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EPISODE 218: MARTHA ROULEAU – GRIEF & GRIEVING

Martha Rouleau

The grieving process evolves over time, and the reason it evolves over time is because of the way the brain happens to work and begin to make sense of this new shift in its new change in its experience.

Female Voice

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business, produced by the William & Mary School of Business and its MBA program. Offered in four formats: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. For more information, visit wm.edu.

Ken White

Welcome to Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. Sharing strategies, information and insight that help you become a more effective leader, communicator and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. If you've lived for any length of time, you have experienced grief. It's a universal emotion caused by losing someone or something you've loved or cared about. Whether it's the loss of a job, the death of a family member, or loss of a pet, grief and grieving can be intense, strong enough to adversely affect your work and life. Martha Rouleau is an adjunct lecturer and mindfulness wellness professional at William & Mary. She works at the university's McLeod Tyler Wellness center. She recently delivered a presentation on grief and the brain to William & Mary faculty and staff. Afterwards, she joined us to talk about grief and grieving, what they are and how to approach them as a person, colleague and leader. Here's our conversation with Martha Rouleau.

Ken White

Martha, thank you so much for joining us. It's great to see you and great to have you on the podcast.

Martha Rouleau

Oh Ken. Well, thank you so much. I'm happy to be here and to be able to shed any light on this you know particular topic because I've really learned so much from learning about grief and grieving through my own personal experiences and through some additional training and research that I did. So thank you.

Ken White

Yeah, oftentimes some of our guests have just spoken to a class they've been visiting the building and we talk about what they talked about with the students. You had just given a seminar that I sat in on just several days ago and I thought, oh, we've got to have Martha come and join us and to talk about grief. How is it defined? What is grief?

Martha Rouleau

Well, so we look at Ken grief and grieving. So grief is actually the emotion that we have. It's a very natural emotion that we have and it's really the notion that if we have loved, we will experience grief. It is one of those emotions that really is universal. And because we are connected beings mammals that there will be loss and that we are wired to feel the loss because it is one of these bonding experiences that we have. And it's an attachment. It's an attachment that happens in the brain and all the chemistry that goes along with it. So typically when we talk about grief, we understand that it's the emotion. Very often it can come as certainly big waves. We can even years down the road have an experience and we can feel that pang of grief again. And that's all okay. We remember, right? And the body will remember, particularly when there's attachment. So now we look at grieving. And grieving is actually the process we go through as we continue to evolve and experience what it's like to be living in a different situation, with different parameters, with different experiences than what we had when we were with a loved one.

Ken White

Yeah.

Martha Rouleau

And I want to just jump in here and add this piece too. Where is very often. Sometimes grief can be minimized because people can consider that there's like a hierarchy and someone's grief should be considered worse than my grief. But we all have our own unique experience of the situation or unique experience of the person, animals, transitions, that letting go and that shift through transitions is also important to notify, to recognize as a part of grief.

Ken White

You've worked with so many people. What are some of the events you mentioned? It could be a person, it could be a pet. What are some of the events that you've seen that have caused people to grieve?

Martha Rouleau

Right? Oh gosh, certainly a loss of a loved one. I just mentioned loss of a pet. I think retirement. I think retirement is a very interesting place to go, that very often people don't want to acknowledge. And usually society basically says, oh, you're so lucky. Right? You're so lucky, you're retiring. Not realizing that it's a shift and a shift in the way the brain is perceiving your world. And certainly loss of employment. It can be people who have lost their health and there's a chronic illness that comes up. And their way of being able to move throughout the world can be very different than what they're used to. And being able to come to an understanding of what's that, of how to do it differently is another.

Ken White

So not necessarily losing an individual, losing something that, like you said earlier, you love something, it was very important to you.

Martha Rouleau

Something that matters to you.

Ken White

You had said, it's a personal process. How do you explain that?

Martha Rouleau

So as a personal process, I think it's important to hopefully, I wish this for people to have ease is to understand that there's no set deadline, there's no set arrival point that we're going to get to, that the grieving process evolves over time. And the reason it evolves over time is because of the way the brain happens to work and begin to make sense of this new shift in its new change in its experience. So the hardest part, I have found for most people is to give ourselves permission to be able to take the time that it takes. And so there's many stigmas or cultural beliefs that go along with this, of, gosh, if you don't hurry up, you're not going to be a productive enough member of society. Keep back the emotions. It's not okay to express them. You're supposed to be strong. Let's not overdramatize the situation. And when are you going to be back to normal? So the reason we have to honor the fact that it's a unique process is because our brains are going to be putting things into perspective and it's going to take a bit of time for that. And particularly when the attachment has been strong biologically, but also, I want to say, the attachment to meaning and purpose, when we think about retirement or the loss of a job, right, that's

given that person meaning and purpose. So there's that whole new way, perhaps even values based, of how do we redefine ourselves?

Ken White

So yes, there are some similarities, but yes, there are major differences then, and that's that personal. Time frame, I would assume there is none.

Martha Rouleau

There is no time frame. And I think that's what we have to really think about, particularly when we think about the five stages of grief that are very familiar out there, that yes, they have a lot of truth and merit to them, but if we begin to use them as a measuring stick of how am I doing and evaluating ourselves, then perhaps we're not allowing ourselves to just trust in the fact that it's going to evolve. And grief is a very. Grieving is an interconnected process, because if we're all recognizing that and can share that this is what I experience, then we can elicit support, really, from others to help us, help us understand and help us feel connected. So that's why even having other people who are grieving or other people who are supportive us going through grieving is probably one of the key factors that can help the trajectory as we continue to evolve.

Ken White

What can it feel like? What can people experience as they're grieving?

Martha Rouleau

Well, the motion of grief itself is clearly, it can be sadness, it can be overwhelm. It can be anger, it can be frustration, it can be even some people get to the point where they hold two feelings of, this is so hard, this is so difficult. And I'm thankful for. Thankful for the fact of whatever it might be. There's this sense of uncertainty, for sure, because we're living in such a different place, how do we actually see or imagine? Because the brain wants to predict what's going to come next. And if we have that familiar way of someone always arriving home at 06:00 p.m.? Right? At 06:00 p.m. is going to come up for the longest time where we're going to keep predicting that that person is going to come home. And the brain's right there predicting until again, it can make peace or shift the neuroplasticity to see things a little bit differently. Some people feel very isolated as well, too. And that's where I'm just going to be stressing. You'll hear my theme, Ken, of making sure we understand. It's that connection, interconnectedness, that helps us have compassion and empathy and feel not alone.

Ken White

That 06:00 p.m. thing. I just had a colleague who had lost a dog quite a while ago, maybe three, four years ago, who said, just the other day I pulled in the garage, I was expecting

the dog to greet me. And I know that's not happening, but, yeah. So that leads me to what you were talking about when you were sharing your session earlier. This is all tied to the brain, and one of the words that you had shared was neuroplasticity. What is that?

Martha Rouleau

Right. And I want to make sure I give credit to Mary Francis O'Connor's work. She's written a beautiful book called the Grieving brain. And there's also a TED talk out there. As you know, I showed just a little clip of that, and I think she's got beautiful examples of what to do. So over time, as we have experience, the brain creates that neural pathways of what the experience is. So 6:00 person walks in the door, animal walks in the door. And because we attach our neurobiological attachments, which means also through our experiences of connection, not just a physical act, the brain is continually looking for those same patterns over and over again. So the reality and the dissonance is when at 06:00 the brain is predicting, because it has such a strong, I can even say, like maybe even a superhighway, depending on the number of years of that experience, of 06:00 p.m. And all of a sudden it's not happening. The brain is going to take a while to try and make sense of this. Okay, so, no, there's an absence here, although my memory, my virtual memory, right. My virtual memory is that person is going to come in. And Mary Francis O'Connor has a lovely phrase where she says, we're actually creating our new cartography inside our head. And that's why it takes time. Right? And that's why it's okay. In that moment when there's that sense of, oh, yes, it's 06:00 and they're not returning home, feelings are going to come up. And that's why there can't be a definite end line because it could be years. And that doesn't mean that we're not adapting. And I think that's where it's real important to remember about evaluation and not evaluating ourselves, because we are adapting all along. The more and more we have the courage to stay present with your experience of emotions, because emotions are messengers. They're telling us that something mattered, and they're not, I believe from my mindfulness background, they're not to be put away, pushed away. They're to be just really seen, experienced, so that they then can shift. One thing that I definitely want to add right here is because I offered the program a second time for students and it was in person. And at the end we stood up and we offered some movement. And one student came up afterwards and indicated how she actually experienced the shift of from having sat, having listened, having felt some of the experience she was having, and then to move things around in the body. So I'm jumping ahead a little bit about what are some important things we can do, because there has been some research, just like trauma lives in the body, grief. And grief can be such a traumatic event lives in the body, too. So whatever feels good for the body to move and shift and allow things to not stay stuck, it can be really valuable.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Martha Rouleau in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business, the Financial Times, Bloomberg

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Ken White

You took the question right out of my mouth. So what does someone do when you say movement or you mean exercise?

Martha Rouleau

It can be walking. It can be anything that resonates with them, but something really to get the body moving. So, of course, here at William & Mary, how lucky are we with all the amazing yoga classes and the rec center has all those classes. It doesn't have to be vigorous. It can be just the fact of gentle opening of the body. So energetically some people might like a more stronger aerobic workout, and some people, and this can shift from day to day, might just say, you know what, I just feel like a real gentle walk to do. So no prescription here. It's really, again, making this process be your process.

Ken White

Yeah. So many of our listeners are big exercisers. So many of our guests work out at 06:00 a.m. every day because they know if they don't, they're not going to get to it later. And so, yeah, it would be interesting, I think, for executives and leaders to what does this do? I already work out. Does that mean a lighter workout? A heavier workout? But bottom line is it is tied to the body and that can help a healing process. You also mentioned breathe. Breath or breathing. Where does that come into play?

Martha Rouleau

Oh, breath comes into play because if we really take a look at breath and breathing, we understand it's probably the only remote control of an organ system that we have. So the reason I say that is that it's our central nervous system with our breath that we actually can control. So because of that, and if we think about when we're contracted, when we're tight, right. Very often our lungs aren't filling to the full capacity, which means our oxygen intake is limited. And it might be scary to offer full breath and to open up for some people and if it's an intense emotion and if there's a lot of anxiety around it. But I think anytime anyone can just bring a little bit of deeper inhale and deeper exhale, and I think it's valuable, I would always be really cautious taking, seeing where the person is at in their process and how the emotions are impacting their body before there was any prescription, but anytime, and I shouldn't say but, and anytime we can bring awareness to the breath

and feel any value from it, even outside, just looking up and taking in a nice big breath, feeling spaciousness around us, can be very healing and calming to the body.

Ken White

So if a listener experiences a loss and grieving is coming, it's going to be part of life for a while. What's one of the first couple of things they should do?

Martha Rouleau

Yes. I think that one of the first couple of things they should do is definitely reach out, find their support right away, make sure they have that. Whatever way they can begin to offer some gentle movement, I think is really helpful as it feels valuable for them. It's so valuable also to have the mindset that this is going to be a journey and look at their relationship that they want to have with their journey. And there's going to be some days where it's just like, you know what? I am just going to go put my head under the covers and that's okay. Right. And if there's people along the way that can help, kind of you check in and see where you're at is really valuable. I never, and I've learned that in my work with grief. Want to say to anyone, oh, there's hope down the road? No. I think planting the seeds that, gosh, is there an opportunity maybe to see that this is going to evolve and there might be hope down. Hope down the road. We sometimes talk about it in the training as, like, the tunnel of darkness, and sometimes we feel in it and then sometimes, oh, yeah, there's a glimmer of hope. Let's not overlook that glimmer. And even if it's in hindsight, retrospective. Oh, yeah, look at that. Yesterday I was able to blah blah blah, or yesterday I chose to blah, blah blah. Finding that self nurturing. As we're supported in community.

Ken White

And you've worked with leaders and managers, what should they think of if a team member is experiencing a loss? How can we, as colleagues, support someone else and as leaders, support those who work with us and for us?

Martha Rouleau

Right. And it's interesting you say that because people who are in the workplace, it was actually someone, after our time together last week in the program, sent me an email and said, it's so hard to be able to have grief and be in the workplace. Feeling that level of comfort of course, in many ways of where's the support? And there's not necessarily supposed to be the closest people, your support network right there, but to be able to be allowed to come in and to feel comfortable that, yeah, their emotions might eb and flow during the day, and that's not an indicator of who they are, their quality or their productivity. It's just they're going through a process.

Ken White

So the leader saying, do what you need to do. I'm here to support you.

Martha Rouleau

Yeah, I mean, beautiful. I love those words. That would be great. And also checking in. And it's interesting how people have shared that the event happens. There's a lot of intensity around the event and maybe for a bit afterwards, but then where are the people later down the road? Where is that check in? So I think it's important because you know, that anniversaries of the events really, it's actually the end. We call that anticipatory grief of either it being an anniversary date or it could also be we're in the process of, we know someone is soon going to be passing or we're even unsure. That's the anticipatory grief that can be difficult. So those people that come in and have that sense and maybe want to share and talk about it is great. But to do that check in to see how things are going, just to know that, oh yeah, they remembered, I think makes that interconnectedness feel really meaningful.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Martha Rouleau, and that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business, home of the MBA program offered in four formats, the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. Check out the William & Mary MBA program at wm.edu. Thanks to our guest, Martha Rouleau, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.

Female Voice

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