

## Ep #231: Handling the Emotions of Tragedy



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Angela Kelly**

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## Ep #231: Handling the Emotions of Tragedy

Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 231.

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's your host certified life coach Angela Kelly Robeck.

Hello, my empowered leaders and Happy Tuesday. Not so happy Tuesday, I might add. The podcast that I had intended to share with you this week is unfortunately the opposite of what I need to share with you this week. I will get through this.

As you've all heard by now, there has been another school shooting here in the United States. This time, at the date of this recording, 19 third, fourth, and fifth grade children and two teachers were killed at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas when a gunman entered into their building and shot students and teachers for over an hour.

As the story unfolds, the details and images of what the school community has had to bear is terrifying and horrific. There aren't words that I can offer at all that take away the pain from those who've lost children, from teachers who've lost students and colleagues, for the principal whose school was under attack on their watch, for the community who's been forever impacted.

I know we all send our love and our prayers and our strength full knowing how inadequate the offering is. All I can say is that my deepest, deepest condolences to all of you. I know the words mean nothing in taking away the pain. And yet, it's all we can do to offer at this point.

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I want to say it's unimaginable that this happened. But yet, it's not. Because every teacher and every school leader has imagined this scene in some form happening at their school. Teachers looking around the room and planning where to shelter students, how to lock their doors in time, what they're going to do to protect students and themselves if a perpetrator should enter into their classroom.

Principals who spend time and energy discussing and researching how to keep their campus safe knowing in the depth of their belly that there's only so much to be done, and that ultimately, we can't possibly solve for every scenario and we can't control other people's decisions and actions. In such a moment, even with safety measures in place, we all are exposed, helpless, and vulnerable on our campuses.

I know for me my biggest fear of all time when I was a school leader was the thought of active shooters and natural disasters such as earthquakes, tornadoes, that kind of a thing. My school was very—my district, I should say—was very proactive. We actually did conduct drills every year. We provided training to our teachers. We provided extensive training throughout the district.

I thought they did a great job of preparing us. Yet I still knew that with that training in place and with the supports that we did have in place, we were still setting targets. If someone can shoot their way into a building, like they did in Sandy Hook, that had all the security systems in place, then we know for sure that schools with less funding for such systems are even more vulnerable.

So what do I share with you today? Where do I go with this? First of all, I want to acknowledge the truth. I want to say the truth to each and every one of you. The truth is that in our current state, the way that things currently stand in our country right now, this type of event can happen anywhere at any time to any one of us. That is the truth.

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The truth is that principals and teachers are aware of this truth. It's always in the back of our minds, creating this low-level anxiety that's playing in the background. Then it's triggered when an intense situation such as Robb Elementary, comes into our awareness. The intensity of the panic and fear that we have reminds us of how common of an occurrence this has become.

The truth is that we can't escape the fear of this possibility. We can't step away from it. We can't pretend that we don't worry or have anxiety or fear about our school being next. It's just been true too many times. All we can do is acknowledge the truth, process the truth of it, the reality of it, the pain involved with it, the thoughts that spin in our head because of it. Through this process of acknowledging it, letting it be in our front awareness, on our front burner, letting it be there, letting us feel this pain together.

When we do this, what we can do is come up with a plan so that it doesn't have to distract us from doing the other parts of our work we want to accomplish. I understand why we're in the cycle we're in. This happens. It becomes on the forefront. We're just devastated. We're disgusted, and we're horrified. Then there's other work to be done.

And we do our best to put those safety systems in place, to talk about mental and emotional wellness, to talk about gun control, to talk about all the different components required to actually solve this problem. But eventually, the rest of the work comes back to the front, and we need to address the other areas of our work. So then this gets put on the backburner, but it never goes away.

So if we're willing, while we're in this moment together, to acknowledge it and to feel the pain together, to process together, to support one another, and to talk about it, to share our feelings, our thoughts, the actions we want to take, the actions we don't want to take, the actions we're afraid to take, the actions we're too tired to take.

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Let's just be honest with ourselves. Tell the truth of what's going on for ourselves and go to this space where we come up with a plan so that we can do the other work. It doesn't make our fear go away completely, but when we are open with ourselves about the thoughts we have regarding campus safety and active shooters, we can manage our mind and manage the level of fear that we feel when we acknowledge the truth and possibility of something this awful becoming a reality in our own communities.

There are folks who might think we shouldn't talk about it. That we're creating more fear by bringing the topic up for conversation. But what I have noticed about fear, especially fear of the worst case, which the situation most certainly is, is that when we attempt to avoid or suppress it, when we don't want to talk about it because it's hurts and it's painful, the fear actually grows.

I've seen this in my work with school leaders. When they want to reject or avoid or push away things that they're afraid of, things they don't want to have happen to their schools. When they don't acknowledge it, the fear actually grows in them.

We actually feel more isolated and afraid when we keep our thoughts to ourselves, when we don't take time to process how we are feeling, when we don't walk ourselves through how we might approach a situation because we're too afraid to even go there, to even let the thought come into our mind what if this happened to me, to my school, to my students, to my staff? What would I do?

We don't want to talk about it because it's too painful to even think about. Yet in our unwillingness to feel the pain in just talking about it, we don't have a plan. We don't talk about the solution, the plan, the reaction that we want to have if this horrible thing were to happen to us.

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So I invite us to create a space to think about this, to talk about it. Talking it through with yourself or with a colleague or with a coach, it helps you become more grounded because you are bringing a plan to mind. When you have thoughts that arise and you feel the fear, you can remind yourself and calm yourself by reminding, “Hey, I've got a plan. I've already thought this through. Of course, it's not perfect. Of course, when I'm really in the situation, who knows the truth of how I will respond, but at least I've thought about it. At least I've considered it.”

You can just comfort yourself knowing I've had the courage to think about this and what I might do and what our plan can be even though we know, we don't really know.

In some cases, I encourage principals to process their own emotional reactions to a situation before they approach other people. The reason that I offer this is I want my principals to have the mental and emotional capacity to hold space for other people's emotional reactions.

So, for example, if you are going to talk to a teacher about a staffing reassignment or you're going to let them go, and you anticipate them having an intense reaction, you have the luxury of time to plan out and give yourself time to first process how you're thinking and feeling and getting that out of the way and getting that down to neutral. So that you can then approach them and have lots of capacity to be able to hold space for their emotional reaction to the word you're saying to them.

But in cases like this one, we don't have the luxury of time. We can't just sit at home or in our office and process our emotions fully so that we can be available to others. We have to do the emotional work in tandem. We have to be able to give ourselves time to grieve and, at the same time, we have to find a way to be available for others.

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I've reached out to a friend of mine. She's a colleague, a coaching colleague of mine, and I do hope to have her on a future podcast very soon. She is an expert on grief. I know she's going to have some incredible insight to help you process your grief while continuing to lead your school and your community.

What I have offered to my clients is that they interject personal self-care and the ability to hold space for other people. They take five to 10 minutes for themselves throughout the day, process grief and pain. Let the emotion wash through enough so that you can regroup and go back out there and support your teachers again.

I want to give you permission, please give yourself permission. Be sad. You want to be sad about this. You want to be enraged. You want to be frustrated. You want to be grieving. I don't know an educator on this planet, a parent on this planet, a human being on this planet who hasn't been impacted emotionally when you think about with these children and the school and the stuff I've been through. Give yourself time alone so you can process in private.

Also be willing to share just like I am now. There's no way I could talk with you all today void of emotion. That's not how you should be expected to approach your school, leading your school right now and your school community. Be willing to let others see the truth of how you're feeling. Because being available for them, being strong for them, it doesn't mean void of emotion. It's the opposite.

The strongest thing you can do is learn how to allow any motion to vibrate in your body. As painful as it is, as terrible as it feels, as scary as it feels, the strength in school leaders comes from being willing to feel anything that comes your way and being able to own that emotion and share your process with them so that you can help others share in their grief.

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A lot of people have asked what can I do? I've been posting on social media. I've been emailing my community. People are saying what can we do? How can we help? Oftentimes when a tragedy like this happens, we do ask what can we do? What actions can we take?

I first want to say that as a coach, when people say what can I do, I notice that sometimes they want to jump into action to avoid the action of stopping and feeling and processing the emotion all the way through. So if you find yourself trying to get very busy with doing and helping, notice if you are doing that in an attempt to avoid feeling angry or feeling sad or feeling grief. It's not to say don't take action. It's to say just notice why you're taking the action.

If you are avoiding, that's okay. But you don't want to avoid at the expense of suppressing this grief and sadness because it will continue to come with you. Emotion does not dissipate until it's been acknowledged and allowed and processed.

So in terms of action. You guys look. There are so many actions that you can take to feel helpful. If you want to have the thought I'm helping, I'm making a difference, I'm speaking up, I'm doing my part. All of those feelings help us feel better in the wake of something this tragic. There are endless actions you can take to stimulate change, and it really just comes down to which actions feel most aligned for you. You have to make that decision for yourself. There's no right action to take.

Personally, I believe that this is a multifaceted issue. There are people who thrive off of protesting and writing to their senators and getting into the political scene. There are people who are about gun control. There are people who are about mental emotional wellness. There are people who are about the parenting aspect, about the school aspect, about gun control and background checks. There are so many angles to this.



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There's no one right path to go down. I don't think there's one right path. I think the paths all have to merge in order for us as school leaders to feel like we have multiple safety nets in place to prevent things like this from happening in the future.

But I also want to say this. For some of you, you might not feel that you have the capacity to do anything more right now. I mean after all, it is the end of a school year, a very long and difficult, exhausting school year for many of you. You might be so fatigued. Decision fatigue, physical fatigue, mental fatigue, emotionally fatigued. You might not feel like you have the capacity to go and take a bunch of action right now. I want to say, that's okay. You don't need to do anything more than what you can in this moment.

In closing, I do want to offer the one thing that we all can do, and that is this. Simply pay attention to your emotions. Be aware of how you are feeling in your body. Give yourself that moment to acknowledge the emotions coming up for you, all of the emotions. From the shock to the numbness to the anger to the frustration to the grief and the sadness and the pain and the fear. There are just all of the emotions come up. This event has triggered something very deeply inside all of us.

Every event, every school shooting that has ever happened has created and triggered something very deep within all of us. Trauma. This is traumatic. Even so, I invite you to not shy away from the emotions coming up for you. Notice how they vibrate in your body. Notice where they vibrate.

Different emotions live in different spaces in your body, and it's different for everybody. Anger will feel different than sadness and grief. Fear will feel very different than shock and numbness. You want to just follow them, allow them from your head to your toes, let them vibrate. Just let them be present. Allow them. It's okay. Tuning in and giving yourself permission and

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space to acknowledge and process emotion is the one step all of us can take towards the emotional healing that we need and that we want.

Understanding our emotions and what they feel like to us and being able to describe them and knowing that we can handle and allow an emotion to wash through us, even the ones that feel terrible as we're processing it. Knowing we can do that, that we know what they are, we understand what it is, we can allow for it, that is what gives us the courage to show up in other ways and to have the capacity to be there for other people.

Because emotions are the hardest thing that we experience as humans. This is why we need to teach ourselves and others how to handle them in a way that doesn't involve death and destruction. Think about this. For those who follow this podcast, even the gunman had a steer cycle going on. He had thoughts and feelings that resulted in a decision and in an action to go buy guns, buy rounds of ammunition, walk into a school, and shoot innocent people. We need to see that and understand that. He was in an emotional state that influenced his decisions and actions.

We're not condoning any of it. We're just noticing the truth of that. As a school leader, we ourselves have to be courageous enough to explore emotion, our own emotional experience, so that we can understand how to guide and teach and support students and staff in their own emotional experience.

Because at the end of the day, every human's actions are influenced by their thoughts and emotions. Emotions influence our decisions and actions every single day in every single action we take. So we want to understand them and study them. We want to be able to say with integrity we know how it feels because we have processed the feeling. We've allowed ourselves to feel the pain. We want to see through our own study of our own emotions that people who do horrendous things also have thoughts

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and feelings that are so intense that lead them to these decisions and these actions.

Absolutely, there is much to be done to put measurements and protocols in place so that when people are reacting to their emotions, when they are making decisions from like an intense emotional space, and they're not thinking through the results or they don't care about the results at the time because they're in so much anguish. We do want to have protocols and procedures in place to protect other people when somebody is not able to manage and navigate their own emotions.

But we can no longer avoid conversations around emotions. We can't continue to label them as unnecessary and soft, and they're less important. They're they just take up time and space for really what we should be doing as academics. Emotions are what makes us unique as humans, and they are what impact the way we show up in the world.

So here's what I have to offer you. The Empowered Principal™ program prioritizes mental and emotional wellness for you and your community. We value emotionally grounded school cultures. We put our money where our mouth is, and we ask our districts to do the same. We don't shy away from uncomfortable feelings. We lean into them. We study them. We notice them, and we become more intentional with them.

The reason we do that is so we can understand others, how to help others from the very beginning. Teaching kinders and pre-K's what emotions are and how to how to handle them, even when they're big and uncomfortable and they feel scary and they feel hard and they feel like they're never going to go away. How can we teach children to allow emotion without reacting to it in a violent way? In order for us to teach them that, we have to teach ourselves that. I believe that coaching is one of the solutions to this problem we are facing as a nation.

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So I am offering free coaching sessions to anyone, anyone who wants to process this tragedy or discuss the emotions that are coming up for you at this time of the school year. All you have to do is email me at [angelakellycoaching@gmail.com](mailto:angelakellycoaching@gmail.com), and we will schedule a 30-minute session at no cost to you.

I've also included some additional resources in the show notes for ways to talk with students and staff. Support systems for principals, support systems around child trauma. I've just looked up a variety of resources to offer. There are many more available. If you would like more information, please feel free to reach out.

I am here for you in whatever capacity you need. I'm here to hold space for your emotions because I have been very busy processing my own this week. I'm not afraid of emotion. I'm not afraid of any emotion that you have or any emotion that I have. I am here for you. I'm offering free sessions to anybody who would like to experience coaching as part of the solution. Just email me, and we'll schedule a session together at no cost to you.

My dear school leaders, I love you. I care about you. I can only imagine the fear, the anger, the pain that you're in. We are in this together. You are not alone. I believe that together we can work towards change and solutions in whatever capacity you see yourself fitting into that solution. I'm here to help you make that happen for yourself in your school. Take good care of yourselves. Have a blessed week. Be mindful, be kind, be loving to yourself. Give yourself time and space and grace. Take good care. I'll talk to you next week. Bye.