

Ep #20: Navigating the Unexpected Grief of Divorce with Krista St. Germain



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**Lauren Fair**

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## Ep #20: Navigating the Unexpected Grief of Divorce with Krista St. Germain

You're listening to *The Sensible Split* podcast, Episode 20. Today I'm joined by grief expert, Master Certified Life Coach, widow and mom, Krista St-Germain. Krista and I talk about grief and how it can affect you, your spouse, your children, and the divorce process itself. This is an interview you're not going to want to miss.

*The Sensible Split* is a podcast for smart but overwhelmed women in search of a roadmap to a successful separation and divorce. If you are looking for guidance in navigating the practical, legal, and emotional aspects of divorce with confidence, this is the show for you. Here's your host, Master Certified Life and Divorce Coach, Divorce Attorney and Mediator Lauren Fair.

Hi there. Welcome back to the podcast this week. I'm so excited to welcome Krista St-Germain to the podcast today. Krista is a grief expert, Master Certified Life Coach, widow and mom who has a brilliant and transformative coaching program and community for widowed moms.

I invited Krista to be a guest today to talk to you about divorce related grief, and she so graciously agreed to join us today. It's so important to understand how grief is connected to divorce and how it can impact you, your kids, and the divorce process itself. Particularly if you're not aware, that is what you may be experiencing, or not know how to handle it.

I met Krista very early on in my coaching education and have had the opportunity to learn so much from her over the years. I had the good fortune of having Krista as my instructor when I was training to become a life coach and then again later during master coach training.

Most recently, I completed Krista's advanced coaching certification in grief and post-traumatic growth, which was amazing. I learned so much about grief, how it affects us, and had the opportunity to coach some of Krista's clients who had been recently widowed, which was an incredible experience.

I noticed in coaching the widows in your program Krista that although they had lost their marriage in a different way than my clients do, through the death of their spouse rather than through divorce, they all had experienced significant losses in those events, and there were so many parallels in what they wanted

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coaching on as they transitioned into a new phase of life and encountered obstacles along the way.

And although we know death of a spouse and divorce can be some of the most challenging transitions in life, having that personal experience of coaching the widowed moms really highlighted for me how similar the effects of grief and entering a new stage of life without your person we're so similar for the widows as well as for women going through divorce.

In addition to your extensive grief coaching experience, I understand you're divorced yourself, and so I thought, "Who better to have on the podcast to talk about grief than you?" So, Krista, thank you so much for being here today.

Krista St-Germain: Well, thank you so much for having me. That was such a lovely introduction

Lauren Fair: I felt like I couldn't do you justice.

Krista: It feels kind of like a full circle thing, to have worked with you for so long and then for you to have your own podcast. I didn't discover coaching until after my divorce, and then after I had been remarried and my second husband died, and so I think that's probably one of the reasons I've always been... like I love you as a person... but also cheering you on, because of what you're doing in the world.

I wish that as I was going through my divorce that I would have had a coach who could have helped me like I know you're helping your people. So I'm delighted to be part of your podcast.

Lauren: Thank you. And really, you have kept me going in this transition from being an attorney to getting into more of the divorce coaching realm when it's been hard. I mean, it's not always been an easy transition, helping people through the same type of life transition but in a very different way. It's all new skills. It's a whole shifting of identity.

Yeah, it's not been the easiest thing, and you have been... In my mind I'm hearing you cheering me on at differing points, and your belief in me that you've

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held long before I had it in myself really has helped me grow to where I am today. So thank you so much. And yeah, you're actually the first person I'm interviewing on the podcast, too. So it's just so fun to have you on today.

Krista: I'm winning. I'm winning, Lauren. I feel like I'm winning.

Lauren: Well, if it's okay with you, to start, could you share a bit about your story? What brought you to grief coaching?

Krista: Yeah, it definitely wasn't something I had planned on doing. I'll tell you that I was 40 and I had just gotten remarried; second marriage, as I mentioned before. Kind of like the redemption story of marriage, right? Because the first one had just not ended well, and the second one was just proof to me that amazing humans do exist. And you can be treated like you want to be treated.

And I really felt, for the first time in a long time, that my best days were ahead of me. I just had this fresh vision for what life was going to be like with him. We'd only been married three months. We'd lived together for a couple of years; well, a year.

But we were coming home from a trip, we had driven separately, and we were almost home, maybe about 15 minutes from home, and I had a flat tire. We were on the interstate, and so I pulled over onto the side of the road. He pulled over behind me and wanted to change the tire.

We had AAA. I knew in my bones we should probably call AAA, but he was like, "No, I'll just change the tire. We can get home faster." And so I acquiesced. I was standing there on the side of the road texting my daughter, she was 12 at the time, and told her that we would be late.

He was trying to get the spare tire out of the trunk in my car, and a driver that we found out later had meth in his system and alcohol in his system... it was daylight, mind you, 5:30 on a Sunday. Our hazard lights were on but he did not see our hazard lights. He did not see us. He did not break, he just crashed right into the back of Hugo's Durango and trapped him in between his car and my car. Within less than 24 hours.... We got him to the hospital, tried surgery, it didn't work, and he died.

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And so I went from a super high to just the lowest of lows. And even though I had a really good therapist, who I immediately went back to, she had helped me through my divorce, what I very quickly figured out was that I really didn't know much about grief that was actually helpful. What I did know about grief was kind of unhelpful.

I pretty quickly found myself in a place where I just wasn't making the progress that I wanted to make. I really was believing that I would probably never be happy again, like truly happy again. It just happened to be that at that same time Brooke Castillo was launching her Self-Coaching Scholars program. I had been following her podcast and decided, what the heck, I'll give it a try.

So it wasn't grief specific coaching at all, but it was the tools that I was starting to learn in life coaching, combined with the reading that I was doing about grief, that really opened up new possibilities for me. Ultimately, I decided I didn't really want to be in this corporate job I'm in anymore. If life is this short and this precarious, and things can change so quickly, am I making the difference that I want to make?

The conclusion that I came to was no. And so I certified through The Life Coach School, quit my corporate job, and threw myself into coaching. That was in... Hugo died in 2016... so here we are.

Lauren: Wow. Can you tell us more about how you're helping widowed moms now through the work that you're doing?

Krista: I help in a couple of ways. One is, I'm a fellow podcaster, right? I have a podcast called *The Widowed Mom Podcast*. I love helping people in that way. I think it's amazing that we have the opportunity to help people who we may never meet on the internet. It's wild.

So I have that, and then also I have two main programs. My kind of flagship program is called Mom Goes On, and it's really a program, a group program, designed to meet women in the place where I felt like I got stuck, which is what I call a "grief plateau". It's when you're kind of beyond the acute, intense early grief but you haven't yet created post-traumatic growth. You haven't really

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created the life that you love. It's hard. You feel like you're surviving but you're not thriving. I work with women in that space.

And recently, I also launched a program called Grief Essentials, which is really a shorter program designed to make early grief less terrible. It's not quite as intense as my Mom Goes On program, but it's for people in early acute grief that are widows.

Lauren: Gotcha. Can you explain a little bit more about how you would define grief to people who are not so familiar with it? I think, when we think of grief oftentimes, we're mostly thinking about it in relation to specifically the death of a loved one. And I know that's what you focus on, but how would you define grief in general?

Krista: Yeah, and I love that you asked that question because sometimes it's just something people skip over, right? We just make assumptions. So my favorite definition of grief is "the natural human response to a perceived loss." And that can be so much more than bereavement, which is loss of when someone dies.

So we expect life to go one way. We expect something to go one way, we expect a relationship to go one way, we expect a job to go one way, right? We expect something to go some way, and it doesn't go that way, and we perceive that as a loss. And grief is our natural human response to that perception. And it's also so much more than just a feeling.

Sometimes people use the definition of grief and they're really just thinking about grief as an emotion. But to me, it's an umbrella term for the whole experience; all the thoughts, all the feelings, all the actions, everything that is happening as we adjust to something that feels like a loss.

Lauren: In the work that you do with others who are going through this really difficult transition of losing their person, and also from your own experience, how do you see grief affecting people? What's considered "normal" in terms of... What does that look like when they're grieving?

Krista: I think it would almost be easier to say what isn't normal, because grief is so different and it's so full-body. It can be so all-encompassing that it is so many

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things for many people. Our hormones are out of whack. We're not sleeping as well as we were. Everything in our chemistry just feels off. It can feel like you're on a wild, unpredictable rollercoaster. It can be full of stressors that you never imagined. It can affect all areas of your life.

And so it's so much more, I think, than how we might be tempted to classify it or describe it. Which is usually why it's so miserable, because people aren't expecting it to be as intense, right?

I remember having such a surprising experience of grief fog, and nobody ever told me that that was a thing. I was used to being able to go to a book. When I wanted to understand something, I'd go to a book, I'd read it, and I'd learn about it. I couldn't retain anything. I would read, but I would have to read it over and over and over, and I couldn't process or retain. That's a very common thing that happens in grief, but I wasn't prepared.

Lauren: How did you come to realize that that was what was happening for you?

Krista: I think eventually I stumbled onto the term somewhere. And that's an interesting thing, just even to think back to those early days. It was all so foggy in some areas that I don't even quite remember how I came to certain conclusions, or figured certain things out.

Fortunately, I already had pretty good systems in place, in terms of... I never really was one to rely on Post-it Notes. I always had a planner. I was good about writing things down. But for my clients who don't have those systems in place, you really can feel like there's something wrong with you, when yesterday you were good at remembering things, and all of a sudden, today you're missing payments.

Lauren: Yeah, that's so interesting. Because as you're saying that, I'm thinking of clients that I've worked with who are going through divorce. And one in particular characterized that kind of difficulty with brain fog as being like she had scrambled eggs for brains. Where she's like, "I don't know what's wrong with me. I feel like my brain is like scrambled eggs. It's just so strange."

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Krista: Yeah, cotton candy was how I described it; it's like fluff in there. I can't tell you how many times I would lose my keys; I did not lose my keys. Or I would go to the grocery store and I would buy the same thing that I already had because I couldn't remember that I already had it. You really do start to kind of question yourself. Or things like...

There's this thing that happens in your brain, of relearning, and I didn't know that that was going to be a part of grief. And so it felt very odd to me, when intellectually I knew he died. If you asked me, "Did he die? Is he coming back?" I would say, "Yes, he died. He's not coming back." Yet, also, when the garage door would go up I would think it was him for a minute, right? Or I would pick up my phone and try to text him.

Those kinds of things, where the brain hasn't quite relearned the new reality. If you don't know that that's going to be a part of your experience it can feel very disorienting when it happens, and you kind of question yourself.

Lauren: Yeah, and this story about what happened with you and Hugo, every time I hear it, it just hits me deeply. And it's, I think, quite clear how that would lead to a lot of grief for you. But you've also had this experience with being divorced, before finding Hugo, and I'm curious, in looking back at that situation now, you might see the existence of grief in a divorce context as well. Was that part of your divorce experience?

Krista: Most definitely, although I don't think I recognized it at the time. I don't think I labeled it as that because I didn't really have the language for it. But when I look back... Because it took me a long time to file for divorce, a long time, and a lot of therapy. I think I did a lot of grieving as I was going. I was grieving what I wanted, and that it wasn't that. That it couldn't be changed, and that I had tried.

And also recognizing where I wish I had done it differently, and grieving that. And imagining what it was going to be like for my kids. Just all of that tumultuous stuff that happened before I said what I said, eventually, was huge grief for me. I just didn't really know that then. When I came to the conclusion, I actually felt a huge sense of relief immediately because it took so long to get there. I

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remember feeling really relieved. But then, in actually going through the logistics of getting through it, that then there was more grief.

Lauren: Yeah, so it sounds like you're saying you went through this process of grieving the loss of the relationship in some way, prior to even getting to the point of deciding that you wanted to move forward with the divorce, or even saying those words to your former spouse. And afterward, there was still grief that came in a different way.

Can you tell us more about what that was like? What was the distinction about the grief before the decision, and the announcement of decision, versus after?

Krista: Yeah, I think the grief before was in large part about who I wanted him to be and how that conflicted with who I figured out he was. And I don't mean that as... This is not me attacking him, at all. We're actually in a pretty good place now. But you have this way that you want something to be, the way that you imagine it will be, and then it's not that.

And so it was him, it was our relationship, it was our time together, it was the possibility for repair. It was just all those little aspects of it. The primary loss, which I now have language for, the primary loss was the divorce. But all the secondary little losses that I was processing before were just like the facets of the diamond of the marriage, right?

Then, once we got divorced, losing his family was really hard. They were still, and are still, very kind to me, but it's different, right? I don't get to go see them on holidays. We don't live in the same state. And so not being a part of their lives felt like a really big loss to me.

The moments that we have spent parenting, and how I expected that to be and how it's been different, has been an aspect of that loss. I really did hope too, when we got divorced... In large part, because I came from a divorced family. So my parents were divorced and remarried. And from my perspective they did a brilliant job in co-parenting. Whatever drama they had, they did not let my brother and I see. We didn't see it. I know it was there, and as an adult I've learned more, but at the time I experienced it as them always being a united front, and them actually getting along really well.

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So I had this vision, especially in the early days, even at the point of divorce, where I imagined that he and I would be, I called it “super friends”. This is really what I was hoping for. We just came to the conclusion, “We're not going to be able to be married anymore, but also, I still love you. I still value you as a human. I value you as my friend. We're still going to co-parent, and we can be super friends. We can still share jokes and memories.”

And that was not what it was like. That was not where he was. I think I could have been there much easier, but he couldn't and so that was a loss to me. This is how I thought divorce was going to be, and it's not like that. So yeah, there's lots of aspects that were grief-ey.

Lauren: Yeah, it sounds like you were the one that initiated the divorce. Is that correct?

Krista: Yeah.

Lauren: And so when you say that he was not at the same place, do you think that that was perhaps just part of him being on a different grieving timeline than you were? You said you grieved a lot before you made the announcement. And I think that's so common, where spouses are just in different places with grieving the end of their relationship. But do you think that was what was happening for you and him?

Krista: Yeah, I do think in large part that was it, where he felt like that. If you were to talk to him now, I think he would say it shouldn't have been a surprise. But I know that he received it as a surprise in that moment. It was just like he wasn't hearing me until I was just done than done. And then there was just kind of no going back from that point.

And so I think he didn't want it, he had a lot of regrets, and yeah, it was more like a death for him almost, in that he didn't want to even see it coming. So yeah, we were in very different places for sure.

Lauren: Yeah. You mentioned primary loss and secondary loss, and I think what you're referring to there is... Primary loss being... I mean, obviously, we're

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losing the marriage, right? And the other person as the partner. But can you say more about what you mean when you say secondary loss?

Krista: Secondary loss is one of those terms I wish I had known, partly in the divorce, but also especially after Hugo died. Because the secondary losses just keep coming. So the secondary losses are losses that happen as a result of the primary loss. For example, my daughter had really hoped that Hugo would teach her French, because French was his first language. So not being able to learn French from him is a secondary loss for her, right?

And not being able to watch him teach her French, or teach her how to snow ski or water ski, or the things that we had planned, those are all secondary losses. It's things that wouldn't have happened... Losses that wouldn't have happened unless the primary loss happened. So in the case of my divorce, the changed relationship with his family was very much a secondary loss.

Lauren: A lot of what you're saying is bringing up a lot for me, in terms of my personal experience with divorce too. And I feel like I did a lot of grieving of the loss of him as my partner, grieving of the loss of the marriage, before I ever got to the point of saying the word "divorce"; we were never ones to throw around divorce as a threat.

And I think in hindsight, by the time I had said the word, like I thought if something didn't change we were going to end up there, that really it was already too late at that point because I had been grieving so long before that, before I even got to the point of being able to say that word.

When you're talking about secondary loss and such, I think too, even though I had grieved the loss of him as a partner... because at that point I still loved him, but I loved him differently. Not so much as a partner anymore, but more like maybe a different family member... I felt a responsibility for taking care of him at that point.

And what I think I hadn't grieved at that point was what came after, when we started living separately and trying to move forward. Really, I never wanted the divorce. I think most people don't, right? We don't ever really want the divorce. Sometimes we get to the point of deciding, "This is what's best for me, and I've

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got to do it anyway.” But I really actively didn't want it largely, and he didn't either. So it was very difficult emotionally to go through this.

But as we're going through it, what hadn't come up yet was the loss of him as a friend. The loss of the vision that we had for our joint future. The children that we would never have together. The retirement in the rocking chairs on the front porch that we used to talk about. That was never going to happen.

And I think a lot of that didn't really come up until after the process was already in motion. Like you, I don't think I had any awareness that that was grief at the time. I had no label for it. I had no input from anyone else at the time, even though I was in therapy, I think around articulating what was happening.

I do think now, and understanding a lot more about grief and applying it, from learning these concepts from you during a time where I lost a family member, I do think it would have made a big difference at the time if I had had this information and been able to identify what was happening. I think it would have normalized what I was going through.

Because I thought something was just wrong with me. I mean, it took me years after the divorce to get emotionally right, if you will. I thought something was just wrong, and that I would never be right again. I was just sort of damaged from this. And I think I could have integrated that experience better into my post-divorce life if I had had the context for what was happening, and been able to meet that with self-compassion and learned how to process what was happening.

Krista: Yeah, I think that is actually more common than not. Because we're all operating on a lack of information, and in many cases misinformation, about what grief is and what it's going to be like. So I, for sure, relate to that both in my divorce and then with Hugo's death.

Lauren: I know you're a strong advocate for people having accurate up-to-date information on grief, so can you share some common misconceptions that you see people having about grief?

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Krista: Yeah, probably the biggest one is that people are still buying into the idea that grief comes in stages, specifically five of them. I ask all the time, anytime I give a grief presentation or talk to anybody about grief, I will say, "Who's heard of the five stages?" Every hand goes up. "Who's heard of any other grief theory?" No hands go up. And that's because we just don't talk about anything other than the five stages.

It was so valuable in its time, but that was 1969. And that was work done on hospice patients, people coming to terms with their own mortality, their own terminal diagnosis. And then later it extended to the work of bereavement. Anecdotal, at best. It does not represent what most people experience.

So five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. If you have had a grief experience, most people don't really relate to that, right? So I think that's one of them, the most common and perhaps damaging pieces of misinformation up out there.

Also, we tend to love the phrase "time heals." We hear that all the time. And I used to say, "Time doesn't do anything but sit there. Time is just a mental construct." I do think it's more nuanced than that. I do think it's important that we allow for time, because again, our brain does need to relearn the new reality so that it can make accurate predictions again.

And that only happens with new data, and new data only comes with time. So to some extent, we do need time to pass. But also it's not as simple as just hunkering down and waiting for time to pass and then expecting, "Oh, I'm one year out, so I should feel better." What we do with our time matters greatly. So I think that's one people fall for.

"Just stay busy." Oh my gosh, how many times? I don't know if you heard that in your divorce, but I definitely heard it after Hugo, "Just stay busy." So then what do you do? You throw yourself into work. You try to distract yourself. You don't want to give yourself silence, because that's when the thoughts and feelings come. There is some value in healthy distraction, but not to an excess

Lauren: Yeah, that actually is very much what my experience was when I was going through my divorce, and going through that grieving process, that I really

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didn't understand what was happening. I worked so much, and so yeah, I was super busy.

That did not fix anything for me, other than in the short term it occupied my brain so I didn't have to allow in some of what I probably needed to allow in, at that point, right? To allow that experience to happen. And so I'd work, and I'd feel better in the short term, and then when it'd be my off hours it would not feel good

Krista: Yeah. You know that I love dual process models, because we've worked together, but the dual process model, I'm a big fan of. Because it helps us find balance. It basically says, take all the things we do and divide them into two buckets. One bucket is grief related. So it's thinking about the loss, dealing with the logistics of it. And the other bucket is restorative activities. So things that are unrelated to the loss.

Dual process model says go back and forth. Intentionally oscillate back and forth between thinking about it and dealing with it, and avoiding it in other ways. And that is good, but it's got to be both. We can't just only think about the loss, and only deal with it. And we can't just only distract from it. We want to go back and forth

Lauren: Yeah, you mentioned not having a label for what you were going through in your divorce. If you were to have a label now, how do you think that would have changed things? And is there any danger in having a label?

Krista: It's such a good question. I think what would have been helpful to me to have labeled is just the idea, first of all, that it was even grief. I knew there was sadness, but nobody had ever explained to me that it was a grief experience. So I think that would have been really helpful to have labeled. I think the concept of primary and secondary losses would have been helpful.

Because what I have noticed is that when you're prepared for a secondary loss and it happens... and the trick is you can't really be prepared for it, because you don't know what they're going to be until they happen... but when you're prepared for the concept of a secondary loss, so that when one happens you can name it as that, then it's so much easier to normalize the experience that you're having; which is very normal.

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When otherwise, you might be inclined to make it mean you're sliding backwards, or you've done something wrong, or you're avoiding something, right? We tend to not be our own champion in those moments. Whereas, if we could just say "Oh, yeah, this is a secondary loss."

I imagined that we would be together at my daughter's wedding. Here's the daughter's wedding, we are not together; secondary loss. And feeling the loss does not mean I didn't process my grief or I did something wrong, right? It's just, "Oh, this is another facet of that." So that would have been a helpful label to have.

I think, with labels we just want to keep in mind if we can use it as a way to support ourselves as opposed to a way to pigeonhole ourselves or hold ourselves back. I think my inclination is to use things in a way that's supportive to me. So for me, probably, labels would have helped.

Lauren: You know divorce is just a stressful time. Anyway, I think what comes with it is a lot of undesirable emotions. I'm wondering, how do you distinguish between what is just a normal divorce-related stress? Because this is just a difficult transition for many. Versus, might this be divorce-related grief?

Krista: Okay, when you ask that question, here's what comes to mind. Because I get this question a lot as it relates to childhood behavior. So the way that I get this question is people will say, "I'm trying to parent my kid and their other parent has died. Is what I'm seeing typical childhood behavior? Is this just what kids this age do? Or is this grief?"

And I feel like what you're asking me is a similar question. How I usually answer that question is to say that I don't think that it's the most useful question we can ask. Because grief really does permeate everything, right? Maybe we could figure out if it was "normal" or not. I don't even know that we really could because grief just is so all-encompassing. But also, even if we did, what would that give us?

A more useful question for me is, "Okay, this is what's happening. This is how I'm feeling. How am I going to take care of myself, given that this is what I'm feeling?" Whether it's "typical" life stress or whether it's divorce-related stress or

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whether it's grief, or whatever we label it, what do I need next? What would feel good to me next? What would be helpful to me next?

Then I can spend my energy solving for something I can actually do. Which to me is a step closer to where I want to go. So that's the way that I think about it; like hmm, I don't really know. It's really hard to separate. It doesn't matter. What do I really need? And then I'm going to put my attention there.

Lauren: Yeah. There's going to be times where you can notice, "This is where I'm experiencing a loss," like you mentioned with the loss of being able to have holidays and things with your former spouse's family and things like that. Where it's going to stick out to you. "Yeah, I think this is grief right now."

But there might be other times when things are just difficult. You're feeling a certain way that you don't love, and in that moment you're not really sure. Is it just stress from this transition or is it grief? It's not super useful to spend a lot of time trying to figure it out if it's not apparent right away. But it's more just like, "This is how I'm feeling. What do I need right now?"

Krista: Yeah, what do I need? how do I take care of myself? How do I support myself through this? And then I'm less worried. It's because it almost implies 'there's something I could do about it, once I label it, but really, probably not.' I mean, I wouldn't have had a lot of the financial stress if I had not gotten a divorce, right? So in those moments where you're clipping coupons and you know trying to figure out how you're going to make the money work, it feels stressful and also kind of grief related.

Lauren: Yes. You're saying, I think, grief isn't a problem to solve. Is that it?

Krista: Can we put that on a Post-it Note and send it out to all the listeners? Grief is not a problem to solve. I would also extend that. Honestly, I don't like to think of feelings as problems to solve either, but especially grief. It's just the normal human response to a perceived loss. I think what we want to think about is, are the ways that I'm responding natural?

There's nothing to berate ourselves for, or shame ourselves for, about our response. But at a certain point we also get to be the ones who look at the way

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that we're responding and decide if it's moving us toward or away from what we want. So that we can then begin the process of thinking intentionally about the loss.

And integrating that. Deciding who we want to be in it, what we want to make of it, how we want to kind of weave it into the fabric of who we are. And what is often our initial reaction may not be the ultimate response that we want to choose. That's where I think coaching can be so helpful.

Lauren: So you mentioned post-traumatic growth earlier on. Can you tell us more about what post-traumatic growth involves?

Krista: Yeah, I always, every time I hear it, I just remember hearing the phrase for the first time and just thinking, "What did they say? What post-traumatic growth?" Because everybody seems to be very familiar with the idea of post-traumatic stress, but there are far fewer people who are familiar with post-traumatic growth.

Post-traumatic growth is simply a phrase that some researchers coined in the mid-90s, and they were noticing as they did their work at that time... To put it in context, we thought of trauma as very much "big T/ little t", right? So certain events are traumatic, other events are not so traumatic. We didn't think of trauma as much as a subjective experience to this individual; which we do now.

But at the time these two researchers were doing their work, what they were kind of noticing or thinking was that something traumatic would happen to someone and their level of wellness would dip; that would be the first group. And then the second group would be, something traumatic would happen, their level of wellness or life satisfaction would dip, but then they would bounce back to where they were before. And that was the goal, right?

And then they noticed the third group, which would experience the same dip of wellness or life satisfaction after the "traumatic" event, but instead of just bouncing back to the baseline that they were at before the event, they were actually going on to bounce forward. They were reporting greater levels of life satisfaction, greater levels of quality of life. And it wasn't in spite of what had happened, it was actually because of what had happened.

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So they used what had happened as a way to make changes in the way that they lived, so that they were actually more satisfied with their quality of life than they were before the traumatic thing happened. And I teach that in the concept of spousal loss/partner loss, but really it's possible for all of us, no matter what sort of traumatic thing we've been through.

That doesn't mean you asked for the divorce, maybe you did, even if you did ask for it, it doesn't mean you wanted it, right? But here it is. It's happened. Then what? Who do I want to be in this? How can I now get more in touch with what I value and what I want to make of my life? How do I want to go through the world so that I'm not on autopilot anymore? I'm actually being and living the way that really matters to me.

Which, of course, is different for every person, but we can definitely go on to create greater spiritual satisfaction, a greater appreciation for life. For me, I just remember thinking specifically as it related to my career. "This job's paying the bills, but this isn't what I want to do. I'm just doing this for the money," was basically where I found myself, right?

And so one of the dimensions of post-traumatic growth can be career satisfaction. That you shake things up and figure out, "Hey, maybe you're not in the role you want to be in." Or for some people it's religious in nature, right? They realize that their faith beliefs are not serving them, or that they didn't even really choose them, and then go through something that really shakes them. They rebuild in a way that feels really good to them.

Maybe it's painful along the way, but that's post-traumatic growth. It's taking what has happened to you, even though you experienced it as traumatic, and using it as a way to increase your life satisfaction.

Lauren: You mentioned that this impacted your view on your career in the aftermath of losing Hugo. I'm wondering, was there specifically anything that you can recall as being what you would characterize as post-traumatic growth that followed your initial divorce?

Krista: That's such a good question, Lauren. I don't think I really have ever even thought about it until this very moment, to be honest with you. But now that I'm

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thinking about the dimensions of post-traumatic growth, I can tell you that that was definitely a time, not just in the aftermath of the divorce but leading up to the divorce and then following it, of great spiritual growth for me.

I was really seeking and trying to just figure out who I was and what I wanted. And so part of that, I think, was a spiritual growth for me. Relationships can often be a part of post-traumatic growth, and sometimes maybe whether you want it or not. But I think when you get divorced you find out who your friends are. You find out who you want to be investing time in, and who maybe was just part of your life because of the couple that you were and maybe isn't going to withstand the test of time.

And so you can get a little more clarity about right-sizing some of the relationships, and where you want to invest in, where you don't. You know, appreciation for life. I think, going through the divorce, it didn't really happen until later. But I think I appreciated my second marriage so much more in some ways than I did the first one, because of what I had been through in the first one.

I appreciated the little ways that we connected with one another, and the ways that he treated me, and just some of the things that were different about that relationship, because I had the contrast of the divorce. So I don't think that I would have had the ability to appreciate some of those things without the contrast, you know?

Lauren: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

Krista: I'd love that you asked me that question.

Lauren: Good, yeah. I'm glad. I think sometimes we just don't really have occasion to stop and think about those things unless we're specifically asked. You mentioned before addressing your clients behavior of their children as it relates to the loss of their parent, and whether that was normal or not. And so this just kind of brought up for me considerations about parenting children during difficult life transitions.

I'm wondering what your experience was with seeing how you handled the grieving of the end of your relationship, versus maybe the timeline of that for

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your children. Were you able to, in hindsight, now look and see if there were differences in that timeline for you versus for them? Or in the experience that you had of it versus what they had?

Krista: 100%. Again, because I was in the captain's chair essentially, right? I was the one that was adjusting to it and reconciling it the whole way and then made the decision. They had no idea that it was coming. No clue. Because we never fought in front of them. As far as they knew we were in a great place. And they were little, so keeping that in mind too. But man, that was as hard to tell them that we were getting a divorce, as it was to tell them that Hugo died; both were equally hard.

Because you don't know the impact that it's going to have on them. Both of those things caught them very much by surprise, and both of those things were not wanted.

Lauren: So you, being in a captain's chair, already knew this was coming. You had already started grieving, and they're finding out much later and then starting that grieving at a very different time. I think we see that a lot, being in a different place with processing the end of the relationship versus children being in a very different place.

It's just so important to recognize that and to be patient and allow kids I think to have whatever feelings that they're having about it, and not make that wrong. Even if you think they should be further along in that grieving process or just an acceptance of what the new family structure looks like.

Krista: Yeah, I think we also want to keep in mind that grief isn't something that ends. And so if we can remind ourselves of that, then it becomes easier when we see something in them where we're like, "Oh that's surprising. I didn't expect that response." We can, over time, choose the way we respond to it and think about it. But the grief will always be there and that doesn't mean anybody's doing anything wrong, ourselves included, or them included.

As you were asking me that, I was also thinking, when it came to the divorce I was in a better place because it was my choice to support them. Then, when Hugo died, where it just all happened, I wasn't in a good place. It was harder to

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support them because I was trying to support myself. So I look back and I am at least grateful that I really did, by the time I asked for the divorce, I did feel solid in that decision. So it was much easier to maintain my equilibrium; not easy, but easier.

Lauren: That's really interesting. It's making me wonder, if you hadn't been the one initiating the divorce, but say you had been blindsided by it, if you think that would also be true? That your ability to be there for your kids may have been diminished, as opposed to when you were initiating it?

Krista: Yeah, I definitely do think it would have been diminished.

Lauren: Yeah. Another misconception about grief that just has come up for me as we've been talking, is the idea that just because you're the one that's initiating the divorce that you either are done grieving at that point, or that you weren't grieving to begin with, because this was your decision. And so somehow that changes whether you experience grief or not.

And I know, because like you, I was the one that initiated the process, I still had grief for a long time. And I think it's important for people to be able to recognize that

Krista: Yeah. I still sometimes do. Honestly, when we have those good parenting moments, or when we're together in social settings and things are going well, I will sometimes still have moments where I'm like, "I really didn't want us to be here. I would go back and undo things if I could." Now I am happy with the way that my life turned out. I'd still choose what I have today, yet I still have those moments where it does 'what if, woulda, shoulda coulda.' Things happen.

I just think that's part of grieving and part of being human. My decision to ask for a divorce doesn't mean I didn't love him. It doesn't mean I regret ever being with him in the first place. When we make assumptions, generalizations like that... I see my clients will do this, "If I'm happy in my life now, it means I didn't want what I had then." No, it's not true at all. It's not true at all. The best decision can still be a really hard one

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Lauren: I think that that's so helpful to hear, that even so many years down the road, even after a second marriage, that you were very happy. To know that you still have those moments where you feel like there's a little bit of grief coming up is so helpful. To be able to know that that can happen, and that doesn't necessarily mean that something has gone wrong, with respect to the decision that you made.

It sounds like you still feel solid about that decision, and also you still experience some grief. And those two things can coexist.

Krista: Totally. That would have been nice to know ahead of time, by the way.

Lauren: Also, I'll have experiences where I'll just hear a song and it'll make me sad. It reminds me of him, the good days that we had together. I don't know that that will ever go away. I do think the intensity of it has reduced over time. But to be clear, it wasn't just the passage of time, it was also I think a lot of work that I did during that time.

But I don't know that that will ever go away either. This also just brings one other thing to mind, is that sometimes they see spouses separate and they start down the divorce path, and then there is an abrupt sort of 180. Of well, "We need to get back together. We need to make this work."

And listen, if you think that you want to stay in your marriage, you want to work on it, great. I'm not discouraging that in any way, but I think sometimes it's done because you start experiencing undesirable emotions.

A lot of those are probably part of a grief experience, and then we think that something has gone wrong in that decision and that we need to save something that we probably intelligently know is over, and we want it to be. And so it's like, "How do I get out of this undesirable emotion that I'm experiencing? I go back and I try to save that thing that I feel like I'm losing."

So often, from working in the divorce field for as long as I have, those situations, where that's the decision that's made without a real plan on how to fix what went wrong in the first place, how are we going to improve the things that led to the

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breakdown of the marriage, that doesn't happen. And within three to six months or so they're back to moving forward with a divorce.

And I truly think, after having seen that over a long period of time across different families, that coupled with this education on grief, I think there's some aspect of grief playing into that behavior. And this is one of the things that I think is really helpful for people to really just be mindful about, and to really be thoughtful about their own experience, and digging deep as to why they are making the decisions that they're making.

To really make sure that they're thinking those things through because... especially when there are kids involved, it can be confusing to have that happen. To go back thinking, "I need to save this thing," without a real plan. When it's really just possibly some difficult emotion.

Krista: I need to feel the emotions of grief, and not cling to this old thing that's no longer serving me. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

Lauren: I think another way that I've seen it impact the process is when everybody is on the same page, that the marriage is over, and they've gone very far through the legal process, but at the end someone doesn't want it to end, and so they keep finding things to delay the resolution of it. You make changes to a settlement agreement, and then there's now a new change that was never requested.

It's just an example sometimes of what we're making the end of that process mean, and the difficult feelings that come with that. And it can be a way to hold onto that thing that we're losing for just a little bit longer. Because if the process is done well, that means it's really over. And I subconsciously, perhaps often, I'm not ready to let that thing go.

Krista: I see widows do this all the time. Obviously they can't hold onto their person, because they died. But they will hold onto the headstone planning. They will hold on to the estate paperwork and drag it out. And it doesn't make sense to them why they're doing it, because they kind of want it done. But they're like, "Why have I been procrastinating on this?"

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But I think there are a lot of parallels there, where we're just not quite ready to close that chapter.

Lauren: For anybody who's listening who is thinking that their best days are behind them, what advice would you share with them?

Krista: I look back, and that really is one of my most painful thoughts, that when it was in my brain I did not know was optional. And so that's what I would want them to hear. It's totally normal to have that thought, and also one of tens of thousands of thoughts that you are having today.

And if it is not a thought that is going to help you move towards what you want in the future, you can also diffuse yourself from that thought. You can pull away and choose a different thought. And sometimes that takes work. That's why I'm a huge proponent of coaching and thought work, right? But we really can choose to think differently.

Because if we don't... If I had kept that thought, all my brain ever would have shown me is what I lost and what I was never going to have again, right? It would have continued to filter my environment for evidence of how my life was never really going to be that good again, and I'd never be really, truly happy.

It also came paired with other thoughts like, "I should just be grateful for what I had. At least I had a shot. I'll just live for the kids." Those kinds of thoughts were all in there, too. But when you open yourself up to the potential of 'what if it really is just a thought that I have been thinking? What if it could be possible for me to believe that better things are ahead? That maybe my life isn't over. And my shot at happiness isn't gone."

And then just getting curious about it. So that ultimately you come to a place where you actually do believe. Because you've chosen that your best days are ahead of you. And that doesn't mean you didn't love what you had either, right? But you actually don't have to believe that thought that so frequently shows up in your brain.

Lauren: Yeah, so you don't automatically have to believe that that's what's true for you, if that's what it feels like right now. But it sounds like you're also saying

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we don't also need to jump to the toxic kind of positivity of 'everything is great. Everything is going to be fabulous in this next chapter.' It's more about just being open to the possibility of what your brain is offering you about the dismalness of your future...

Krista: Very early in coaching, I don't know if this happened to you, but for me very early in coaching, I remember hearing the idea of post-traumatic growth and hearing that I could believe my best days were ahead of me, and there was a point in time where it felt repulsive. The idea felt repulsive. I was not open to it at all.

And what finally happened was it clicked for me that it wasn't a matter of I should think one way or another. The light bulb came on and I was the one who got to choose what I wanted to think. And even then I didn't want to think my best days were in front of me.

I still didn't want that, but something clicked at a certain point and I realized, "Oh, that's what it means. It's not about that I need to think there's a morally superior way to think you should be positive. It's 'I'm the one that gets to choose for me.'" That was a big moment, for sure.

Lauren: It's so evident, as we sit here and just talk through these losses that you have been through in your life, in what seems like a relatively short period of time, too...

Krista: Yeah.

Lauren: How long was it between your divorce and when you lost Hugo?

Krista: Oh, I was 40 when Hugo died. I mean, it's just a three-year period.

Lauren: That's a tremendous amount of loss.

Krista: If we go back and chart the whole marriage, it didn't feel so quick. But when you go back and you look at how quickly circumstances in my life changed, it does feel like it happened very fast.

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Lauren: Well, you're just such a pillar of strength, and such a gift to the widowed moms that you coach, and the ones that you reach through your podcast. I would just love it if you could share a little bit about where people can learn more about you and the work that you do.

Krista: Yeah, for sure. So *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, I know that sounds very niched, and it is. But also, if you're just interested in grief or post-traumatic growth, that's my jam. That's what I like talking about, so you're welcome to listen. And for sure, if you know a widow, send her my way. And then on Instagram I'm @lifecoachkrista. I don't even know what I am on Facebook, @coachingwithkrista, I think. Who knows? But I'm on there. And my website is CoachingWithKrista.com.

I welcome... Truly, if anybody needs any grief or resources, I love connecting people with coaches like you. I can only coach the widows. That is my jam, so send the widows to me. But also, everybody deserves support when they're grieving and so I love helping people connect with the support that they need.

Lauren: Yeah, your podcast, I listen to it and I'm not a widowed mom, just because it is so valuable, in terms of a source of information about grief and difficult transitions. Also, if you have a friend who's lost their spouse, I really can't say enough about Krista's Mom Goes On program after I have seen parts of it, much of it, from the inside.

It's such meaningful work that you're doing, truly, and to see the impact that that program and the community of other widows supporting each other that you've created in various stages was so inspiring, and truly a real lifeline to many. It was such a special experience to be able to interact with them and to see the impact that the program was having on them.

It's just really the most impactful application of life coaching and grief science that I have seen. It's just such a gift to these women who are going through some of the most difficult times in their lives. And to see this, them, start to apply the skills that you teach them and support each other, it was really inspiring. So thank you for that. What you do is really amazing, Krista.

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Krista: I guess I pinch myself on a regular basis. I look at the connections that these women have with one another. Grief can be so isolating, and I know the people you work with probably feel the same. It's not that no one gets a divorce... There are other people getting a divorce, but people aren't often talking about what's actually happening, and it's so easy to feel alone or to take what's happening and make it mean that there's something wrong with you or that you're doing something wrong.

There's just so much value in knowing that it's not a "you" problem, it's just what grief is like, you know? I love what I do.

Lauren: Yeah. It sounds like you didn't have coaching at the time that you were going through your divorce. I'm curious what you think that would have made, in terms of a difference for you, if you had had access to coaching when you were going through that transition?

Krista: It's interesting. I've thought about this before. I was pretty desperate for a long time to make that marriage work, and so ultimately I think if I had had the coaching tools, as I learned them early on, I would have misapplied them. I would have applied them to try to make myself stay.

It's only been through a much more seasoned use of the tools, and more work that I have done on myself, that I can now see when someone is using the tools to help them get what they truly want or when someone is using the tools to help them get what they tell themselves they should want.

I think I actually might have kept myself there longer, which is so, so interesting. Right now, if I could go back now, where I am and have those tools, it would have been way easier to navigate, way easier. And I wouldn't have stayed there as long. I often wonder. I think I would have tried to convince myself I could be happy there, instead of figuring out what I really wanted and then using the tools to let myself have it.

Which honestly, is why I would say it's not enough to just have the tools. It really does help to have an outsider's perspective on your brain and on your life to help you make sure that you are using them in a way that is actually moving you towards what you want.

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We talk about this a lot in my advanced certification, how can you tell when a client is using a tool against themselves?

Lauren: Right, that matters, too. So it sounds like it's primarily around the decision-making stage for you, that if you had had the tools, plus an outsider perspective to support you in that decision-making process, it would have been probably a more efficient process.

Krista: Yes, it would have been easier to believe that what I wanted mattered, and that I could have it. As opposed to just 'you made your bed, now you have to lie in it' thinking. Which I did a lot of.

Lauren: Well, thank you so much for sharing so much of your own personal stories with us here today.

Krista: Thanks for having me. I'm honored to be your first podcast.

Lauren: Yes, well, you've shared so many pearls of wisdom with us today. I know it's going to be a great episode for everybody to hear. Thank you so much, Krista.

Krista: Thank you. Let's keep in touch.

Lauren: Yes. Bye, for now.

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