

Ep #202: Leading While Grieving



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello empowered principals, welcome to episode 202.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal Podcast*, a not so typical, educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy, by refining your most powerful tool. Your mind. Here is your host, certified life coach, Angela Kelly Robeck.

Hello my empowered leaders, happy Tuesday. I am on such a high after recording the 200th episode of the podcast with all of my mastermind students. I love them so much; they have grown so much. They are making such huge accomplishments and huge gains as school leaders.

I really do hope you will join us. I want to personally take a moment to invite each and every one of you to consider joining the Empowered Principal Program, it's my exclusive one-on-one coaching program. Where I coach you individually for an entire year. It doesn't matter what time of year it is. You can join at any time. And, I have your back!

I'm going to coach you through any situation, help you build up your resilience, help you build up your staff's resilience, and your student's resilience. We are going to talk all about emotional and mental resilience throughout the month of November. I am in the middle of writing a book right now about social and emotional learning that sticks, that works, and we are going to talk about that all throughout the month of November.

I am going to break it down for you step-by-step, tool-by-tool, strategy-by-strategy, so that you can start to help your people get through this school year. We thought this year was going to be easy. We thought it was going to feel better. And what is happening is it actually harder, right? It's harder than last year. And that's because it feels different.

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And, because of the expectations we had. We thought it was going to go back to, you know, what we call normal. And it's not. People are finding it hard and they are tired, exhausted, and they're fatigued. I'm going to break all of it down throughout the month of November.

So, with that said, today I'm talking about a topic that really doesn't fit in to any one category. So, I am going to put it in here, the end of October. It's just going to be a resource for you to have at the moment you need it. It's based on my own personal experiences and if I am going through it, I know lots of other people are experiencing this as well.

The title of this podcast is called Leading While Grieving. And I am going to share some personal stories with you, and I am going to keep in my heart and in my mind some of my clients' experiences that they are going through. I want you to know there will be times, throughout your leadership career where you will have to lead your school while deeply personally grieving.

There might be something going on in your family. Perhaps you have lost a loved one. It could be something going on with your school community. There will be times when you must face your school and community and you must lead and stand in that leadership while also on a personal note grieving very emotionally. I decided to share this conversation with you because it can debilitate your ability to lead. If you're not caring for yourself emotionally during a time of grief.

So, anything could come up. There is going to be a time in which you're feeling that low, heavy, dark, deep pain, and you are asking yourself how can I get out of bed? How can I get up?

How can I go and lead my school when I am feeling this way? And, any circumstance could arise it could be an illness, a situation with one of your children. It could be you're going through a divorce, or your children are

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going through a divorce of some kind. It could be the death of a loved one. It could be a school shooting. It could be a loss of a student, or a parent. There are several circumstances that can come up in your life while leading your school.

Let me tell you something, these circumstances do not wait for a convenient time. They don't wait for summer break. They happen during the school year. I have always said to my staff, "Life happens during the school year."

We are in school much longer than we are not. So, with that said, and knowing that life does happen during a school year I want to bring this topic up in case it's something that you need to work through. I know it is something I have had to work through and I am helping a few clients of mine through the grieving process.

I want to disclose and start with saying that I am not a grief therapist. I am a life coach. I help people process emotions with life coaching tools. These tools have worked for me. They have worked for my clients, and they have worked for hundreds of thousands of people who use life coaching strategies to support them through the ups and downs of life so they can move through grief and sadness and continue to function as principals, as parents, as spouses. I am sharing this experience, my personal experience of how I handled grief with the hope that you might also find it helpful. But I want to say if you are experiencing grief that has significant impact on your ability to function daily, please go get the support you need. Speak with your doctor, get a referral for a therapist, and get the level of support you need.

This episode is really talking about how I processed my own grief with life coaching tools, to help me be able to stay functioning and to have a time and space for myself to process the true emotions I was feeling while also continuing to be a school leader and continuing to lead my company and

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my business. So, I am just going to share with you what I have been dealing with.

So, this past summer over Memorial Day weekend, my husband and I received a call about a very dear close friend of ours. Who had suffered a traumatic brain injury. In the beginning it was very touch and go, for several weeks. We were in ICU for a very long time. And we did not know whether he would survive.

When it first happened, my brain wanted to reject the news. This is classic, this is kind of like the five stages of grief, right? I was in denial. I wanted to reject the news. I didn't want to feel it. I didn't want to allow myself to take the time out of my schedule to process what was happening. I'm a little embarrassed to say that.

But when we are school leaders and we are going full motion, we are mothers, we are parents, we have a busy home life and we have a busy work life when something big comes our way we don't want it to have happened because we don't want to have to slow down and disrupt our schedule and little delicate balance of routine that we have going on.

We have those routines so honed in that if anything rocks the boat or tips us it feels like everything is going to fall apart. And, that is how I felt. I was big in the launch, getting new school leaders on board. I was onboarding my new school leaders. I was saying goodbye to my first-year leaders.

I was launching for the fall, and it just felt like this wasn't the right time to slow down and stop and deal with something so significant. But I am sharing this so honestly and openly. Because I want you to know your brain is going to offer that. It's going to say this isn't happening this isn't real. I have other things going on. We had plans with them how could this be true. It is his birthday; this can't be happening. I just didn't want to believe it.

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Because I didn't want to believe it was true, number one. And two I didn't want to have to stop what I was doing to feel.

So, I had a lot of resistance about taking time out of my regular routine to process the truth of what I was feeling. And I had some pretty interesting thoughts pop up, ones I am not very proud of. But I am going to share them with you because if my brain is offering it to me. I am assuming other people's brains are offering it to them.

It was thinking, I don't have time for this. My brain is being dramatic. I'm just trying to get out of work by being sad. I was being very uncompassionate with myself and with my friend. It was just crazy what my brain was offering me.

I was really struggling to step back and do less work. So, that I could focus on the processing of that emotion and how I was feeling. And spend time with my friend's wife. She was all alone and he was in the hospital and I really had to write everything off. I had to cancel consult calls. I had to cancel coaching calls. I had to stop recording podcasts. I had to stop. I felt annoyed by that, if I am being completely honest. There was a part of me that was sad.

A part of me that was like okay let me put my ducks in a row and figure this out. Shut everything down, so that I can then go be available. But there was this little part of me that felt annoyed that I wasn't able to just keep going. Then there was another part of me that felt frustrated that I couldn't just focus and be fully productive. To kind of—My brain wanted to handle both. It wanted to be fully present for my friend and myself and my husband, but also be like this badass CEO who was still running her company no matter what.

So, there was this cognitive dissidence going on in my brain about the situation. I definitely had that keep going mentality and it made me think of

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colleagues from my past. This is another thing, it made me think of my colleagues from the past who always seem to have some dramatic issue going on in their life. Some big problem and when I was a teacher and had fellow colleagues who always had big drama in their lives—I just wasn't amused by that.

I didn't have time for that. I didn't want to stop what I was doing to sit down and listen to all of that. It just felt like there were some people in my circle, in my colleague arena, who always seem to have something big going on. I wasn't super compassionate about that. So, I felt like I was-- I didn't want to have something big in my life that was outside of work.

Now, I very much see how this was just a thought and I am very aware of the judgmental-ness of it. And, as I watched my brain offer all of these thoughts, the judgmental ones, frustrated ones, the annoyed ones, the almost fear-based ones, the unwillingness to let go of work.

That zone of comfort and to lean into grief and compassion and holding space for other people's grief. I really recognized how the same patterns of thinking occurred back when my mom was ill.

So, when my mom was sick—My mom for those of you who don't know, had a long-term illness and she was sick. My entire tenor as a school administrator she was diagnosed with COPD. She lived for 11 going on 12 years prior to her passing and I was in school administration 7 of those 11 years of her illness. So, I think back to those days and I remember not wanting to take time to grieve.

I didn't want the grief to impact my work. I tried to tell myself to compartmentalize it didn't seem right to ask for the time off. I didn't want to be known as the principal with the dying mother, the drama situation going on. So, I hid my personal feelings. I hid my personal story from my super intendant, from the district level, and I tried to deal with it on my own.

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Granted, some of this pressure was from myself to perform at really high levels.

More truthfully, my actions were being driven by what I thought other people would think of me. I was judging myself when I presented with a personal crisis. I didn't have a win, win here. It was going to be a lose, lose no matter what. I down played myself, my mom's illness, up until the point I could not ignore the truth.

I started getting calls weekly as her condition was progressing. I couldn't ignore the truth of that condition any longer. Or, my grief in watching her be sick and needing to fly home and give my family rest and give them time off.

So, that I could take care of her so, they could have a break. I really juggled this for the entire tenor, my seven years as a school leader. At an even deeper level I saw how I was using work to protect myself from the feelings I did not want to feel.

I want to highlight this, because a lot of us love the work we do and we use that as an excuse not to feel our personal feelings. Work feels really good especially when we are on it. When we are Type A people, when we are on top of our schedule, when we are making gains, it feels great to be at work.

Then to come home and have personal grief weighing you down. Like this big cloud over your head when you get home, it is very tricky and sneaky to want to stay at work and want to stay in work mindset to protect yourself from feeling feelings you do not want to feel. So, in my case I use the busyness of my work to distract me from thinking about my mom. More importantly my friend's condition.

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This summer, when we first found out about what happened. I found myself questioning, if you can believe this, whether or not I should even reschedule client and consult calls. We got the call... I was actually away in Santa Cruz, on a girl's weekend. I was on The Chardonay, which is a sailboat that takes people out throughout the bay. We saw whales, it was the most amazing trip. I got the call while I was on that boat. I got back and I finished out that evening.

I got up the very next day jumped in a car, and came home. My husband said, "We are on the way to the hospital." And I said, "I have two consult calls today." And he looked at me like I was crazy, crazy! He said, "Angela if this isn't something you can justify rescheduling consult calls and client calls and taking some time for yourself, what is it going to take?" Ugh, and I knew he was right.

I was letting my brain go unmanaged because work is my zone of comfort. It feels really safe and comfortable, I'm in control of my coaching day and routines. I know what I am doing. I am an expert coach. I love what I do. But, going to the hospital, cancelling on my people, cancelling on potentially new clients, going to see my friend and having to hold space for her and spending the entire day in the hospital, and be with my friend and his wife, that was going to invite me into emotions I didn't want to feel. And into a situation that I felt highly awkward in and uncomfortable. And my brain did not want me to go there.

So, I can see why I was really attached to the work. I have to drop the judgment that I wanted to stay at work. Of course, I wanted to stay working. I wasn't a bad friend for having that thought, it was just a thought. Granted I needed my husband to put me in check. Thank you, Mitchell. But, it took that awareness for me to see what I was doing. Fortunately for me I have tons of coaching tools to help me.

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So, I was able to work through the discomfort of rescheduling and taking time off, going to the hospital, spending the entire weekend in the muck and the mess of the grief that I was in. I allowed myself to process all of those thoughts and all of those emotions that were spinning in my body. It wasn't pretty. We held space while we were there.

Then Mitch and I came home and lost it. It was hard, it hurt, and it was very painful. But I observed myself. I watched myself, my husband and I go through this grief together and I processed it in real time and I observed myself in real time. So, that one day I could share this with you and clients. Because I know there are people in the world that are hurting. I know you are going through grief and pain.

And I can't allow myself to hold back this information, these tools, and strategies. Because, you need them. These tools that I create through my own experiences of my life. That is why there are coaching tools and you can apply them to every aspect of your school leadership.

So, here is what I've learned about leading my company while I have been grieving and how you can apply these tools to leading your school during any period of grief. Whether it's a personal grief or a professional grief.

Number one, know this, no one wants to feel grief. It is painful, it is all consuming, it consumes your body. It just ravishes over you. It feels like you have no control. It's all consuming. Your mind, your emotions, your psyche, your heart, your physical body; it consumes you and it takes time.

You can't rush through pain; you can't rush through grief. Your brain will naturally do everything in its power to avoid grieving, because it is so consuming and you will not want to feel it. You will naturally feel a very strong resistance. Just know that is part of the process. Your brain is going to want to default to going to work, or being with your kids, or whatever feels like comfort to you. That's normal and that's okay.

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Number two, grieving takes time. It doesn't typically go away in an hour, or a day, or a week. This has been going on for me for months. The heaviness of the grief can last as long as it needs to last, but it will last until you acknowledge it and allow it and process it. You are going to want to know this ahead of time. So that you are not frustrated with yourself when it comes in waves.

You will have processed an emotion and it will wash through. And, then another wave comes. It is just like the ocean; big waves keep coming and building up. Boom, a big one hits you, all consuming. Then it releases, and it is calm for a while. Then boom, another big one hits you, and you have to process it in order to release it. If you don't process it is like standing in the break line of the waves and you are going to be pounded with wave after wave after wave.

Processing the wave is like diving into it and then popping up on the other side, after the break. If you are familiar with the ocean at all. You can look it up on YouTube. You can see where people stand in the break and they get broken and they fall, or they dive under the wave and allow it and then they pop up.

This means number three; this means you are going to have to plan a time to grieve. You are going to actually need to plan on spending time and allotting it on your calendar to focus just on grieving. You'll want to schedule a time when you are going to allow yourself to think about what is happening.

You are going to flood your brain with all the thoughts you have about the painful situation. You are going to think about the divorce, the kids, yourself, when things were good, and you're going to think about how heartbroken you are and you think about the day you were told, all in. You are going to sob, you are going to cry, and you are going to let yourself think about the situation.

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This requires you to schedule it out. Which, sounds kind of weird but I highly recommend this. Putting it on the calendar to crawl into bed early and to just grieve lets your brain know hey, I hear you. I get it. Your heart is hurting and it wants to express how it is feeling. You are just going to say hey I hear you. I see you. I am going to give you that time. You are going to have a safe, private place, go to bed as early as you want. Cry for as long as you want.

You can think for as long as you want. You can journal, meditate, whatever you want to do. You want to actually schedule time. Here's why, it tells your brain that it has a safe time and space to do this. Number two, when you actually give yourself that time and space it allows you to be more present while you are at work. When you know, you are going to have time to feel, it allows you to focus on your work while you are at work.

This is one thing I really did. I didn't try to just push through. There's a difference between trying to push through at work and knowing that you don't have to hold it together twenty-four/seven that there will be a time and space to process how you are feeling.

Now, I want to highlight that this is different than compartmentalization. So, a lot of people will say compartmentalize, you know, be personal at home and be professional at work and compartmentalize the two.

Compartmentalization doesn't work because you are one human with one human brain.

Compartmentalization is when you attempt to leave your personal thoughts at home and only bring your professional thoughts with you and then you leave your professional thoughts at work and you go home and just have your personal thoughts. It doesn't work that way. What I am offering you is different. It's about preplanning time for work, and time for grieving.

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Number four, this work requires you to get less done at work. You are going to need to know this in advance because you will be distracted. You will feel heavy. You're going to feel the weight of that grief even when you are working.

Even though you've created a time and space the thoughts will drift through. You are going to think about your friend you are going to think about your mom, you are going to think about the divorce, you are going to think about losing your loved one. You are going to think about the family situation you have going on.

It will happen, so trying to fill your work schedule up and over work it's not going to work. Because you can't work at the same pace you normally do. What happens is that it just frustrates you, you over schedule yourself and then you feel like you are not keeping up and getting everything done and then you are going to tell yourself "I don't have time to grieve, because I am not keeping up at work."

Again, you are not compartmentalizing you are just offering yourself the opportunity to have some compassion and to lower your expectations for how much the quantity of time you are working the quantity time you are getting things done and you want to allow yourself time and space for that heaviness, for your grief. You are going to do things slower than normal. So, plan on doing less with your day. Delegate what you can. Put what you can off, just to a later time.

Now, there are going to be times when your brain wants to indulge in the grieving. You need to be on to yourself. When am I resisting grieving? When am I indulging in it to avoid work? So, sometimes the flip happens, right? Now, I've done this too. I have been so into my grief that I can't feel like I pop out. Part of the reason this happens is because I haven't structured my grief time.

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I haven't given myself time and it ends up just bubbling to the surface and coming out whenever it comes out. In order to avoid that, you want to preschedule yourself and give yourself lots of time every single day. Plan on doing a little bit less. But you will know you are indulging in grieving or using it as an excuse to avoid something else when you feel that little twinge of guilt or secret anticipation of not having to do something. Not having to go to work, not having to do the work.

So, you want to be mindful of this, when you are resisting grieving and when you are indulging in it too much. It's the opposite. Just be aware of that. But for most of us school leaders out there, we'd much rather resist grief than allow it. So, in one of my podcasts, I am going to have my producer drop the link in the show notes I talk about how to process emotion.

I want you to look into all of the podcasts on emotion. I talk about processing emotion, the difference between your emotion, other people's emotions, and then your thoughts and feelings about their thoughts and feelings. You want to look up all you can on emotion and the tools that I offer regarding processing emotion. Because grief is an emotion that we must allow.

We need to acknowledge it and process it in order to be the best leaders that we can. If you have questions, concerns, want support with life coaching tools on how to handle grief, please feel free to reach out for a free consult at angelakellycoaching.com. I would love, love, and be honored to support you.

Have an amazing week, take good care of yourselves guys, and next week I've got to tell you what is happening...We are talking about social emotional learning for you, staff, students. We have a lot of behavioral issues going on out there with adults and with the children. And we are going to talk about it and break it down throughout the month of November.

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Be sure to tune in, share with all of your colleagues, this is going to be outstanding. I love you guys, have a great week, and I will talk to you next week. Take care, bye.