

## Ep #246: What Widows Need to Know About Grief Theory



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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[The Widowed Mom Podcast](#)

## **Ep #246: What Widows Need to Know About Grief Theory**

Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, episode 246, What Widows Need to Know About Grief Theory.

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 just bought tickets to go see my daughter in Costa Rica. I'm very excited. I don't get to go for a few more but in late February, I'm going to go and see her. My dad's going with me. I've mentioned it before, but she decided she wanted to go to Costa Rica and she found a little hostel where she could work and study and do her classes all online this semester. And so that's what she's doing and I miss her and I want to see her.

And so I just booked tickets and I'm excited. I'm going to be there for 12 days, yeah, 12 days. Couldn't come soon enough. Not to mention the weather will be significantly better in Costa Rica than it is in Kansas, but I'm really looking forward to just seeing her and hanging out. And I love that I have a job where I can just do my coaching calls from there and I'll have internet access and I can work from there. Probably won't be recording any podcast episodes from there, but I can create and think and coach and do my thing near a beach and my kid and I love that. So that's what's going on with me.

I decided today I wanted to do an episode for you that is valuable, but not super detailed because quite honestly, you don't need to know that much about grief theory. But I do think that the way that we approach grief theory matters. And so I do want you to have some information. So in this episode of the podcast, I'm just going to cover what you need to know briefly about eight grief theories, the ones that I think are the most relevant or the most noteworthy for you.

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And then at the end of the podcast I'm going to break down what I actually think this means to us, and so that we can put it in context. Because it's not so much about each individual theory as much as it is about the collective takeaway and so stick around for that. Also I want to remind you that on March 5<sup>th</sup>, I am doing a *Grief Plateau Masterclass* and I want to invite you to come to that. You can go to [coachingwithkrista.com/griefplateau](https://coachingwithkrista.com/griefplateau) and that's where you'll find all of the information.

It's going to be live on a Tuesday, 3:30 Central to 5 o'clock, 90 minutes long. I will record it, so don't worry if you can't make it. But this is for you if you want to learn what a grief plateau looks like. But more than that, how to get out of it. A grief plateau is a place where I found myself really stuck and lacking the language to describe it. So it's a term that I later made up because nobody else seemed to have a term for it. And I think there's so much power in just giving a name to our experience. So I want to teach you how to identify a grief plateau.

We're going to talk about the top five mistakes, there are more, but the top five things that we're doing accidentally, that keep us in that place. We're going to talk about the two meta skills that we all need if we want to create something beyond the grief plateau. We're going to talk about how the autonomic nervous system factors into that. And I'm going to give you a little follow along digital workbook, of course, access to the recording. And then we'll go for 90 minutes and I'll coach for part of that too. So if you want to come, [coachingwithkrista.com/griefplateau](https://coachingwithkrista.com/griefplateau) is where you will find all of the details.

Okay, let's talk about grief theory and what you need to know as a widow. I feel like we got stuck in a time warp when it comes to grief theory, because the one that we keep talking about the most is Kubler-Ross Five stages of Grief, which was created in 1969. So of course, if you've listened to *The Widowed Mom Podcast* for a while, you already know that that's kind of one of my pet peeves. But I want to go back further than that just to give a little

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bit more context for the way that theorists have looked at grief over time has evolved.

And I'm going to tell you the ones, the theories that I like. I'm going to just kind of describe them to you, give you some of the most common criticisms of each. And then we're going to talk about what you really want to be considering as the person who is going through a grief experience. So if we go way back in the day, 1917, we find good old Sigmund Freud. We love him, but gosh, he's offered some challenging things over time. So his original model of bereavement basically presented grief as a process of detaching from the deceased.

And he kind of proposed that we were supposed to take all of that emotional energy that we felt about our deceased person and then redirect it. And that if we didn't do that, that we would struggle, we would have prolonged grief or pathological mourning. We would be essentially fixated on that lost person. So we really just want to cut ties with them is kind of what he proposed. You can imagine there are some issues with this. We no longer believe, or at least I don't, and we can talk about continuing bonds here in a little bit, because that's another grief theory I want you to be familiar with.

But we really can have a healthy relationship with someone who is deceased. We can choose the way that we want to think about them. We can remember them. We can tell stories about them. We can continue to relate to them without it lowering our quality of life. In fact, we could argue that it increases our quality of life when we intentionally create the bond and the continued relationship that we want to have with them. But Freud thought that was a bad idea. He thought you kind of want to cut ties and move on and if you don't, there's something wrong with you.

Then in the 1940s, Eric Lindemann came and he created something called the grief work hypothesis. If you have ever heard the term, the work of grief or you have heard somebody say, "We need to do grief work", this is where

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that work came from. So he basically said, “Hey, grief is work and it’s emotional work and it involves cognitive processing. And we need to do the work. If we want to heal, essentially, then we have work to be doing.” And so he identified some common symptoms of grief.

And he really emphasized the importance of expressing our emotions and thinking about what has happened, the circumstances around the death. And so we can credit him with grief work, which I don’t think is necessarily, again, none of this is really good or bad, or black and white at all. But anything taken to extreme, probably loses its usefulness.

So if we’re telling ourselves always that we have to be doing the work of grief, then we don’t have a chance for respite. We don’t have a chance to do things that are unrelated to our loss, which I think there’s so much value in and kind of goes against also what the dual process model teaches, which we’ll talk about in a minute. So we have Sigmund Freud’s model of bereavement. We have Eric Lindemann’s grief work hypothesis.

And then in the 1960s, John Bowlby came out with his attachment theory. And basically the idea there was that grief is an innate response triggered by the loss of someone who is an attachment figure. And his approach was very phased. So he said that we have to go through phases of shock and numbness, yearning and searching, disorganization and despair, and then reorganization. And he was criticized in some part for just being a little bit too rigid. We understand why we want stages.

Wouldn’t it be great if we could just have stages and phases and they were just clean and linear. And all we had to do was just go through a process and then poof, we get off of the wild ride of being an emotional human in grief. We get why we want that. But pretty much any approach that has stages doesn’t tend to reflect the experience that most of us have. So Bowlby’s work was criticized as being too rigid, not allowing for how most of us experience grief, which is that it’s a little bit unpredictable. It’s not linear. There is no end point.

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But again, you can see just in 40 years there, quite a bit of evolution. So Freud is saying you should cut ties. Then we identified the idea that there's work. And then we start to see this first kind of idea of there are stages or processes that we need to go through.

Then not until 1969 did Elizabeth Kubler-Ross come out with *The Five Stages of Grief*. I have done a podcast episode on this specifically. I've talked about it in so many podcast episodes for sure. I'm sure you're tired of hearing me talk about this one. But essentially she was studying people who were terminally ill and noticed anecdotally that they seemed to go through these five stages as they were coming to terms with their own mortality.

So they would go through denial and then they would get angry and then they would bargain and then they would experience depression and then they would come to acceptance. And first, she wrote the book *On Death and Dying*. And then she applied those five stages to *On Grief and Grieving*. It is no secret here that this is the one people seem to know about, if anybody in your life has asked you something like, "Have you been angry enough? Don't worry, you're just in denial. Oh, I think this is the part where you bargain."

Or maybe you've asked yourself those questions. It's because the Kubler-Ross model just seems to be the one that caught on and that everybody talks about and it's the only one people seem to know about. Again, valuable in its time but limited. And even Kubler Ross in her later years wished that people had not taken her work and made it so linear. And wished that people had not taken it and made it into something that implied that grief ends because even she knew that that's not the way that it is.

If grief is the natural human response to a perceived loss, we can't undo time, which means we're always going to have a response to it. Grief doesn't end, there is no finish line. And so her work has been criticized in

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that regard for being stage based, overly simplified and implying that it's linear and has an end when it doesn't. So that was in the late 60s.

Then in the early 80s, around 1982, J. William Worden came out with his *Tasks of Mourning*. I've done an entire podcast episode on this, so you're welcome to listen to that one as well. But basically, he proposed that there were four tasks that people who were bereaved had to accomplish. So we had to accept the reality of the loss. We had to process the pain of grief. We have to adjust to the world without the deceased and then find a connection with the deceased as we live this new life.

So a little more fluid, a little less stagey, more focused on, hey, these are the things you want to be focused on doing as opposed to this is exactly how it's going to go and once you've done these things, poof, you're done. But still some criticism for again, not really fully representing that grief doesn't end. If we think that there's a task list, and once we've checked all the boxes on the task list that we won't have grief anymore, we're setting ourselves up to have an experience that just doesn't reflect reality.

And also not everybody's going to complete all of these tasks necessarily. And they could still tell you that they're happy with the quality of their life. So are all of these things absolutely necessary in the way that he outlined? Maybe not.

Then my favorite comes into play in the late 90s, the dual process model, Stroebe and Schut's model. This one resonates with me the most. I've done a podcast episode on it in and of itself. But I really like this one because it's so reflective of how I experienced grief, which is the dual process model proposes that there's basically two camps of activities. There's grief related or loss oriented and then restoration related or restoration oriented buckets of coping behaviors.

And instead of thinking that we need to only do the grief work, which we understand where we got that, thank you, Lindemann. Instead of thinking

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we only need to do the grief work, the dual process model shows us that really it's an oscillation. It's a back and forth. It's healthy, coping is confronting the loss and then also taking a break from it and confronting the loss and taking a break from it, loss oriented things, restorative things.

And this to me if you're the A achiever, the high performer. That's how I self-identified for many years and you want to get the A in grief it can be really easy to judge yourself when you're taking breaks. It can be really easy to tell yourself you're doing something wrong when you notice that you're not thinking about the loss, which just creates more suffering.

And what I love about the dual process model is that it kind of gives us permission to be human, to think about it and then to not think about it, to feel our feelings and then to go do something completely different, Netflix binges. So I like that one, but again, some people would criticize it and say that it's overly simplistic. Some people would say grief is so much more complex than that, and drawing two circles and telling people to oscillate back and forth just doesn't really capture it and I get it.

Any process is hard to not oversimplify. So it is what it is. So we're on number seven of eight now. In the 1990s, the continuing bonds theory came out, so, Klass Silverman and Nickman. And they basically said that a healthy part of grieving is actually forming relationships with the deceased. And I love this one too, in that I don't think most of us really give much thought to having relationships with people who aren't living anymore but really we all are.

Whatever we're thinking about someone, whether they're living or deceased or halfway across the country or in our house. That forms the quality of our experience with them, whether they are physically with us or not. And even once they die, I loved hearing this and like helping people with it because it's so empowering to know that you still get to be the one who chooses what you think about that person. You still get to be the one who creates that bond. That can't be taken from us.



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They can die but we can still feel connected. They can die, but we can still bring their memory into our lives. We can still bring their legacy into our lives. We can still have them very much with us. And so that's the work of continuing bonds theory.

And then the last one that I wanted to bring to your attention is Kessler's sixth stage of grief. So Elizabeth Kubler-Ross co-wrote her books with David Kessler. And David Kessler in 2019, came out with his sixth stage of grief, which is building meaning. I like this one and dislike it. I think what rubs me wrong about it is that it's called the sixth stage of grief because again, it implies that grief is linear. It implies there's an end, and there just isn't.

And also, as someone who understands the marketing side of helping people, sometimes you do need to speak the language that people are speaking so that they can hear you. And then when you get their attention, you can show them what you really mean. And so sometimes I think that's what David Kessler has done here is he has said, "Hey, you can also make meaning of this. You can also decide what you want to think about this loss. And you can decide what you want it to mean in your life." And he called it the sixth stage, that even he knew that there's really no stages, and that there's really no end.

The other criticism for the sixth stage of grief finding meaning is that sometimes people will take it to mean that it is a should, it's something that they should do when, frankly, that's the last thing we need is another should, when we're experiencing grief. I don't think that's his intention behind that. I don't think he's trying to say you must find meaning. I think he's saying it's an option, you get to choose.

So that's basically what we have in about 100 years. So we went all the way from you should cut ties to now we have some stages. And then some very specific stages that we must go through. And now we back up a little bit with some tasks of mourning, maybe it's not stages, maybe it's just

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tasks. And then the dual process model comes along and says, “Well, maybe it’s not even tasks, maybe it’s just there is this kind of coping. There’s dealing with a loss and then there’s taking a break.” And maybe we’re going back and forth.

And then continuing bonds theory says, “Oh, and by the way, you actually get to continue these relationships, even after someone dies you can do that.” And then Kessler comes along and says, “And you can make meaning of what has happened.” So that is grief theory in a nutshell, not because you need to live by any of this. You don’t. You could never have heard anything about any grief theory, and you can have exactly the grief experience you would like to have.

The reason I think it’s important for us to be aware that grief theories exist and have evolved over time is so that, one, we don’t box ourselves in. If all we know is the five stages then we tend to force ourselves into this one theory. If we know that there are many different approaches to grief, we don’t have to do that to ourselves. We can let it be a broader, more unique experience. And grief really is so subjective. We’re all having a completely different experience.

Even within *The Widowed Mom* community where I spend all of my time. There are similarities, but there are so many unique experiences that each of us are having. And none of it is right or wrong or good or bad. It just brings us back to the point that grief really is unique.

I also think it’s valuable not only to know kind of how grief theory has evolved for us individually, but also to remind ourselves that those who love us and are trying to support us probably have a very limited view of grief theory too. And so if in their mind, they expect that grief ends or they expect that we’re supposed to go through some stages and end up in this place of acceptance. Then they might, out of genuine love for us, be pushing us to that end or trying to encourage us to get to that place.

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So it's easier for us to navigate them when we understand where they might be coming from. Then we can just pull back and say, "You know what? Grief theory is still evolving." Wouldn't it be great if it was just nice and tidy, and if somebody could just write a book and say, "Hey, here's how you do it, and if you just follow these steps, then poof, you will feel amazing and you will get everything out of your grief experience that you could ever possibly want. And it will all just be wonderful. Here, follow this book." That's not the way it happens. It's not the way it happens.

And we can relax a little bit and we can remind ourselves that there is no right or wrong way to experience it. There is nowhere we are supposed to be. We cannot go backwards. We aren't falling off some imaginary wagon. Grief ebbs and flows, it changes. It's not just time doing any sort of work and it's not one size fits all, and that matters.

The thing I didn't talk about here, because it's not really a grief theory per se but is post traumatic growth. And so I want to end on that because I just want us to all be reminded that post traumatic growth is a possibility, it's not morally superior. It's not a should, but all of us can use anything that happens in our life to inform the choices we make next. It's such a great reminder when something happens like losing our person, of what we really value, of what really matters to us, of what we actually want to create in this life that we have.

It's such a wakeup call for us to check in with ourselves and ask ourselves, am I living into the values that I have? What could I change that would help me be even more of who I want to be or experience even more of what I want to experience? What could I do that would have me living even more of what matters to me? That is post traumatic growth essentially, that nobody can take away from you, what you decide to make of anything that happens in your life.

And you can use it not just to bounce back to the level of wellness or quality of life that you experienced before your person died. But you can

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literally use it to bounce forward, to even greater levels of life satisfaction, of meaning, of wellness, whatever words you want to use. So I've done entire episodes on *Post Traumatic-Growth*, feel free to go and listen to those. But even though it's not a grief theory, I just want us to be reminded that that is what's possible.

Unfortunately, where a lot of us get stuck is that grief plateau, so it's back to the workshop that I mentioned. We get stuck in that place where we feel not great. We're not doing terrible, but we're not doing great. People are telling us how strong we are. We don't feel so strong. We look like we're doing okay because we're getting things done and we're not in the fetal position anymore, but we don't feel great. We aren't genuinely loving life. And there are some things in the way, and that's not a sign that we're doing anything purposefully wrong or wrong at all.

It's just a sign that more is available and we want to figure out what's in the way. So again, I'll plug the *Grief Plateau Masterclass* [coachingwithkrista.com/griefplateau](https://coachingwithkrista.com/griefplateau), would love to see you there. And regardless, zoom out. Don't put yourself in a grief theory box, not helpful to you.

Take the little bits like I have done that speak to you from each of the grief theories that exist. And use it as a way to move yourself toward the experience that you want without trying to worry about an overemphasis on tasks or stages or some sort of hypothetical destination that doesn't actually exist. Okay, that's what I have for you this week. I love you. You've got this.

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

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normal that's less than what you deserve. Go to [coachingwithkrista.com](http://coachingwithkrista.com) and click Work With Me for details and next steps. I can't wait to meet you.