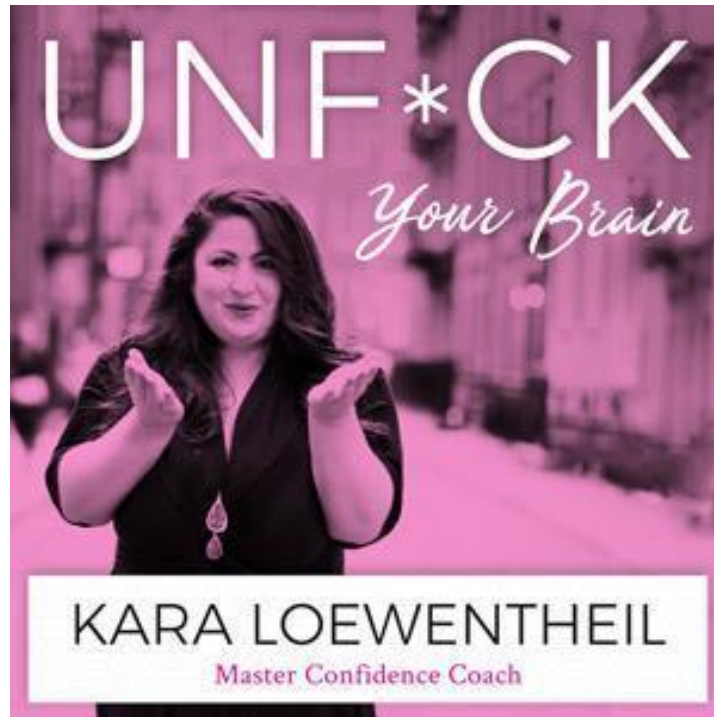


UFYB 288: Grief, Patriarchy, & Post-Traumatic Growth: An Interview with Krista St-Germain



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to *UnF*ck Your Brain*, the only podcast that teaches you how to use psychology, feminism, and coaching, to rewire your brain and get what you want in life. And now here's your host, Harvard Law School grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Kara: Hello my chickens. Today's guest is I would almost say part of almost the founding story of *UnF*ck Your Brain*. If you were a client of mine back when I used to do a small group program called *UnF*ck Your Brain* then you know all about Krista St-Germain. I met Krista when she was my assistant instructor when I was training coaches for The Life Coach School at one of their in person trainings. When was that 2018? No, before that.

Krista: Yeah, 2018.

Kara: I think 2018 was my last year that I did one-to-one coaching maybe.

Krista: I don't know, we're in a time warp.

Kara: We met a while ago, maybe 2017, it's been a while. Who can say? And then I was like, "You are good at this and smart. Now, you're mine."

Krista: And then you petted me.

Kara: I petted her. We both showed up wearing Leona dresses. And so then I hired her and she was a baby coach. And she worked in my *UnF*ck Your Brain* program. And she would work with people on their first month when they came in. And that meant that I got to spend 18 months of my life having people say to me, "This program has been nice and all but Krista told me that your thoughts cause your feelings and that just blew my mind." And I would have to be like, "Yeah, that Krista, she knows some good shit. She knows some good secret stuff that I never told you."

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It's like your kids have to hear something from somebody else, they can't hear it from you. So anyway, many amazing people had Krista as their coach in my program. But she was destined for bigger and better things. So she had to go off and do her own incredible work. So she is going to tell us all about that. Tell us who you coach and what your work is and what do we need to know about you.

Krista: Yeah, it's the work that nobody ever really intends to do but through life circumstance. So I work with widowed moms and I'm obsessed with grief and post-traumatic growth and helping people rebuild life. And not just get to that place where they think that they should get this new normal. That's one of my biggest pet peeves is that idea of a new normal. But helping them really truly love life again.

Kara: But tell us how you came to that, how did you become an expert in grief, as you said, not something people really set out to do.

Krista: Yeah. So when I was 40 I was on my way back from a trip with my husband, we hadn't been married more than a couple of months. My first marriage had ended in divorce and it was not the best situation. And so Hugo and I met, he was just like the redemption story, proof that you can be treated the way you want to be treated and it can be easy and good. And I had a flat tire, he went to change it, he didn't want to call AAA, very stubborn, "Baby, just let me change the tire and we'll get done faster."

And as he was trying to get access to the tire, a driver that we later found out had both meth and alcohol in his system just didn't see us. And it was 5:30 on a Sunday so it was daylight but crashed right into the back of Hugo's car. And within a day he was just gone. And so I found myself with a great therapist able to get through the early days of grief, but at a point which I now refer to as a grief plateau, really just not sure where to turn and

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not finding any resources for myself. Because my therapist was like, “You’re doing great.” And I was like, “Really?”

I don’t think this is what great feels like. I mean I’m doing okay, I’m getting through, I’m back to work, I look okay, the kids are getting fed, but I actually kind of don’t think I can be truly happy again. And I don’t think that’s what great is.

Kara: Right. That doesn’t seem okay to me. Yeah.

Krista: Right, yeah. And so then it just kind of coincidentally happened that Brooke Castillo launched Self-Coaching Scholars right at that point in time where I was like, “What am I doing here?” And then I joined and coaching just kind of knocked my socks off and so here I am. Quit my job.

Kara: Knocked my socks off.

Krista: The true midwestern in me is coming out.

Kara: I told Krista before we started that she was like the midwestern mom I never had. And I’m used to this now since my partner is a midwestern, the partner I never thought I’d have. So let’s talk a bit more about that sort of experience you had, I love that term, grief plateau. Why do you think there’s such a kind of lack of resources for grief? It’s sort of like as you’re saying, we have that kind of like immediately afterwards. But then like everything just peters out.

Krista: Yeah. Well, in all the conversations I have with people about grief, what I find is that everybody pretty much only knows about the five stages of grief. In most people’s minds, that is the only grief theory that exists, even doctors. I’ll talk to doctors and that’s the only one they ever learn too. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross did this valuable work at the time and then we just

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kind of assumed that that was the way grief went and then stopped talking about it. And maybe just like other things there are lots of theories about grief and things that we could learn. So we don't talk about it.

We're not ready for it. We have a lot of misunderstandings about it and yeah, people just think, have you come to acceptance yet? Were you angry enough? Did you bargain? And then you're done.

Kara: And then you're done, it's just, you've just got five little boxes and then that's it.

Krista: Right, you're good. And we live in this culture that kind of assumes and talks about grief as though it is this finite journey and once you reach the end and then you move on and there is a rainbow and a medal and I don't know, something happens magically in a year, and we're just done.

Kara: You've got a bag of cereal that somebody gives you with a little prize inside. So what do you think about those? I mean I think there's multiple things to talk about here, one being that I feel like I haven't done an intercultural comparison of grief. But it doesn't seem unrelated to me that America culture is so kind of obsessed with the positive and looking on the bright side. And we don't really deal with death. We don't have the same intimacy with death in our culture and older people often live in nursing homes and away from their family. We're just not in conversation with death as much.

Krista: Yeah. And also we need to be productive when they're grieving. And yeah, there's a million things that I think make it way harder.

Kara: Right. It's all the things that interfere with your ability to be productive as a worker, giving birth or dying or grieving or even heartbreak or any of the kind of big emotional impacts or physical impacts that people go

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through. We don't really know how to deal with correctly or not deal with well I guess. So what do you think about the five stages of grief? I know you have strong opinions.

Krista: I mean I think it was an amazing anecdotal observation at the time, that started a valuable conversation. But what most people don't understand is that it wasn't even actually about coming to terms with someone's loss. It wasn't about what you experience when you have a loss. It was a study of hospice patients. It was about people coming to terms with their own death. And then that work was taken and then applied to dying.

Kara: Wait, that's so interesting. Hold on. It was a study of how people deal with their own death and then it was turned into, this is how you deal with the grief about somebody else's death?

Krista: Right. It was first on death and dying and then became on grief and grieving.

Kara: That's so weird. That's not generalizable in that way.

Krista: No. And if you go back and you read even what Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote in her later years. It was very frustrating to her that people took her work and applied it the way that they did and made it formulaic and made it linear. She never really intended for that to happen, but it was something nobody was talking about at the time. So there's value in it then but we just stopped talking about, even though there are many other grief theories.

We just stopped talking about it and everyone's walking around trying to fit square pegs in round holes and take a process that really is not linear and

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make it something that has a beginning, middle and end and it's just not that way.

Kara: I mean when I think about how uncomfortable Americans in particular, but just people in general are with uncomfortable emotion, we're like, "Okay, I want it to be a process so I'll know when I get to stage two and then what comes next. We want it to be mechanized and almost industrial in that way. We just go through the steps and then it's done and we have successfully grieved as opposed to the messy emotional experience of being a human. Do you have a theory, what is a theory of grief that you find more compelling or more useful?"

Krista: I think that one of the more useful ones is the dual process model of grief. And the reason I like that one is because people in our culture anyway, tend to classify behaviors as good or bad, right or wrong. There's a right way to do grief and I know I definitely fell into this, that's probably why I read so many grief books is because I wanted to do it right and productively. And so a dual process model teaches that there's really kind of two buckets of activities.

So there's grief related, loss oriented activities, thinking about the loss, processing the feelings, dealing with the business of the loss. And then there's this other bucket of activities which is respite, non-loss related. So having hobbies, taking a break, living your life, doing things for fun. And a lot of people will think they can't do that because if they do those non-grief related activities then they're avoiding their grief or they're not as productive in their grief.

And so what dual process theory teaches is that healing is in the oscillation, the intentional back and forth of I'll take time to do the grief related things, the loss oriented things. And then I intentionally give myself permission to take a break from it and we go back and forth, back and forth.

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Kara: It's dialectical kind of ongoing.

Krista: Yeah, it's both and, and there's nowhere to get or go and there's no way to do it right or wrong and behaviors aren't good or bad, it's all-encompassing. And it gives us permission to take care of ourselves and to rest and to not just be obsessed with what has happened all the time.

Kara: So I'm curious how you work with widowed moms and I'm curious how you see kind of patriarchy or socialization showing up in the way that women in particular respond to grief?

Krista: How long do we have?

Kara: Plenty of time. This is going to be the main chunk of the podcast.

Krista: Yeah, I don't think most of us realize how much we are socialized to value the partnered relationship and how much of our identity is wrapped up in being partnered. I don't know if you remember this but way back when I did the 100K program with Brooke and you, you mentored me. One of the things I was talking about was how widows really struggle with confidence. And you were like, "Why? Wouldn't they be struggling with loneliness or sadness? That doesn't really make sense to me."

And what I found is that they don't realize how much of their confidence was being leveraged by the identity that they had in the partnership. And so when that is stripped away then they feel quite vulnerable and naked. They'd all kinds of money drama. If we're not taught as women that we're good at creating money, if we're only taught that we're good at budgeting money then what happens when we get a large amount of money from a life insurance policy? Or we're totally freaked out about losing it because we don't believe we're good at it.

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The wedding ring, we don't want people to see that we're not married anymore because what will they think of us? They will judge us. I see that all the time.

Kara: Yeah, our status will be lower as an unmarried woman.

Krista: Yeah, the lack of self-trust, the decision making anxiety, not having ever really made decisions by yourself and not really knowing how to think about making decisions really shows up, the right or wrong decision making. There is a very long list.

Kara: Do you see a difference in, I don't know exactly who you tend to usually work with but I wonder if that stuff is more pronounced with people who got married earlier and were in their relationships longer. I'm curious, for you for instance you weren't with Hugo very long, were some of those same patterns there or was it a little bit different?

Krista: Not nearly as much. I didn't feel like I had been devalued because I was no longer partnered. But I did, I remember, I didn't want to take my wedding ring off because I didn't want to be 'back on the market'. That's how I thought of it. I kind of hid behind that, I'm not really ready for that. I did have a lot of the financial drama in my brain but I don't think it was as significant for me. A lot of the women that I work with tend to be in that really sweet awkward spot where they're about to be empty nesters and then they become widows.

Sometimes also caregivers of parents, but in that almost an empty nester phase where your identity is about to switch again. You're about to redefine yourself or you have a very specific vision for how your life is going to go and then it doesn't. It's like, okay, who am I if I'm not going to be a mom in the way that I have defined myself and I'm also not a wife. I don't even know who I am.

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Kara: Yeah. I mean I do think women are socialized to have the identity of wife in a way that don't feel like you hear men say so much. Well, if I'm not a husband then who am I? Husband is just one of the many things. Well, I'm a husband and an ad executive and a golfer. I don't know, I'm describing mad men now. But I don't feel there's that same, obviously there are men who are widowed and really grieve their partners of course or are suffering divorce. But I don't think that there's that wife has been a woman's whole identity for so long or a history lesson in civilization.

That was your whole deal, you're a wife and a mother. So that idea of, it is such an interesting thing to be like, this is my identity but I can somehow lose it if the circumstance changes or if my marital status changes in a way that I don't think that men, however much they might grieve their wife or their husband if they're widowed or they become a widower, they're not having that same, who am I if I'm not a husband.

Krista: Yeah. And I also don't think they have that same history of seeking external validation. They are less likely to look for other people's support or worry when they don't get other people's validation about the decisions that they're making. So do I date again? And what do I do with this money and where do I live and how do I parent and all of these things that women seem to really struggle more with.

Kara: Yeah. I just coached somebody and I'm doing the Stop Second Guessing Challenge this week and I just coached somebody about always deferring to her husband on decisions. And then what happens if your husband isn't there, who's making those decisions? You've systematically devalued your own opinion this whole time. So I'm curious, one of the things that you're talking about and certainly that we've heard me talk about ad nauseam on the podcast.

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Is the sort of socialization for women around not just the status value of a relationship, that it's higher status to be partnered than to be single socially. But also this sort of a relationship is your key to happiness. You can be happy only if you're in a happy relationship. So then of course if your partner's gone then you can't be happy. So I'm curious how you sort of see that show up in your work and what are your thoughts now on the other side of this about kind of happiness and relationships?

Krista: Yeah, I see it show up all the time. So there is a lot of, without even realizing it, I think women tend to believe that the goal is to get partnered again. And it's just a matter of doing enough self-work to improve themselves, so immediately they go back to am I good enough for the male gaze? Without using that language, but what do I need to do to my body because it's been a minute and probably I'm not as desirable as I once was?

There's a time limit on that because of my age so I'd probably better hurry up and I'd better fix myself and get myself to an emotional place where I'm good enough, ready enough to date because ultimately I can't be happy unless I'm partnered. So the approach that I try to take is to go back and kind of do the model before the model which is to help them get in a place where they own the emotional experiences they had when they were partnered. Because otherwise they attribute all of their happiness to that person and that partnership.

And so if I can get them to really see that no, it was always you. Not to diminish the other person, I'm sure they were amazing too, but it really never was them, it was always your thoughts about yourself and your life and nobody can take that away from you even when your person dies. So we spend a lot of time on that.

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Kara: I mean I think that's such, it's such an example of why changing your circumstance to resolve your self-doubt that's a temporary measure. I see these people who got married without doing this work on their thoughts too and then they feel confident. Then the minute they get divorced it's all right back to where it was because they never actually changed the thoughts, they just felt better because somebody had 'chosen them'. And then the minute that that's not true, right back to those thoughts again.

Krista: There's always somebody in my program who had a rebound and got remarried quickly. And is proof to the other people that hey, this is not actually the ticket to happiness and I really wish I would have slowed down and figured out what I wanted and who I wanted to be. And realized that I actually could be happy without being partnered and it really doesn't have anything to do with it.

Kara: That is one of the best parts of group coaching is whatever your thing is, there's someone in the group who is or has that thing that you think that you need or want and they're just as bananas as you are, same nonsense. So can you tell us, you mentioned post-traumatic growth earlier. I don't think a lot of people have not heard that, they've only heard of post-traumatic stress. So can you tell us a little bit about post-traumatic growth and how do you think that factors into grief?

Krista: Yeah, I remember the first time I heard post-traumatic growth just as a term and it was like one of those record scratch moments where you're like, "Wait. What is that? What did you just say, post-traumatic what?" And it's the idea that you can go through some sort of traumatic event and you can experience a level of wellness that is worse than where you were before the traumatic event. You can experience a level of wellness that is equivalent to where you were before the traumatic event.

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Or you can use the traumatic event to kind of bounce forward instead of back to greater levels of satisfaction and wellness. The researchers that coined it originally were actually studying widows, they had noticed that some widows were completely miserable. Others were kind of back to 'normal'. And then there was this other group that were actually experiencing more satisfaction and greater levels of happiness and independence and spiritual connection and deeper relationships.

Kara: It wasn't just [crosstalk].

Krista: Right. And it wasn't because they had secretly plauded the death of their partner or anything, yeah.

Kara: Wow, widows who successfully get away with murdering their partner are really happy afterward.

Krista: Yeah. And they are so happy, yeah. I like to compare it, because people tend to think it's a moral thing, it's another should. It's like, well, okay, if I experienced a loss then I should experience post-traumatic growth. Totally not helpful.

Kara: Well, that's what I wanted to ask about, I can totally see and I think I do see people using that as like, okay, so the way you grieve productively and best is to have post-traumatic growth.

Krista: Yeah. The way I think about it, and this is because I live in Kansas probably, we have tornados here. Is if you've been living in a house for a long period of time and a tornado comes and knocks down your house, you're going to have to rebuild your house, you're going to have to find somewhere to live. You could try to rebuild that house as closely as possible to the house that you lived in, that wouldn't be right or wrong or good or bad.

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But if you lived there for a while you probably learn some things about what you liked about that house and what you didn't like. So if you're going to build a house you could also take advantage of that wisdom and experience and update the design and add more windows or add more electrical outlets or whatever. That's post-traumatic growth. It's like can we leverage what we've learned from life experiences to create even more of what we want? It doesn't make us better. It's not morally superior? It's just an option.

Kara: And I think that there is not something there's a timeline on. It's not like, okay, well, I've been grieving too long now, I'm supposed to be having post-traumatic growth now.

Krista: No, and there is no timeline, because grief doesn't end. There is no finish line. Grief is just all the thoughts and feelings that we have about a perceived loss. We're always going to have thoughts and feelings about the loss. So the goal as I see it is just to go from unintentionally thinking about our loss to thinking about it with intention and to deciding who we want to be given that the loss has happened.

Kara: Yeah, well, I love that. So I mean I think that that kind of segues into what advice would you give somebody who is on their grief journey and is having, I don't think, it's not the grief itself that needs to be solved. It's the way that we're relating to the grief or what we're making it mean or how we're talking to ourselves about it. So for any listeners who are kind of struggling with grief or struggling with their thoughts about how it should be going or what should be happening, where do you recommend people kind of start or what's the piece of advice that you could offer?

Krista: Yeah. First just to ignore everything you ever thought you knew about grief because most of it's wrong and it's not helping you, honestly, because there is no right or wrong. Ignore most of what you've learned

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about emotions unless they've learned it from you or other similar teachers. Because when we think about feelings as problems then of course we want to change our thinking to solve the feelings but they aren't problems, they're just experiences to allow.

And so we don't need to think positively, we don't need to force gratitude. We don't need to find the blessings or the hidden benefit. None of that needs to happen. It's more about, can we separate ourselves from what we can control and what we can't? And then make choices accordingly, that to me is what it is.

Kara: I've seen this quote a few times, it's like grief is love with no place to go or something. I like part of that but I also feel like it's, I don't think actually the problem is that the love has no place to go, the person's gone. The problem is actually that we don't know how to allow and express and experience that love and grief are the same way. We think that the love has no place to go because we think that we need the person or the relationship. And people are grieving things that happened to them as well.

It's not necessarily that you've lost somebody who's died. People are grieving the end of a relationship or they're grieving the old self they were before an injury. I mean I went through a really, you know, we've been talking more about loss in terms of death. But people listening to the podcast know I've talked quite a bit about I went through a really intense grief process when I met my partner of the whole life that I was not going to be living anymore.

That I was giving up one life to live a different life and that was, I think, would have sabotaged and ended that relationship if I hadn't done enough emotional work to be able to hold that. So when I think about that idea that it's grief is love with no place to go, it doesn't need the person to go too. It

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needs a place to go inside you. You have to open that dam inside yourself to allow feeling.

I think there's just something around part of what I feel makes grief so hard is that, or at least in my experience when I've grieved people or relationships or whatever is that, it's like I'm trying to get rid of the love also because I think that that's what's painful. But it's not actually the love that's painful. There's the grief but there's also the story about the grief or the belief that the love being there is what's causing the pain and that I need to get rid of it or that I need to be through it. All of that is what's painful.

Krista: Yeah. That has never really resonated with me either, that it has love with nowhere to go. I get that if we didn't care about someone, of course we wouldn't grieve them, but yearning is only a small portion of the grief experience. So yeah, it just never really resonates with me either. It's more like can I just decide consciously how I want to think about the fact that this has happened? Can I reconcile that I wanted it to go this way, it went that way, grief. Then I get to make another choice. Okay, this is what happened, now who do we want to be? Now what do we want to think about what's possible going forward?

Kara: So if somebody is grieving a loss, especially if they are a widow, where can they find you to learn more about your work?

Krista: Yeah. *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, which I realize is super niched, but I highly recommend that if you just want to learn about grief, or you're interested in post-traumatic growth or you want to support someone, come and listen or think of someone you know in your life that might benefit and send them. Because there are lots of widows out there who are just like I was and weren't getting the support that they really wanted. And coachingwithkrista.com is where all of my socials can be found.

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Kara: Your socials.

Krista: My socials.

Kara: Thanks for coming on and sharing your wisdom with us.

Krista: Thanks for having me, yeah, appreciate it.

If you're loving what you're learning in the podcast, you have got to come check out *The Clutch*. *The Clutch* is the podcast community for all things *UnF*ck Your Brain*. It's where you can get individual help applying the concepts to your own life.

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