give it a name.

Breathe into it. open up to it. Say yes to it. The NOW process that I teach in episode three is, name it, that's the N. Open up to it. That's the O. And witness it. That's the W. NOW; name, open, witness. Name it, what is it? Open up to it, say yes. Breathe it in. Let it sit with you. Don't try to run. Don't try to numb. Don't try to get away. Don't tell yourself there's something wrong.

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Tell yourself, this is sadness and I can handle it. This is overwhelm and I can allow it. This is stress and I can sit with it. Whatever it is, you name it, you open up to it, and then you just go to your body and you watch it and you see what it does. You see where in your body you feel the vibration of that emotion. Witness it pass and digest or process in your body for as long as it takes.

And typically, it's only going to take a couple of minutes. It might come back though, so you have to be committed to allowing that feeling to process as many times as it takes. And this is counter-intuitive and I know it is. And I know nobody's telling you this, but I need you to hear it.

Whatever that emotion is that you think is a problem, it is not a problem. Stop wishing it away. Wishing it away is part of the problem. When you just decide that it's okay for that emotion to be part of your human experience, because guess what... it already is. When you can decide that it can be with you and it is not a problem, it can be art of your day, you don't have to cover it up with a behavior or a substance. Then you will be free of it.

But it won't be because you made it go away. It will be because you welcomed it. And that makes all the difference in the world. It was so weird last night, as I went to bed. I picked up a book that I hadn't read in a while. I'd kind of gotten halfway through it and then I just put it down and got shiny-objected into another book, I'm sure.

And it was Pema Chodron's Taking the Leap: Freeing Ourselves from Old Habits and Fears. And the exact chapter related to what we're working on today was what was up next for me to read. So, I want to read something straight from that book because it's one of those moments where you just think, wow, of all the chapters for me to turn to, and this is exactly what I need to hear and I think it's what you need to hear. So, I'm going to read it to you. And Pema is one of my absolute favorite teachers.

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She wrote, “The sad part is that all we’re trying to do is not feel that underlying uneasiness. The sadder part is that we proceed in such a way that the uneasiness only gets worse.” The message here is that the only way to ease our pain is to experience it fully. Learn to stay. Learn to stay with uneasiness. Learn to stay with the tightening. Learn to stay with the itch and urge of Shenpa so that the habitual chain reaction doesn’t continue to rule our lives and the patterns that we consider unhelpful don’t keep getting stronger as the days and months go by. Someone once sent me a bone-shaped dog tag that you could wear on a cord around your neck. Instead of a dog’s name, it said, ‘Sit, stay, heal.’ We can heal ourselves and the world by training in this way.”

This is exactly what I’m talking about, right? The saddest part of all of this is that in our attempts to get away from the uneasiness, we create more uneasiness. So, stop telling yourself that the emotion has to go away. Stop telling yourself that it’s a problem that has to be fixed. Remind yourself, you grew up in a culture that taught you nothing about emotion and sells you happiness at every turn, so of course we all think that emotions are problems to be fixed.

But I promise you that they are not. So, instead of trying to make whatever that feeling is go away, invite it to sit with you. Invite it to stay. And in doing that, in making friends with it, in seeing that it really is harmless over you, in proving to yourself over and over that it will pass and it’s just something you can feel in your body, it really can’t hurt you, that’s how you will heal. That’s how you will unhook yourself from the habit that you’re in of numbing out with whatever your behaviors of numbing are. Are you with me?

Again, it’s not good or bad or right or wrong. There’s nothing wrong with you if you’re numbing. But if you don’t like the result that it’s creating in yourself and in your life, you don’t have to keep doing it. But you do have to make friends with those feelings that you don’t want to feel. This is why – I say it all the time – this is why when I coach people, this is where we start.

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We start with the feelings work because when you can feel a feeling, when overwhelm is no longer overwhelming to you, when you don't have to get upset because you're sad or lonely anymore, when it's not a big deal for you to feel stress or anxiety anymore, it's not that the emotions go away. It's that our experience of them changes, that we develop a different approach that now they aren't problems, they're just part of our life experience. And when they're nothing that we need to numb from, we don't look to anything outside of us to numb with.

So, in summary, you're going to plan, in writing, a day in advance how much, how often, and when you're going to do the activity. And you're not going to put anything in the plan that you're not really committed to. And when you notice that you follow the plan and you still have feelings, you have an urge to do the behavior that you don't want to do anymore, you're not going to use willpower. You're going to allow your feelings.

You're going to name them. You're going to open up to them. You're going to say yes to letting that feeling be with you. And you're going to witness what it's like to have that feeling run through your body and go on that merry way. And you're going to do that as many times as you need.

And if you need more help with this, you're going to ask me for help, right, because this is what I do with my clients all the time. This is what I love to do is help you make these kinds of changes for real.

Another reminder, if you're not getting emails from me and you're missing out on the free group coaching calls that I've been offering or you're missing out on the tips that I'm sharing and you want to be in the know, then just go to coachingwithkrista.com. After you've been on the site for about 10 seconds, you'll see a little pop-up and you can just put your email and your address in that pop-up and that will get you on the inside track to what I send to people who are in my community and on my list.

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Alright, so, I hope that was really useful to you, gives you a good foundation. I'm sure we can talk about more of the specifics later. but we just have to be willing to feel feelings. And when we do and we decide that feelings don't have any power over us, then we don't need to get away from them and it's pretty amazing. Alright, I love you. Have an amazing week. You've got this. Take care. See you next week. Bye-bye.

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