

## Ep #152: Why We Suck at Grief



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Krista St-Germain**

[The Widowed Mom Podcast](#)

## Ep #152: Why We Suck at Grief

Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, episode 152, Why we Suck at Grief.

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. I had a good weekend. I had a great weekend actually. Sometimes you go into a weekend with low expectations and then it's just such a lovely weekend. I didn't expect it to go badly or anything. But I just didn't expect it to be anything all that exciting and it was such a good weekend.

So, I watched the Final Four game. I'm not even that much of a basketball fan to be honest, but the boyfriend is, his youngest is and of course KU, University of Kansas. I'm from Kansas. Was playing and made it all the way to the championships which are tonight, so that was really fun. We had a little gathering, my daughter hung out with me and we cheered for KU. And the boyfriend and his son cheered for Villanova because that's who's in their bracket. I have KU going all the way but anyway did that.

And then got a bunch of flowers for the house. This makes me so happy. There aren't that many Garden Source quite open yet in my area because I'm recording this in the first part of April but there were a few. And last year of course we moved into this house and then has all of these pots. I think I counted 13 pots, it's got a ton of pots. And so, we got all the pots looking great and multiple hanging baskets, and just made the outdoors a lovely place to be. In fact, I think this afternoon I'm going to go sit on the porch and see if I can get some work done out there.

It's still a little bit cold but I just like looking in my backyard. So that's what's going on in my world. And before we jump into this episode the reason I

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wanted to do it was because last week I was guest teaching in a program that a friend of mine runs, her name is Rachel Hart. And she runs a program called Take a Break which is all about changing your relationship with alcohol. And she's just a masterful coach. And so, I was teaching with her. She had asked me to come and talk about grief in her program.

And one of the things I told her was that I just think we suck at grief. And to me that's, you know, this is the world that I live in. The grief is what I do all day every day. And so that's not a newsflash to me. But I got quite the chuckle from her and I think it really was kind of new information for her. And she was so curious about why I said that. And so, I thought, I just need to do a podcast episode to talk about why we suck at grief. One, because I don't want you to feel bad about it. And two, because I think we can do better.

So, I came up with a list. I had to shorten it. I came up with the list of 15 reasons I think we suck at grief. So, we'll call it the top 15. There's more that I could add to this list and it's probably something I could talk about for a long, long time. But I'm just going to give you the main 15 and we'll go through them together. So here we go.

So, we suck at grief. And reason number one is because we think that there are stages that we're supposed to go through. And we think that these stages are linear. And if you've listened to the myths of grief, episode two, you'll already know this. If you haven't, definitely go and listen to that episode because I do cover some of the same things in this episode. But the five stages of grief is a popular grief theory. There are so many grief theories. Did you know this?

Think about anything. Think about weight loss or gosh, anything you can think of probably has more than one theory. Somebody has a different idea about everything. And the same thing is true for grief. There are quite a lot of grief theories but the five stages of grief is the one that seems to have

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taken hold in our culture and so it's the one that people know about. And because they only know about that one and because they misinterpret it.

Then they come out of it thinking that there's supposed to be five stages that we go through in grief. And we're supposed to go through them, first, second, third, fourth, fifth, in that order. And that somehow when we do that we're done which is not at all the intention of that grief theory at all and also largely inaccurate. But we don't know about any of the other grief theories, we just know about that one. So that's the number one reason we suck at grief.

Number two, we think that time heals and we're told this, time heals. So, what do we do because we think that time heals? Sometimes this means we wait and while we're waiting we avoid. We resist. We don't allow ourselves to feel our feelings. We distract ourselves from them. We end up using behaviors to numb them out. So, we overeat, we overdrink, we over-shop, we over-scroll, we over-busy. Some people even over-travel.

We can do lots of things to distract ourselves from our feelings which all makes perfect sense if we think that time will heal and all we have to do is just grit our teeth and white knuckle our way through time so that poof, we reach this magic moment and somehow we're healed. But that's not how grief works. Now, there is something to be said for the passage of time.

So, I'm not saying that the passage of time isn't helpful because in a way it is in that as time is passing, assuming that we're not in a coma, our brain is getting more data. And as it gets more data it is getting used to the idea that our loved one has died.

So, I'll give you an example. If for years the first thing you did in the morning was roll over and see your partner. Then your brain expects that when you wake up tomorrow you're going to roll over and see your partner. So as time passes and you wake up multiple mornings and you do not roll

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over and see your partner. Or you hear the garage door open and you realize it's not your partner. Or you get a text message and you realize it's not your partner. Or you go to text them and you realize that you can't text them.

When those things happen over, and over, and over your brain is gathering more datapoints. And in a way it is changing what it predicts to be true for you. There is a great book and this book speaks so well to this and so much more. It's called *The Grieving Brain* and it's by Mary Frances O'Connor. I really want to have her on the podcast at some point. The subtitle is *The Surprising Science of How we Learn from Love and Loss*. I highly recommend, if your widow fog isn't too bad and you like to read.

Even though this book is very focused on the brain it's really readable. It's really consumable. And it's not meant for the neuroscientists by any means. It's meant for the laypeople like you and I. And so, you might really get a lot out of what's happening in your brain during grief. And maybe I'll do another episode of the podcast on some of the key points from this book but I digress.

The passage of time in and of itself, if we're just counting on that, and then we're using the time heals idea to not actually think about our loss and to not allow ourselves to feel what we feel, we make it so much harder on ourselves. So that's number two.

Number three, we think there's a right and a wrong way to do grief. I can't tell you how many times I have had conversations with widows who have come to me because what they're worried about is that they will do grief wrong. As though that's a thing. It's not a thing to do grief wrong. There isn't a right or a wrong to grief. And imagine for a second how you feel when you think that you could be doing grief wrong. You feel terrible.

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And remember we've talked before about the filtering system in your brain. So, you have this filtering system in your brain that's job is to go and show you data relevant to you in your life. And there's just too much data out there in the world for your brain to process so it can't process all of it. So, it has to have a way to filter what's relevant to you. And you've probably heard me talk about this in multiple episodes. It's called the reticular activating system. So that part of the brain is always looking for evidence of what we think.

So, your thoughts determine what your brain searches the environment and provides data to your brain in support of. So, if you're thinking there's a right and a wrong way to do grief that's like giving a homework assignment to your brain that says, "Hey, brain, please go find evidence of how I'm doing grief wrong. Please go show me all the ways that I am getting it wrong." And then it will block out anything that doesn't line up with wrong.

So, all you will start to see is wrong. And first of all, wrong is made up because there is no such thing. But second of all, it just doesn't help you because it makes you feel terrible and it's not the truth. It's not the capital T truth. So that's number three.

Number four, we believe that grief ends or that something magical happens at the one year mark. We think the point is to get through our grief, get to the end of it. And we use terms like, journey, path. And sometimes I don't even know what other words to use. I'm definitely someone who uses them. But the unfortunate thing is that sometimes it gives the impression that there must be an end to that path. There must be a finish line to that journey. That's not true. Grief is the natural response to loss. It's our thoughts, and feelings, and actions about a loss.

And if the loss, it has happened and we can never change that. Then we're always going to have thoughts and feelings about it so there's no end. That doesn't mean we're going to feel as low forever. We will think and feel

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differently about the loss but it won't end. We will acclimate to it. We will integrate it into our lives. That's the goal. Can I choose on purpose how I want to think and feel about what has happened to me? Can I choose on purpose how I want to think and feel about this loss? Can I decide who I want to be now that this loss has happened?

And if you're already past the one year mark you know this, but nothing magical happens there, nothing magical. So, if you're waiting and you're thinking, well, all I need to do is get through the first year then see problem number two which is thinking that time heals and so then we wait. And then it's so disappointing when we get to the year mark and nothing magical happened.

That's why sometimes people have such a harder time in year two, not because year two is harder at all. But because if we thought year one, all we had to do was just survive it and we didn't actually figure out how to support ourselves through it and think about it on purpose. Then of course we're going to struggle more than we expected in year two because we'll see that there was nothing magical that happened. And then now it's time to start looking at how we're thinking and feeling about the loss.

Number five, our approach to dying has changed. And what I mean by this is that it used to be more common that births happened in the home and that deaths happened in the home. And so entire generations grew up around birth and around death. It wasn't done in buildings out of the home. But it is much less frequent, much less common that people actually die in the home.

Now, I don't know the data on this. And I suspect that we are on the other side of that trend in that palliative care, hospice care. Our approach to that is changing and people are bringing their loved ones home more frequently to transition at home. But I would guess that most of us didn't grow up with our elders transitioning in the home.

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Now, that's not completely true for me. I actually did have a couple of my grandparents who did have hospice care and did pass away in the home. But I think that's more the exception when I think about all the people who died as I was a child, very few of them were in hospice care.

So, I was around very little death which means we've created more discomfort with death, less familiarity with death because it hasn't been around us so much. It's kind of been something that you go away to do and all of a sudden grandpa was in the hospital and then he just didn't come out. Or grandma went into an assisted living facility and then she just didn't come out. And our children don't have that experience. So, we aren't having those conversations necessarily because the person isn't dying in the home. And that's resulting or has resulted in more discomfort around death.

Number six, and these are in no particular order by the way. I literally just sat down and it was like flames were shooting out of my fingers onto the keyboard, but number six. We worry so much about what other people think about how we're grieving and how we're living, and all the choices that we're making. And this makes it so much harder on us. And I understand why we do it. I did it too. But because we think there's a right and a wrong way and for many, many reasons we give so much weight to other people's opinions about how we're doing it.

And if we could just get behind the idea that we're not doing it right and we're not doing it wrong because there is no such thing, that everybody's way is just their way and that's okay. And our only job is to just figure out what works for us, to make choices that serve the lives we want to create and the values that we have. And that will be unique to every single person as opposed to trying to make all the people happy with how you're doing it because you can't, it's an impossible task.

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Number seven, we think life will be better when grief is done and see point number four. Grief is never done. But I find it fascinating and it happens in every human experience but it of course also happens in grief that as humans there is a part of us that does not want pain, that does not want anything that we would classify as negative. And so, we're always looking for greener grass. We're always looking for the exit ramp. We're always looking for something better instead of just choosing to stay present with what is because what is, is all we ever have.

What is, is all we ever have but we're always trying to escape it in pursuit of something better. And I don't think there's anything wrong with pursuing goals. I love goals. But to say that life will be better somewhere else is to kind of miss the point. And I think we really just have the wrong goal. We were talking about this in Mom Goes On the other day about loving what is. And what a lot of us are trying to do is change what is because we think we can't love it as it is. And that's to completely miss the point.

So, we're basically trying to make sure that everything comes back together again. That everything is put back together instead of increasing our ability, our capacity to allow things to fall apart. Because if they have to always be together in order for us to love them and be present then we're going to miss out on a whole bunch of life because that's not the way of the human experience.

I love, and I've talked about it before but I love, love, loved Pema Chödrön's, *When Things Fall Apart*. I read it not very long after Hugo died when I could actually absorb information. But it felt like it spoke to me. And much of her work has done that over the years but this one in particular. And what she's talking about, there are many things but one of the things that stuck out to me is that we think that the point of life is to get it together. But that's not it at all. It's going to fall apart and it's going to come together.

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And it's going to fall apart and it's going to come together. And that's going to happen over, and over, and over, and over. And the point isn't to force it one way or the other. I think the point is to make space for all of that to happen for it to come together and things to fall apart. And find the beauty as best we can, stay present in the falling apart and the coming together. And that's the goal. Loving the whole experience which means we're loving the good stuff and we're loving the stuff that we define as the bad stuff. We're living the rollercoaster life.

And we're not saying that the bad things shouldn't happen. We're recognizing that the bad things are a part of the good life. And we suffer less when we take that approach. So, if you think the goal of your grief is just to get through it so it's over so that you'll be better, you're going to have a completely different experience than if you can figure out how do you relax into life with all of its highs and its lows. So that's number seven.

Number eight, we don't have a consistent or a useful definition of grief. I am fascinated by how many times I talk to people about grief and even coaches actually because I have a large coaching network. Is usually they will think of grief as a feeling. And it's so much more than that. In reality grief is, it's lots of thoughts, and lots of feelings, and lots of actions, lots of behaviors. And it's not just the negative stuff.

It's really problematic when we think that we're grieving and grief is only negative. And then we have an experience we would classify as positive. This is when we start making ourselves feel guilty and we start telling ourselves that we're doing it wrong. Because if we think that grief is just is feelings and only negative ones and then positive feelings show up, you can see why then we think that's problematic. But it really isn't because all feelings, negative and positive are part of grief. So many thoughts and ways of seeing the world and ways of seeing the loss.

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Sometimes we're grateful that it happened, that's part of grief. Sometimes we're mad that it happened, that's part of grief. Sometimes we're sad that it happened, that's part of grief. Sometimes we're totally numb, that's part of grief, it's all of it. And so, I think we define it too narrowly. I think a solid definition for grief is that it's just the natural human response to a perceived loss. Grief is the natural human response to a perceived loss. Why do I say perceived? Because what is a loss for me isn't necessarily a loss for my neighbor.

Different losses hit people differently because they have different perceptions of those losses. I was doing a Facebook Live the other day and someone put in the comments that her husband had been abusive to her. And so many people in her family and friends were giving her a hard time about why she was sad. And it's because their perception was that it wasn't a loss to her. She has a different perception and there's nothing wrong with the way that she perceives that loss. But it is unique to the individual. And it isn't just about death, any loss.

When we think something was going to go one way and it went another, and we perceive that as a loss we're going to have some thoughts and feelings about that. It's going to take some adjusting to. That's grief.

Number nine, you've heard me say this 36 million times but why not one more. We think feelings are problems and we were never taught how to allow them. This is one of the biggest problems we have with grief is that we think feelings are problems. We're supposed to solve them. We have no idea what to do with them because no one ever showed us how. When we think feelings are problems then we think we're not supposed to be feeling negative feelings but guess what? That's part of grief.

When we think other people aren't supposed to be feeling negative feelings we try to fix them and that's impossible because their thoughts cause their feelings, we don't. But if we don't want other people to feel bad that's when

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we start trying to manipulate them to feel better. When we don't know how to feel good when someone else is feeling bad, that's when we start saying clichés and platitudes. That's when it starts getting awkward. That's when we start saying, "Oh, they're in a better place. Don't worry, you're young. There's more fish in the sea. Well, at least you only had one child."

This is when we say, "God had a plan." This is when we offer clichés and platitudes because we're trying to make people feel better, or they're trying to make us feel better. This is the reason we ghost, one of them. This is one of the reasons we get ghosted, people don't know how to feel okay when we feel bad. They weren't taught. This is why we feel so much anxiety about running into people in the grocery store. It's because we think feelings are problems. We don't want them to feel bad. We don't want them to feel bad for us.

We don't want them to feel awkward. We don't want to feel awkward. We think all of it is a problem because we just weren't taught any different. This is why it is the number one thing we work on inside of my coaching program, is that feelings aren't problems, they're just experiences. And if I can get you to feel them enough times you'll genuinely come out believing that what I'm saying is true and that you're good at feelings. And it's okay if you're not good at them but don't be mad at yourself about it, it's just that nobody ever taught us.

Number 10, people don't talk about their experiences in grief, they don't. Maybe inside a very small social network but think about how much we use social media to communicate with people. And yet on social media we might post a few things about the 'negative experiences in life'. But for the most part it's highlight reels. It's not real raw humanness. We hold those cards so closely and we don't really share openly. And so, what does that do? That gives other people the impression that they too should play their cards closely, should not be open.

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And we create this experience where it's only okay to share the positive stuff and it's not okay to share the real stuff. More isolation.

Number 11, we do a lot of comparing and despairing. Comparing and despairing. Comparative grief meaning we will say things like, "Well, their situation was way worse than mine. So, I shouldn't be as sad as I am. I should just be grateful. I should be doing better than I am." We make ourselves feel badly about our own experience because we decide that someone else's was worse.

Or conversely, we make ourselves feel righteous when we decide that our grief was worse. Neither of those two options feels good. I'm going to vote for what's behind door number three which is like, hey, this is hard. It's hard for them, it's hard for me and it's okay if it's hard. I love them, I love me and it's just hard. As opposed to, I should be doing better because their loss was worse, or how dare they compare their loss to mine. No, it's just loss is hard. Let's stop comparing and despairing because it just makes it harder.

Number 12, we believe that we have to put our kids first before we can help ourselves. And this is not black and white. I realize that this is nuanced. But truly, truly, truly we cannot help our kids if we do not first help ourselves. And we are not doing us or them any favors if we think that our wellbeing is at the bottom of the list. We've got to put it at the top because only then can we role model to them what it looks like to support yourself, what wellness looks like. Only then can we teach them what we're learning.

Only then do we have a cup to pour from that isn't empty, kind of cliché but it's so, so true. And I think it's really important.

Alright, number 13, we only know about posttraumatic stress disorder and we don't know about posttraumatic growth. And I recorded a whole episode on posttraumatic growth, so if you haven't heard it you can go listen to more. But posttraumatic growth is basically a term coined by some

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researchers, Tedeschi and Calhoun in the mid-90s. And before they coined this term it was thought that after a trauma the best we could hope for was to get back to that baseline of wellness that we were experiencing before the trauma.

And they got very curious because they were seeing that sometimes people were just bouncing back, but there were other people who were bouncing forward as they called it. Meaning that they were experiencing deeper levels of satisfaction in life following a trauma than they had before it. And not in spite of the trauma but actually because of it, because of their response to it. And for some people this happens very naturally but everyone can learn how to create posttraumatic growth for themselves.

We can take anything that's happened to us in life and decide who we want to be now that it's happened. We can decide to live a life that's even more aligned with what we value. We can decide to create relationships that are even more powerful, more meaningful, deeper. We can grow in any way we want to grow. We can change in any way we want to change, deeper spiritual satisfaction. This is all possible but people don't know.

And then unfortunately sometimes what I see is that when we do know about posttraumatic growth, we turn it into another should. And then it becomes something we should do as opposed to something we could do. And we don't have to do that to ourselves. We shouldn't grow from grief. We shouldn't do anything because should feels like S-H, you know what. But we could if we wanted to and it wouldn't be right or wrong, or good or bad, or morally superior but it is available to us.

Number 14, we're on the home stretch. We believe all the thoughts in our brain because we don't yet have the skill of being able to think about our thinking. We don't yet see ourselves as the thinker of our thoughts. We're just so busy thinking our thoughts. And this is a huge thing that I focus on in Mom Goes On because this is really important. If all we do is believe the

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thoughts that show up in our brain then guess what thoughts we might actually live into? How are some of these? I'll give you a short list.

The wrong parent died, have you ever thought that? I should have done it differently, have you ever thought that? My best days are behind me, have you ever thought that? All of these thoughts that show up in our brain, if we just keep believing them instead of seeing them as optional. It's a life that's not built with intention and that's not what I want for you.

Okay, last one, and this is a biggie. We think that what happened shouldn't have happened. Have you thought that? And I've quoted this on the podcast many times but I always keep going back to it because it's just so relevant. Byron Katie's quote, "When we don't argue with reality, we lose but only 100% of the time. "When we don't argue with reality, we lose but only 100% of the time." It's totally okay to argue and believe that it shouldn't have happened. But what I want is for you to notice what it creates in your life.

It creates resistance to something you can't control. You end up giving your energy, resisting something that you have no ability to change and it creates so much suffering. So, I don't think that you have to believe necessarily that it should have happened, although that is definitely an option that's available to all of us. But at least consider allowing yourself to believe that it happened instead of continuing to believe that it shouldn't have happened. Because it happened allows you to experience acceptance and peace if you believe it.

It shouldn't have happened just keeps you in constant battle with the past and constant battle with reality and it doesn't help you at all.

Okay, so it's okay if you think you suck at grief, cut yourself some slack. Consider all the way our culture sucks at grief. I sucked at it too. But now decide that you're figuring it out as you go. Don't believe anymore that you

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suck at it, choose to believe that you're figuring it out as you go and choose to believe that you're going to be part of making grief easier for others too. As you figure it out you're making it easier for others.

Alright, that's what I have for you this week. Remember 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 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 that you can move forward with confidence.

Please don't settle for a new normal that's less than you deserve. Go to [coachingwithkrista.com](http://coachingwithkrista.com) and click work with me for details and the next steps. I can't wait to meet you.