

Ep #122: A Ph.D. in Grief



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Many have experienced grief. Everyone's grief is different. This episode is a raw and very vulnerable expression of my journey with grief thus far in hopes to connect with those of you who have been through it, those of you who will go through it, and as a connection to myself through one of my favorite outlets, which is writing. This is episode number 122.

I understand that for many of you, you have followed along on social media, and you understand the roller coaster that we have been on. But if you are just a podcast listener and you do not follow me on social media, then you have missed out on the announcement that my beautiful mother, Kathleen Conti, has passed away.

Not after a absolute month of rollercoaster and emotions we, since last time I was on this podcast, she was actually given, that following day from the last time I recorded, she was finally given a proper diagnosis from the Cleveland Clinic. They found out that her cancer was stage four melanoma and was completely curable, completely treatable. They had very high hopes for her.

We got a call on a Friday afternoon stating that her diagnosis was melanoma. This was good news. There are now immunotherapies that have advanced tremendously over the last few years. We could expect a full recovery. They said once she started immunotherapy, it would just melt away, and she would be okay.

So she actually passed away about five days after that call and about four days before immunotherapy began. To say that we are devastated would be an absolute understatement. I wrote out some of my feelings, and I'm going to read those to you now.

Mom's diagnosis and death whirlwind of events have happened fast. We were living our best lives, no symptoms of sicknesses, only a few short weeks ago. Her cancer diagnosis happened, and she passed only 21 days after and only four days before starting her treatment that the doctor said would cure all of it.

Ep #122: A Ph.D. in Grief

Only 25 days ago, she and I were doing normal mom and daughter things, shopping and pooling and cooking and laughing and, and just being together. 15 days ago, she was so weak that I was spoon feeding her and wiping her mouth.

Only five days ago I was watching the doctors and the nurses running circles around her yelling at each other and ripping her clothes off and trying to keep her alive. On that day, I had to do the absolutely unthinkable. I had to make the decision to take her off of her ventilator and let her pass in order to get her out of the pain that she was clearly in. I then held her and talked to her and reminded her of stories about our childhood Christmases as she passed away.

Now she is gone. The funeral is over. All of the out of town relatives are back to their lives. The chaos of the caretaking and the prescriptions and the doctor's visits and the funeral arrangements, it's all gone. I am just left here in my office writing this email with a gaping hole in my heart that is almost unbearable.

My head is still spinning. We still aren't exactly sure what took her. They said maybe it was a stroke, maybe a blood clot. I don't have the audacity or the energy to look into it if I'm being honest. But I will tell you that the days in between the death and the funeral were almost completely unbearable. I had no closure. Only demons have memories and what ifs and sorting through all of her stuff and finding her journals and smelling her clothes and losing my mind every 10 minutes.

Initially, we weren't planning on having an open casket funeral. We had planned on a cremation because that was her request. But I made a mistake in the paperwork, and I accidentally had her embalmed, which I've laughed about a few times because I just know that she would think that that was hilarious.

But this accidental embalming allowed us to have an open casket, which we weren't going to do. The open casket service brought me more closure than I knew was even available. I didn't know why people did open caskets.

Ep #122: A Ph.D. in Grief

I didn't know that it would bring so much closure. But seeing her looking so beautiful and peaceful after such a traumatic last couple of hours was exactly what I needed. She will be cremated on Tuesday.

This month, August 2023, I am getting a Ph.D. in grief because it has absolutely brought me to my knees in a way that I never had been rocked before. I know that I will heal. I know that grief at this very early stage is the most raw and the most intense, but I wouldn't wish this on anyone.

My nights are spent suffocating in the quiet home that I live in while everyone else is asleep, and my days are spent either crying or pissed off or just completely zoned out or looking at our old texts and watching videos of her laughing or laying in her bed.

My entire life has been on hold. This all just happened so fast. So, so, so fast. I mean, 22 days between finding out she had cancer and her death. I haven't worked in weeks. I have forgotten completely about self-care, although that is something that I plan to bring back in full force now.

You know, I've always been a doer. I can get anything done, right? Build a business, done. Build someone else's business, done. Build my body for a bodybuilding show, done. Employ 60 people, done. CrossFit, done, right? Raise four kids, have dinner on the table every single night, done and done.

But with this, there is nothing that I can do. I'm at a forced stop, can't fix it. There's no way around it except through it. At times, I paint my war face on, and I come at it like a warrior. Other times, I feel like I'm begging and I'm clawing with reality, and that this is a nightmare. I feel completely tortured and begging for it to stop.

I've been listening to grief podcasts and reading grief books and journaling and breathwork and therapy and nature walks and writing letters to my mom and writing down things that I don't want to forget. But it feels like I'm in a tidal wave, and I'm being pulled under, and I'm in complete panic that this is my new reality. I am begging to wake up.

Ep #122: A Ph.D. in Grief

But all of the journaling and the therapy and the breath work, all of these coping tools are simply laughable at the magnitude of this wave. It feels like someone is throwing me a teeny, teeny, teeny, little two inch floaties to hold on to in the midst of a tsunami.

They say that the only way to get through the grief is to allow it in, to allow it to rock your world, to not busy yourself with other things, to not distract yourself with other things, but to allow it to just take you. I've been allowing that. I've been open with it. I've been writing about it, and I've been sharing about it. I've been telling everyone that will listen what it's like. I've been grasping for straws also and begging for answers that will tell me that I will be okay, that I'm not forever broken. Because honestly I'm certain that I will be forever broken right now.

I'm sifting through every message from my friends and from loved ones and from followers. I'm reading the books and the podcasts, and I'm looking for evidence that there are people out there that lost their moms young, people that lost their moms in a close relationship and lost them young and still had a "normal" life.

To be honest, I haven't found much that I want to hold on to. Most good-intended people that try to comfort me just tell me that I will never get past it. I refuse for that to be true. They say that the pain of grief is equivalent to how deeply you loved the person that you lost, and man did I love that woman.

I knew every wrinkle and crevice on her hands. I studied the way she walked, the way she smelled, laughed, the way she cried. I looked up to her, and she looked up to me. She took care of me emotionally and financially my first 20 years, and I did it right back to her the last 15. My brother, Ben, described her very well with his words here I'm getting ready to read to you. This is just a small snippet of something I took out of a larger piece of work.

He said she was there for all of it, every second. She lived for me. She gave everything for me. She went broke for us. She bounced checks to

Ep #122: A Ph.D. in Grief

make sure I had a few extra bucks in college. She drove three hours at two a.m. to bail me out of jail. She healed broken hearts, hangovers, lost games, sicknesses, and bad news with meatballs and cheesecake.

She led a career in telecommunications for 30 years. That was the glue that held our family together. She made sure every single holiday was decorated for, cooked for, and celebrated in the highest form. She was so kind to every human unless you were taking too long to get off of the airplane.

She was happiest in the kitchen in the morning with coffee. She was a Democrat. Then he said no one's perfect. This is a Republican obviously. She made a house a home. She laughed so hard and never judged. Our house had an open door policy, and inside that door always smelled like pasta or coffee. She loved the Red Sox fiercely, taking walks, a swimming pool, shopping at Goodwill, and a good deal.

She was an avid reader, a sucker for romance. She just deeply wanted to be loved. I, guys, I didn't know that my body could even feel this magnitude of emotion. I didn't know that this was available to me. I didn't know that this type of feeling was even possible. I feel lucky that I had her, and that I got to go through the experience that allowed me to love another woman like that.

I also think that grief is a teacher. I'm new to grief, but I am being fucking schooled. I notice already that it's working its magic on me. My heart has started cracking open in new ways. I feel already that I am softer. That I am more compassionate for others. I find myself more patient with every single person around me. I've stopped talking so much, and I've started listening.

I have a new and a fresh desire to put more love into the food that I cook for my kids, to make a bigger deal out of holidays with my family, to kiss my husband more passionately. I have found that I want to work even less but do even better work. Spending less time marketing my work and more time crafting a masterpiece of a body of work for my clients.

Ep #122: A Ph.D. in Grief

I want to finally learn the harmonica. I've put it off for too long. I want to travel, and I want to sit in the woods, and I want to lift heavy weights, and I want more good music in my life. I want more concerts. I want more music festivals. I want more days of laying on a blanket in the sunshine.

I want more boredom and slowness. I've started noticing things. I've started noticing spider webs a lot, like really in awe of what spiders can do. I feel like the birds are chirping louder or chirping for the first time in a long time. I learned that in deep grief, the feeling of joy is actually more available to us if we allow it in because everything is heightened.

Today, I was hiking at Veterans Park here in Lexington and probably scaring all of the other hikers with my sobs. I asked mom to help me find joy again and to give me a sign. About ten steps later, I found a heart shaped rock on the trail, and the heart was crooked and lopsided, just like the ones that she always, always signed next to her name. It will now live on my dashboard forever.

It's in times like these that I know that I will eventually be okay. Maybe I could become the voice that I am so desperately searching for. I'm so desperately hoping I will find someone to tell me that I am not broken. Maybe it's just been me that I've been needing this whole time. Maybe even one day, I will feel a calling to be that for others.

Thank you for listening. Thank you for allowing my mom's name and her story to resonate inside of your heart and for allowing me to take this month away from business to talk to you about her and to talk to you about my family. I want to thank everyone who came to her services and to everyone that just loved her throughout your life and everyone that prayed for her. I love you mom. So much.