

Ep #250: Understanding Grief as a School Leader with Krista St-Germain



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Angela Kelly

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Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 250.

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.

Angela: So with me today I have a colleague and a friend. Her name is Krista St-Germain. I've known her for years. We met through the Life Coach School. Krista is a certified life coach to the Life Coach School. I will let her introduce all of her credentials in a moment. But Krista is here on the podcast today because she specializes in grief.

When the incident in Uvalde, Texas took place, I had an influx of clients who needed to really process the grief they were feeling as it related to that incident. Then I had to help people process the fear of the anticipation of that.

So I've been very mindful about what you need as a school leader to number one, acknowledge and talk about. Two, have a safe space to really go into this place where we're thinking about grief, and we're handling it and talking about what it feels like and the experience of it and how to process it, whether you're dealing with something personally or professionally. When it's appropriate to maybe take some time off or to keep leading, and all of the things around grief and school leadership.

So a heavy topic today, but I think a very necessary one. I really want to welcome Krista to the podcast. Krista, thank you so much for being here today.

Krista: That's truly my pleasure. Yeah, it is a heavy topic, but it is important.

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Angela: Yeah. Can you tell the listeners a little bit just about who you are and what you offer and who you coach?

Krista: Sure. Yeah. So specifically, never really intended to take my professional career life in this direction, but I work with widowed moms. I help them figure out how to love life again after losing a spouse. I do that work because that's what happened to me.

So when I was 40, my husband was killed by a drunk driver. We were coming back from a trip. It was kind of at that place in life where everything was going amazingly well. Like amazing, amazing. Then the accident happened and within a day he was gone. My whole life just felt like it turned upside down. I went from really thinking life was amazing to believing that I would probably never be truly happy again.

Of course, it wasn't an overnight process for me. But once I got myself back to a place, thankfully, due to a wonderful therapist, and then also later life coaching, I decided that I really wanted to help other women experience and get the same tools that I really so desperately needed and struggled to find after my husband died.

So I didn't really know anything about grief until I had my own grief experience. Then I started to realize that we live in a world that doesn't really understand grief and doesn't talk much about grief. Much of what we think we know about grief actually isn't very accurate. Sometimes it's pretty outdated. It's not all that useful. I had to learn that the hard way.

I don't want other people to have that same experience. I also had never heard of post-traumatic growth. I didn't know that was a thing. We talk a lot about post-traumatic stress disorder, but we don't really talk about post-traumatic growth. There's just a lot of things that I think if we knew would

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make grief easier when we experience ourselves and easier for us to help others as they experience it. So that's why I do what I do.

Angela: I've already learned new content and things in the world I didn't know existed. So this is why I'm having Krista on because this is not my area of expertise. Like I am a life coach for school leaders. I know the business of school leadership. I know how to help people navigate that. I know how to coach on many, many topics. Krista can just take us to the next level.

So this is really just an open dialogue about grief. I just really want to provide a venue for you to even consider thinking about grief, whether you're in grief now you're or you have experienced that in your past, or you're a person who tends to anticipate the fear of grief in your future. Wherever you are on the spectrum, just having a space to talk about it and learn some of the latest information and the facts and some tools and strategies that you can use should you or somebody you know ever need to apply them. That's really the purpose of today's conversation.

So, Krista, one of the things that I have noticed in the Facebook communities that I participate in is well, let's just cut to the chase. The first thing I want to talk about is the experience of the Uvalde, Texas incident where unfortunately in our school systems, we have had multiple, multiple situations where we have experienced grief. We've experienced mass shootings, loss of staff members, loss of students, and it can feel in the moment too hard to process, too much to manage.

One of two things happen that I'm seeing with school leaders is they either feel like they can't handle it, and maybe they leave, or they stuff it down and ignore it because they feel like they have to be strong for the school community. They have to know to say the right thing and do the right thing and be the right person. So I kind of see two things happening here.

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What is your take on these types of situations that are happening? Just from your own perspective, what can we offer to school leaders that you think might be of help to them as they're thinking about the grief that they personally feel and holding space for other people's grief as it relates to just really a national tragedy?

Krista: Yeah, also many good questions. I wish I could just give... I wish there was just a way to formulate a manual and just pass it out and say here, do this. But you know, it's just never quite that simple is it? So, I think maybe we start this conversation by just kind of putting grief in context, a little bit.

Because people think of grief and different things come up, right? Some people think of grief, and they think of death. Some people think of grief, and they think of grief as a feeling only. Different things come up in our minds when we think of grief. So when I think of grief, the way that I define it is the natural response to a perceived loss. All right. So I don't think of it as just a feeling. I think of it as kind of an umbrella term for how a human responds to something that they perceive is a loss, which is kind of broad.

Angela: Yes.

Krista: Right.

Angela: But it makes sense when you think about it because it could be just a breakup, right? Maybe a divorce would be a perceived loss, or just a boyfriend girlfriend going different ways. Right.

Krista: You didn't get the promotion you wanted. That could lead to loss.

Angela: Right. Yeah.

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Krista: Yeah. So there are death losses. There are non-death losses. Even thinking about what we went through in the very early days of COVID when we just didn't know what to expect, right? We expected, and I'm imagining administrators expected the school year to go one way, and then nobody came back from spring break.

Angela: Right?

Krista: So they expected it to be one thing, and it went a different way. It felt like a loss. So within that reconciliation, we have lots of thoughts and feelings about it.

Angela: Yes.

Krista: So sometimes we tend to think so narrowly of grief that we make some assumptions that it is not going to include anything but sadness or anger, right. When in reality, it can be multifaceted. We have lots of different thoughts and feelings about things that happen. So somebody might be experiencing grief and thinking I'm so sorry about what has happened to that teacher. Also, I'm so grateful that I'm okay.

Angela: Right? Which feels conflicting.

Krista: It does feel conflicting. Also, it is a natural response to a perceived loss.

Angela: Yes.

Krista: Right? So, sometimes we just don't expect that. We think grief is always going to be negative, and maybe it's not. Then sometimes we judge ourselves when we're not experiencing what we think we're supposed to experience.

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We're also typically very familiar with the idea that there are supposed to be five stages to grief. I'm grateful to see that the more I have these discussions, the less people seem to be limiting themselves to that one theory. But I think it's important to remember that just like anything, there are many theories about grief. Right? Just like I'm sure in the world of how to lead, we would find many different leadership theories.

Angela: Correct. Yes.

Krista: So there are also many theories about grief. The five stages of grief is one of many.

Angela: It just seems to be the one we all know, or maybe it's a popular one.

Krista: It is. It just seems to have kind of picked up steam in our popular culture. Yeah, it's the one that people seem to hear about in school. But I think it's important to realize that it isn't necessary a linear process. In fact, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler who created the five stages theory, they never really intended for people to interpret it the way that it has been interpreted.

I think it's important to note that first of all, it was actually a result of their studies on hospice patients. Right? It was about someone who's coming to terms with their own mortality as opposed to someone who is bereaved. Like, experiencing the grief of loss. They never really intended for people to come away from their work thinking that okay well first, I'm supposed to deny. Then I'm supposed to get angry, and then I'm supposed to bargain. Then I need to get depressed. Then and only then will I come to a place of acceptance. Right.

Angela: Right.

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Krista: So if I could add anything, I would just say let's just not even worry about any of that. Right? Because it's not so useful. Because what we end up doing is we end up comparing our natural experience, which there is nothing wrong with, to an idea of what we think our experience should be. Then it's like we're trying to fit square pegs in round holes. There's just not a lot of value in it.

Angela: Right.

Krista: We would be much better served to say okay, it's not linear. That we don't have to go through any neat and tidy stages. There is no appropriate or inappropriate amount of any emotion in our experience, right? All emotions are a part of grief. There is no end. It does not end, right. We can't undo the loss. We're always going to have thoughts and feelings about the loss. There's no end. Sometimes we use language when we talk about grief, that implies that like there's—We say things like journey, which kind of implies that there's a destination.

Angela: Yes, I can see that.

Krista: Yeah. So then, because we think there's a destination or an end, we tend to measure ourselves relative to where we think we are to this thing that doesn't actually exist. So. So since the loss, any loss that's happened will always be there because none of us can time travel. The goal is really just to fold that life experience into our own to adapt to that loss, to integrate it into our life experience. Not to get to a place where we're no longer sad about it or somehow we say yay, verily, okay, I am at the end of the grief rainbow.

Angela: Right?

Krista: Pot of gold. It just doesn't happen.

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Angela: Yeah, I feel like people want there to be an end because the pain of, especially in the beginning, you don't want—it feels terrible to feel that pain, and our brain wants to have it end. So I can see why the like even our own brains will tell us like there has to be an end to this. Or when will I get to the end of this? Like a finish line. When will this stop hurting? I cross the finish line, and then it's over for me. This experience is over.

So I think it's fair to say, and I just I love the way you said that. It's that you can't undo it. It doesn't go away. Because we always do have thoughts and feelings. Actually, I want to connect it to school leadership. Because there is a full range of emotions that we feel as school leaders. The job never ends. There are always things that will feel hard or feel easier regardless of experience, regardless of where you are, what position you are holding.

The only way that a school leadership journey kind of ends, I guess, is maybe if you retire, but while you're in it, there is always something. I think that's the relation we can make to grief is that like you are going to experience that that multitude of emotions as long as you're alive.

Krista: Yeah. Yeah. It's so much less problematic to experience those multitude of emotions when you believe that they are supposed to be there.

Angela: Right. Yes, versus thinking that something's wrong, or that you shouldn't be feeling a certain way. You're judging maybe an emotion you're feeling. Yeah, I can see that where just the acceptance of this is normal. However, I feel is a part of being normal.

Krista: Yeah. I think that's a huge part of what makes us exhausted in grief, especially when we're supporting other people who are grieving is when we see the emotions that others are experiencing as problems to solve. Right? Because then, and I can only imagine what this is like if you're a leader in a school, right, or a principal, when you see everyone around you having an

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intense emotional response, and you're having your own. And you believe that that is a problem to solve. Then you start putting pressure on yourself to do it right, as though that's a thing, right? Which it isn't.

Angela: We know that.

Krista: And to imply that somehow you can solve other people's emotions, which you clearly can't. So this is why I think a lot of us even outside of the school setting just in general when it comes to grief, we struggle so much more than we need to struggle because we have been bought and sold this bill of goods in our culture that says happiness is the goal. You're supposed to be happy all the time. Right?

Then we weren't taught very much about emotions, most of us growing up. So we think they're contagious. We think they're problems. We think we're supposed to be able to help other people feel better. In reality, it's just not possible. It's also not a problem, right? Feelings are to be felt, right? They're not problems.

Angela: This is so good. School leaders, I just want to highlight what Krista's saying here. Because when you get into the school leadership role, you have the thought that it's your job, your responsibility, because you are in the position of leader to fix all of the things. Many times when people come to you, what they want you to fix is the way that they're feeling. Right?

They come to you with an urgency, and they want you to fix it right then so they can feel better, or they can have their problem solved. What Krista's saying is that it's not your job or responsibility. It's not anybody's job or responsibility to ever fix somebody else's emotions because the emotion isn't a problem.

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Krista: Yeah, and you didn't create it. Like, if it's not between your brain and the tips of your fingers, there's really not much you can do about it. Because that's all you can control right is what happens in your mind and in your body. What's going on for other people isn't something you have any power to control. So you can decide who you want to be and how you want to show up for people and the example that you want to set. But we have to be very clear in what we can control and what we can't, and not burden ourselves by trying to change things we can't.

Angela: Right? This just brought up a question in my mind. I'm assuming that somebody out there listening is thinking okay, so I can't control those other people's feelings. I have my own set of feelings I'm dealing with. They have their set of feelings they're dealing with, but the pressure of school leadership is get everybody back on track, processed emotions because the emotions are getting in the way of the goal. The time that it takes for people to process the emotion impedes our ability to do our job, which is lead the school.

What would you say to that for school leaders who feel pressure? Like they want to hold space for people without trying to fix things. But they're a little bit feeling pressured, whether it's internal or external pressure, on like getting those emotions out of the way so that they can get to their job?

Krista: Yeah, I would just offer a slight reframe, which is that the emotions aren't getting in the way. Our response to the emotions are getting in the way.

Angela: Ah, can you say a little bit more about that?

Krista: Yeah. So if we are resisting the emotions that we're feeling then of course we're adding more energy to the resistance, which means we're

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less able to take that same energy and spend it elsewhere in the classroom doing other things, right?

Angela: Yes.

Krista: If we are telling ourselves that the emotions are too intense or we can't handle them, we're actually taking our energy away from constructive ways we could be spending it. If we're treating the emotion like a problem to be solved instead of an experience to be allowed, right. It's our response to the emotion not so much of the emotion itself. Emotions are supposed to be there.

Angela: Right.

Krista: Right. They're valuable. They're part of our human experience. They have things to teach us. They aren't problems. Once they're there, if we cannot resist them either in ourselves or in others, then we can let them flow through. Like I like to think of it like if you have water coming down a hill, and you build a dam, right? What's going to happen to that water? It's going to back up. It's going to pool. It's probably eventually going to work its way around the dam, unless you're really good at dam building.

Angela: Right. But there's pressure building up.

Krista: There's pressure building. Exactly, exactly. So but we don't need to do that. If we just let the water flow down the hill, it's not gonna hurt anything. Right. So it's that. It's not resisting what is. It's allowing ourselves to decide no, okay. Everyone's got their own emotional experience here. It's the judgment of the emotion, the resistance to it, the worry about it that actually makes it a challenging experience or more challenging. Right? If we just allow ourselves to feel what we feel, it's not actually as much work as it seems.

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Angela: Right. So I guess that kind of leads us into processing emotion and what that looks like. I feel like this is—it feels a new topic for a lot of people because it's not something we talk about in education. Not something we talk about really in the world. But as life coaches, we're starting to bring this just to our awareness that there is that allowing and processing of emotion and how that benefits us.

But people are a little bit afraid of it because of what it might look like, or what other people will think, or the amount of time it might take. Or that they if they let themselves go there, they won't come back out. How do you coach people to dip themselves and allow themselves to really process an emotion while they have children to raise, schools to run, classrooms to teach?

Krista: Yeah, yeah. I don't think we want to judge ourselves for compartmentalizing. I think that can be a very effective coping mechanism. But we just want to maybe consider at what point does it lose its usefulness? Right? Do we compartmentalize so much that then we never go back and address it, and it's just kind of sitting there and waiting for us.

But a lot of us naturally have a tendency to decide that right now perhaps isn't the time where I can handle all of this feeling or allow it to be there with me. If we don't have the skill, maybe in the middle of the meeting is not the time to start practicing it. We don't have to do that to ourselves.

Also though, I think it doesn't have to be as scary as we think. Of course, if we grew up having not learned this skill then the idea that it feels scary is also something not that we don't want to beat ourselves up about. But really, emotions are just vibrations in the body. I know this is probably very similar to what you teach too, right.

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So I teach a three step process, which I think is easy to remember. I use the acronym NOW. It's really as simple as N is name or notice. There's some differing opinions about whether you actually even need to name an emotion. At least you need to notice it though, right? That it's there. So I notice a tension in my chest. You may not have a name for it at the time. That's okay. Or immediately, you might say oh, I notice I'm feeling sad, right? But we're just naming or noticing it.

Then reminding ourselves that the next thing our body wants to do is to get away, right? That's our natural inclination. So you want to do the opposite of that. O is for open, right? Open up to it, which simply just means give it permission to be with you. Right? It just means saying okay, I can allow this. I can let this be with me right now. That can be a silent thing. It doesn't have to be, pardon me, something to say out loud.

I like to think about it too. I don't know how many of your listeners are women, but most of mine are. If we were in labor, we would not have told ourselves that the labor pains shouldn't be there. Right?

Angela: Right. That's so true.

Krista: If you're having a labor pain, resistance is futile.

Angela: Yes.

Krista: It is not helping. It's actually going to make it worse. I think it's the same thing with an emotion. So when you remind yourself that no, it's okay that this is here. I'm open to having it. You can kind of breathe in and let it be there then your experience of it actually gets easier instead of harder. So you name or notice, open, and then the W stands for witness.

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That just means witness the actual experience of the emotion in your body. Because if you do that for a couple of minutes, typically less than a couple of minutes, without getting caught up in the story that created that emotion in the first place, but by truly watching what it's like. So, maybe the emotion that you're experiencing feels like a clenching in your throat. Maybe it feels dark. Maybe it feels buzzy, right?

I remember when my son was going into middle school, and he was so worried that he wouldn't be able to find his locker, and he wouldn't be able to find his classrooms. I mean we walked that school several times in preparation.

But the night before, we did this exercise, and we decided that it was anxious was what he felt. He described that anxious feeling as he was witnessing it in his body. He said it was like purple. He told me it was an octagon. He had all these descriptive words for what that emotion felt like in his body. Simply by putting his attention there, it kind of resolved itself. It processed through, right.

So that's really what it's about is just not resisting it, not telling ourselves that it shouldn't be there, that we can't handle it, or that it's a black hole that we'll fall into but just going oh, okay. There's a feeling there. Oh, I notice it. Okay, what can I do to allow it? I could give it permission to be here. I could open up to it. Then what's it like for me as that emotion processes through my body?

Angela: Yeah.

Krista: Right. That's really it. So that's the main process that I find to be a value. Then also I am a huge fan of tapping, emotional freedom technique.

Angela: Oh, tell us about that.

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Krista: I think that is a fantastic way. Tapping is one of those tools that's catching steam, and becoming more and more researched. But basically, it's a way to create safety in your nervous system when you're feeling unsafe. It's quite easy to do. There are many YouTube tutorials. You don't have to pay anybody anything to learn how to tap. Actually bring a tapping coach into my program because I'm such a fan of it. Or there's an app that I love called The Tapping Solution. I'm not affiliated with it, but I think it's a great app, especially for beginners.

But essentially, you are tapping on energy meridian points in your body. As you do it, it sends a very calming signal to your amygdala, which is the part of your brain that controls your fight, flight, freeze response. Telling your nervous system that even though it is perceiving something in your environment to be unsafe, that you are actually safe.

So it allows you, simply by tapping on these points, and really just acknowledging what feels true. So maybe what feels true is that I feel so anxious, right. You're tapping on the points. Even though I feel so anxious, this is the truth of how I feel, right? Even though I feel so anxious, right here and right now I'm safe. So you set it up with a couple of statements, and you just tap through the points. All this anxiousness, right, all this anxiety. You just keep tapping. Anxiety in my chest or wherever you feel it.

So you really are just acknowledging what is true as you're telling your nervous system that you're safe. Studies show that cortisol drops. It's being used now to help people who have experienced PTSD. The Veterans Administration has actually approved it as a PTSD treatment. So it's got a wide variety of uses. But just in general, it can be a great thing to do to allow yourself to process an emotion.

If you're in a meeting or somewhere where you don't want people to see you tapping on points of your body because you're worried you'll look

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weird, you can always tap on the side of your hand. It used to be called the karate chop point. It's kind of not called that anymore, but it's easy to find if you call it that. But tapping on the side of your hand or tapping on your collarbone. Just breathing while you're tapping. Miraculous.

Angela: That is a skill that I am going to study more and offer to my clients because there are so many moments when we are in a situation where we're in a meeting and somebody is expressing intense emotion, whether there's an angry parent or a grieving parent. Times when we have to communicate information and share information with somebody else that may result in an intense emotion.

Krista: Yeah.

Angela: Learning how to be able to be in that situation and hold space for yourself and the other person can feel really intimidating and scary. It sounds like tapping might be one way that my clients could keep themselves remaining calm while somebody else is having an experience.

Krista: I think it's amazing. There are other things we can do as well. I mean even just some basic breathing techniques. But there are ways. When you notice that you are dysregulated, there are things that you can do. It's a good thing to have a couple of kind of tools in your tool belt.

Because it wasn't very long ago, I was sitting in the doctor's office, and I was having a breast exam, like an extra mammogram kind of deal. I was really sweating. I was going to get a diagnosis. So that's what I did just sitting right there in the office is just tap on the side of my hand and breathe, just tapping and breathing. Because I could feel that I was not regulated. I pulled myself back into my body.

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Angela: Right. I think that is probably why school leaders feel, I feel like they feel dysregulated much of the time. Because there's always this anticipation of a negative experience or anticipation of grief in some way, whether or feeling under attack or feeling like not good enough. Like there's many scenarios we could paint. But school leaders who are listening, they understand what I'm talking about where the majority of time there is some level of dysregulation in the body because of an anticipation of an experience that could come their way.

Krista: I will tell you this too because you might not know this. The people who created the Tapping Solution app, the Ortner's, they actually live very near Sandy Hook.

Angela: Oh.

Krista: So they have a foundation that works with all kinds of but especially school shootings to go in and use tapping as a way to help with healing, right. for first responders, for teachers, for administrators, for students. So not only is it valuable in the moment when the emotion is intense, but it can be really valuable after something traumatic has happened in the body and the nervous system is holding on to that trauma as a way of reprocessing it when the nervous system is safe.

Angela: Okay. Okay, I think that's really valuable. We can put links in the show notes just to get people sent in the right direction to find more information for themselves. One of the questions that comes up is I feel like as a leader, I need to be present at my school holding space for other people. They don't feel like they have permission to actually take some time away to grieve.

Almost, or let's say, for example, one of the principals in one of the Facebook groups I participate in lost his own child, his own 16 year old in a

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car accident. He was a high school principal. So he was saying typically, my biggest fear is that I'm going to lose a student over the course of the summer while kids are out driving around. Unfortunately, this year, his son was one of three. So now he is personally experiencing grief and also having to hold space for his community because there were two other students involved.

I know there's no right answer to this. But what would be some guidance on when is it appropriate for you to prioritize taking your time away, and really just being there for yourself, and giving yourself that privacy to grieve in the way that you need to grieve?

Here's how I want to say it. This probably isn't going to come out right, but there's a time and a place where it's extremely appropriate to take time away and be private. Then there are times and places where we might be doing that and maybe indulging, spending a little more time and indulging, and then we're not sure when to come back or if we should leave. I think there's a couple of things going on there. But just what is your input on people making decisions about leadership and their own personal journey?

Krista: Yeah. Okay. So I think it's a little bit cliché, but I think it's important, so I'm gonna say it anyway, which oxygen mask on you first, right? It's really is true. I mean the airline attendants have it right. Especially when you're in a position of leadership, and you know it is not a sprint. That you are in a marathon, right? You cannot give what you do not have. So you have to trust yourself to know when you are trying to pour from an empty cup, or if you keep pouring, your cup will be empty.

Angela: Yes.

Krista: It's not formulaic. So we can't just say well, take X number of weeks or Y number of days. It's not that. It is you knowing am I taking care of

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myself? Right. Because I cannot lead or take care of other people if I'm not. So while it doesn't have to be my only priority, it does need to be my top priority.

Angela: Yes, I agree. Because I think the majority of school leaders, if ever they were in this situation, they're going to err on the side of taking care of other people first. Compartmentalizing to the point that they don't take time for themselves to process on their own.

Krista: I think initially I mean, when something happens, and it's happening right now, it's very normal to have adrenaline kick in and take over and us to go into solving that problem mode. We just have to remember that while we can do that for short periods of time, we do need to go back and pay attention to ourselves, right, and take care of ourselves.

So just because maybe for short bursts in the beginning. And I see it a lot of times with women who have taken care of a spouse who's terminally ill, and they've done it for a long time. It's exhausting to your nervous system. So yes, you can do it for short periods of time. That might be okay. But also you need to remember that you need to pay attention to yourself and make sure you're taking good care of yourself. That's different for everyone. Being a martyr is not going to help your school or your family in the long term.

As far as when does it become indulgent? I don't know that indulgent is isn't necessarily what I see as much as I see sometimes we start to hide. Sometimes we start to kind of get this sense that if we were to slow down, it would come for us. Right?

Angela: Yes.

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Krista: So I actually see more of a tendency of like overworking, over busying, trying to distract ourselves.

Angela: I see that too. Yes.

Krista: Yeah. Not wanting to slow down. So you want to be aware of that. Not that it's—It's not a bad thing, but you just want to be on to yourself about okay, do I feel safe to slow down? If not, why not? Right. What is waiting for me that has got me scared or has me wanting to avoid it.

Then always too we can make different decisions. So let's say you were to take some time off and you go back, right. You realize when you get back that maybe you're not ready. You can make a different decision.

Sometimes I think we forget that we put so much pressure on ourselves to make the right decision or we so worry about what other people will think that we don't give ourselves permission to iterate and learn by doing. Right?

So something happens, you take some time off, you go back to work. Okay, well, maybe you weren't ready. We can take some more time off, right? Or whatever the decision is in terms of self-care, it's usually not as permanent as our brain might want to make it out to be.

Angela: Yeah, that's really good for people to hear that whatever decision you make, you can always adjust it based on how you're feeling. It really comes back to you tuning in to where am I in the process of processing emotion? Where am I? What is my body needing and feeling? What is it telling me to do and being in tune with that.

Something you said earlier made me think that I think one of the things school leaders might feel is that if they slow down, they're afraid that they'll get to a place where they can't bring themselves back. Like, that it won't

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ever go away, or that they won't ever feel better, or that they won't want to come back because it might trigger the same emotions again.

Just the idea that number one, you can always make adjustments as you are faced with new feelings and emotions. You can decide for yourself what is the right thing to do for yourself, for your school, and maybe that is taking additional time off or leave even if you need to. That your school will still be okay. That you don't have to sacrifice yourself in order to maintain the integrity of your school.

Krista: It's actually not a service to your school to sacrifice yourself.

Angela: It isn't. For some reason, I think we're sold on that a little bit too hard. But if we play that out down the line, we see the unintended results that we actually create by like trying to hold ourselves together all of the time. That really, even if it's grief or if it's just overexertion and overworking. Like if we push play or fast forward, and we look down the line, this is why people burn out. This is why we're not sustaining and retaining educational staff in our schools.

Krista: Yeah, we see it everywhere, don't we? I mean, it's not just in school. It's in parenting. It's in so many professions. We don't give ourselves permission to do things that are restorative in nature or bring us pleasure. Eventually, we are going to burn out.

One of the grief theories that I love is called the dual process theory of grief. One of the things that it offers is this idea that healing can be found in an oscillation, back and forth, back and forth between things that are grief oriented, meaning thinking about the loss, allowing ourselves to feel like doing kind of what you would call the “work” of healing. So oscillating back and forth from grief related activities to restorative activities.

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Angela: Okay.

Krista: So things that take you away from your grief, and just have you living your life. Or maybe hobbies. Things that get your mind off of what's happened. Sometimes I think we think well, if I'm trying to escape my grief in an unhealthy way. So therefore, I should just be thinking about it all the time or doing the work all the time. But really what the dual process theory says is no, no. We want to go back and forth. We want to actually think about it and allow it, but also in a healthy way choose things that distract ourselves from it and go back and forth, and back and forth.

Angela: Right.

Krista: So giving yourself permission to get out of your role.

Angela: Yes. That makes so much more sense. It's almost like weight training right, where you're lifting the heavy weight, and then you have to take the break and let the muscle repair and build and that's how it you get stronger.

Krista: Yes. Yeah. 100%.

Angela: Yeah, it's the same. Okay, that makes total sense. I remember recently, I've been through two tragedies personally in my life over the last year. I found myself doing that where I was in it and feeling it, and then I would be working, and I would feel amazing about coaching and doing the work that I'm doing because I was thinking about work. Then I would go back.

So I found myself doing that kind of naturally. I will say like I felt like it made the process feel manageable. Like I was capable of being in and out of

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grief, and that I wasn't not honoring what had happened, but I was also honoring my life outside of what happened. So I love that theory.

Krista: That doing both is what actually helps in the healing process.

Angela: Like the combination of that.

Krista: Consciously doing it. So it's different. So maybe it is, I'm just thinking of one of my clients who she's kind of onto herself because she knew she was doing something that while it was restorative in nature, she was doing it to an excess. Such that when she imagined herself when that activity was going to come to an end, she was scared of what would happen when the activity came to an end. Long term, it was a kind of a project she was working on in memory of her husband.

So that's what we just want to be careful of. That we are not doing it because we're distracting ourselves because we believe we can't handle what's waiting for us if we're not distracted. But also instead we're giving ourselves permission to take a break and do other things because we've got to address our whole human self, not just our grief.

Angela: Right. I love what you said about I feel like sometimes when somebody around us is grieving, and in our perception, it's taking them a long time to get over it. We kind of judge them. We think they're indulging in something.

But really, if we step out of our judgment for a second, and we just observe what might be happening for them. To know there are different theories going on, and that somebody might be not intentionally like just swimming in grief or indulging in it to get attention. I don't know what people think the reason behind an indulging in such a painful—Why you would do that on purpose to yourself. But there are people who maybe take more time to

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process than others. Yeah. What is your thought about that? Like other people's thoughts about people grieving?

Krista: I have so many. I'm so glad you asked that. I have so many. So one of the things is that I will offer we don't really move on ever. We move forward, but we don't move on. So if we can kind of normalize that for ourselves. That life will never be exactly the same as it was. That's okay. But to imply that we move on kind of says there's some way to compartmentalize it or shut it off or leave it in the past. Really, we're just going to keep living, and bring it with us as a part of our life experience. So I think that's important to know.

Also, I think, because timelines don't apply, it really is such a different experience for every person. Sometimes we will do things that don't necessarily make sense from the outside. But when we really get curious about it, they actually do make a little more sense. So sometimes we'll actually stall out some of the things that we could be doing related to a loss.

Like I'll give you an example. So sometimes my clients will struggle to order a headstone. Or they'll struggle to close the estate paperwork. It's not because they're not capable. It's not because they're consciously trying to torture themselves by not doing it. It's because as humans, we do things based on how we feel or how we think we're gonna feel.

So there's a part of them that kind of knows that oh, after I order the headstone or after I close the estate paperwork, or after I go through their belongings, like some of those final tasks, then there's more sadness waiting for me. There's another emotion that I'm gonna have to feel. If I just keep putting this thing off then it's like this illusion that we can just keep kicking the can down the road.

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So if we can have some compassion for ourselves and know that our very most primitive brain would really just not like to experience negative emotion at all. So even if we're not doing it consciously, sometimes it is an unconscious attempt to avoid a feeling that we don't even realize is what's happening.

Angela: Right. Right. Yeah, no, I can see that. Just knowing that, that the reason somebody may be processing emotion longer than you personally believe they should be. That there is a model, or I call it a STEAR cycle in our world, but it's the model from The Life Coach School. Like they have a model that's happening for them.

As a leader, it's really beneficial to step out of our model or STEAR cycle for a minute and just be interested in what might be going on for them, which will help us kind of step out of that judgment and into curiosity as a leader.

If you are a leader who's supporting maybe a colleague or a teacher who is going through grief, it can help us maybe expand our capacity to hold space for them for as long as it takes that person to adjust to their new—I don't know if new normal is the right way to say that. But their new reality, I guess, is really what's happening for them. They're adjusting into a new way of existing in the world.

Krista: Yes. Yeah. They're integrating.

Angela: Yes, yes, that's yes. So as they're integrating people on the outside, being able to hold space for them. I think as leaders it's really important to acknowledge that and understand, which is why we're having this conversation. So.

Krista: Yeah, I think.

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Angela: Oh, go ahead.

Krista: I was just gonna say just notice how much of our conversation is like only necessary because there's this idea that feelings are problems, right?

Angela: Yes.

Krista: If we didn't really think other people's feelings were problems, we wouldn't be so worried about how they're feeling. We also wouldn't get so weird around grief. Right? So a lot of what happens, I think, we start second guessing well, what should I say? What should I not say? Should I act like nothing happened? Should they just be getting over it? Is this grief? Is this not grief? With all of this kind of extra weirdness that doesn't need to be there, that if we better understood grief or better appreciated the importance of emotion we could avoid.

Angela: Yes, that is so true. I think I'll probably explore this a little more and talk about why emotions are not problems and really kind of sell our brains on the truth of that. Because I think if we would ground ourselves in that as leader, as anybody. If we ground ourselves as school leaders, that is going to make our work in schools so much easier. Because a lot of what we're trying to solve for, whether it's trying to solve for students or teachers or leaders, is we're trying to solve for emotion.

Krista: Yeah. Yeah.

Angela: If you think about it, right.

Krista: Even with what you said earlier about like the anxiety, the anticipation of what could happen in your school. Right? Even that is about feelings.

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Angela: Yes.

Krista: Because what we're really worried about is in the future something bad will happen, and the worst part of that will be the emotion.

Angela: Yes.

Krista: So the more now we can, we can kind of develop those muscles of being able to allow emotions, and have an easier experience of emotions that we perceive as difficult, the more confidence we can feel in the future that if something were to happen, we would actually be better able to navigate it. Because we perceive that we're good at feelings.

Like we believe it. We believe that we're good at feelings. We believe that the feelings aren't problems. That we know how to be with people who have feelings. Then the possibility of something that happens in the future feels less daunting, and so we can feel less anxious about it.

Angela: Yeah. It's about the belief that you're capable of handling any emotion that comes your way. That you're capable of holding space for any emotion that another person experiences. I think that's really where the empowerment piece comes in as a leader. I want to just I know we've talked for an hour already, but I want to ask you one final thing.

You mentioned I think maybe before we were recording about post-traumatic growth. Or maybe in your intro you said that. I'm so fascinated by this. Can you explain that a little bit more? Because I think whatever that is sounds amazing. I feel like it's going to give people some hope and encouragement that even when something as tragic as a school shooting occurs, there can be growth after an experience like that. So can you tell us about what that is?

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Krista: You bet I remember hearing about it the first time, and it was like one of those record scratch moments where you stop and you say wait, what? What just happened?

Angela: That totally caught my attention.

Krista: Yeah, post-traumatic growth is a phrase that was coined by two researchers, Tedeschi and Calhoun are their last names, in the mid-90s. What they discovered was, they actually happened to be studying widows. But they were noticing that so there's kind of this baseline of wellness that people experience before a trauma.

Before post-traumatic growth, it was really thought that after a trauma, people experience a dip and wellness. The best that they could hope for was a return to that baseline. Right? That was kind of the goal. It's like okay. It's where it was. It gets worse, and we hope it gets back to where it was before the trauma.

What they were noticing is that some people were experiencing trauma, and in this case, loss of a spouse, and they were actually reporting greater levels of wellness and life satisfaction after the trauma. So they started to study it, and then it just kind of changed the paradigm about people's expectations of what's possible after trauma. Which is not that it's not that it's morally superior to grow after a traumatic event.

Not that you have to or should, but that we are all capable of taking any life experience and using it to inform the choices that we make and therefore have deeper, more meaningful, richer, lives. So better relationships, a greater sense of purpose, deeper spiritual connections. I kind of liken it to because I live in Tornado Alley. I live in Kansas. To me a great analogy for this is if a tornado comes and takes away your house, which can happen here.

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Angela: Which does happen, right.

Krista: Which does happen. It happened not too long ago a couple miles down the street, a couple months ago. You could just rebuild the house you had. Wouldn't be anything wrong with that. Right? You could just rebuild that house. Also, it is your option because I bet you learn some things by living in that house.

Angela: Yes.

Krista: Maybe you would really like a larger kitchen. You would like more natural light. You would like electrical outlets to be in a different place. Right? You would like to do some things differently.

Angela: Yes.

Krista: If you're going to rebuild the house, you could take what you have learned and modify your house. Right? Is it morally superior? No. But is it your option as a human on the planet whose house was just destroyed? Yes. Right? You could do that. So that's what I work with women on is okay yes, we can get back to the level of life satisfaction that we had before a loss. Also, though, how could we make our lives even more aligned with what we value because of what we learned having gone through this experience?

Angela: Oh, yes. Yeah, that is the perfect analogy because it makes it so tangible. It makes it so understandable that bad things that we label as bad happen in the world. We still get to decide what we're going to make them mean as a result of having gone through that.

Krista: And who we want to be after they have happened, right? I mean that's why I left my corporate job because I was like okay, wait a minute. If

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life can be taken this quickly, as you know, my husband died, is this the mark I'm meant to be making on the planet? Right? Is that the morally superior option that I left my job to become a coach? No. But it has me living a life that's more aligned with what I value. I took something that I learned from that life experience and applied it in a way that has given me more satisfaction with my life. That is my human right.

Angela: Right. I do believe that I was just coaching a client today on this how she can never really get off track. Even when she feels like life or leadership is off track, that off trackedness is really just an awareness, right. An opportunity, as it comes to your conscious, that you are feeling off track or misaligned is what I would call it. It's really just an opportunity, an invitation to reassess.

Krista: It's more data. Right?

Angela: Right. Yeah, it's information that's inviting you to reassess like what is my priority? What are my values? What does on track look like and mean to me? You get to define whatever that is for you.

Krista: Yeah.

Angela: So I love this idea of post-traumatic growth, and that there is a potential on the other side of something that is one, out of our control and two, feels like we could not recover from. To know that there is another option. I think just knowing that can maybe, as school leaders are now entering into a new school year still kind of dealing with COVID. There's who knows what's going to happen with COVID. Just knowing that there is opportunities for growth on the other side of COVID, on the other side of unfortunately school shootings. That's a positive thing to consider.

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Krista: Yeah. To me, it's like even less about—They use the word growth, but to me, I think of it more as meaning and satisfaction, right? It's like we're all just fine as we are. We don't need to grow from anything, but are we living the lives that we want to live? Something traumatic can be such an opportunity to really recognize the difference between what is out of our control and what is in our control and make more of what is in our control.

Angela: Yes. To intentionally choose what is within our control, to intentionally choose that.

Krista: Yeah. Yeah, sure.

Angela: That's so great. Oh, my goodness. Thank you, Krista, for this. This has been time—

Krista: You're so welcome. Time has sped by. What the heck?

Angela: I know how has it been an hour? I don't know. But I just really appreciate your time. This is just an area that so outside of my expertise. I feel like I have just personally learned so much, and I can't imagine how much listeners are walking away with. If there's anybody out there listening who would like to contact Krista or learn more or has a need for her services or know somebody who has a need for her services. Krista, where can people find you?

Krista: Well, I too am a podcaster. So my podcast is called *The Widowed Mom* podcast. So anybody who's interested in grief is welcome to listen. Of course, it's a little bit targeted, but I do cover a lot of just basic grief and post-traumatic growth. I also have a kind of grief 101 course on my website that's free. If anybody's just looking to learn a little bit more about grief, they can find that at coachingwithkrista.com. You scroll down on the homepage, and you'll get a little pop up and you'll see it. But yeah, I'm more than happy

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to field any questions that anyone has too. So all of my information is coachingwithkrista.com.

Angela: Yeah. We'll put all of her links in the show notes so that you can have direct access to her. But again, Krista, thank you for your time. Thank you for your insight. I hope this has been helpful to everybody listening out there.

I just want to end by saying that even something as painful as grief is not a problem. I think that's the big takeaway here is there's no emotion that you could ever experience that's wrong, or that's a problem, or that needs fixing. I feel like that's a big deal for us. That any emotion you are experiencing, especially when it's one that doesn't feel socially acceptable or it's not all of the labels we have around emotion. That there is nothing wrong with emotion, any emotion.

I think that if we could really just sink into that thought, that would be so helpful moving forward and leaving our schools. So thank you for that. I really appreciate that so much.

Krista: Thanks for having me.

Angela: So, again. Yes, again, so listeners out there if you do know somebody who is experiencing grief or you yourself are, please reach out to Krista. She is a master at supporting not just widows but people with grief. She specializes in that. But I really encourage you to get the help and support that you need to move you forward. So have a wonderful day everybody. Enjoy the podcast. I look forward to talking with you all next week. Take care bye.

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