

THE STOP BINGE EATING PODCAST

with Kirstin Sarfde

Ep #356: Going Through Grief with Krista St-Germain

Hello! In today's episode, I'm talking about grief, but not by myself, with Post-Traumatic Growth and Grief Expert Krista St-Germain.

You probably know what grief is but, what does Post-Traumatic Growth mean? Well, you'll find out later in this episode.

I wanted to have her on the podcast because not only do a lot of people have a hard time going through grief without overeating and binge eating, because they have such a hard time dealing with all the emotions but also, because I've seen so many of my group members experience loss and grief as they've gone through my program.

They've experienced grief due to deaths of family members, including pets, friends, and also break ups, divorces, job losses, and so many other life events that have resulted in them experiencing grief.

So I thought this would be a really valuable topic for so many people to hear an expert speak on.

We're going to talk about what happened to her that got her started in this work, what is and isn't normal during grief, what you can do to support yourself as you go through grief, how you can support others who are going through grief, and so much more.

I really enjoyed our conversation so much and not just because it was so informative but also because Krista and I actually met in 2018 and haven't chatted in forever. So it was so good to reconnect! And also, that's why you're going to hear me being so excited during the start of our conversation. I know

it's not quite the tone that you'd expect at the beginning of a conversation about grief but I was just so excited to talk with Krista.

So I hope you enjoy this conversation too and find it to be helpful whether it be for something you're going through now or to prepare you for something you will go through in the future.

So, without further ado, let's jump right in. Here's my conversation about grief with Krista St-Germain.

Kirstin: Hello, Krista, and welcome to *The Stop Binge Eating Podcast*.

Krista: I'm so glad to be here. It's funny how the world works and how we cross paths and recross. Yes, thank you.

Kirstin: I know. A fun fact for the listeners. Krista and I go way back.

Krista: Way back.

Kirstin: We both got certified through the same life coaching school. We actually did a program together. I don't know when that was. Many years ago.

Krista: I think that would have been 2018.

Kirstin: 2018, yes. When her team reached out, I was like, "Absolutely. Let's have Krista on the podcast."

Krista: "I know her."

Kirstin: I know. It's nice to have a familiar face and a familiar voice.

Krista: Same.

Kirstin: We're going to talk about grief, and we're going to talk about eating. I think it's going to be really insightful and informational. I'm also really excited to learn a little something today. I think this is going to be really fun.

Krista: I love it when anybody says "fun" and "grief" in the same general paragraph. It's rare, but I think it can be light. So much of what we struggle with about grief is because people aren't willing to have conversations. I can come on a podcast that's about stopping binge eating and talk about grief, and that's amazing.

Kirstin: Yes. Well, because they can be related. How have you seen grief and eating be intertwined and related?

Krista: Well, for one, just out of personal experience, not to mention the clients' experience, but out of personal experience, food is very much where I went for comfort after Hugo died. I can understand that because there's so many things that you don't want to feel and they're right there. You can use food as a way to get away from those feelings, at least temporarily. I totally did that.

Kirstin: Let's get a little bit of background about you so people can have an understanding. I know you just mentioned Hugo. He was your husband.

Krista: Yes.

Kirstin: Would you mind telling a little bit about your story and why you do the work you do?

Krista: Yes, absolutely. I was on my second marriage. First one had gone down in flames. Second marriage was proof that you can be treated amazingly well. It just felt like my life was on a big, big high. I was 40. We had only gotten married about three months before that. Had lived together for a while, but just had gotten married. We were on our way back from a trip that we had taken, we drove separately. I had a flat tire. We were on the interstate. I pulled over, and Hugo, being the stubborn engineer that he was, did not want to call AAA, just wanted to change the tire himself.

I'm standing on the side of the road texting my daughter, who was 12 at the time, to let her know that we were going to be late. He's getting into my trunk trying to get the tire out of the trunk. A driver that later we found out had meth in his system and alcohol in his system just did not see us at all. We had our hazard lights on, but he did not see us, crashed right into the back of Hugo's Durango and trapped him in between his car and mine. I just went from this, "The best days are ahead of me," to, "I don't know how I'm ever going to be happy again," in literally less than 24 hours. It happened very fast.

I thankfully had a great therapist from my divorce, and I went right back to her. She was very helpful in terms of being able to talk about it and not burden people that I cared about with this terribly traumatic story. What I quickly realized is that that was not getting me as far as I wanted to get, and most of what I thought I knew about grief wasn't really proving to be accurate. The things I thought I knew weren't really helping me. I found myself eventually stuck. Serendipitously found life coaching at the same time, and started doing my own grief research and figuring out what is this actually about, what do you do, and what does help.

Then fast forward quite a bit when I got to a better place, decided, "Okay, this is the work I want to do. I want to help people with this." Grief can be easier if we have accurate information and if we have the right tools, and if we have conversations. Everybody's going to grieve. It's not just losing your spouse. There are lots of different things that we grieve.

Kirstin: What were some of the things that you thought you knew that were maybe incorrect or myths about grief, or just inaccurate things that you came across?

Krista: The only grief theory I knew about was the five stages. I thought that was the gold standard. Also, I didn't resonate with it at all. That was very frustrating, to read this denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, and go, "Oh, that's not really what's happening for me." That was a nice surprise to realize that the five stages you thought are supposed to be accurate aren't really. Also, it's only one of many grief theories, developed in the late '60s, by the way. If you think about any field and how it evolves over time, think about how many grief theories and studies have been done since the late '60s. A lot, but people are still defaulting to this "five stages" nonsense.

I thought grief was linear. I thought you had to follow some approach. I thought ultimately, you would get to an end place called acceptance, and then you would be done. I was told a lot that time heals, and you should just stay busy, as though time would magically pass, then you would reach perhaps the one-year mark, which I also heard was the goal. "Get to the one year and then it will be easier." Surprise, not helpful, not accurate.

Also, I never really realized that I didn't know how to feel feelings. That was not so much about misinformation or myths, it was just like a skill gap that I didn't have. At a time when you really need to be able to feel and you don't have the muscle developed because nobody taught you, it's pretty frustrating.

Kirstin: What was it about the five stages of grief that wasn't resonating with you?

Krista: There's just so much more to grief than those five things. I think that's what was most immediately frustrating is that I recognized I was having all of these other feelings. Guilt. Relief. Part of me felt guilty that it happened and that I had parked where I had parked, but then, also, part of me felt relieved because I didn't think he would want to live like that, because before he died, it was pretty much a done deal that he was going to be without one leg, probably two. I knew him, and I didn't think he would be happy with that. Where was that in the five stages?

Also, oddly, I didn't feel that angry. That made me doubt myself. "Should I be angry? Am I repressing anger? What's happening here? I think I'm supposed to be more angry." Denial never really resembled my experience. I felt numb, and it was hard to believe that it happened, but I didn't feel like I was denying that it had happened. There were just all sorts of problems with it for me, it just didn't resonate.

It felt like an emotional roller coaster. It definitely didn't feel linear, and it definitely didn't feel like I was making any progress in the sense that you would advance one stage to the next. Yes, there was a lot about it that just didn't work for me.

Kirstin: It sounds like one of the hardest parts about that is feeling like your feelings are invalidated, like you're doing grief wrong.

Krista: Yes. Even Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who created the five stages of grief, in her later years, wrote a lot about the way that she regretted people's interpretation of her work. She never meant for it to be formulaic. She never meant for it to suggest that this was the only way to experience grief or that other emotions weren't part of it, but took off. The way that people talked about it and took liberties with it gave people like me the idea that it was something other than what she intended it to be, which is really just like an anecdotal study of hospice patients.

She was just noticing that as people are coming to terms with their own mortality, with a terminal diagnosis, that this tends to be what they do. First, they deny, and then they get angry, and then they bargain, and then they get depressed, and then eventually, they accept their own mortality. Super valuable in its time. Then later applied to grief, but never meant to say that this is the only way or right way, or somehow, a formula of how you're supposed to do it, but that's how people talk about it.

Kirstin: It's great that there are people like you who are exploring other ways and other options instead of just sticking to, "This is the one way." I think that that's something that people get really stuck on, that there is one right way to do things, or one way that you should be experiencing things, and that's it. I see that happen with a lot of my clients that maybe have wanted to lose weight, since most people who binge eat do also have a desire to lose weight. They start thinking, "This is the way to do it. This is

the only way." It's my job, in part, to show them other options that what you've been taught by this diet or that diet or diet culture in general, or whatever, isn't the only way.

Krista: I think it's particularly valuable when it comes to grief, too, because, yes, at least I wanted to get the A in grief. I wanted to do it the "right way." Also, people around you are so uncomfortable with your discomfort, they want you to do it the "right way." They will take this "five stages" stuff and put it at you because they don't have really any tolerance for you to be so sad.

Kirstin: Yes, or they don't have any knowledge about another way. Like, "This is it. This is what you're supposed to go through." This is what they know.

Krista: Yes, for sure.

Kirstin: I think another piece of advice that you mentioned that gets thrown around a lot is it just takes time. If you just give it time, you will feel better.

Krista: If that were true, then all that would need to happen is time would pass and we would all be in the same place. It's just not that simple. I used to be very anti-time heals, there's no benefit of time. Now, as I've learned more, I have realized that it's just a little bit more nuanced, which is to say that time is a part of healing, in that a huge part of healing is the brain relearning the new reality. Enough exposures to the new reality that the person has died, or the job is no longer yours, or the divorce has happened, or whatever it is that we're grieving. The brain has to have enough exposures to that over time that it updates the way that it makes predictions.

For our attachment needs, really imagine how awful it would be if we never knew where the people we loved were, or when we would see them again. How much of our brain space that would occupy if we were constantly wondering where they were, when we would see them again, how do we get to them. Fortunately, our brain, just through repetition, does that for us. It has enough exposures to that information that it can make predictions with relative certainty, so that we don't have to worry about it until it changes. Then, time does need to pass so that the brain can relearn. That is important.

Also, what we do with time really matters. How we learn to support ourselves and cope and feel our feelings, and process what's happened, and look at the stories we're telling ourselves. All of that is so important, too. Without that, if we're just white knuckling it all the way through that first year, thinking that only time will do its job, then you get to the first year and you're like, "Crap, I still don't feel great. Is the second year harder? Maybe it is." I think that's where that comes from.

Kirstin: I think people hear, "Time heals time, you'll feel better in time," and they forget that we can't just wait it out. There needs to be some "action taking" like you were describing.

Krista: Yes. You've got to both take breaks and deal with it.

Kirstin: Yes.

Krista: Not just avoid it.

Kirstin: Yes. One of the things you said was that you didn't know how to feel feelings during that time. What was that like for you, not knowing how to feel these feelings that you were experiencing?

Krista: Fortunately, there were a lot of other things that were helping me in terms of, I had a super supportive family, I had a great work environment, I had a wonderful therapist, so it wasn't all terrible, but I did a lot of escapism. I did a lot of going to food, and I went a lot to shopping, and I went a lot to busyness to try to avoid feelings. I did notice myself worried about slowing down, worried about evenings, worried about weekends. I was just really holding it in, in many ways, or trying to distract myself from it using Amazon. There was a lot of Amazon purchases. There's a lot of ice cream, you'll laugh, but ice cream with chocolate syrup and saltines was my thing.

Kirstin: Oh.

Krista: I know, right? My grandpa taught me that. At times when I wasn't really hungry, and then I definitely threw myself into work. I did a lot of things to distract because I didn't really know. I didn't have a lot of confidence in my ability to feel. I think sometimes it is a matter of- I worried about this, and I see it in my clients- the feelings feel so big, and so overwhelming, and so much like a black hole that if you let yourself go down, you worry you will be sucked into and never come out of. You worry that you're spinning the plates, and you're keeping them all spinning in a way, and if you start to feel, then you'll drop the plates and you will fall apart. It just feels safer to avoid and keep your distance. I get it, and also not so helpful in the long term.

Kirstin: Yes. I hear the exact same thing from so many of my clients; big emotions, being afraid that it's just never going to end once you open the door. As we've all seen, it's when you avoid it and just distract from it and ignore it, that's when it doesn't go away.

Krista: Yes, and gets worse.

Kirstin: Yes.

Krista: Not only does it not go away, but then, the coping behaviors that might help us avoid the feelings in the short term, then produce consequences that we don't want in the long term. Now I'm spending more money, and now I'm gaining more weight, and these things that are unintended consequences to what was a coping mechanism.

Kirstin: Yes. How do you teach people to feel their emotions now?

Krista: First, we talk about safety to feel, and making sure that our nervous system is in a place where we actually can feel the feelings. Oftentimes, when we are super resistant, it might be because we don't know how to regulate ourselves. We don't know how to recognize dis-regulation and come back to regulation. There are so many tools, I'm sure that you teach too. I'm a big fan of tapping. That's my number one. I love tapping, and so I teach a lot of tapping.

Also, just things like taking a walk. Things that have bilateral stimulation built into them, so that your eyes are going back and forth to help create that parasympathetic response that creates safety. Safety first in the nervous system. Then I teach feelings with what I call the NOW process, so name, open witness. Give it a name. What is it? This is anger, this is sadness. Open up to it, which is the exact opposite of what we tend to want to do, but just like we wouldn't try to make a labor pain go away, we know enough to open up to it if we've given birth, same thing here, got to open up to it.

Then describe what it's like in your body. Witness that experience. What is it like? What are you noticing? Not what are the stories that you are inclined to tell yourself when you feel that way, but what's it actually like in your body? Is it a tightness in your throat? Is it a buzzing somewhere? Is it a

sinking feeling in your stomach? Is it a bowling ball or a brick? Those kinds of things. Name it, open up to it, and then witness what happens when it passes through you.

Kirstin: A lot of what you're saying is very similar to what I teach. I bet if I have clients who are listening, they're going to see a lot of similarities in there with the descriptions, even the way that you talk about the descriptions, because so often that's one of the things that stops us from feeling safe, is the stories we tell about our emotions. I feel like I'm going to die," or, "It's like I'm being poisoned," or, "I feel like I'm going to explode." That was the one I used to think, "I'm going to explode."

Instead of being factual about it and saying, "I feel restless. I feel tight. I feel," whatever the sensations, we start to tell you stories that make it so much bigger than it is and make it seem really scary.

Krista: Yes. One of my stories was, "I don't have time for this." Which didn't make it seem scary, it made distraction, validated distraction. "I don't have time."

Kirstin: Oh my gosh, yes. I hear that one too a lot. "I don't have time to feel a feeling."

Krista: "I don't have time to feel this. I got kids to raise. I got a life to lead. I got a job to do."

Kirstin: Yes. What do you tell somebody if they give you that reason?

Krista: I get it, and it's not as time-consuming as you think. With a little bit of practice, what you can learn is that you can do it while you are doing other things. It's not like you have to stop and tell your kid to go to the other room while you feel a feeling. You can literally be doing the dishes and noticing what you feel and letting it pass. It doesn't last as long as you think, either, if you're not in the story of it.

Kirstin: Right, yes. The more you think about it, the more you're going to feel the emotions. That's also something that I talk about as well, is we don't need to just sit and feel. That's not what it has to be. One of the goals I like to think of is to be able to feel and carry on with your life while feeling, but not in an avoidance way and not in a distraction way necessarily, but be able to just be in the emotion and do life.

Krista: And live, yes, I totally agree with you. I also noticed from my own self that, as much as you want a shortcut, there really isn't one. The only way around, so to speak, really is through. Yes, I can keep putting it off, and also I'm putting off the good stuff that I want to feel at the same time.

Kirstin: What do you consider to be normal in grief?

Krista: That's such a good question because I think people have a very narrow definition of what is normal. Also, because our brains are so programmed to find risk and danger, they are always looking for how they are abnormal and doing it wrong. We're setting ourselves up for failure there. It would be easier to tell you what's abnormal in grief than it is to say what's not; there's so much that's normal.

My favorite definition of grief is that it's the natural human response to a perceived loss, and perceived loss is big. Anything that you thought was going to go one way and it went another way, and to you, that feels like a loss. It's not just bereavement. It's not just somebody died. It is, "I thought it was going to go this way, and it went that way, and it feels like a loss to me. Now I'm going to have a whole bunch of thoughts and feelings about that." In the beginning, they're just going to happen to me. I'm not going to choose them, and all the emotions are fine. It can include everything from sadness and despair and powerlessness to joy and relief. All the feelings are part of it.

Over time, my goal is not to get over my grief. My goal is not to be happy about my loss or be grateful for it. My goal is to choose the way I think about it on purpose and to let myself have supportive experiences of how I feel. Normal, holy cow. Grief fog, most people don't expect grief fog. Grief is such a full-body experience that it really does impact every system in our body. Sometimes what happens is that we're not sleeping as well. Our hormones are out of balance. Our heart can actually hurt. Our prefrontal cortex just spins like that buffering wheel on your computer when it's overloaded and you can't think, and you can't retain or read, or it's harder to make decisions. Your blood pressure can go up. The increase of heart attack immediately can go up.

There are so many things that grief affects. It's really a more supportive question instead of saying, "Is this normal?" is really to say, "This is what's happening. What would feel supportive?" Because it's pretty much all normal.

Kirstin: Yes, I love that. It's, "What's normal for you?"

Krista: Yes. Also, "What's normal in this grief versus that grief?" What was normal for me when Hugo died is very different. I've been going through a whole grief thing right now. My most current partner of five years, we've broken up, and he's moved out. It's a whole different grief experience. I can't tell myself, "This isn't normal because it wasn't what I experienced when Hugo died," because it's just a different grief. I'm in a different place and I know different things, and it's hitting me differently. What would feel supportive next? Here's what's happening. What if I don't make myself wrong for it? What do I need next?

Kirstin: Sometimes I've heard that people, when they're in grief for various reasons, they can start to blame themselves for things. They feel like they could have been able to prevent it, they should have done something differently, they should have seen the signs, or whatever it is. How would you coach someone through that?

Krista: I would label it first. I think labeling is such a powerful thing. That's an example of counterfactual thinking and super common in grief, which is that we come up with these would have, could have, should have thoughts that if I would have done this, I could have done that, I should have done this, and had I done those things, it wouldn't have happened. It always ends up, "Had the past been different, it wouldn't have happened."

There are different ideas behind why our brains do this, but almost every brain does this; counterfactual thoughts. Just to not take those thoughts so seriously is super helpful. This is counterfactual thinking. "Oh, this is the part where my brain offers me a counterfactual thought. This is the part where my brain is arguing with reality, and that's just something that brains do sometimes in grief." Sometimes it can be a way of avoiding feeling powerless.

If we can find a person, a reason, a something to blame, and it can make sense to us, then that can actually be emotionally easier or less daunting than accepting that crap just happens that we were never so powerful that we could control in the first place and that bad things do happen to good people. All these paradigm-shifting, really uncomfortable "eugh" things that we just don't really want to be true if we can acknowledge that they are and just notice, "Yes, I will offer sometimes counterfactual thoughts to myself as a way of avoiding feeling powerless."

Kirstin: That's really interesting. When you're going through all of this, when you're going through your version of grief, when you're going through those kinds of thoughts that you were just talking about, how can you take better care of yourself? How can you prioritize yourself? How can you trust

yourself when you're going through all of this, when you have all these different thoughts, all these different emotions, all the different, even physical stuff that you were talking about?

Krista: Can I tell you my favorite grief theory?

Kirstin: Please.

Krista: Can see I get excited. Obviously, five stages is my least favorite. The dual process model is my favorite. The dual process model is super helpful when it comes to the question you asked, because what the dual process model does is it gives us a formula for healing, and it's super generous and very easy to apply.

Dual process model says everything we do after a loss can be divided into two buckets. There's a loss-oriented bucket, which means we're thinking about it, we're feeling about it, we're dealing with the logistics of it, we're facing it. It's memories, it's pictures, it's stuff, it's looking at the loss. Then the second bucket is pretty much everything else is restorative. We have loss-oriented and we have restorative. Restorative is laughing with friends, Netflix binges, getting outside, taking a walk, gardening, any hobbies, anything unrelated to the loss.

What most people do is they tend to want to do one or the other. Human socialized as women tend to be particularly bad at restorative activities. We've been taught to not prioritize those. If you're like me and you wanted to get the A in grief, it could be easy to seem like, "Okay, I just need to do only the loss-oriented things." If I do something else, then I make myself feel bad about it. "Oh, I didn't love them enough," or, "Oh, I'm not doing grief right." When I notice myself laughing or not thinking about it, then I judge myself for that.

The dual process model says what we want to do and where healing is found is in the intentional oscillation back and forth between both buckets. We want to think about it, and then we want to take a break. Then we want to come back to the loss-oriented, feel it, and then take a break. If it's hard for you, prioritize the restorative activities. Put those in the calendar. Get out, do things. Give yourself a break from thinking about it and remind yourself if your brain jumps in with the judgment and says, "Oh, I'm doing it wrong," or, "I didn't love them," or, "I didn't care," or, "I'm moving on," or, "What are people going to say?" then we get, "No, no, this is the restorative part of my healing. This is a requirement. I need to do this for myself." Then it can be easier to prioritize it, and can be easier to redirect your brain when it wants to jump in and judge you.

Then it's just so gentle because we can just go back and forth. It's not fancy. It's not hard. It's just, "Okay, I've been thinking about this for a long time. Maybe I just need a little distraction. Okay, have I been distracting for a while? Maybe I need to feel it."

Kirstin: I love that. I can even see that in so many other different areas where we tend to feel guilty about not focusing on something, or we get really tied up in the distraction, or whatever it is, and not trying to think about it. We really can fall into one side or the other. Something that I see come up a lot with my clients is when they feel guilty about resting even. "I shouldn't be resting. I should be productive," instead of finding the balance between the two, and going back and forth.

Krista: Many of us have bought into, myself included, a narrative that productivity somehow equals value and worth. Of course, we would be inclined to judge ourselves when we're not being productive. Even if we're still in that paradigm, rest is productive, but back and forth, back and forth.

Kirstin: You took the words right out of my mouth. I actually just said that on a coaching call this week.

Krista: Oh, yes.

Kirstin: Rest is productive. [chuckles]

Krista: Especially in grief, by the way, because it really is such a full-body experience. It's like, for those who have been pregnant, that first trimester where you're like, "Holy crap, what happened? Where did my energy go?" It can be like that where all systems are just pushed so much more than what they're used to, and so it's really physically tiring. Yes, rest.

Kirstin: Talking about acceptance, being accepting of that, being accepting of where you are, where your body is, how your body is responding, instead of arguing with it, fighting against it, or forcing yourself to do other things.

Krista: Yes, and not minimizing the importance of going back to the basics sometimes. I think sometimes when you have to remind yourself, "Oh, actually I need to focus on how do I get better sleep. I need to focus on am I hydrated. I need to focus on gentle movement. How's my nutrition?" Some of those basic things, like how am I caring for this vessel that I am in? Then we can label it as too basic. We can tell ourselves we should have already mastered that by now, that that's not a very good use of our time, that we should be on to other things, when really we could be praising ourselves for going back to the basics, because that's what we need in that moment.

We could be so proud of ourselves for resting and taking good care of ourselves and putting ourselves higher on the priority list than maybe we're used to, and saying no to things that maybe are draining for us that we would ordinarily say yes to. All of those acts of self-care, if there were ever a time, grief is definitely the time.

Kirstin: I think that a lot of the times we underestimate the basics and going back to the basics, like you're saying, I should be farther along, I shouldn't have to focus on this. I shouldn't have to put so much effort into this. It's like, well, maybe right now you do and it is what's best.

Krista: Maybe it would be what is most loving.

Kirstin: Yes. One of the concepts that you talk about is post-traumatic growth. Can you tell us about? What that means, all the things?

Krista: Yes. First of all, I want to know why the heck no one taught me about post-traumatic growth until so late in life. Post-traumatic growth was actually a phrase coined in the mid-'90's. Hello? 2025.

Kirstin: Oh.

Krista: I know, right? A couple of researchers were doing what researchers do, and before their work, what we thought was that when someone would go through something traumatic, that there were basically two possible outcomes. They would go through something traumatic, and then their level of wellness or quality of life would dip, it would go down. Then it would either stay there or it would bounce back to where it was before the traumatic event happened.

They started noticing, and largely what they were studying was widows, which is who I coach, they started noticing that there was a third option, which was there was this group of people who weren't staying down or bouncing back, but rather they were bouncing forward. They were reporting, not in spite of what they had been through, but because of what they had been through, that they were actually more satisfied with life than they were before the loss.

I know. Not a moral imperative, not another should we need to add to our to-do lists, just really refreshing to know that I get to be the boss of what I think about anything I go through. Sometimes grief and loss can be this invitation to stop and assess the life that you're living and come back into connection with what you value and how you are expressing those values. This is what it was for me, because I was just kind of going through the motions.

I was in a pretty good, happy place, but did I love my job? There were all these things that were on autopilot in midlife that grief makes you just stop and go, "Whoa, if life is this short, am I living it the way that I want to live it? Am I in relationships in the way that I want to be? Is my spiritual life where I want it to be? Am I doing what I want to do, making the impact that I want to make?"

If the answer is no to any of those questions in small ways or big ways, we get to decide and make changes accordingly. We don't have to be grateful for the loss. We can still wish it hadn't happened and decide what we want to make it mean and who we want to be in it. That's essentially post-traumatic growth.

Kirstin: Wow. What do you think it is that causes that kind of self-assessment and self-life assessment?

Krista: I think for many of us, it's like you see that the world didn't stop and you see that people are going to work, they're getting the mail, they're shopping for groceries, and they're doing all the things that you were doing too, and you're still doing them, but it's like your world stopped. It just makes you look at things differently, where you're just like, "What? If it can be taken that quickly, why am I even here? What am I even doing? What is this all about?"

It's like a record scratch, where it's just like [onomatopoeia] and life stops and you look around and it's just, I think, a very natural time to assess. If you understand the value of that assessment, then maybe do a little bit more, take that really as an opportunity for you. Again, not because you should or not because we have to grow from our grief or any of that, but because you are human and your life matters and your satisfaction with your life matters. Why not use what you go through to make more informed choices about who you want to be?

Kirstin: I like what you were saying about making it your own choice, not feeling pressured to grow from this. Maybe people don't want to grow from this. Maybe that's just not their experience or their path that they're meant to go down. Maybe just getting back to where they were is the goal, and that's okay.

Krista: In the beginning, I think for sure it is. I remember the concept of post-traumatic growth. I remember evolving and softening into that idea over time. At first, it was offensive, and then later it was kind of like, "Oh, okay. It's not a should. It's not I have to. I'm not better if I do. It's just an option and what might I want to change?" We can soften into it over time, but I just think we don't want to take it like some sort of moral imperative.

I like to think about it like a tornado is a really good metaphor for it. I live in Kansas, so we have them. If a tornado comes and it knocks down your house, there's nothing wrong with asking the builder to

rebuild the exact same house that you had. Nothing wrong with that. Also, if you learn some things from that tornado, or you learn some things because you lived in the house for a while, and you want to update the design of your house, then it's your option to do that. You can. It's also totally fine to just ask for the same house.

If you do make changes and you do update the design of your house, that also doesn't mean you didn't love your old house. It doesn't mean you asked for the tornado. It just means this happened, and now I have got to choose what I want to do next, and I get to be the one who makes that choice, what do I want? For women, that can be particularly hard because oftentimes we don't know.

Kirstin: Especially because we get taught what we should want, that gets confusing. Then we also start living into what we think we should want and what we should do and don't really take that time to look at what we do want. This is something I see happen all the time with my clients that are wanting to eat like a "normal person" and just eat what they want, not feel so guilty about it, and just make their own decisions. They get so caught up in the rules they've been taught and get so caught up and what they should be eating and shouldn't be eating and have to eat and need to eat and all of this that when I start working with them and we start to talk about what they want, they're at a loss. They don't even know.

I bet some of your clients as well fall into that when they start working with you. They know that they want help, but they don't even necessarily know what the end goal is or what they want in the end.

Krista: Yes. It can be so disorienting too, when you've gone through a significant loss because you may, to a large extent, have thought that you did know what you wanted, and then the rug got pulled out from under you, and not what you did know that you want is no longer available to you, which is really disorienting and discouraging. The identity components of that and literally grieving who you were with them or who you were in that stage of life or with that thing that was taken away from you, if it wasn't a person, processing all of that and then choosing, it's a messy thing.

Kirstin: Yes. What would you say is one of the number one things that your clients have a hard time coming to terms with or accepting as part of the process?

Krista: That's such a good question. I think it can be hard to accept the idea that grief doesn't end when you want it to and when you want to be done with it. It can be hard to accept that it doesn't end. If grief is the natural human response to a perceived loss, the loss is always going to be what the loss is. We can't change it. We're always going to have a response to it. Again, it doesn't end.

Secondary losses can be hard to cope with until you have a name for them. I think once you have a name for them, they're easier. The primary loss would be whatever the main grief is, for me, it was Hugo died. Then the secondary losses are all the losses that happen as a result of the primary loss. Many of them you don't see coming, and it's not like you can just process them all now. You have to wait for them to happen and then recognize them when they do and support yourself and take good care of yourself.

It can feel like you slipped backwards or you didn't do something right in your grief, when really what's happening is that this is just another layer of your grief, it's a secondary loss that you are now noticing. Maybe it is you thought that he was going to walk your daughter down the aisle, and then that day comes and he's not there, so that feels like that's another loss.

Being able to make peace with the emotions of the grief that will be ongoing so that you have a more supportive experience, people tend to resist that. They tend to just kind of want to check a bunch of boxes and get to this mythical place called acceptance, and then not feel about it anymore.

Kirstin: I have a friend that had a miscarriage. She was grieving that loss. Something that she shared with me was that she also learned that the grief doesn't really end, but you just learn to live with it. Can you speak on that a little bit?

Krista: I find that to be a really helpful way to think about it. I know sometimes in the beginning, that's not what people want to hear because it's so emotionally intense. If you think about it like a muscle, the more we develop the ability to feel how we feel and support ourselves as we feel it, the more we develop the ability to notice when we're dis-regulated and get ourselves back to regulated. The more we stop arguing with how we feel and just let ourselves feel it, that is what makes us better able to carry the grief because we adjust. The waves keep coming, but we just get better at surfing them, we get better at adjusting for them, taking care of ourselves. We're less likely to get pulled under by the surprise wave and better able to just surf it.

Generally, I think it's a safe thing also to say that the intensity over time lessens, it's just not realistic to say that it goes away entirely. You would never want to measure your success based on not feeling feelings about your loss.

Kirstin: Yes. I can imagine why people wouldn't want to hear that because they want the grief to just be done. They want it to be over.

Krista: Aren't we just supposed to be happy? Isn't that the goal of life, is we're just supposed to be happy? Then, if we're not happy, we're doing something wrong? That's what they keep trying to sell us in the commercials.

Kirstin: Right. Which you and I, through our trainings, have been sold on the 50/50 life, which is much more realistic.

Krista: That's a huge reason why I found myself so unhappy in my midlife, was because I really bought into the idea that you're supposed to be happy. That was before Hugo died. I was like, "Something's wrong because I'm not happy all the time." Really, truly, you have grief because you lost something that you cared about, someone, something. I personally appreciate being sad sometimes and missing the thing that I lost that I loved. I wouldn't want somebody to take that away from me. I say that now. I probably wouldn't have said that in the early days.

Kirstin: It is very rare you hear someone say that they appreciate feeling sad.

Krista: I remember when a client told me one time, she was like, "I've made friends with my grief." I was like, "That is such a beautiful way to think about it." She's like, "I'm grateful for it. I love it. I cherish it. We're friends now." I'm like, "Yes."

Kirstin: That's so great. You can just let the grief be there. You can hang out. Right? You can part ways, come back, and it's all okay. We don't have to judge it or get mad about it.

Krista: Yes, or we don't have to make it go away. We don't have to be grateful for it either. I think that's something that feels important to me is just this idea of choice. It's not about, there is a way we're supposed to do any of it. It is what is the way for me? What do I choose for reasons that I like? Then

we get away from the should's and the shouldn't's and the rights and the wrongs, and it just becomes, okay, this is what I'm choosing. If we get to the point where we want to make a different choice, we just make a different choice.

Kirstin: So good. Oh, this is so good. Is there anything that we haven't talked about yet that you would like to make sure that you say, or any final tip, or just number one thought that you'd like to share?

Krista: Gosh, there's so many possibilities, right? I think we didn't really talk about how to support someone who's grieving. I would guess that some of your listeners are also dealing with that. I do think that can be a valuable thing to talk about. Basically, what I would say is that it's totally okay and normal if you are uncomfortable with somebody else being sad because we have been taught that we're supposed to be happy, and we do have this writing reflex that exists inside us where we perceive someone is sad and we want to "fix it." That's why we say they're in a better place, and they wouldn't want you to be sad, and just stay busy, and time heals. That's why we say all those things.

Can we notice that, yes, I don't have to be mad at myself because I'm uncomfortable with this other person's discomfort, and how they feel is not a problem to solve, it's just something to be witnessed. Then we can come along beside them and then instead of, "They're in a better place," or "You should be happy you had them," or "You can have another child," or "Don't worry you're young," or these things, it's, "Ugh, this sucks. I'm so sorry. I love you. I'm here." We can be a witness instead of trying to fix. That's what most people in grief really resonate with the most because they don't want to be fixed. They just want somebody to be with them as they process the hurt.

Kirstin: Yes. I have found that one of the best things we can do to help support in that way is to work on being okay with us feeling our own feelings.

Krista: Amen. Yes. That's what it is, right? When we can comfort ourselves, when we feel uncomfortable about their feelings, that's when we don't need to say the thing to them that is received as dismissive.

Kirstin: Absolutely. When we see us feeling feelings as being okay, then we can believe that other people feeling feelings is okay. It's when we think, "I'm not supposed to feel this way. I need to fix this," just talking to ourselves that way, then we're of course going to treat other people that way too, but when we are allowing ourselves to feel feelings and we see it as okay and normal, then we can think that way for them also.

Krista: I don't know percentage-wise of the things that we label as problems that we experience as humans, but I think that one shift is so profound.

Kirstin: I agree.

Krista: Someday we won't even need to have conversations like this because someday kids are just going to learn this in school because their parents are going to have embodied it, it will be taught in curriculum, it will be role-modeled at home, and it just won't be such a thing. Won't be such a gap.

Kirstin: I think that it's slowly happening where people are getting more comfortable with emotions after so many years of being taught that it's wrong, or that you shouldn't, or that you need to just buck up, or man up, or shove it down, whatever.

Krista: If the inroad is grief or if the inroad is to stop binge eating, it's a hard thing to go through. Sometimes it's the inroad to a skill that will change not only that one thing, but so many things in your life.

Kirstin: Right. Yes, absolutely. I'm sure it's the same for your clients as it is for mine, where it's not just you've gotten to this point and now everything is great. You become a different person as you go through the process. As you're going through the grief, as you're learning to accept this new life, maybe the post-traumatic growth, creating an even better life. With my people, it's not just we're not binge eating anymore, but there's just so much that comes along with it with just feeling better about yourself and feeling more relaxed with food.

Just being able to enjoy life more and not hiding yourself and not being so focused on your body all the time. There's so much stuff that comes along with it. It doesn't happen at the endpoint, it happens through the process.

Krista: 100%. I think I'm imagining your clients too, who maybe have not experienced the loss of a spouse or a significant grief, maybe they have and maybe they haven't, but to come in and learn, okay, my feelings aren't problems and I know how to support myself when I have them so I don't have to use any distraction or anything to get away from it. That's what will prepare them for the next thing that happens once they figure out the binge eating, because the next grief will come, the next thing will happen, and it's the same skill that you need to deal with the next thing that happens after the coaching is over. I feel very passionately about that with my clients, too.

Kirstin: Yes, I totally agree. I totally agree. It's such a great skillset that you get along the way that's going to transfer into other things.

Krista: Had I had that before Hugo died, I know that I would have had such a different grief experience. Thank you for talking about grief. As you can tell, I get fired up about it, but what I want is for people to have a better experience than I did, and that happens because of conversations like this. Somebody, they are so much less likely to buy into the five stages nonsense and so much less likely to say, "Well, my experience isn't normal," and so much more likely to create a supportive experience for themselves because they listen to your podcast.

Kirstin: Yes. Where can we find you if someone wants to learn more about you, hear about what you teach, all that stuff? Where can we find you?

Krista: I'm also a podcaster. I have a podcast called *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, very niche. I recognize this and feel free to forward it onto the widows in your life, but also anybody can listen. I get emails from people all the time that are not widows that just want to learn about grief and post-traumatic growth, and so they listen. They're welcome to do that.

Then I have a downloadable book that I created called *Memories That Matter*. One of my big worries after Hugo died was that I would forget all the memories, and so I created 100 questions, 100 journal prompts to help you remember not just a spouse, but some memories from a relationship that you care about. If people want to get that, they can go to coachingwithkrista.com/stop, they can find it there.

Kirstin: Awesome. I will link all of this in the show notes to make it easy for everybody.

Krista: Thank you.

Kirstin: Thank you so much. I think this is such an important topic. I really appreciate you coming on and sharing it with this audience as well.

Krista: 100% my pleasure.

Kirstin: I hope that they also come to you and listen to all the amazingness that you have to say and to teach on your topic because-

Krista: Oh, thank you.

Kirstin: -I know that this is just the tip of the iceberg and there's so much more, like you said, you could probably talk about this for hours and hours and hours. I feel the same way. [chuckles]

Krista: Much to the chagrin of people in my orbit. They're like, "Stop talking about it." [laughter] But I do love it. Yes. Thanks so much. I appreciate it.

Kirstin: Yes, thank you.

I don't know about you, but I learned so much from that. I sure hope you did too.

Krista is just so wonderful and I want to give a huge thank you to her for sharing her experiences and her expertise.

As she mentioned at the end of the conversation, you can learn more from her by listening to her podcast, The Widowed Mom Podcast, and you can also download her free ebook called Memories That Matter by going to coachingwithkrista.com/stop and as I said, I'll link those in the show notes.

Alright, thank you again to Krista, thank you for listening, and I'll talk to you next time, bye bye.