

150. Navigating Grief and Loss in the midst of personal and professional responsibilities

Vanessa 00:00

Welcome to the Empowered brain, the only podcast using science, psychology and coaching to help you rewire your brain and create a life you love with your host, Dr. Vanessa Calderon, a Harvard grad physician, master coach, and mother of two.

A sweet friends, welcome back to the podcast. If you follow me on social media, what we're talking about today is not going to surprise you. If you don't follow me on social media, this may be a sort of a big surprise for all of you. So we're talking about grief today, and how to navigate grief and loss in the midst of living a life you know, having a business having a career having a personal life, kids relationships, and how you navigate grief in the middle of all that. And the reason why I'm bringing you this topic is because I'm experiencing grief and loss.

And I wanted to share with you what I have been experiencing, both from a place of you know, being authentic about what I'm experiencing. And also because they think Damn, I've learned so much in such a short period of time, and I just wanted to share those lessons with all of you. My sense is, I'm not the only person that has ever experienced grief and grief and loss can show up in so many different ways, the loss of a loved one, divorce, the loss of a job, all those types of things. And so I just want to share what my experience has been in the hopes that it can help some of you navigate your own response to grief and loss.

Okay, so March 3, my mom died. And my mom was an incredible human being, I just get so lit up inside when I think about her and her life. She was acting mayor all the way through and until she died and she had you know, she had been struggling with cancer. She had breast cancer that had metastasized to her bones, and eventually to her soft tissue to her liver, and was experiencing treatment of chemo and radiation for the last six years of her life. And while she was doing that she was still actively serving as the mayor. And if you had not known she was a cancer patient you would never know. You know, towards the end, when she was getting more and more bone metastases, she became a little bit weaker, and so required a walker to walk but still walked still went to all her Park cleanups where she got volunteer, she still went to all of her meetings, she still served as the mayor of her town, I have just oh my gosh, I am just so proud of the woman that she was and the legacy she left.

And experiencing the loss of your mother is some stuff man, it was incredibly emotional for me. So you know, on March 3, she died. And what's interesting, I think about my experience is her disease was progressing for the last six years. And every time she had disease progression, I experienced grief, and I had episodes of mourning where I would cry or get upset or feel rage. And then there would be a

stage of life stabilization with her disease, and then it would progress again. And every time I would progress. I knew we were getting closer and closer to end of life. And that was really hard for me. And I was pregnant with her. I'm the only physician in our family. So I was, you know, trying to answer questions and making sure we were navigating her healthcare appropriately, all those types of things. And on March 3 2024, at 7pm she transitioned from her human body to her spiritual body, her spiritual form. And it was the most beautiful transition ever. My sisters and I were there I have two sisters. And we helped her with so much love and so much regard for the debt she kind of wanted. So we created she was on hospice. She had been on hospice for about three days. We took her home from the hospital about three days before that. And we took her to a her home and we had filled it with so much love. My sister did such a great job. There were beautiful fresh flowers everywhere and candles and aromatherapy and soft music. And it was just the most loving, peaceful environment for her to have her transition. And it was beautiful.

In the last few days before she passed. We had just this incredible outpouring of the community and a family. All these people showing up to share with her the gift that she had been in their lives and It was incredible to witness I was there the entire time. And it was just so incredible to witness. And at 7:22pm, when she took her last breath, my sisters and I were there standing over her. You know, I saw her take her last breath, I had my finger on her pulse, I felt her last heartbeat. When that happened, I just had an incredible emotional reaction, which was, I think, for me, knowing what I know, and having so much insight into my thoughts and all the awareness that I have. I watched myself experience what I was experiencing. And I still had the experience, you know, like, my first reaction was so much sadness, so much sadness and loneliness. I felt like this huge amount of rage built up inside of me, I immediately gave her a big hug. And I didn't want to let go.

And I realized I was feeling a tremendous amount of loneliness in that moment. In that moment, I felt so alone. And I had thoughts come up for me, like, oh my gosh, no one is ever going to love me the way she loved me. And I feel so alone. I remember feeling so alone. And I wasn't you know, I was there with my sisters who are incredible and so much family that was around and I just felt all these emotions come up for me. And then from the loneliness, I went to a bunch of fear based responses, including anger, anger and rage were my two big go to emotions immediately after. And I knew I was projecting you, I was feeling anger. I knew I was feeling rage. And I knew that it was because my mom had died. I knew all of those things. And I was projecting my anger out to my husband, who's incredible. And I love him so much. And thank you if you're listening for being so patient. And I even told him, I remember when we were having a phone call, I said, I'm projecting my anger out to you. And I know it, I know I'm projecting. And he was just so patient.

He's like, That's okay, you know, you can project your anger if that's what you need to do, which made me more mad that he wasn't like fighting with me. He had all this rage, and he wanted to get it out. And he was just so patient and kind and just let me project. And when he didn't give me anger back, I started projecting my anger on other people. It was then mad at the world. And I was mad at the world for the inequities my mom experienced as a woman and as a woman of color. I was like, you know, big middle finger to the patriarchy and to sexism and to machi small, which is the Spanish word for patriarchy. And then eventually, I got really mad at God for taking her away.

And I remember feeling like, Man, this is the most incredible human being in the world she loved with all her heart, she's made this huge impact, why would you take her away. So I just had a tremendous amount of anger and rage and sadness, you know, often when people are grieving, and the anger and rage are showing up. Sometimes it's because underneath all of that is just so much sadness. And it's really tough for the human body and the brain and the spirit to process so much sadness all at once. And so other emotions show up, like anger and rage. This is what I've been learning as I've been going through this. Because, you know, I, I've been experiencing this the way I experienced a lot of other things was trying to do my best to learn from this as I experienced it at the same time.

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So I had all those experiences of anger and rage and loneliness, and just a ton of sadness. And I also in the beginning, I didn't realize I was experiencing this. But I was also experiencing some almost like a dissociation or like, kind of like a denial almost where, you know, I live in Atlanta now. And my mom was in California. And after being there for a few days, after she had passed away, I flew back home to be with my kids and take care of my family. And when I got home, I was separate. I felt separate from the experience. And I remember telling myself, like, you know, I know she's in the spiritual world. I know, she's around me, and I do have those beliefs that her energy is in spirit form. And it's you're around me now. And I believed that before and I believe it now. And because of that, I think I was telling myself, it's fine. It's okay, like she's around me.

And even though I would experience sadness, I felt really consoled by that. But what I realized is, when I had separated myself, physically from the space, I started experiencing some symptoms of what I think was denial. So I had those experiences and then comes her the few days before we were going to have her services her cell we called it a celebration of life. We didn't call it a funeral. You But her Celebration of Life services. And as we were as the days were coming up right before that, oh my gosh, here is like another experience a tremendous amount of grief and mourning. It's about two weeks later now. And I'm just having so much grief.

So there's a difference between grief and mourning. So grief is what you feel inside of you. Mourning is what you experience outside of you. So grief is feelings of sadness, mourning is like writing and that that's the mourning part of it. And I realized for me, when I let myself mourn, I was just in tremendous amount of tears. So, what I tried to go online and ask myself, what stage of grief are my n? You know, there's those stages of grief that you may have heard of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, that were brought to light or proposed by a researcher Elisabeth Kubler Ross. And so I went online and asked myself what stage of grief Am I n, because I wanted to know, so that I knew how much longer I was going to have to feel it because I wanted to move past it as fast as I could. Because it was really hard to feel and I didn't want to feel it anymore. Oh, goodness, gracious. Vanessa, I love you so much little Vanessa are trying to move past this so fast.

Turns out, you can't move past a very fast turns out, it's on its own timeline, and you can't control it. So what I've come to learn, I've learned so much, by the way. So the first thing I've learned is those stages of grief are developed by this incredible psychologist Elisabeth Kubler Ross. But they were developed for individuals confronting end of life. So those were those stages of grief that she had seen as a theme that would happen for most people. They were not developed for other folks experiencing different

types of grief. But they have since been adopted by almost everyone, everyone talks about the stages of grief for almost everything. But the truth is that when you lose a loved one, first of all, you don't always experience those same stages of grief. And if you do, they are not linear. So yeah, I was experiencing a ton of anger. In the beginning, I didn't experience any denial in the beginning, just a ton of anger. And I didn't go to bargaining, you know, or I don't feel depressed, for example, and you feel sad, but I don't feel depressed. And so there's, I just I mentioned that because I guess what I really want to get across here is that your experience of grief is valid, whatever you're experiencing, it's 100% valid, and your experience of grief is going to be so different from anyone else's experience of grief.

Even if you're grieving for the same person, even if you were raised in the same house, you know, my sisters and I were incredibly close and I loved them so much. And we all had totally different responses to my mom dying, just very different experiences of grief. And the reason why is your experience of grief is going to be unique to the relationship that you had with the person. So your experience of grief is going to depend on you know, all of the perceptions, all of the experiences, everything you experience with that person. And two siblings living in the same home are going to have different experiences with their parent. And so our experiences were different. And I didn't understand why they were so different in the beginning. In fact, I really judged the experiences of other people thinking that my experience was the valid one, everyone else's experience was invalid.

They were doing it wrong. But it turns out, every experience is valid. And it's going to look different for everyone. And the sooner you can just accept that your experience won't look like anyone else's, the more peace you will create with your experience. I started reading a book that has been super helpful that I will recommend to all of you that are experiencing grief or if you know someone experiencing grief if you want to share this with them. My book was the book is called grief and how to heal from it. Actually, I'm gonna pull it up right now. So I give you the exact title because it has been understanding your grief. It's what it's called, called Understanding your grief and it was written by last name wolfelt Wolf ELT. It's been a very supportive book for me and a very healing book for me. Really just I think because it's really supported me and validating a lot of what I was feeling. Okay, so your grief is going to feel a lot different than a lot of other people's grief. And it's not all going to come all at once. So I think for me, that was another thing that was shocking to me how it has come from me in waves. So you know, I felt a lot of emotions in the various Getting in the first few days. And then I didn't feel very many emotions, I felt just like, so blessed and grateful for the life that my mom lived. And that's how I would talk about it.

And then I would get these like waves of grief. You know, what I used to do when my mom was alive is I would get in my car, and to go pick up my kids. And that was the time that I would call her. And so I remember the first time that happened for me, I got in my car, and I would go pick up my phone, and oh, my God, that hit me so hard, that there is no one for me to call that made me really emotional. So that's how it will show up. Like the other day, I was in a meeting with with a few people. And I'm experiencing, you know, I was having a sort of a good day that day, not an incredibly sad day, that day with grief. And we're on the Zoom call. And I noticed I make a comment about something that's in her background. And she's like, oh, yeah, my mom gave me that. And immediately I felt the sadness when she said, Mom, and what they would her mom gave her. And so grief is so fascinating. What I've come to understand is, it's not something that you necessarily get over process. It's something that you learn

to integrate into your life, because it's going to take its time. And instead of thinking about it as like, how do I process it? How do I get over it? How do I move past it? What's been supportive to me is thinking about it as how do I create peace with it? How do I reconcile it? How do I let it teach me what it's here to teach me and keep going? And that for me, what I've realized is once I was able to just reframe the way I thought about it, because in the beginning, my initial response was, how do I move past this as fast as possible? This feels horrible. I don't want to feel like this, how do I get on the other side of this? And that is just not something that grief does. In fact, you know, Carl Jung says What you resist persist. And the same thing with grief, when you resist it or try to get to the other side. It's just going to be there longer and harder.

And so I remember, once I had that shift in my mind, where maybe resisting it or maybe trying to move past it really fast isn't the right way. And I was sitting in doing this morning meditation, and I decided, like, what would it be like if I surrendered the grief and even open to surrendering to the grief created this incredible amount of lightness in my body? Where that heaviness and sadness was sort of lifted off? And I told myself like, okay, so what would that be like? And all of a sudden, it felt different. And I'll tell you, you know, I am today I'm recording this podcast, it's March 29. You won't hear this for a while. But um, it's not even been a whole month yet for me. And I'm still not sleeping through the night, I'm still having like, middle of the night awakenings, thinking about things having these dreams. And that day when I had that meditation and told myself, like, what would it be like to surrender? I had a night where it felt much more peaceful. I still woke up, but it was different. It wasn't like, the night I was having before or even since then, because I still had some nights that have been really tough, where I feel like there's a lot of Fasching at night.

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So I guess my invitation to all of you is to allow yourself to surrender to the process. And really ask yourself, you know, it's not about processing, it's about reconciling. It's about creating peace with what you're experiencing. So the other thing that I think is really important, when you come to ask yourself, How do I support myself? You know, these are going to be a little bit obvious, but I just want to share with you what it looks like. So one is acknowledging that you're going to need to take care of your mind and body. So what do I mean by that is, do your best to sleep and do your best to eat healthy whole foods, avoid excess carbs or sugar. So sleep for me has been one of the toughest things because prior to this, I am an excellent sleeper. And I actually really value sleep. I sleep at minimum eight hours every night and I do my best to go to bed. I have a beautiful night routine that I used to have before and get up in the morning. I have spent this beautiful time meditating and I just had these routines that I would have, which have gotten really disrupted.

I am struggling sleeping through the night. I do my best to try to go to bed early but even then sometimes I avoid going to sleep because I'm don't want to feel what I'm going to feel and so I catch myself sometimes like staying up a little later than normal. And like, Okay, I see what's happening. I see what I'm avoiding. And so, my invitation to you is do your best to catch yourself when that's happening and try your best to sleep you know as peacefully as you need to. And whatever routine you need. To create, maybe you make sure that if you already don't have a sleep routine, you create one, minimize your electronics, maybe add some lavender oils, you know essential oils to your bedtime routine if you need to. Make sure you're making it really dark so that you're doing everything you can to support you

getting a good night's sleep, make it nice and cozy. Maybe take a nice warm bath before, whatever you need to do to support you and sleeping through the night. So the healthy whole foods so in the beginning for me, I didn't want to get out of bed and I didn't want to eat. I just thought it was so pointless and stupid to eat. I don't I didn't have I didn't have an appetite. So Why eat. But I would catch like stomach pains in my stomach. And I was like, oh, okay, I guess maybe I knew what it was a news because I had eaten.

But I just thought eating was so stupid. So like, there's no rush into this, right? Like, it wasn't rational at all. It's just what I was experiencing. And so finally I was like, Okay, I know I have to eat, I know that if I wait to eat really long, I'm just gonna eat whatever I find. And that's not what I want. Because I know that what I need is Whole Foods, I need healthy whole foods and eat good protein. I don't want excess carbs or sugar. And so then I started just preparing stuff around me to do that. And I was again, super fortunate because my husband and I both primarily work from home. And so he was home and would check in on me, have you seen anything, can I make you this? Can I make you or whatever. And he knew that I wanted to have healthy whole foods and he was really supportive and doing that. And if you're alone, just set yourself up, maybe do an order from the grocery store now that we can get almost everything over to our house and order yourself something you know the healthy whole foods so that your fridge is full, your house is full of things that are going to support you. If you're being supportive to somebody else, consider ordering this for them or getting them going to the grocery store, doing a grocery run for them, and bringing them stuff that's super easy, already prepared and already healthy to eat, and would go a very long way. And then the last thing for me was exercise. So I before this, I'm a big, I was an athlete, when I was growing up, I love to exercise every day. And you know, for the first few days, immediately after my mom died, I didn't exercise at all. And then when I finally came home, back to Atlanta, I couldn't get myself out of bed. And I knew that I needed to go outside.

And I knew that I needed to exercise. But it was just such a challenge for me to just even put that energy into doing that. And so knowing that I needed to do it was really helpful. And I remember, you know, the day I decided to finally do it, it was like two days after I got back home, I got myself out of bed, I put on my gym clothes. And then I just walked really slow to my car. And then I sat in my car for a few minutes before I even turned it on. And then I drove myself to the gym and I just sat in the parking lot for a few minutes. And it's not like I was sitting there saying I'm avoiding this. I was just sitting there like scrolling through like social media, which I never do. And so I was like, Ah, this is interesting. Look at what I'm avoiding. I'm just avoiding all of this. And I eventually had a had an workout. And I remember after my very first workout how incredible I felt, I just felt like the endorphins were running. And I just felt so good. I will say though, after I was done, I was running intervals that day, and I was stretching after my run and had this huge wave of tears like I needed to start crying immediately as I was stretching.

And so I let myself cry a little bit, I finished stretching. And then I left and I that was still back in the early days where I told myself I was going to resist this and know that I was going to feel better every time I felt a little bit better. I kept thinking that I was over it. And man that does not support you. Because the next time you feel sad, you're like wait a second, I thought I was over it already. So again, understanding that this comes in waves and that it doesn't come all at once, for me was one of the most reassuring supportive things for me. Because the truth is, if it just it can't come all at once, if you were

to experience a tremendous amount of grief all at once, it would be devastating. It would be devastating. I don't think the human body in fact, that book I read mentioned how it comes like this purposefully. Because Can you imagine how devastating it would be to your mind to your body to your spirit to experience all of that grief at once. And so it being it coming in waves is by display design, it's supposed to come in waves. And so allowing it and creating space for it to come like that really supports you in integrating what you're experiencing into your life. So, again, how to support yourself, one have those routines make space for to come in waves and to create those routines for yourself. Get yourself out of bed and out of your house if possible.

Even if it's just like a five minute walk outside and tell yourself it, I thought, well, we'll only do five minutes, it only has to be five minutes, but you've got to get outside and, and get that fresh air and feel that sun. So the other thing that I've realized has been really supportive is having my experience what I'm experiencing, not just in my head outside, which means like talking about it. So talk about what you're experiencing. If you have people around you, that you trust, that are supportive, that love you, that aren't telling you to get over it already, that aren't telling you to stop being so emotional to stop crying. If you have people that are actually creating a supportive environment, talk to them, let them love you, they just want to hear from you. They just want to be supportive, let them love you. If you don't have that there are support groups out there. That's why they exist, I would recommend you Google a support group near you. Because that won't just help you get stuff out of you. But it will also help normalize what you're experiencing. I'll tell you, for me, this was incredibly hard for so many reasons.

For one, I didn't realize the amount of like discomfort it was to let people in for me, I thought I was already over that. But I'll tell you, this experience with grief has opened up so much for me, I'm learning so much about myself. And this was one big one that I didn't want to let people in. Because I didn't want people to see me sad for all the reasons that we avoid sadness as a society, I was ashamed to feel sad. I was afraid, you know, I was ashamed of what people would think. I didn't want to like rain on anybody else's parade. You know, the programming around sadness in our society is usually that sadness is unproductive that it's not helpful. Why would you feel sad, it feels so silly move on, like the person, you know, like all of those things. And I realized I was holding on to all of that. I'm also, you know, a general optimist. I'm usually upbeat and happy. And I'm also a master coach. And I'm really great at noticing and managing my own thoughts and emotions. And because of all that, you know, the thoughts, the limiting beliefs, the stories I had told myself as I should be over this, I shouldn't have to deal with this, I should be able to transmute this feeling of sadness to something else. Now just tell us with friends that that is not supportive one bed, it's not supportive at all. In fact, all it does, it keeps you stuck.

Because, again, what I mentioned is grief isn't something you get over grief is something you integrate, and you can't integrate it into your life if you pretend like it never happened. And so talking about it, especially with people that love you, will support you in integrating this into your life. So for me, you know, I avoided talking to anybody about this because one, I didn't want to be sad. I wanted to tell myself that nobody loves me, nobody cared, because then that meant I could stay isolated. That's just not true. I had so many friends reaching out to me that I just didn't even want to like I remember in the beginning, I didn't even want to text anybody back because I just told myself, they don't really care, or

This is so stupid, or they're just they're just doing this because they have to out of obligation. Or really people love you. And for me, allowing myself to let the Min has been a journey for myself, and also really healing.

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The last thing for me is I remembered thinking, you know, what, if they're all in a good mood, and then I show up, and I don't want to be fake and pretend like I'm fine. I want to be authentic. But I also don't want to bring down the vibe of the group. So how do I sort of reconcile all those things. And it's still a work in progress for me, I'll tell you, but what I realize is I get to be authentic, I get to feel my feelings. And I get to trust that, that the adult friends in my life are going to be fine, that they'll deal with their own emotions, that the vibe of the group will be fine that it will deal with itself. And I don't have to feel responsible for all of that I could just really know that my come from is authentic. And that's who I want to be. The last thing is, you know, when you're thinking about isolating yourself in the beginning, isolation is something I think a lot of us lean into. But long term isolation is not healing. For the same reasons I mentioned earlier. When you isolate yourself long term, what are you doing, you're keeping yourself from fully Integrating your experience. You can live a life of isolation if you want. But isolation leads to a number of really bad health outcomes. In fact, so much so that we've called isolation, the sixth vital sign because human connection matters so much. You've got to be around other humans to have a long holistic life. And isolation leads to a number of bad outcomes. So if you're experiencing grief, and then you also go into isolation for like a long term isolation, it's just it's going to take you longer to process what you're experiencing to integrate add into your life and it's going to lead to bad health outcomes.

So I'm, that's something for me that was just so supportive and learning how Okay, so sometimes I need to be alone. And that's okay. But long term isolation is not healing long term isolation is not supportive, and it won't help me reconcile and integrate what I'm experiencing. And the last thing I will say is an I actually hated it. When people said this, to me, people were like, be kind to yourself, you know, give yourself what you need. And I wanted to give everybody the middle finger would say that to me, because I don't need people. If this is what I told myself, I don't need you to tell me to be kind to yourself. I'm always kind to myself. But what I realized is, I actually didn't know what that really really meant, like, what it meant to be kind to myself to give myself what I needed. I didn't know what that meant. Until right now, I've always been, you know, well, not always. I used to be really hard on myself. And I had a huge transformation and coaching changed my whole worldview and my life. And then I learned how to love myself and be super kind to myself. But this is just such a different level. When I finally allowed myself to ask myself like, what do you need?

Hey, Vanessa, what do you need? What do you need today? What do you need in this moment? Hey, Vanessa, what do you want? When I allowed myself to ask that question and genuinely listen to the answer. So much changed for me, was able to just sit quietly, I was able to understand that, you know, I'm not getting behind on anything, I'm not getting behind on goals, I can continue to move forward. And if it's a little bit slower now, that's okay. Like, I'm not in a race with anybody. And I think that was the other thing for me, that was really healing. I was so afraid to slow down in life, because of all of this that I thought I needed to go keep going at my same pace. But that's not what I needed. That's not what I wanted. What I actually needed, was to give myself the love that I needed in the moment, give myself

space. And so my invitation to all of you is everything I mentioned here, but also, again, like ask yourself, what do you need? What do you want and say your name? Hey, Vanessa, what do you need right now?

Hey, Vanessa, what do you want right now, for me, it was interesting, what would come up, I need to sit, I need to lie down. I need a hug. I need to do work. I need to record a podcast right now. Like I feel really good about that. Because you're going to have these days while you're on these beautiful highs and other days when you're not. And just listen to yourself, be kind to yourself, and really ask yourself, what do you need, and give yourself whatever comes up. Alright, so with brands, I go through this entire podcast without crying, which is shocking. I didn't think I'd be able to do that. And, again, my mom was the most relatable human being that you know, my experience of resilience, of grit, of really, like limited and unlimited potential unlimited possibility. That's just how she lived her life. I was able to give a beautiful eulogy for her and I just feel so grateful that her blood runs through me and that she was my example of what's possible. There's a podcast I did with her a long time ago. I think it's in like the early 70s or 80s. It's called the an interview with the first Latina mayor. So I recommend you checking that out. If you're interested. It's one of my earlier podcasts, but you'll get to hear her voice. You'll get to see how she just approached life, which I just think is such a gift over the crickets podcast episode 29 Alright, twit friends, I will see you next time, adios!

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Hey, sweet friends, if you love what you're learning, then you've got to join us in the journey. It's my all inclusive program and the best community out there giving you the education you never knew you needed to help you create a life you love. Join us at [Vanessa Calderon md.com](http://VanessaCalderon.md.com) forward slash join. I'll see you there.