

Ep #110: The Limits of Hope



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With Your Host

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Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, episode 110, The Limits of Hope.

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 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. The move is complete, you all. If you've been listening to the podcast, you know that my boyfriend and I bought a house and have been moving. And the movers came, the movers went, it is done.

We are in the new house. I still haven't actually sold my house yet so I need to do that, but we're in the house. And I let all the feelings be there because I had a lot of them. Some of them not really anticipated, but I've been in my old house for 17 years, lots of memories there, both of my children were raised there.

We moved there when my daughter was six months old maybe. And so every room in the house had memories everywhere. Memories just going through all the stuff and it was not easy. So I had to go through kind of my own little grieving process.

And I just let myself do that and I dealt with the grief grenades as they showed up because, boy howdy, did they. And also what I did was I just decided in advance to love the new house. I mean, it's hard not to love quite honestly, it's beautiful.

But I remember a few years ago when my teacher Brooke moved from her home in California and she moved to Texas, and she shared that story and she talked about how powerful it was for her to just tell her brain in advance that we were going to love Texas because the brain finds what it looks for.

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And so I decided that I would also follow that advice and just decide in advance that I would love this neighborhood, I would love this house, and I would ask my brain to look for all the things that I love. Because of course, if I ask my brain to look for all the things that I don't love, it's going to find those things.

Combining a household with someone, my two kids, his two kids, my dog, his dog, the cat, there's a lot of messy humanness to that. And I really want my brain to be focused on what's amazing about it, and not in a fairyland denial sort of way, but just in a way that helps continually use my brain to my advantage in support of the result and the life experience that I want to create.

And hasn't been all that challenging yet to be honest, but maybe someday it will. So anyway, that's what's going on with me. So let's get into this episode. I don't think I ever contemplated a downside to hope until after Hugo died. In fact, I used to think that hope was everything.

The organizational symbol of my beloved fraternity is an anchor and the anchor symbolizes hope. And when I say fraternity by the way, most people probably say sorority but technically, my sorority is a fraternity. Long story but we refer to it as a fraternity, so that's what I'm talking about.

And my fraternity has been an important part of my life since college. I never really imagined myself in a sorority but I'm really glad it's something that I did. And it was so powerful for me in college that I've kept my involvement as an adult.

And in fact, when Hugo and I were returning from the trip when the accident happened, we were coming back from a volunteer summer camp that was in memory of one of my sisters who was killed when she was 25. And we had started that program with the hope that we could take something bad and do some good in the world because of that.

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I actually have a tattoo of an anchor, which is the symbol of hope, I have a framed piece of art with Emily Dickinson's Hope is the Thing with Feathers poem. So what I'm offering you in this episode felt very contrary to me as it unfolded in my life.

A bit like my security blanket was being taken away. So I'm not trying to steal your hope or tell you that hope is universally bad. My wish for you is that you will just give pause and think about the role of hope in your life going forward and decide when it serves you, when you want to use it, and when you don't.

Because like anything, hope is not good or bad, it's not right or wrong. It's not morally superior. And it's also not a panacea for human problems. I believe that hope has its usefulness, but it also has its limits.

So let's talk first about the usefulness of hope, and then we'll talk about how hope can hold us back. So when you've lost your person and you're feeling lots of negative emotion or emotions, and those emotions feel random and unpredictable, it's easy to feel hopeless.

It's easy to convince yourself that it won't get better or that you'll never truly be happy again. And I remember thinking that maybe it would get better but that there would be a limit on how good it could get, thinking my best days were behind me because I just wouldn't find a love like that again.

So when we're feeling hopeless or resigned to something that isn't what we want for our lives, then hope can be a useful emotion to create for ourselves. Hope can give us a respite from those intense negative emotions that no one ever taught us to allow.

And in parallel, we can develop the skill of allowing our feelings to run cleanly through our bodies. Hope can help us lift our heads up, even just

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ever so slightly, and hope makes considering the future without our person more possible.

Hope can be what helps us walk through what seems like a never-ending tunnel of darkness. Post-traumatic growth teaches that we can use a traumatic life experience, and if you're not familiar with that, definitely check out episode eight called Post-Traumatic Growth is Real.

But post-traumatic growth can help us create a richer and more meaningful life experience, increase our resiliency, develop deeper relationships with those that we love, stronger spiritual connections, we can use a trauma to align more with our values and live with more intention and more presence.

And I see the use of hope here. Something happens that we don't want or we wouldn't wish for, and we can use hope as a steppingstone toward the growth that is available to us. Not because it's a moral obligation to grow from loss, but because if we want to and we don't know how to, then hope can kind of be that rung on the ladder that we use to climb toward creating the future we want.

And hope can also help us get started changing something that we haven't yet been able to change. When we're feeling hopeless or resigned or when we're believing that we'll always struggle in a particular area of life, when we're believing there's something wrong with us, or believing we're damaged or not valuable, hope can get us started towards seeing the truth of who we really are.

The truth that our worth is non-negotiable. The truth that we are not damaged, even though part of us very much believes that we are. So when it comes to creating what we want in the future, hopelessness prevents us from trying, or it drives us to quit. And hope helps us consider that we could try again and that not all is lost.

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So hope has its upside for sure. But on the flip side, hope can actually hold us back. Hoping for a cure for a long-term illness can sometimes be what prevents us from having conversations that we later wish we'd had. Maybe some of you are in that position.

Relying on hope can sometimes be the reason that our partner's affairs were never put in order, or why insurance wasn't purchased, or why end of life matters were never discussed. And that may be where some of you are.

Of course, that part of life is probably over if you're listening to this podcast, but I hope that as we look back, we can have some compassion for why we relied on hope. We have a human brain that wants to avoid pain. We're literally wired that way. So we don't have to beat ourselves up for having relied on hope to be our anchor.

We can understand that we were scared and we can be kind to ourselves, knowing that we really were doing the best we could do with what we knew at the time, and we weren't bad, and we weren't wrong because we avoided those uncomfortable issues or because words were left unspoken.

Hope can also hold us back because while it can get us headed towards something we want, hope is passive. I want you to think about this. Remember, as humans, we're feelings creatures. Our actions in the world are fueled by feelings, by emotion.

So consider a time when you achieved a goal that you're really proud of. Something that was hard for you to do, something that challenged you. Hope wasn't what got you across the finish line.

When I was in my mid-30s, I decided I wanted to run a half marathon. And running did not come easily to me. I did not identify as a runner at all. I had to start with the Couch to 5K program. Maybe you've heard of it. And run a little bit, then walk, and then run, and then walk.

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And it just was hard for me. My neighbor friend Mandy, who later became my running partner, was a natural runner. In fact, it was a little annoying. Not going to lie. The first time she decided to run a marathon, she trained by herself, ran by herself, and won first place in her age division. It was like, no big deal.

Meanwhile, I'm struggling so hard. But that's actually why I wanted to run. That's why I wanted to run a half marathon is because I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it and it was hard and I wanted to do something hard. So initially, hope helped me get started.

I had the hope that I could do it. I didn't believe I could do it, but I hoped that I could and that's what helped me get started. But at a certain point, hope was no longer useful. We can't use hope to get ourselves to a big uncomfortable scary goal.

So I didn't just think, "Oh, I hope I run 13.1 miles." I had to feel something much more active. I had to feel committed, determined, I had to decide to believe that I was making it happen no matter what.

When I quit my corporate job to become a life coach, the same thing happened. I didn't just think, "Well, I hope it happens. I hope I make this business successful." Because hope would have never gotten me to take the kind of action that created a successful business.

I had to decide to believe that I was going to figure it out no matter what, even when I didn't have evidence that I could do it. And hope didn't build my business because hope doesn't get hard things done. Courage, determination, commitment, those are the emotions that I used to make that dream a reality for myself.

So whatever your dream is, even if your dream right now is just being able to dream again because that's where some of us are, hope really isn't

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going to do the job if you have a big dream. We have to learn to think in ways that create the emotions that we need for the specific challenge that's in front of us. And as much as I always believed in the value of hope, it's not always the fuel we need for the job.

The last thing that I want to offer about hope, and this one's a little deeper is this; when we're trying to get ourselves to hope, we're doing that because we have an underlying belief that where we are or what we're feeling isn't okay. We have a thought that what's happening shouldn't be happening.

So in this way, hope is arguing with the reality of what is. And when we're arguing with what is, we're not able to stay present with what is. Hoping our grief will go away is a rejection of our grief. Hoping it will go away, whatever it is, is rejecting what's real for us right now.

It's another way of saying I'm not willing to feel this way. This shouldn't be happening, I shouldn't be here, I can't handle this, so I will hope for it to change. I can't be present with what is, so I must hope for something better.

But the present moment is also where life happens. It's really all we ever have, even when it hurts. So hope can keep us from that mindfulness we say that we want. Mindfulness is just being fully present in our experience. Not trying to avoid it, not trying to numb it, not trying to escape our emotions.

And so the way to reduce our suffering is to acknowledge and to allow ourselves to be in the present moment because that's where life is lived. To feel the pain of loss, the pain of being human without resisting it, without judging it.

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And I don't think when we're trying to access hope that we're intentionally trying to resist it. Resist our human experience. But hope is an obstacle that blocks our ability to be present with what is because it implies that there's somewhere better to be.

It makes it hard for us to relax and be where we are, to relax and to allow ourselves to feel the depth of whatever it is we feel, to relax and be who we are because who we are is already good enough, even when we're in pain.

I also think that hope prolongs this search for certainty that we have as humans. It prevents us from being able to relax into uncertainty, which I believe is the more useful path. Because let's face it, as much as most of us want certainty, it's an illusion and nothing proves that more than the death of our person.

So if we could just give up hoping for certainty, we could get better at uncertainty. We could relax into uncertainty a little bit more and that truth is so hard. I think it's the hardest for humans. That truth that impermanence is the foundation of our lived experience, that nothing stays the same, nothing is guaranteed.

Grief is a part of life. We spend so much time and energy clinging to the illusion of certainty and resisting what is, so much energy thinking that positive emotion is better than negative emotion and trying to avoid it and thinking there's something wrong with us when we feel it.

No. If we could just drop that resistance and stop clinging to the hope that something is better, we could stay where we are. We could stay in the present moment. We could stop trying to escape the human experience. And if we would give up hoping for something better, then we could really experience what's real for us right now. And right now is the only thing that we're promised.

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Okay, that's what I have for you this week, wherever you are, whatever's going on for you, I love you and you've got this. Take care and I'll see you next week. Bye-bye.

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.