

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro



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With Your Host

Krista St-Germain

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Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, episode 60, Interview with Jana DeCristofaro.

Welcome to the *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 truly look forward to. Here's your host, Master Certified Life Coach, grief expert, widow, and mom, Krista St-Germain.

Hey there. Welcome to another episode of the podcast. Got something a little bit different for you today. It's an interview with someone I think you're going to learn a lot from, but she's not a widowed mom. I know that's not normal, it's not what I normally do on this podcast. But I really want you to hear what this woman has to say.

She is also, in addition to her role at The Dougy Center, which is the National Center for Grieving Children and Families, located in Portland, she is also the host of a podcast. And so, she might be a familiar voice to you already. She's the host of a podcast called Grief Out Loud, a very helpful podcast I have found. Something that definitely helped me in the early days after my husband Hugo died.

But the reason I want to bring her to you is because even though Portland might be very far from where you live, it definitely is very far from where I live, Jana is someone who, for the last nearly 20 years, has specialized in working with grieving children and families.

So, she knows this journey from a different but very useful perspective than what you and I have. She's not a widowed mom, but she sees what families go through who are grieving, and I just cannot wait for you to hear from her.

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

I also want to tell you, their website, dougy.org, so good. So many quick tip sheets and little pieces of information that are just usable, practical, very tangible information for you, especially if you're looking for information on how to support your children as they are in grief. I think you'll find a lot of value in what Jana has to say in the interview, what The Dougy Center does, and I hope it's just really useful to you. So with that, here is my interview with Jana DeCristofaro of The Dougy Center. Enjoy.

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Krista: Welcome, Jana DeCristofaro. Pronounced that correctly, right?

Jana: You got it.

Krista: So I'm so excited to have you here, namely because I think my listeners are going to benefit so much from not only what you know and have experienced personally, but from learning about The Dougy Center and what you do as an organization, even if they live nowhere near you. Because I bet so many people that you serve don't live anywhere near you.

So why don't you start by just introducing yourself and tell us a little bit about how you came to this work and then a little bit about The Dougy Center. What you do, your role there, all that kind of good stuff.

Jana: Thank you so much for having me on the show and for the show, for the existence of it. It makes our job at The Dougy Center easier, knowing that there's so many resources out there we can refer families to. So let's see, I'm going to start with me. This Monday, this coming Monday, which will be Memorial Day Monday marks 18 years since I've been working at The Dougy Center for grieving children.

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

And I volunteered for about six months as a facilitator in a group with grieving teens before I got hired on. And people ask me this question all the time of how did I get into this work and I say every time totally by accident. The best accident that's ever happened to me, I would say, in that I went to school to get my Master's in social work with the vague idea that I wanted to be a therapist.

And I didn't even really know what that meant when I went to graduate school. That's how much of a baby I was in not knowing what I was doing. So, I went through two years of graduate school, wrapped that up, and was like, I just didn't feel like a good fit to be doing therapy or counseling. So I got a job doing research, which worked great for my analytical brain, but didn't work so great for my heart and soul, which wanted to be with people, which is what drew me to this social work world in the first place.

So, a friend of mine recommended The Dougy Center to me. She was like, you should call this place up, I don't know, there's sad kids, there's crying, there's teddy bears, I don't know, I think you'd like it. And I wasn't really sure what it was about sad kids crying and teddy bears that made her think of me but thank you.

So I looked it up and I was really lucky because there was a volunteer training starting the next week, and usually our volunteer trainings fill up very quickly with a waitlist, and there happened to be a cancellation, so I stumbled again, by accident, into this volunteer training. And the first few moments of the training were super awkward and uncomfortable, as any new experience walking into a room full of strangers is.

But then the leader of the training started talking about the purpose of The Dougy Center and the mission and how The Dougy Center exists as a place to create community and connection for kids and teens and young

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

adults and their family members who have had somebody die. And that's what we were supposed to do.

Create an environment where people can come and talk about their grief and feel understood and connected and supported. Not a place where they were coming to fix anything, change anything, give anybody any advice or direct their life in any way. And it was the first time since I started graduate school that I felt like I could take a full inhale.

Because I was so tense in school like, I'm 22, I don't know what to tell people what to do with their lives, and who am I to say what people are supposed to do. So that moment in volunteer training really like, it just solidified for me this is the way I can work with people.

And in the end, the content about being grief and death and illness really didn't matter to me. It was just the approach. So that's a random tangential answer to your question of me and how I ended up at The Dougy Center. And it'll be 18 years on Monday. And The Dougy Center's been around for - since 1982. And we were the first program in the country to start addressing the needs of grieving children.

Prior to that, the general approach was kids don't grieve, they don't need to know anything, just stop talking about the person, pack up all the pictures, put away the stuff, they'll be fine. And I mean, that obviously wasn't true, but people just didn't know how to talk about the fact that it wasn't fine.

And so our founder, Bev Chappell, had the idea that kids need a place to come and be with other kids who have had somebody in their life die and need a place to talk about that experience, play about that experience, witness other people's experiences as a way to decrease isolation and to normalize what people are going through and to realize that there's nothing wrong with them that they are experiencing their grief. It's normal.

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

So that was kind of the founding of The Dougy Center. And from that first group that Bev held in the basement of her ranch house with blue shag carpeting and an old punching bag for our first official volcano room, which is one of our creative expression rooms, The Dougy Center has grown into a program that serves three locations in the Portland metro area.

Pre-pandemic times, we had 550 kids walking through the doors of our three locations every month for ongoing free peer support groups, primary bereavement groups, kids, teens, young adults, family members who have had parents, sibling, primary caregiver, or close friend die.

And also our program called Pathways, which is for families when someone has an advanced serious illness. So prior to when someone has died, having a chance to come together and connect. So that's the brief overview of what The Dougy Center does and who we serve.

Krista: Yeah. There's so much to it. I was trying to remember how I discovered The Dougy Center and I really don't know if I found your website first or if I found your podcast first. But your podcast has been around for five years?

Jana: Yes. I was just trying to remember that this morning. Grief Out Loud started in January of 2015.

Krista: Yeah. And so, my husband's been gone for almost four years. So, I remember discovering it pretty early on and I remember the first time I heard you say platitude and cliché-free, we promise, I was like, thank you. Thank you so much. I was so tired of hearing everybody's well-intentioned silver lining make you feel better kind of thoughts and just so relieved to find a space that seems like it is, as you described The Dougy Center, I think your podcast probably reflects that same culture of we're not here to

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

fix anything, we're just here to talk about it and be able to express what's real for us and normalize.

Jana: Yeah. To be able to create that community and it's gratifying to know that our podcast, which we created in the hopes of the folks who weren't able to come to The Dougy Center in person or weren't able to access a grief support program in their own community could feel that connection even from afar, so it's super gratifying to know that you kind of stumbled across Grief Out Loud and were able to feel that.

Krista: Yeah, for sure. For sure. And I'm pretty picky. We kind of talked about this a little bit too. I haven't really had a lot of guests on the podcast, but I'm really excited to have you because just even looking through, and I think listeners, if you have not listened to Grief Out Loud, you definitely should go and listen and you should subscribe.

Maybe not every episode will interest you, but even some of the episodes that you think by the title may not be so interesting might be more useful than you think. Because sometimes what we learn, even from people who have different situations than we have, there's so many similarities in grief and in the shared experience of it that I think people will be interested in.

But I wanted you to be on the podcast because most of the women who listen to my podcast, they're widows and they're moms. And one of the things that I found so useful from both your podcast but also your website is just the vast amount of information of how to support children who are grieving.

And that's probably one of the number one questions that I get, or the number one category of questions is how do I support my child? How do I know the difference between what is a typical behavior of a child versus

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

what is something that indicates that I need to provide more support? What is grief? What is “normal?”

That’s complicated enough for most of us as parents without the death of the father. Parenting is hard. But I would love for you to share your insight on that. What do you tell people when they ask you, how do I know if this is grief or if this is typical, if I should intervene?

Jana: Yeah. I mean, there’s two common responses that I have. The first one is that once a child has had someone in their life die, particularly if they’ve had a primary caregiver, a parent, a sibling die, every behavior, every reaction is an adaptation to having had that person die.

So, it somehow becomes less important to separate out what’s grief behavior and what’s normal behavior because it’s normal grief behavior at this point for that child, which I know isn’t very helpful from a parenting perspective. Like, okay great, now what do I do?

But I think sometimes stepping back a moment and changing the lens through which we’re perceiving kids’ behaviors and remembering like, everything this child is doing, saying, thinking, feeling is an adaptation to the fact that someone really significant in their life has died, and they’re also a child who is progressing through developmental milestones and stages. So those two things are happening simultaneously.

And then the other sort of common response that I give is what would be different about how you responded as this child’s caregiver if you were able to categorically say grief versus normal behavior. Because I just wonder then, what would be different? Because if I’m thinking about a normal grief behavior, I’m thinking about wanting to tune into what’s the emotion that’s happening, what is the need that’s being expressed.

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

And I don't know, I'm not a parent, so I don't know. If it was just normal behavior, would be skip over the attuning to the emotion and the need and just provide a correction or a punishment? I don't know. But I sometimes wonder if that's where parents and caregivers are really grappling is like, well, I'll just tell them to do something different if I know it's not grief. But if it's grief, then I'll do these other things like attend to the behavior or let the behavior slide in some way.

And I wonder if there's some way to find the middle ground of that, of recognizing it's an adaptation. Every behavior is an adaptation to having had somebody die and how can I attune to the emotion, address the need, and still have guidelines and expectations for what is the behavior we want to be having and seeing in this particular family, in this particular culture, in this particular setting. So, I feel like that was a really vague, esoteric answer to a question and I'm sure your listeners want but what do I do. I'm happy to go deeper.

Krista: Can you just give us the manual please, Jana? If a child does A, I do B.

Jana: If we had that, Dougy Center wouldn't need to do any more fundraising. We would just call it a day then.

Krista: Yeah. I do think it's so helpful though the way that you said it's kind of like we're asking the wrong question is what I took from that. It's really less relevant about whether it's grief or not grief, and more relevant that, hey, the whole landscape just changed.

And I'm always thinking about when I'm coaching and when I'm trying to think of ways that I want to help people, thinking what is useful to them, not what is right or wrong or good or bad or no lens of morality, but just what is

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

useful. And so, I think what I'm hearing you say is it's not so useful to filter things through is it grief or non-grief.

Jana: Unless you knew for sure as a parent that your reaction to that behavior would be wildly different, which I then think is also hard to do because you have a grieving child who is going through their normal developmental places. And so...

Krista: Can you give me an example of that? When you think it would be...

Jana: Well, when I think about a teen and a teenager is maybe not wanting to participate in family events as much as they've wanted to, and they're wanting to spend more time with their friends, or they're not being maybe as kind with their words to their adult when their adult is asking them to do things around the house.

If a caregiver is like, well, is it just because of the grief? And for me, I'm like, well, if it is because of the grief, would that mean that you would allow that behavior to happen? Or do you have particular expectations where I hear you that you're super frustrated, I hear you that it sucks that your other parent's not here. It sucks that dad's not here to go on this camping trip that we have planned.

And we still have an expectation in our family that we're going to talk to each other with kindness. So, I really want to hear what's going on for you. I just need you to come to me with a little bit different tone of voice because I can't hear you.

Krista: As opposed to excusing the behavior in the name of, well, it's just grief, therefore I don't need to uphold the standard anymore, we can let this one slide.

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

Jana: Exactly. Or coming at it with so much rigidity because this is normal teen behavior and I need to correct it in some way without a recognition that that behavior is coming from a teen who is also grieving the death of somebody really significant in their life. So, there may be some emotional needs or an emotional reaction that needs to be seen and heard in some way of like yeah, I get it, I'm super frustrated that dad's not here either.

I don't love having to pack everything in the car. When dad was here, he packed the car, but now I got to pack the car and I got to think about the groceries. It's really hard and frustrating. What's different for you? What are the things that you're finding yourself having to do that you didn't have to do when dad was here? How can we help each other?

Krista: Yes. So good. Finding that shared experience, validating, not arguing with the emotions that someone is presenting.

Jana: Yeah. And making space for the feeling can be there and the thought can be there, and we still have things that need to get done around the house. So how can we do that together, how can we figure out what's going to work so that there can be some flexibility and there can still be expectation.

Krista: I get asked a lot about anger in particular and teenage boys. This seems to come up quite a lot where moms are trying to figure out how much of their son's anger is just normal anger and then how much of it is related to grief and how they navigate that, how they - do they foster some sort of expression? I'll hear a lot, "He doesn't want to go to any sort of group or counselor or any of that." Any particular wisdom specifically as it relates to anger and boys just because I get that question a lot?

Jana: Yeah, I would say don't forget about girls and their anger too. It might express itself in different ways, but the root emotion might be frustration,

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

anger, irritation. And I guess again, I go back to that same place of if you knew the anger was grief, would you respond differently than if the anger was just other kinds of anger?

Because I imagine helping boys and girls and kids of all genders find ways to name their anger and their frustration and find healthy, productive outlets for that anger and that frustration. It's going to be useful whether it's grief-related anger or friend-related anger or state of the world anger, rather than just squelching it like, stop being that way, stop being angry. Anger is a totally valid emotion. What can we do with it?

These are the things you can't do. You can't kick a hole in the wall, you can't punch the door, those don't work in our household. Here are some things I do when I'm angry. What are some other ways we can come up that you can express this anger? Because it's totally okay and valid to be angry and frustrated.

Krista: And really, is that any different from anger or frustration that a child would feel for any other issue? A non-grief related issue. It's no less valid to feel angry or frustrated about something that happened in school, even when you dad didn't die.

Jana: So, one of the things I think adults can do for kids and for teens is that anger is not one of those emotions that is stereotypically associated with grief. I think it's becoming more so as more folks like yourself are talking about grief. And so, I think for some kids, there's not that connection automatically. And even for parents, there's not that connection automatically that anger is a totally valid experience to have in grief.

Sometimes teens and kids and will think, well, grief only looks like crying and sadness, so if I'm angry, they may not make that connection themselves. And so, as an adult, you can help your child start to mind-map

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

out all the emotions that can come with grief and let kids know that those are okay to have. It doesn't make you a bad person, it doesn't mean that you miss your dad or your mom any less because you're angry about something.

Krista: Yeah, which I think underneath that is kind of this assumption and I work on it a lot with people that emotions are problems, especially the negative ones. That because we kind of have this messaging in our culture that we're supposed to be happy all the time and we can buy happiness and that's kind of the American dream is we're supposed to just be happy all the time.

That when we experience a negative emotion, we think it's a problem. And so, when we see our child experience a negative emotion, grief or not, then we're inclined to fix it, to try to fix it, which of course presumes it's a problem. And it's not at all.

Jana: Absolutely. I think that summarizes so much of it. And I think too of a parent having a lot of wondering about if a child is showing emotion that's deemed or stereotyped as a negative emotion, is there some pressure, is that reflecting back on their sense of themselves as a parent. Like to be a good parent means that my kid is always happy all the time, when you have a kid in your life who's grieving.

So how can we help kids be more emotionally aware and have more tools at the ready to identify those feelings, express those feelings, process those feelings so that they feel more secure and confident in going through the challenges that come with having had a parent or a primary caregiver die. That to me is a reflection of really attuned, engaged parenting, rather than oh, my kid is happy so good, I'm done.

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

Krista: It's fine, they're handling it appropriately, they're happy. Yeah, and also I think - I don't know if you do any teaching specific to this, if so I'd love to hear about it, but of helping parents hold space for their own emotions while letting their children have their emotions, recognizing that they don't have to be the same for both to be valid, and one can be really experiencing a lot of intense emotion while the other is not.

It doesn't have to be - what I hear, and I'm not doing a very good job of saying this, but is parents that think, moms that think I can't be happy until my child is happy. I can't be calm when my child is anxious. I can't feel peaceful when my child is angry.

And so, they look to change the emotional state of the child because they think that until the child is experiencing something different emotionally, that they can't experience what they want to experience emotionally. Is that anything that you teach or work on?

Jana: Well it makes me think - you mentioned the tip sheets that we've written over the years for parents and caregivers and suggestions on how to support kids. And we used to keep them kind of in the similar order was like, how to talk to kids about death and what kids can understand about death.

And at the end, we would put, and don't forget to take care of yourself. And probably about a year and a half ago, we thought, you know, that section should probably go first in these tip sheets.

Krista: For the parents to take care of themselves.

Jana: That's step one. Number one thing you can do to support your child is to support yourself. So not that you have to be calm so your child can be

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

calm, but to recognize that you have different emotions and that you're going to have parallel experiences.

Your experiences are going to unfold alongside of one another, but they're not going to be the same in that you're grieving as a parent, a very different relationship than your child is grieving, and you're in a very different cognitive developmental, emotional, mental state than your child is. And yeah, that's a lot of pressure.

Like my kid has to be happy and then I can be happy, or my kid has to be calm and then I can be calm. Well, I think about it from two perspectives. One, as an adult, you have this opportunity to model for kids the diversity of emotions that we experience and how we take care of ourselves. And to carve out that one, I can be calm while you're having a really hard time. That's going to create so much safety for your child too.

If your child is having a day when it's just feeling really intense in their grief and really missing their person and feeling like everything's terrible and nothing's going to be okay. And as the parent, if you can be in that place, not so much of no, it's going to be fine, it's going to be fine, it's going to be fine, but more from like, I hear you, I have those days too.

Today's not one of those days, today I'm feeling really pretty settled and pretty - I'm excited about our weekend and I'm looking forward to the show we're going to watch later together tonight, but I feel you, I have definitely had those days, as a way to like, we can have different experiences, I can connect with your experience, and I can hold out the hope for when we're going to have - you might have a different day too.

And then the opposite holds true too of wow, you are really excited about the day, you're having a lot of energy, and mom's feeling pretty tired and really missing daddy today and I'm going to go with you to the park, but I

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

may not be as excitable as you're used to seeing me. But it's not your fault, it's nothing you've done, I'm just missing daddy a lot today.

Krista: Right. Everybody's then responsible for their own emotional state. I think what I like about that is how much permission it gives the child to express what it is that they're feeling without worry that they will further burden the parent or upset the parent. Because I think a lot of kids put that pressure on themselves when they think if I get upset, then mommy gets upset, and so therefore I have to hide my upset because my upset makes mommy upset.

Jana: Yeah, I agree. And I think there's going to be some element within a family where, especially for teens, I think as kids get older, there's just going to be this inherent I'm not as comfortable expressing my grief with my parent as I am with my friends or my therapist or my grief support group.

And I don't know if that's actually something that a parent really has to try to break through for a teen to say I get it, it's pretty intense when the two of us try to talk about our grief together. I appreciate this time, I value them so much, but I totally hear you. it's kind of extra charged when there's both of us because we're both missing the same person, and it makes sense that it might be easier to talk to strangers who never met dad and that they're not having the same experience.

So as a parent, just to take some pressure off of themselves if they're feeling like I've got to get my kid to talk to me about every aspect of their grief, that it may just be too intense and that the best thing you can do is provide those other places for teens and kids to plug in to talk about it.

Krista: Yeah, I'm glad you brought that up because that is something I've gotten a lot of too, where there's quite a lot of concern of they're not talking about it with me, therefore that means something bad.

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

Jana: It's very common. So at The Dougy Center, our model is that the volunteers and the staff, people who are working in the group, they meet before and after each group and the parents and the caregivers have their own group, and the kids have their own group, and teens have their own group.

And so, the volunteers will come back together after group just to talk about like, what the experience was like for them and problem solve anything that may have come up. And it's so common to have the adult in the adult group say my kid doesn't talk at all, I don't even know if they miss their dad, they're just not grieving.

And then that same kiddo is in our group talking, talking, talking, telling us all about their dad and all about their grief and just the fact that they aren't necessarily ready or able to talk to their parent about it yet, but it doesn't mean they're not talking about it.

Krista: Or that they're not grieving. So I'm curious since you've done this work for so long, both as a volunteer and also as a paid part of the staff there, what are some of the things that you've learned with working with all of these children over the years that would surprise people?

Jana: That question is so hard. 18 years in it's like, I can't remember what might be surprising. It's kind of like asking the fish what it's like out of the water. Let me think about that. What would be surprising? Okay, I think the thing that would probably surprise people the most, and I only know this because when I tell people what I do for my job, usually they run away or they say, "Oh my gosh, I couldn't do that, it must be so sad."

And they just - I think people imagine kids coming together, sitting in a circle, crying for an hour and a half. And it couldn't be further from what happens in reality, which is there are tears and there are times of crying,

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

and there's just as much time laughing and playing and being silly and kids being kids. Kids being grieving kids looks like kids being kids.

They're just doing it with all the other kids in the room who have also had somebody die. And I will share one story that really surprised me in my role. There was somebody who came to my groups. I think when they started, they were probably eight, and when they were ready to close from The Dougy Center, I think they were probably 10 or 11.

Probably were in group about two years, which one thing that I think is very surprising for people is how long kids will choose to come to The Dougy Center because our groups are ongoing and they can stay as long as they want to. And the fact that this will not be surprising to your listeners, but I think it's still surprising out in the greater community that grief is ongoing.

It doesn't wrap up. You don't get over it in eight weeks. And that that support can feel really important for days, months, years after the person died. So that's a little aside. So, this person was getting ready to close from group and they'd been really verbal in what we call our talking time, our talking activity time.

They talked a bunch, they asked a bunch of questions, they did all the activities. If there was going to be a model talk time participant, this was the person. So that when they were closing, we were in the game room and we were playing. I remember we were playing, and I asked him, I said, "What's been the most helpful part of coming to The Dougy Center for you?"

And the ego part of me was expecting like, those great questions you asked and the activities we did and the chance to talk about my dad and my grief. And they looked up and they said, "Playing foosball." I was like, oh, okay. But I shelved that, and I just reflected back, and I said, "So most

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

helpful part has been playing foosball. What's been really helpful about playing foosball?"

And they said, "You know, at school when I'm playing foosball or playing other games, I look up and the kids don't get it. They don't understand. But when I play here at The Dougy Center, I look up, every other person who's at the foosball table with me, they've had somebody in their life die too. And I don't have to explain it to them, and I can just play and have fun."

And I thought, just like, yeah, really meaningful experience for me to remember that. Just because kids are talking and giving me insights, that may not be the part that matters the most to them.

Krista: Yeah. So, my husband was killed on the way back from a summer camp program that I've been involved with for 20 years this year. So, it's for kids who are blind or visually impaired, and what you said, it's exactly the same thing that we see there. What they remember is just the shared experience. They don't even have to necessarily talk about their vision loss because they know they all get each other.

And when they go out into the regular world, it isn't their experience. They are different in the regular world. That's how they perceive themselves, but when they're with these peers, they just have that shared experience. And now it becomes about horseback riding and archery, and less about the vision loss.

So, it's probably that same thing where it's just kind of understood that these people, they have had such a similar experience that they get me unlike others. I can play foosball.

Jana: Yeah, I don't have to explain it all the time.

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

Krista: Yeah. It's not the elephant in the room.

Jana: So I would say that was surprising to me personally, and I think for the general population I think would be really surprising is how much laughter and fun and silliness happens even in the midst of a grief support group. And not just with the kids. With the adults, with the teens, with the young adults that there's something about a shared laughter among a group of folks who are grieving that goes deeper than almost any other laughter I've been a part of.

Krista: Yeah, it's interesting too. I get that same, oh, you must be sad all the time. I get that too. And it really couldn't be further from the truth. But I also don't think my perspective on emotions has changed so much since my own loss that I genuinely don't believe negative emotions are problems or that grief is a problem.

And so, I don't perceive emoting even when that's what happens as a downer. I just see it as it's just kind of what we do is we have thoughts and feelings and we express them, but it's not depressing just because we have emotions. And we can laugh without making it mean anything.

Jana: Well, and I think about too the folks who are in our group maybe for a few months or for a year, and they talk about the times where maybe they aren't having what they perceive to be the hard parts of grief like the crying or the anger or the deep missing.

They go a day or two days and they don't have that, and then all this guilt. So when I think about the people who first come into group, and usually what they're saying is when am I going to stop feeling this, how do I get to the place where I stop feeling this. And then people get to a place where they aren't feeling it as much or as intensely, and they think, how do I go

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

back to feeling the way I felt it at the beginning and how can I get back to feeling my grief so intensely.

So, it's a total Catch-22 for grieving folks. There's no good answer to that, but it's just interesting to reflect on while we're in it, it's so painful, I want out of it, and when I'm out of it, what does that say about me and my person and my relationship to them.

Krista: And maybe we could just lighten up a little bit and let the emotions just be what they are without trying to get away from them or trying to judge the absence of them. We could just be with them.

Jana: Yeah, which I think is the power of that peer support where other people in the room go, oh yeah, me too. And even though that may not change it necessarily, just knowing I'm not the only one who lives in this vacillation, feeling like I'm giving myself a hard time coming and going. Somehow just knowing they're not the only one who's doing that seems to free up some space to not be so harsh on themselves about it.

Krista: Very good. So I'm also curious to know your perspective on this concept of children being resilient because I think what I notice is we have kind of a polarity happening where either people think of their children as very fragile and helpless, or they also think of them as very resilient and independent.

And so, I'm wondering, how do we find kind of the balance between both? How do we recognize that yes, children are resilient, but maybe not so resilient that they couldn't benefit from support?

Jana: Well, I think a lot about the word resilient too, and I mean, I've been thinking about this word for a few years now because it's really been popping up a lot and resiliency research and improving resiliency,

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

increasing resiliency. And Nora McInerny from the Terrible, Thanks for Asking Podcast did a great episode all about it.

And I was like, thanks Nora for all the thoughts I've been having for two years, actually articulating them. So, I will not do justice what she said, but I struggle a little bit with the word resilient because it inherently means to return to a previous form. So, to be resilient is to have something challenging happen and then to just go back to the way you were before.

And I think again, those bigger picture perception shifts of that grief is not about going back to who you were before the person died. That's most likely not going to happen and perhaps shifting that from being the goal into how do I become a person who has had this really significant event happen in my life, how do I explore what they means to me, how do I continue to explore what that means to me, how do I integrate the loss, integrate the memory, integrate the relationship and carry it forward into my life in a way that will probably shape and inform a lot of the decisions and things that I choose to do and how I interact in the world and shape my relationships.

So again, a little tangential intro to answering your question. But yeah, so I think just pulling back a little bit from that idea of resiliency and grief. And when I think about the capacity to still engage with life with grief, that's what I think. If that could be resiliency's definition that I would get more on board with it.

Krista: Is there a term that you like better? One that speaks more to you?

Jana: Not that's going to be a word. It's going to be a sentence or a paragraph. So I just think about how do we help children integrate the experience into their life so that they don't see it as something they have to get over, move on, move past, and cut out of their life because that's going to cut them off from so much.

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

Cuts them off from the memory of the person, cuts them off from the relationship, the ongoing relationship they could have with that person who died, cuts them off from what they have learned about themselves and others by going through this experience of grief. So yeah, I think more about the idea of integration and caring forth and honoring the fact that this grief has happened and will continue to be a part of your life.

So to go back to your original question of like, how do we find the place between my kids are broken forever because this has happened to them and they're totally fine and don't need any help and support, and I mean, I think just find that middle ground, which sounds really simplistic. Again, the perceptions that we bring.

So, because a child has had a parent in their life die, that will be a profound experience that continues to inform their entire life. But it doesn't have to be something that fractures their entire life. And then things that we find that help kids with the integration rather than the fracturing is ongoing support, understanding, recognition, normalization, validation.

All those things that we've already talked about. As a parent, being able to provide those for your child and also find other ways for them to find community and connection. And every kid's going to be different.

For some kids, that's going to be an individual therapist where that's where they're going to feel the most comfortable. For some kids, it's going to be that peer support group around grief. For other kids, it's going to be staying engaged in other activities and communities that feels really fulfilling and nourishing to them.

So that could be their soccer team if they have really good relationships there. That could be a mentoring relationship with a coach. That could be a youth group. It could be all kinds of different things. So rather than a one

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

size fits all approach, you've had a parent die, that means you have to go to individual therapy and a grief support group.

And for some kids, that's totally the right route, and for other kids, that's totally not what's going to be helpful for them. So, you know, just tuning into your kid and getting connected with them and getting creative about the ways to find community, support, connection, and understanding.

Krista: Is that something that The Dougy Center advises on? Of how to do that?

Jana: I mean, I think it's having ongoing conversations with your kids to say, look, I found this place, whether it's The Dougy Center or there's programs based on The Dougy Center model all around the country, so maybe there is a program in your community, and saying to your kiddo like, I found this place, I don't know that much about it but it's a place where kids and teens can go when they've had someone in their life die.

It's not counseling, it's not therapy, it's just a place to go and be with other kids. And I can't - well, I should say for Dougy Center model, adults can't come unless their kids are going too. So for a lot of adults, it's like, I want to check it out but I can't go if you don't come with me, so will you come once or twice just so I can check it out, because I could really use finding some support for myself.

So, let's just agree to go three times. And then after three times, if you're like, this is really not working for me mom, it's fine, I'll find my own support someplace else, but will you come check it out three times. And most kids will get onboard with a short-term commitment that way.

And again, I think it's really about the phrasing. So at least for Dougy Center model it's like, making sure we don't use the words counseling or

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

therapy because that can be a number one pushback for a lot of kids. We say counseling or therapy, and this is not true for everybody, a lot of kids and teens will hear there's something wrong with me, you're locating the problem in me, and you're going to try to fix me. I'm not interested in that.

So really coming at it from it's not that you have to go because there's something wrong with you. It's that we've had someone in our life die, and a lot of people don't get that. It can just feel nice sometimes to go be with other people who have had someone die too.

And also making sure to share like, this is not the sad place. We're not going here to cry. Some people will cry, but that's not the whole point of it. And I think a lot of kids and teens are freaked out that they're going to have to hear a bunch of sad stories and they've already got their own sad story. They don't want to hear other kids' sad stories. So again, it's like the phrasing, the framing of it, and the short-term commitment to just try it out and we'll go from there.

Krista: Yeah, that makes complete sense. Very useful language too. I can see why the language of counseling and therapy could be quite off-putting, or the idea of going somewhere where you have to be sad or everybody else around you is going to be sad. Not be something a teenager especially might look forward to.

Jana: No. I used to do our orientation sessions, which is the first-time appointment when all the families come, and it's mixed of kids and teens and the adults. And the kids and teens are together, and inevitably, there are a few teens in the room, and they have sunglasses on, hoods on their hoodies up, headphones in, not making any eye contact.

And I didn't push it with them. I was like, hey, thanks for coming in today, I'm guessing a few of you are here against your will. And that's totally fine,

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

I'm not going to take it personally. Here's what the Dougy Center is not. We're not counseling, we're not therapy, we're not here to change how you feel or tell you how to grieve in any certain way.

And at that point, one headphone would come out. And then maybe the sunglasses would come down a little bit. And usually, by the end of the hour, both headphones came out and the sunglasses didn't always come off, but there would be a little bit more engagement. And I think a lot of it was just I'm not here to get you to feel or think a certain way. Just here to create an opportunity for you if you want to engage in this. Seemed to go a long way with the teens.

Krista: For sure. I think a lot of moms I talk to; they struggle to believe that they can trust themselves to know how to support their kids. And so, they're always looking for someone to tell them that yes, this is normal, or no, this isn't, or here's what you need to do. Because they're in such turmoil themselves, and sometimes their self-confidence is in such a different place than it used to be. And it's just self-doubt everywhere.

Jana: Yeah. And that's where, you know, if you have a kid or a teen who's like, no, I am not going, trying to find a support group for yourself or a coach, a support service like you provide or a parenting coach even. Just someone else that you can bounce some ideas off of, because sitting with the reality that if you were a coparenting household or coparenting relationship, if your child's parent, you weren't living together, there was still probably some element of bouncing ideas off of another adult to come to a unified decision about how to address things like school work and discipline and stuff like that.

So just acknowledging the reality like, now you're doing this on your own in kind of an echo chamber, and of course that would bring up all kinds of

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

insecurities and wonderings of if I'm doing it right and how important it is as a parent to find other places where you can get that support.

And that might be the best thing you can do for your kid and teen and maybe the intervention place is less about child and teen and maybe about you getting that support for yourself so you feel more empowered and confident in your decisions.

Krista: Yeah. That's always what I end up coaching on is I obviously can't change anything for anyone who isn't part of the coaching conversation, I.e. your child, but I can help you look at your thoughts about yourself as a parent and your thoughts about your child and help you get to a place where you feel calm and grounded and loving and you know, whatever it is that you want to feel that helps you parent from the most effective place, which is so beneficial.

So, speaking of challenging situations with children, dating. I get so many widowed moms who are challenged by dating and their children's reactions to dating, so I'm wondering what experience you have since you hear the perspective of the kids on that side.

And it's not always a particular age of children. Sometimes it's even grown children. And I know that's probably not who you serve, but we're very worried about what our children think about when we date again. Any wisdom, insights, do's, don'ts?

Jana: That's such a hard question to answer again because every kid is different. Even within your own family, every kid is different. You might have really different reactions from different kids who are faced with the exact same situation, so it's hard for me to come up with any universals.

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

I have quite a few folks who were in the 18 to 40 range, who are young adults who that's a big topic of conversation if it's a parent who's died, if their other parent starts dating again, so it's definitely a big one. Where to even start?

So I think checking in with kids to find out what they think, not from a perspective of your thoughts and opinions are going to drive what I decide to do, like recognizing that as an adult, you are an autonomous adult and get to make decisions about dating based on your own timeline.

And there may be particular things that your kids are needing information or reassurance about. So for some kids, it may be reassuring them that if another adult comes into their life or into your family, it doesn't mean that that person is here to replace the person who died. And for some kids, they might be super excited.

Sometimes younger kids are like, I got a new mom. So it's going to be different for every kid in that way, but just checking in with them to see what are their fears, what are their hesitations, what are they concerned about, to see if there's ways to offer information and reassurance.

Not the reassurance of I promise you I'll never date again, which I think for some parent - if a parent out there had said that, no shame around that. It can be a very instinctual thing to say, particularly right after someone dies to say to kids, there'll never be anyone like your mom, there'll never be anyone like your dad, I'll never date again, and that might change.

Krista: Yeah, and it may be very honest in the moment because you can't imagine yourself dating again.

Jana: Absolutely. And then to maybe come back like, you know what I said when dad first died, I truly felt that, and things have changed for me and I

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

am feeling ready to date again. So yeah, not leaving kids in charge of if or when you date, but there may be places where they can have some choice around things.

So always thinking about that for kids who are grieving is like, where can we build in choice. So it might be it's time to meet this person that you're dating, asking kids maybe where or for how long or what activity they want to do. So, they feel like they have a little bit of power in that situation.

Might be I'm not ready to meet that person in my house, but I'll be willing to go to the park or we could go to the batting cages or we can go do something versus just a sit down meal. So yeah, talking with kids about where are the places where they can have some choice around that.

And then also finding ways that it's going to still be okay to talk about the person who died, even in the presence of maybe the person you're dating. And that might have to be a conversation with your dating person around their confidence and security, because that's one of the things I hear a lot from kids and teens is the fear that now I can't talk about my dad anymore, I can't talk about my mom anymore because that other person is going to feel bad and I don't want them to feel bad.

And so, if there's ways that that new person in your life can engage in those conversations and maybe even, they ask the kid or the teen questions about their mom or their dad. What were they like, or where did you guys like to go, or what are things that you've been missing lately? So that just makes that conversation more comfortable for everybody.

Krista: Yeah. And I think too, we have to sort through those issues first. So, if we're not comfortable with how we're going to talk about dad with the new boyfriend, we need to resolve that first. We need to find our own confidence and our own way of going about it and really feel good about that so if

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

there's work left to be done there, we can't really expect our kids to be feeling really comfortable about it if we're not.

Jana: Right. Yeah, that's a great point.

Krista: So I know The Dougy Center is specifically serving people in the Portland area, but also can you talk to listeners about what you offer in terms of resource guidance to people who don't live in the Portland area?

Jana: Yeah, so if people who don't live in the Portland area are looking for a program that would be similar to The Dougy Center, you can call us at our main number and we can talk you through how to find that. On our website there's a searchable directory where you can search by your state.

You just want to type out the whole state. Don't put the abbreviation. And that will show the programs that we are aware of in your state. It may not be the most updated list because that's changing all the time. So, then we encourage people to find a few programs that are close to where you live and call them because they're going to have the most updated information about what's currently available.

Doing the COVID-19 pandemic, some programs are offering virtual groups and some programs have paused their programming. So, it could be kind of an odd time for trying to find that in-person support. So that's what I would say for if you're looking for a peer support group that you can attend.

Our tip sheets and our podcast and various - we have downloadable activity sheets. All those things are available on our website, dougy.org. So you can click through to look through all the tip sheets, activity sheets, things like that, but you can always call us at our main number, which I'm guessing you'll put in the show notes.

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

So in our show notes, just call our main number. We're available regular business hours on Pacific standard time. And we're happy to talk people through which tip sheet might be the best fit, which Grief Out Loud podcast might be the best fit.

We can also just provide some phone consultation, specifically around things like talking to kids about the fact that someone has died, answering their questions, idea and suggestions for significant days like birthdays, anniversary of when the person died, graduations, other kind of developmental milestone things. We're always happy to talk through those questions with folks if they call us, even if they don't live in the Portland area.

Krista: Amazing. And so in order for someone to make your resource directory, is anybody in your resource directory necessarily following a model that's similar to yours, or is that just resources you're aware but you don't really know exactly the details about how they do what they do?

Jana: Both those things are on our website, in that national directory. So, they are programs that we have been told that they provide support groups for kids and possibly for teens, possibly for young adults too. There's an asterisk for the programs that we know were modeled after The Dougy Center, who took our particular training, and then the programs without that asterisk have not taking our particular training. They may still base themselves on our model.

Krista: Okay. And everything you do at The Dougy Center, you're completely non-profit, yeah?

Jana: Correct. We're 100% funded by community members, donations. We've received no state, government, county funding. And we provide all of

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

our groups free of charge to families, so there's never a fee to attend one of our groups.

Krista: That's amazing. So, what if someone wanted to support The Dougy Center? Where would they go?

Jana: Anywhere on our website. I'm sure there will be. But you can go to the Grief Out Loud website actually, the dougy.org/griefoutloud, there's a large blue button at the top of that page that says donate now, so that's one page. But I haven't looked at our website donation page in a while, but I'm sure there's multiple ways that people can donate online, or they can call us on our main number.

Krista: Amazing. Not that you asked me to say that, by the way. She did not ask me to say that but it's an organization that I think is so impressive, so there might be some listeners that feel called to support. Is there anything else that you think would be reassuring or useful for my listeners to know?

Jana: Do we have another hour and a half?

Krista: We can do another episode.

Jana: I mean, I think anything parents can do to give themselves a little bit less of a hard time. I think there's so much pressure on parents when someone dies to get it perfect immediately. Like I have to protect my child, fix my child, get everything, and to recognize that grief is life-long.

You're going to have the whole rest of your life and your child's life to continue to engage in the grief and engage in the remembering and engage in the honoring. And so, to give yourself a little bit of slack so that

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

your kids and teens can also have a little bit of slack. Because there's no right way to grieve anyway.

So, these aspirations people have to be good grieving or good grievers, or perfect grievers is not based on reality because there is no perfect grieving. There's just the grieving you're doing in the moment and you're doing the best that you can.

And yeah, to give yourself a lot of grace around that, and then to just go back to the basics of being honest with kids, giving kids choices, providing some structure and routine as much as possible, attending to your own emotional, physical, mental, spiritual needs so that you feel a little bit more well-resourced to be with your kids.

Yeah, and then to just step back from feeling like I've got to get this perfect or my kid is going to be broken forever, because that's way too much pressure for you and way too much pressure for your kiddo too.

Krista: Yeah. That's everything. That's everything. If we could just live - might put that at the beginning of the podcast. That 30 seconds or whatever that was.

Jana: It took me a long time to warm up to saying that. I got it now.

Krista: That's solid advice. And it's funny now it's not only do we do this with grief, but we do it with life. Parenting in general. Somehow, it's possible to do it perfectly, whatever it is. It's not the way of the humans. It's just not how it happens. It's messy. We're messy, and that's beautiful. I love it. thank you so much, Jana. I am really glad that you came on the podcast.

Ep #60: Interview with Jana DeCristofaro

Jana: Well, thank you for inviting me on. I'm so grateful this podcast exists, and I'm grateful for your listeners who are tuning into or trying to support themselves in the best ways that they can find.

Krista: Amazing. Alright, call that a day there.

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If you like what you've been hearing on this podcast and want to create a future you can truly get excited about, even after the loss of your spouse, I invite you to join my Mom Goes On coaching program. It's small group coaching just for widowed moms like you where I'll help you figure out what's holding you back and give you the tools and support you need so you can move forward with confidence.

Please don't settle for a new normal that's less than what you deserve. Go to coachingwithkrista.com and click Work With Me for details and next steps. I can't wait to meet you.