

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Krista St-Germain

[The Widowed Mom Podcast](#)

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, episode 191, Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell.

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 have a good guest for you today and I debated what to call this interview. The name of her podcast is actually Work and Life Harmony. And so I ended up going with that but I want to tell you if you are not working right now. If you don't ever intend to go back to work this episode still is for you.

If you are looking to reduce overwhelm, if you're looking to have a system that helps you tame all the mental madness of not knowing what you're going to do today and what your priorities are, and if you're interested in just reducing overwhelm at all, go ahead and take a listen to this episode. I don't want the title to steer you away when I know there's value here for you. And also before we jump into that interview I want to make sure you know that there is free training that is available to you and it is so good. I'm very proud of it. I've mentioned it a couple of times on the podcast.

I did it live in late December and you can get the recording of that training when you apply for a spot in Mom Goes On and your application is accepted. The training is, How Widowed Moms Can Truly Love Life Again Without Forcing Gratitude, Thinking Positively or Reading More Grief Books. And in that training, I teach you the three-part framework that you will need if you want to love life again. It's exactly what we do inside of Mom Goes On. And you can get the whole framework for free. I forget how long it is but it's about a two-hour training I think.

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

So it's quite lengthy, you can always watch it at 2x speed if you're like me and you have no patience but it is there for you. And to get it you go to coachingwithkrista.com/lovelife. And then you can apply for Mom Goes On. It's a five-minute application and we will send you the training if it looks like Mom Goes On is a fit for you. And the reason we only send it to people who are accepted into the program is because we are extending an invitation to join Mom Goes On. And I don't want to extend an invitation if you're not quite ready for Mom Goes On.

Because it's not for people who are in super early grief and are barely functioning. So, that's what the application is intended to do. So go and check that out, let's see, a little bit of personal information, what's new and different to tell you about. So my daughter is still home from Costa Rica which is amazing. It's been great to have her here. She goes to Spain at the beginning of February. So we've got a little bit more than a month left before she leaves. And so that's been fun, kind of coming down off the holiday high around here.

I record this a little bit early obviously, you might not feel like you're coming off the holiday high when you listen to him but I am. It's like that moment where you just got all the Christmas decorations put away and I love Christmas so I kind of go all out, so to get all that stuff put away. And I kind of have the house feel like, okay, we're entering a new year and it's not so crazy Christmassy around here. And then about to take a trip, we're going to go to Las Vegas for a couple of days. And this will be the second trip that I have taken with my boyfriend to Las Vegas.

The first trip was a little bit harder. A lot more grief grenades because I hadn't been there since Hugo died. The last time I had been to Las Vegas was with Hugo. But now that we've been once together I don't anticipate nearly as many grief grenades. I think it'll be pretty smooth sailing. It's always interesting whenever I think about a Cirque Du Soleil show because Hugo was French Canadian and Cirque Du Soleil was kind of his thing, he

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

loved it. So we have seen quite a few Cirque shows together over the years. And so seeing Cirque shows without him is a little weird.

We're going to see the one at New York, New York, it's brand new. So at least it doesn't have a history. It's a Cirque show, but it's not one we ever intended to see together because it was created after he died. But other than that I don't think there will be much in the way of griefiness there for me. I think it should be pretty fun and a nice little getaway. I also found something to do that the woman who cuts my hair told me about, she and her friends did it which they call it Savor the Strip. And it is a food tour, a foodie tour.

So you just show up at the first restaurant and they take you to several different restaurants. You get to cut in line and you don't have to think or make decisions about what you're going to eat. They just tell you what to eat and they give you the drinks that are the best ones at that restaurant. And I love this idea. I know some people, it might be your worst nightmare because you actually want to decide what to eat but I kind of hate making decisions, especially on vacation.

I just don't want to make any more decisions. I feel like I make so many decisions all day long, I don't want to make anymore. So it's really appealing for me to just show up and somebody just gives me the good food and I don't even have to read a menu. And I get to do that multiple times in multiple restaurants. So I'm looking forward to that. So I'll give you the update when we get back.

But let's jump into the interview with Megan. It is actionable. It is practical. And if you're interested in what she has to say, if you're in Mom Goes On stay tuned because we, Megan and I talked after I recorded this podcast episode and I think we're going to bring her in and have her do some trainings within Mom Goes On because I really do like her approach and it's rather different. If you are not in Mom Goes On, she's got some pretty

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

awesome opportunities that you can take advantage of and she talks about them in the podcast.

But more than anything I just want you to take a couple of actionable things that would help you feel less overwhelmed and more organized and put them into practice and see what shifts for you. Alright, so let's jump into my interview with Megan. Enjoy.

Krista: Megan, welcome to the podcast. I am so excited to have you here, genuinely excited, yeah.

Megan: Me too. I'm looking forward to this.

Krista: It's so funny, we were talking right before we started recording but I really didn't know who you were until a couple of weeks ago. And we did an interview for your podcast. I was on your podcast and then in preparation for that I listened to a couple of episodes but since I've been listening to a lot of episodes because I really like what you teach and it's so different and refreshing. So why don't you get us started? Tell us a little bit about who you are, what you do and why you do what you do because I think even that is pretty interesting.

Megan: Yeah. So my name is Megan Sumrell and I live in North Carolina. And I call myself a time management expert for women. And I think a real, well, kind of backstory I guess of how I got into the space of helping women plan, manage their time. People don't believe it when they hear this but I was not born super highly organized. My mom will be the first to say, I would have been a gold medal Olympic winner if hoarding and procrastination had been [crosstalk]. So I just always like to level, so that with everyone.

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

I didn't just come out of the womb rocking all this stuff. So these were skills that thankfully I kind of found myself in a career right out of college that led me down this path. Where I spent over 20 years in the corporate IT space really leaning into process improvement, continuous improvement, business optimization and systems optimizations for software teams. So I spent years studying project management, time management, how to run things more efficiently, all of that. And got married later in life. Started a family later in life.

And when my daughter was just a couple of years old I was in that, I like to call it, in the trenches of motherhood when you've got the toddler, you're juggling work and don't even know who you are anymore all that stuff. And had her at the park one day, pushing her on the swings and the woman next to me just starts chatting as women do in the south here. And she just innocently asked me a very simple question and just said, "What do you do for fun?" I was floored because I did not have an answer literally, nothing came to my mind.

Not that I didn't enjoy being at the park. I mean I had nice things that I enjoyed but doing things you enjoy versus thinking back to my days pre-motherhood, all of that. I mean I had a very full calendar of hobbies for me and things that looked lit my fire and all of that. I could not remember the last time literally I'd had any fun. So that kind of led me on a journey. Thankfully I had a wake-up call to say, "Megan, you do this for a living. You go into organizations and you figure out ways to make sure that they can have all the things that they need and efficiently."

So I was like, "Let's apply all the skills and tools we have to my own calendar so that I can find and prioritize the time to bring fun back in, to not just feel like every day was this race against the clock on the hamster wheel." So I threw away all the ways I'd been planning, managing, organizing everything, and starting from scratch. And after several months some friends and family started noticing I looked different. I can remember

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

some of them going, “Have you lost weight? Are you eating differently?”
“No, I’m happier.”

It's amazing how we look different when we feel so much better. So long story short, some women asked if I would teach them what I was doing. And so I had to think long and hard about whether I break this down into something that would work for others. And now here I am all these years later and I've developed this. I call it the TOP Framework. It stands for Time Management Organization and Productivity. I've left my corporate career behind.

And I now spend what little time I spend working, bringing these time management principles to women all over the world with the ultimate goal of bringing them harmony, not balance in their lives.

Krista: Yeah, but that was the next question I was going to ask you. Can you talk about that, why harmony and not balance?

Megan: So I think that term we all see, work-life balance or even if it's not work, it's just balancing all the stuff, all the responsibilities, all the tasks, all the emotional aspects, everything. The kind of planning and productivity community knows something's wrong because they're all leaning into this. We need to have balance. We need to find balance.

And when we lean into balance we actually make things worse because when you think about what balance is, picture the old scales with the two plates on either side. The only way that scale is balanced is if you have equal weight on either side of it. And this is what I see so many women feeling like, this is the secret to happiness is, I need to balance everything. So what that's translating into is one of two outcomes. The first is we're either trying to do all the things at once, multitasking in its worst possible form.

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

We are helping a child while cooking dinner while trying to answer an email while trying to clean, all the things at once. Or we try to achieve balance by saying, "Okay, well, if I spend one hour on this then I have to spend the equal one hour over here." And so it just perpetuates more exhaustion and overwhelm because now we feel like we're trying to balance some half equation all day long. So instead I like to lean into this idea of harmony and the best way I can describe it, I love this one definition I found for the word harmony which is a pleasing arrangement of parts.

And I think that's so beautiful. And so when we realize our day-to-day life isn't an equation to balance, we don't have to do everything equally, one day might mean that we are leaning all into just one aspect of our life and leaving the others for another day. But at the end of the weeks, the month, the year, what we have is a pleasing arrangement of parts. And it's not going to be equal, some things get more, some things less. We let some things go. But that really is where we can find true peace, purpose and get out of overwhelm.

Krista: I love that. I also think as I hear you talk about harmony versus balance, balance kind of implies that we value things equally.

Megan: And we don't and we shouldn't. And I mean even think about a balance beam, those four-inch balance beams that the gymnasts walk across. My daughter had a very short stint in gymnastics and I would listen to the coaches talk to these girls walking across the balance beam, "Hold your stomach in, hold your arm." Listening to all the things they had to think about in order to stay balanced was exhausting. And I mean we don't want to have to be thinking about, and categorizing, and thinking about all these pieces and parts all day long. Just the thought of it is exhausting.

Krista: Yeah. And we might not even be, one season what's important to us may be different than what is important to us in another season. And I'm thinking of women who have recently lost a spouse. And the amount of

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

paperwork and the amount of details, and the amount of just that you have to get through. It's very temporary and seasonal but it does need to be important in order to get done but it's not going to be there forever.

Megan: No. And it may mean that you have to let a bunch of other stuff go for that period of time to do that and then come back to it.

Krista: Yeah. And then also I see that this is such a prime opportunity if we don't have a strong value on taking care of ourselves and strong routines that we have built that involve self-care. This is the time where it's hard to prioritize it and it falls to the wayside. And the whole widowed mom gig is definitely more marathon than sprint which can also be problematic. So it might be, we might think that it's not as important to value taking care of ourselves in this season and then actually realize no, the complete opposite is really important.

So generally speaking when we talk about overwhelm, so grief or not, why do you think women are just so overwhelmed in this world that we live in?

Megan: So there's now grief aside because that's going to add a whole other layer of emotional overwhelm.

Krista: But even so, let me tell you, even so, I used to – I don't ask this question anymore but I used to on an intake form that people would fill out before they coached with me, I would ask them the three most common emotions that they were feeling. Overwhelm, it was very common to have overwhelm on the list. So just so you know, super common.

Megan: And there's a reason why it's one of the most searched words.

Krista: Is it really?

Megan: Yeah.

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

Krista: [Crosstalk].

Megan: When you're looking in the kind of space of trying to get organized or back on top of things or all of that, everyone's like, "I'm just, I'm overwhelmed." And that often leads to paralysis. There's so much we don't even know where to start. So one of the subtle but not so subtle things that I believe and I've found some studies for that really has led to a tremendous amount of overwhelm, quite frankly is technology.

And I am a lover of technology. I spent 20 years in the software space. Without it, I wouldn't have the ability to create my own business from home with all the wonderful things that we have. But when you take a step back and think about it, when I think about my life coming out of college. So I'm going to be 50 this year so we're looking at 30 years ago. My first job meant that I had my computer at work and nobody had laptops. I mean that was unheard of. You may have had a home computer but there's no cross-pollination of what you did at work and what you did at home.

My second job out of school, I was responsible for this piece of software and if it went down it was critical, whatever. So they issued me a pager, the old-school pager. So if I was at home outside of work hours and there was a true emergency the only way anyone was contacting me was through this pager. Now, if I wasn't sitting in my apartment that meant I had to find a quarter and a payphone with which to call back. I mean we think about this as being ancient times, it wasn't that long ago. It was several years later then suddenly the Blackberry.

Now, we had laptops but you had to dial-up. And so you only did it in case of an emergency. Now we walk around with computers in our pocket, our cell phones that are more powerful than the first computer I worked on out of college. And so this leads to two things, one is just sheer availability. And in the Amazon Prime world that we live in right now, I want it now, I want it today. And we are accessible to everybody at all times.

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

So then whether you realize it or not, we have this sense of overwhelm because we've created this false sense of responsibility that we need to be responsive to that text message, to whatever's coming through. Coupled with that is the sheer volume of information that is coming at us. So one study I found, I think it said 3.1 gigabytes of data per day which translates into filling up a computer in a week of information coming at us from our cellular devices, in forms of notifications, sounds, messages etc.

Now, think back to 20/30 years ago walking, you know, going home from work, nothing was coming at me. No one was calling me, we had so much white space in our lives to process, to think, to create plans, to get organized. Well, now it's as if we have completely taken all of that away and we are in a heightened, just sensory and information overload because we are not being taught how to tame technology to help us quiet down. And so I mean there's a couple of other subtle things at play that I think also lead to women being overwhelmed.

But at the root of all of it really is this nonstop accessibility and information. And when it's coming at us that fast we can't sort it quick enough and our brain just never gets that opportunity to just be still.

Krista: Yeah, it's just consumption and reaction.

Megan: I mean when was the last time you got in a car, turned off everything, radio, phone, everything? This is something I do any time I'm in the car by myself now, for a longer drive, for one hour nothing, no noises. And it's weird when you're not used to it because it's kind of like, what do I do, what do I do? And then all of a sudden you settle into that. It is the most peaceful freeing thing you can do for yourself.

Krista: I never do that. I mean really, truly I am always listening to a podcast in the car or doing something, so more silence yeah, sounds like a little

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

piece of heaven. But we do put so much pressure on ourselves to respond and to be available.

Megan: We do. And so one of the things I always encourage people to do and it's interesting when the women first do it, they're like, "Oh my God, I was so scared the first day." I like to tell people, your phone should never talk to you unless you've told it, "In this situation I want you to talk to me." So what I mean, for me personally, I keep on hearing it actually, my phone's over there. My phone does not make any noises ever unless it is my parents, my spouse or my daughter's school.

So if someone calls me and it's not one of those three my phone makes no noise. It's always silent. And then any text messages or whatever, all of my notifications are off because I'm not a surgeon on call. I don't need to be that kind of responsiveness. And so I had to sit down and say, "Okay, in the moment, what is it that would make me say, this is important enough to interrupt what I'm doing and respond?" And for me obviously if school calls and you've got kids, you need to be there. And so it's going to be different for what everybody is that hits into that category.

But our phones are powerful enough that you can set up in the settings ways to say, "In these circumstances alert me otherwise don't talk to me." And so then I have set times each day where I sit down, open up my phone and say, "Okay, now I'm ready to respond to any text messages, return phone calls", or whatever. But I'm not doing it, in and out, in and out, in and out all day long.

And then I've communicated with my family. If you need me now, call, otherwise shoot me a text, shoot me an email, that's fine, you're never going to be interrupting me because I don't let my phone interrupt me. And that right there, people say that alone has freed up two hours of their life back every day by not constantly being interrupted and responding to that right now. And when you realize it's like, did someone really need to be

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

responded to in a minute or could it wait an hour? Really ask yourself the type of stuff that you are handling at the moment.

Krista: I think it's those little micro distractions too. It doesn't even have to ding.

Megan: No, the visuals have to be off.

Krista: Yes, you've got something in the upper right part of your screen and it just floats in and floats out. You can't help but look to see what it was.

Megan: And that breaks your focus and now you're open to heading down a different rabbit hole. My email doesn't notify me, nothing. Nothing visually or auditory, I'm going to say that word.

Krista: Yeah, [crosstalk].

Megan: I don't see and I don't hear anything. And when I do it's so jarring, I know I need to respond because I've set it up that way.

Krista: I love it. I've been working recently, so I just kind of noticed at the end of this last year how much I was prioritizing work in the morning and how much I had taken away or just kind of gone unconscious as it related to the self-care that I want to have in the morning. And so only recently have I decided, and this is because I work from home too, to your point earlier about when I would go to my – and by the way as a project manager when I would go to my job in the corporate world, same thing. I did the work and then I came home and then I could focus.

And so my before work time never had anything to do with work because work wasn't at home with me. Whereas now I so want to get up and get my coffee and check my email and check Slack. And I was checking it from the bed before I even got up, I mean it had gotten bad. And so I've just recently

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

decided and have been practicing no email, no Slack, no work before I have gotten up, had coffee, self-coached, taken care of myself, exercise, and then I'm ready for work. And then I go to work and then I check.

And I've told my team that "You're not going to get my attention before 10 or 11 o'clock depending on the day. And if something really happens that needs my attention please text me, otherwise, I'm not going to be seeing email." But oh my gosh, all of the urges I have had to allow, it's been a challenge.

Megan: Yeah, and it's interesting because – I love that you bring up mornings. So one of the things I went way deep on for a long time was morning routines and specifically for women. So I have this little fun – actually I'm doing it in February, I have this fun little five-day kind of event, 30 minutes a day where I teach people and guide them through a process of how to create a morning routine unique to you, your personality and the realities of your home life that serves you.

Because I found, years ago I stumbled on – I'm always geeking out on looking for productivity and time management stuff. And when you search morning routines for highly productive people you find almost the same type of routine listed everywhere which involves some sort of yoga, meditation, journaling, etc. And when you really dig in you'll notice most of them are written by men. And so in this research, I stumbled on Hal Elrod's book, which was very famous, *The Miracle Morning*. So I dove into that, I'm going to do this. And I went all in for 90 days and I was miserable.

Krista: I was going to say, his routine is two/three hours long.

Megan: And I kept thinking, I was like, "Something's wrong with me." As women that's what we do, something's wrong with me. Why can't I make this work? So that led me down this rabbit hole of initially trying to figure out what was wrong with me only to discover there's nothing wrong with me,

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

there's nothing wrong with any of us. And I found this study showing that based on your Myers Briggs personality, think of the old school, what you need in the morning to set yourself up for success, it could be completely polar opposite.

And sure enough, when I went through this what it showed me was that Miracle Morning was the worst possible morning routine for my personality type.

Krista: So good to know.

Megan: It was so freeing. And so that's kind of this fun process I guide people through. First I have them uncover what their kind of morning routine personality type is. And then there's this whole series of suggested activities. But then we have to layer in, but what are the realities of your life? The only way I'm going to get up and get two hours of alone time means getting up before 4:30 in the morning. Well, that's not going to happen. I have a young child. So we have to layer that in as well.

And it's just been really interesting to see all these women come up with very different morning routines that they're all so happy with and they'll change during different seasons as well as life.

Krista: What's your philosophy behind morning routines, why do you think it's so important? I mean obviously, you have a whole event planned around it so clearly, it's something you're passionate about.

Megan: Yeah. I truly believe that how you start your day can have a trickle effect 100% from how you start to how you go to bed. Now, does that mean that sometimes we can just have a midday reset and regroup? Of course, we can but the biggest problem I see over and over again with women, and they'll all come to me and say, "I've got a morning routine." And I'll say, "Well, tell me what it is." And they start listing out their morning routine. And

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

I have to shake my head, I say, “No, that’s a morning task list where you are in service to others.”

Because they’ll say, “Well, I wake up and then I pack the lunches and then I make breakfast for my family, and then I get the”, you know, and they start listing out their routine. And all it is from the minute they wake up they are serving others. I said, “A true morning”, and it can be as little as five to ten minutes. But when you start your day in service to yourself again, prioritizing self-care, especially when you’re going through a difficult time.

When you take that space for yourself and do things that fill you up, that make you feel ready, it will have a tremendous impact on how you proceed through the rest of your day. That’s the fundamental shift is a morning routine is one that serves you, not others.

Krista: Not others, I love that. And I think it’s so easy to say, “Well, a morning routine or something like that is great when life is going well. But when it’s challenging I don’t have time for that or it’s not my priority.”

Megan: No, and that’s where again because I think so many people think, well, I need an hour. No. And I have my A morning routine and my B morning routine. So there’s days where an emergency happens or particularly when my daughter was much younger maybe, or I’ve had nights where I’m not sleeping well because I’m at that age. I will then have a shortened version if it’s a morning where you know what, that alarm goes off and not today. I need that extra 15 minutes of sleep because I know that will serve me better.

So I have my full morning routine and then I have a shortened version. So if there was a night where I was up dealing with a sick family member or something I at least know I will have those 10 minutes. I always [crosstalk] 10 minutes.

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

Krista: This is my minimum baseline. Minimum baseline, this is non-negotiable and then my ideal is this, yeah.

Megan: But my regular day-to-day I've got this other one, even to the point on the weekends I still make sure I have my non-negotiable, even on the weekends.

Krista: Yeah, love it. Yeah, would you mind sharing your non-negotiables, what's your bare minimum for you? I know it's different for everyone.

Megan: Yeah. I always like to say, I need 10 minutes without anybody speaking to me. I have to have that. I don't want to hear my name. I don't want to hear, "Mom." I don't want to hear, "Megs". I don't, you just can't talk to me for the first 10 minutes. And so my non-negotiables are I get up, I come down at – my dog is my everything, so get her set, get her breakfast, all of that. I make my cup of coffee and then this is completely opposite to what almost every productivity expert tells you to do, which they always say, "Don't look at your task list or your whatever."

You're supposed to first journal, meditate or whatever. Well, because of my personality type, I am a raging introvert, shocker, again not wanting anyone to speak to me for the first 10 minutes. But I am also easily overwhelmed and highly productive which is an interesting combination. And so what quiets my brain is when I can have 10 minutes at my desk just quickly reviewing my plan for the day and a quick scan through because I stop work at two o'clock in the afternoon. So the business is running hours after I am not there anymore.

So I have to just do a quick look through, I don't respond, I do a quick look through my email inbox and messages for the business just to know because if I don't I am hyper-anxious all morning for the next two hours before my workday actually starts. And I am snapping at my family and things aren't well. So for me, that gets me out of the what-if mode to just

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

have that 10 minutes to go, "Okay." And even if there's an emergency, I'm okay with that because now I know and I'm like, "Okay, that's what I'm going to sit down and tackle first."

And that quiets my brain and lets me step away and now be present to do the rest of my morning routine.

Krista: Yeah, I love that. Maybe someday I'll find that helpful. I think right now for me it is I love what I do and I know my tendency is just to never quit doing it.

Megan: You see, and I have to because I'm doing it so early that then there's kids to get ready for school.

Krista: Yeah, and I don't have that anymore, my kids are old enough that they're self-sufficient. My morning routine is nothing like it was when they were little.

Megan: Now, if it were a different season in life and when I get there I may have to circle back and see, can I jump in and then leave it to go do other things, who knows? Because maybe my anxiety around it will be quieted because I'm not going, "Well, I can't do anything for x amount of hours." So who knows? But again this is why it's so important to revisit. My summertime morning routine is a little bit different from my school's morning routine. But at the end of the day, the question to ask yourself is, are you serving yourself first? And there's no wrong way to do it.

Yoga puts me in a bad mood. So why would I want to start the day doing yoga? And for other people, it's the perfect way for them to start their day.

Krista: Yeah, not prescriptive, highly individual but you really want to think it through with yourself in the center of that. I love it. I love it. So there are some things that I think you probably do very differently than most. And I'm

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

curious to know, just having listened to some episodes of your podcast. I'm guessing some of them you kind of have always known you had a different approach. And then others you were kind of like, "I just kind of take for granted that this is the way that I do it. And it's kind of surprising to me that not all people do it the way that I do it or have the approach that I have."

So can you talk about, for instance, one of the things I heard you say was you're not a fan of the top three every day, [inaudible] record scratch, so let's talk about some of those things that you just see differently and do differently and why?

Megan: So, and at the heart of the things that I do very differently were because the more prescriptive, or the things you see out there I tried them and they weren't working for me. And again went down the rabbit hole of what's wrong with me? No, nothing's wrong with me. I think a lot of those things work for men just because again we're different. It's not better, it's worse.

We're just different but a lot of the wake-up, find your top three and then focus on those. That works great for an individual who, like me 30 years ago, can walk into the office, just focus on work for eight or nine hours then come home and just focus on me. It's a great plan but that's not the realities of my life today and nor is it for most women. We have so many other things that we're juggling.

So I would say two fundamental real differences is one, the first one is just I like to call it my bottom-up versus top-down approach which you and I talked about earlier. Two, how we learn how to get out of overwhelm, back on top of our calendars and have time for ourselves. So years ago I was at this two-day workshop all around creating big goals for, and this was back in the corporate world of you creating big goals for your team and all that and how do you do that?

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

And when you look at most people who talk about goal setting and this is going to be the year I do things for me or whatever. We start at, create the big vision, what do you want to be in five years, three years, two years, whatever? And then they guide you through a process to identify what those big goals are that you want. And then you break it down and you have all these little milestones. And now you've got this beautiful plan mapped out. And then they send you on your way and it's like, awesome.

And then you go home and then the realities of your life smacks you upside the head going, "When in the world are you supposed to have time to fit this beautiful plan?" It's like it's done in a vacuum without bringing in, but I can't do that tomorrow because here's what tomorrow looks like. And I can't do it the next day because I've got this. So that's what I really call that top-down approach where they start you up at the 30,000-foot view goal setting, they bring you down to maybe 15,000 feet and then they leave you.

Krista: Good luck.

Megan: Yeah, good luck. So I like to approach it from the bottom up where I say, "Okay, first before we go there we need to get you out of your daily overwhelm to where you are feeling like you can create plans again." You feel like you know how to now have white space in your calendar again. You know how when something unplanned pops up, you know how to pivot and work that through. Once you're there now we're ready to say, "Okay, I am back in control." Now I'm ready to say, "Alright, what's that goal I'm ready to bring into my life because now I have the tools to know how to do it?"

So I think that's a real fundamental change is, we start in the weeds and get you out of that before we bring in those next steps. And then kind of the second big fundamental shift is what that means, what that looks like. So a lot of the time management principles out there are wake up, do your brain dump for the day, create your list of everything that you need to do for the

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

day, circle your top three and then get into action doing the top three first and then you're allowed to move down to everything else.

That way you're rest assured to be able to go to bed at night knowing you at least got the three most important things done that day. And on the surface, this sounds like a great plan but it's super problematic for so many of us. So first of all when you start your day saying, "What do I need to do today", you're already in reaction mode because now you're kind of hyper, you're kind of a little bit of firefighting mode. The minute you ask that question, "What do I need to do today", your brain is subconsciously filtering out any of those longer-term projects.

And it's truly thinking with the blinders on today. So then we miss those opportunities to chip away at those longer-term projects. Then when we focus on what are those top three, well, asking our brain to make decisions when we're already a little amped up, zaps your energy for the day. So now you're kind of in fight or flight mode looking at this huge list and now you're supposed to figure out the top three. Well, they're all important, that's why they're on the list.

And so we make poor decisions on what we consider a top priority and we tend to just sit and churn on overthinking and overanalyzing what that is. And the fact of the matter is as women we have a lot of days. I have a lot of days that are full with a lot of things that I've done but none of them were things that I would say on some days that fall into my top three. But that's okay because that's by design. We have the days where we just have to churn through life.

And so I like to teach people how to get out of this daily planning rhythm and instead get into a weekly planning rhythm. So that's really at the heart of everything that I teach. So I will by design when I'm planning out my week, I will most weeks, I have a day that's full of not priority stuff, that I would never label as my top three but it's the most efficient way for me to

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

plough through it. So that then on other days I can lean in and have a day where I am solely focused on maybe one of those three things.

Krista: Do you do a top three for the week when you're doing weekly planning?

Megan: No, I don't do a top three but I do work from a prioritized list so that as I'm doing my planning, the things, I'm just working from top down of okay, this is the most important, let me make sure I've got this plugged in at the right time. Now let me move. But I'm also moving them around again to create efficiency. So for example, maybe you realize you need to run four errands that week. Well, wouldn't it be better to maybe wait till Wednesday and do them all four at once as opposed to one on Monday, one on Tuesday, one on Wednesday?

So one of those errands may be super important but I'm going to wait until Wednesday because I don't have to do it before Wednesday and then I'm going to lump it up with the other three errands. So I feel like it's this, it's almost like a jigsaw puzzle.

Krista: It's contextual.

Megan: Yeah, we're piecing it together so that at the end of each week we can say, "Well, the things that were most important to me, whatever that number is, got done."

Krista: Yeah, I love that. I love that. What about, so, in terms of having a system, what do you recommend and where do you see us fall down when it comes to planning systems, multiple to-do lists? Talk a little bit about that. I know you have [crosstalk].

Megan: So one of the nine, so again the TOP framework, TOP stands for Time Management, Organization and Productivity. So those are my three

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

core pillars. Then at each one of those pillars, there's three components to each. And I see the biggest break be in one of the pillars in the organization, or one of the components in that organization pillar which is centralization. And when I talk about centralizing I'm talking about centralization of information. So most people today have information in easily 12 or more places.

You've got the notebook at your desk. You've got the post-it notes over here. You've got the thing in your purse, you've got the one in the car, the one by your bedside. And as things are, we've got email. We've got things living in a text message thread. We've got Slack. So we have ultimately the list of all the things that are competing for our time spread across multiple places. So when you sit down to plan it's almost like I don't even know what to plan. Where do I look to pull this together to figure out what plan to put in place?

So that is one of the first things that I guide people through is creating what I call your centralized backlog. So I've got things coming at me through multiple places, my own head, email, listening to a podcast, I want to remember to do that. But I have a system for ultimately everything funnels into this one repository of information so that when I am sitting down to plan my week or to execute my day I am looking in one and only one place that is telling me, here is where you need to spend your time. And it sounds really hard but it's actually very easy to do.

It's getting that muscle memory in place to know this is how I do, which is why when someone will send me a message through an Instagram DM or something and someone will reach out requesting something, I'll say, "That's great. I need you to send that request here." I'm in the driver's seat of where I let people request my time because I have the system set up. So you get to put those boundaries in place of when and how you have things that you need to remember to do but then you can build your system.

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

Krista: I love that. It's what I do next. I am pretty good at putting things that I receive into one centralized location but I am not – I definitely have not taken it to the level where I tell people where to send it to me so that I give them that burden and not me.

Megan: Yeah, because if someone sends me, "Hey, I'd love to have you on my podcast." And if I reply, "That sounds great", through Instagram I will never remember. So I have to say, "Hey, if you could send that request here we will jump into action because I have the system in place to handle that there."

Krista: I love it. I love it. And I think there is so much freedom in knowing that you have one system that you can trust. It's less about which system and just knowing that you have one. Is it David Allen that does Getting Things Done?

Megan: [Crosstalk] those books, yeah.

Krista: Yeah. So I remember reading his stuff, I don't know, years ago but it just resonated so much with me that our brain is not meant to be processing. It's not meant to store. It's meant to process. And so I see so much time I used to spend wondering whether I was remembering the right thing or doing the right thing because to your point I had things in so many different locations. And I can definitely tell how much better I feel when I stick to the one centralized location, and also lately I've noticed myself drift and have things in multiple places.

And I could take, okay, it's time to pull myself back to my little inbox and not [inaudible].

Megan: This is why I'll ask women, "Do you have those 2:00am panic wake-up sessions? Do you wake up?" And then also the ticker tape starts running, I've got to remember. When you have that centralized repository of

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

your stuff that you're juggling, you free your brain up to rest when it's time to rest. The reason you are waking up is because you are asking your brain to do something it simply is not designed to do at its best. So the best thing you can do for yourself is to say, "It is not my job to remember these things. It's my job to know where to go to find it."

Krista: Yes. And now I have a system that when I go there it contains the list of all the things and I can just work from that one space or make decisions from that space.

Megan: Yeah, it's like in the morning the family will say, "What's going on today?" I'm like, "Hang on." I'm not going to ask myself to remember. I'm going to go look in the place that we all know to look at that says, "[inaudible]." And so I don't ask. And it's not mom's brain that you don't remember stuff. No, you can't, you just simply can't remember all of that, it's impossible. So don't even try and it's incredibly freeing.

Krista: Get it all in one place. Is there anything else, any actionable tips that we hadn't talked about or things people can do that would be immediately useful?

Megan: Yeah. One of the things that I encourage people to do is so many of us, not me anymore but so many people today are relying on this, our mobile phone and our calendar. Because I mean we use, I mean I use a Google calendar, whatever calendar you're using. And what we're ultimately doing is allowing this tiny screen size, what, maybe five by three inches or so, of information that we go to look at. We pull up our calendar to decide, am I available or am I not. And this is one of the main reasons why we are so overscheduled and overcommitted.

So let's say I'm not at home, I have access to my full information on my command center. And someone were to call me or I went to a friend and they would say, "Hey, Megan, are you free for lunch on Friday?" Well, if I go

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

to my mobile device and look at that calendar view the only way I can really get into the details is to look at a specific day. So I can go pull up that Friday and I might see I'm free for lunch on Friday so I say, "Yes." What I can't see from that screen size was that maybe Monday through Thursday was jam-packed.

And that little window on Friday was literally the one hot minute I had for myself and guess what, now that's gone too. So I would encourage people and again, I believe wholeheartedly you can be fully successful using a paper planner or a digital one, both work well. There are decisions you need to know about your lifestyle to pick which one's going to work well for you. But either way, making yes or no decisions on your time when you can only zero in to one day's information is going to lead to tremendous overwhelm and overscheduling.

So people are always surprised when I'll be out and someone will say, "Are you free?" My response is always, "You know what, I think so but I'm going to check with my calendar when I get home and I'll let you know." And they always look at me funny because they're like, "But you're looking at your calendar." I'm like, "yeah, I don't have enough information here. I can't see that next level up to make sure I'm not getting myself overcommitted."

So I would encourage people, pick the one calendaring system that you're going to use, either a paper or a digital one and then never make yes, no decisions as they come in until you can see at least the details of your week and possibly even month if it involves travel before you say yes to something that's going to take up your time.

Krista: Yeah. It's like back to your puzzle idea. It's like making a decision about the whole puzzle and all you're really looking at is one piece. I also love that idea because so often we're inclined to say yes for maybe reasons we don't like, we're people-pleasing.

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

Megan: Yeah, exactly, [crosstalk] or whatever.

Krista: Giving ourselves that extra little space to not fully commit in the moment but pull back, look at the bigger picture of the whole planning system that we have and also consider is this something I really want to do or is this something I'm telling myself that I should do? Do I like the reasons for saying yes to this thing? So good. So how can people get in touch with you? Because they're going to want to.

Megan: Yeah. So it is very easy to find everywhere just @megansumrell. Instagram's a great place. I'm on Facebook as well. And if you want to kind of see and understand a little bit more of the myths around time management and planning, I've got a great free training available that you can find at megansumrell.com/freetraining. If you prefer, just find me on Instagram and ask for it in the DMs and we can send that. By we, I mean my amazing team can send that link over to you as well.

But that's a great place to kind of just help you get that better view of okay, now, I understand why I'm churning and there is another way to actually think about how I'm planning and managing my time, my ultimate goal again is to get you back in the driver's seat of your calendar so that you have that harmony in your life.

Krista: Love it. And this should air before February. You mentioned you have a February workshop, is that something people can attend?

Megan: Yeah. So we don't have the sign-up page set yet but if you go to my website or again, it's just megansumrell.com or to Instagram, it's called Master Your Morning. So we will be opening registration for that right at the beginning of February. Replays are available if you can't join me live. It is a really fun and interesting workshop. And at the end of it, you will have created your personalized morning routine based on your personality type.

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

Krista: I love it. I love it. And we'll put all this in the show notes but just for listeners, it's S-U-M-R-E-L-L. I have a feeling people will probably misspell that on a regular basis. Also, her podcast is fantastic, Work Life Harmony, yeah, it's quick. It's actionable. It's really easy to digest and listen to.

Megan: Yeah, if it's a solo episode they're usually in at about 10 minutes. So I have a new episode every week that comes out on Tuesdays. If I have a guest again which we've had you on which is amazing. The most you'll ever see is about 30 minutes because again we have a lot going on. So I just want to try and give you one actionable thing that you can do every week or think about.

Krista: I love it. Thank you so much for coming on. I'm really glad that our paths crossed.

Megan: Me too, me too.

Krista: [Crosstalk] happened, yeah. Alright, take care, Megan.

Megan: Thanks.

Krista: Okay, 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 you can move forward with confidence.

Ep #191: Work and Life Harmony: An Interview with Megan Sumrell

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