



## Living After Unthinkable Grief

Michele Benyo  
Grief Recovery Specialist

EPISODE 40

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### [Quote]

“We don’t like grief, but it’s here. So, how do we live with it?”

### [Description]

After her 6-year-old son died of cancer, her 3-year-old daughter's heartbreaking statement – “Mommy, half of me is gone” – defined Michele’s life purpose.

In this episode, Michele tells her story, what she needed as a bereaved parent of a young child, and provides some guidance on how to cope, build resilience and live after such a devastating loss. She is now a certified Grief Recovery Specialist and founder of Good Grief Parenting.



### [Intro]

**Jaision Dolvane:** Michele Benyo is a mom of two, a Certified Grief Recovery Specialist, early childhood parent coach, and the founder of Good Grief Parenting. After her 6-year-old son died of cancer, her 3-year-old daughter's heartbreaking statement – “Mommy, half of me is gone” – defined Michele’s life purpose.

Michele says “Childhood sibling loss has deep ramifications that few people recognize; it impacts the most basic of day-to-day interactions”. My daughter spoke it so well one day on the playground when she said to me, “No one can

know the pain that we feel." My daughter's loss will never ever be okay. Yet I couldn't change it. I simply had to make the best lemonade that I possibly could. I had to figure out how to do the rest of our lives—how to help her cope with her loss, shine light into the void, and remake a meaning-full life around her altered identity as a sibling by heart.”

Michele’s mission today is twofold: to help parents through the challenges of parenting while grieving the death of a young child, and to help parents meet the unique needs of a child who has lost a sibling in the early childhood years. Michele’s heart's desire is to see families live forward after loss toward a future bright with possibilities and even joy.

In this episode, Michele tells her story, what she needed as a bereaved parent of a young child, and provides some guidance on how to cope, build resilience and live after such a devastating loss.

### [Episode]

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Welcome Michele.

**MICHELE BENYO:** Hi, Jaison. Thank you.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Yeah, it's good to have you here. So, Michele you know, you've got such a heartbreaking story. I was putting that intro together and I think I almost had like tears in my eyes. I was actually doing the whole thing. But tell me kind of your story of you know, obviously we talked a little bit about that in the intro, but just give me kind of your view on it.

**MICHELE BENYO:** Yes. You know, I was an early childhood parent educator. That was my career and I had two young children of my own. Here in Minnesota All school districts have this program for early childhood age, preschool age children and their parents. And so I was a parent educator. I you know, facilitated discussions, brought wisdom, heard wisdom from parents on all of these topics about those formative years of early childhood that are just so vital for children to get a solid foundation and grow up well adjusted.

And when my own son was four and a half and my daughter was 15 months old, he was diagnosed with cancer and we battled that for two and a half years through her, you know, two year old, three year old age, which are those

challenging, particularly challenging, I call them exuberant ages of early childhood.

And my son died at the age of six and a half and my daughter was three and a half. And she actually said to me, mommy, half of me is gone and I did not know what to do with that. I knew a lot about parenting this age, but it was no longer parenting 101. And I thought, okay, it's not okay for my daughter to grow up half gone. What am I going to do about this? And I thought that I probably had access to a lot of good resources would find just what I needed and it didn't exist. It wasn't there. Nobody could tell me what to do with this.

And this was actually 20 years ago. I knew then Jaison, that if this didn't exist, I was going to have to create it. Because this age of development is just so vital. And even though most children wouldn't say half of me has gone, many of them would feel that when they lose a sibling who was as close as my children were and she had no other siblings. So I grappled with a lot of identity pieces for her as she grew up. And I coined the term sibling by heart because they are still siblings. That sibling bond is still very strong, but she grew up without a sibling at her side. And that was a challenge that we dealt with throughout her life.

And so now I am here offering to parents what I've learned about raising these young children in the formative years who have experienced this kind of loss.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Right, right. So, Michelle, you know, you talk about sort of your daughter and I certainly want to talk a lot about that as we kind of move forward, but tell me just about, you know, it's such an unimaginable, unthinkable kind of situation. I mean, how did you personally sort of, you know, deal with that because you need to first sort of like deal with that yourself. You have to find the strength to then help your daughter.

**MICHELE BENYO:** Absolutely. And, you know, I really recognize that I had if you can call it an advantage. Because my career was looking at my child and wanting to help her in any way that I could. So from the beginning, really my main focus was on how devastating this was for her and how I didn't want this for her. But yes, I also had to deal with myself. We had very good support with the loss from the children's hospital here in the twin cities in Minneapolis. And I felt like I got a lot of wisdom there, but I also just took it on as part of my journey to learn about grief as a lifetime experience, because here I was

experiencing as an adult and I lost my first born and it was just unreconcilable that I lost this child, but my daughter was going to grow up with this grief.

And so I kind of studied it and I learned a lot about it. And I was from the beginning looking at it from the point of view of, I have to learn things that I can give to other people, things that I can give to my daughter, things that I can give to other parents. And I think it was that attitude of, if I don't do this, nobody out there has done this. If I don't do it, then, you know, where does the help come from? And I think that was a big part of what motivated me. And I will say, I also have my faith. I'm a person of faith, and that was a huge support for me as well.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** So, you know, obviously in the moment I just feel like you'd be broken. And now you've sort of you know, had some time that has passed and you thought about this and you looked back and you've now come up with you know, somewhat of a framework or a model to help other parents. So, what is that and you know, what are you kind of suggesting to parents who honestly would feel like the world has ended at that point?

**MICHELE BENYO:** Absolutely. You know, the two things that are important to me to help families with are how on earth do you raise a young child with their whole life ahead of them? When another child that you expected to be raising is gone.

I mean, your dreams are shattered. Nothing, Before I lost my son, I actually had the thought that my family was perfect. I had a son, he had a little sister, she had a little brother to me that was perfect. And then all of a sudden, well, it wasn't all of a sudden because it happened over time, but over two and a half years, but then it wasn't, it was so far from perfect. And how do you pick up and move on?

And so really the first thing, the very first thing is taking care of yourself. You know, I say that I was concerned about my child, but if I didn't take care of my own pain and just, you know, unimaginable heartache, I wouldn't be very good for her. I couldn't do her a lot of help. So really parents grapple with this I'm grieving, I'm parenting. How do I do them at the same time? And the first step really is to be sure you're taking care of yourself. You know, that is just so important. And then the other step is, I mean, you know, there are, there are attitudes about grief in our society. And, you know, you mentioned when you communicated with me that this is such a hard topic and it is, it's also a

fact of life and all of us experienced grief for the first time in childhood. It may be as the death of a loved one, but, you know, for me, it was the loss of a floating toy. And I remember the grief that I felt when I just had to watch that toy float away.

And how do we help children with that feeling when they experience it? And this is what I help parents with, because it's not about protecting kids from this awful thing it's really about, it's awful, but it's a fact of our life. So how do we just live forward with it? And that's that lemonade piece that you mentioned in the intro.

So it's taking care of yourself and then just recognizing we don't like grief, but it's here. So how do we live with it.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Right. So how do we live with it?

**MICHELE BENYO:** You know, one of the first things, thank you for asking the question, because that is the question, how do we live with this? And, you know, the first thing is talking about it. There's a lot that society tells us about grief, That is really unhelpful. I mean, we know when we meet someone who's grieving, we always wonder, should I mention it? Shouldn't I mention it. And with children, we think, oh, I don't want to, you know, I don't want my child to deal with this, so I'm just not going to talk to them about it. And actually that's really the absolute worst, most wrong thing we can do because the child feels it. We feel it. We don't want it to be an elephant in the room. Nobody you know, nobody lives well with an elephant in the room. So we just invite it.

We tell our children, I'm feeling really sad today. I'm really missing David. I remember one time when I was really sad and I was crying and I said to Deanna, my daughter, that I was really missing David. And I said, and I miss his hugs. And she looked at me and she said, oh, mommy, he still hugs me. You know? And she had her way of connecting with him where she could still feel his hugs. And you know, we just, we need to give them opportunities to talk about it, to be honest with them, that normalizes grief.

Because as kids get older, they're going to experience it in different ways. You know, as she got older, it got you know, those secondary losses and the things that she lost with her brother were really painful. But because we had

normalized and talked about and acknowledged the fact that he was gone and that it hurt, it was easier to deal with it as she grew.

So starting one way that we live with grief is simply to acknowledge it and to honor it and to speak about it.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Yeah. Yeah. You know, as you're talking about that as a parent, right. Who sees, I mean, in this particular case, obviously you know, there's a death of a child, but you know, in other cases it could be other instances that cause grief for our children, you like this, there's this kind of like feeling of guilt, is this that you talk about? I mean, I can't help but think that that's probably going to be a fairly amplified feeling for parents thinking that, you know, somehow they could have protected their children.

**MICHELE BENYO:** I think it is I didn't experience guilt. But I know that many parents do. And I think when I work with families, the place where I begin is with those unhealthy ideas about grief and helping parents recognize how they think about grief, what they think about it and then working to help them feel better about their ideas about grief and guilt is one of those. Because grief is simply a response to something that we've lost, and it's a human response and it's P and we learn and we grow through it. Grief is necessary for healing and we can learn things and yes, actually even get gifts.

You know, I don't want to say that everyone should look for, you know, should expect gifts because we don't always feel that way about the loss. But yes, I think just acknowledging that grief or that guilt is a feeling that you feel, but it isn't justified that the point with grief is how do we look forward?

And that's why I talk about living forward and looking forward, because if we're looking backward that those are the kinds of things that keep us stuck and that, you know, that comes back to that lemonade again, what I say is we got a lemon. We don't want this lemon. So what do we do with it? We can bite into it, which is what we do with guilt. We can bite into it and it's bitter and we hate it. Or we can put it on the counter and say, I don't want this lemon. I'm not going to deal with this lemon. And we put it on the counter and it sits there until it starts to rot. Or we can say, I've got this lemon, what can I do with it? I don't want this lemon, but there must be something good I can do with it. I'm going to make some lemonade and we slice it up. And we find some sweetener to add, we add water. And we have lemonade.

So that's, you know, I hope that I can, because when you lose a young child and you have a young family, it can set your whole family on a path that is just not happy. And we don't want that. We want to be able to experience joy anyway. So yeah, let's make some lemonade and make something good out of it.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Yeah. I mean, you talk about one of the things to do with a healthy sort of approach is to make sure that you're talking about it, you're talking about with your family and you're addressing the elephant in the room. Other sort of coping mechanisms that you would also advise parents on?

**MICHELE BENYO:** Yes. I think you know, for really young children, it's magical to acknowledge the emotions around it for young children, which is my area of expertise, because they don't always know what they're experiencing is grief. For example, they may start to behave in irregular ways, they may start to be irritable. So as a parent, just acknowledging that and saying, boy, you're kind of, you know, you're not feeling really happy today. Let's go sit here and talk about that, or do you want to color? And sometimes they can do some physical things to get it out of them. For you as a parent, I think, you know, take the pressure off yourself. When I say talk to your child about it, then parents say, okay, that's kind of intimidating. What do I say? Simply say, do you want to talk about it? Are you thinking about your brother today? Do you want to talk about it? And the child may not, and that's okay, but you're giving them the opportunity for when they do.

And it's okay to say I'm feeling really sad today. I'm going to go sit by myself. You know, I'm going to go outside and sit in the sun. If you need me, you know where to find me or you know, I'm going to go out and be with my friend today because I need to get out of the house. The self-care is really important. It will look different for each person. I encourage parents to identify what they really need. You know, what did you enjoy before this tragedy or this awful thing struck your family? How did you find joy? Did you like to, you know, go for walks in the woods? Did you like to go out dancing you know, get back in touch with those things that help you feel better and let those things back into your life.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Yeah, that sounds very, I mean, that sounds hard, right? Cause you know, it's funny like there's no joy in any of this, any of this that we're talking about. So like even just trying to type joy on this thing, I really struggle. And then you start thinking about it in terms of like, you know, do I really deserve joy?

You feel guilty about it. So talk to us a little bit about like, how do you really overcome that? And then try to get to that joy.

**MICHELE BENYO:** That's a really good question. And it's so important to address the fact that everybody grieves differently and in their own time and this that you just identified can be so hard for people because they'll start to feel like I should be happy. I should be able to feel better. And that's another thing that you need to let go of. If you're not feeling the joy right now, that is okay. You don't have to. Try to encourage yourself to do things that take care of you. But if you can't do it, you know, that's okay too, because you do just need to grieve. And other people sometimes try to tell us, okay, it's time. You should be feeling better now, time to feel better. And that can really put a lot of pressure on us.

And so acknowledge the fact that you don't have to do anything on a particular timeframe. Don't feel guilty about the fact that or pressured about the fact that you're not feeling better. The other thing that parents often feel that you mentioned is that idea of how can I ever be happy again when my child is gone. And you can, you know, I'm in a lot of Facebook groups where people talk a lot about this and people say it will never get better. And some people come in like myself and say, you know, it can get better. And then some people will get mad because we come in and say, it can get better.

It really can get better. When we become willing to look forward, but there's no timeframe for that. There isn't a right way to do grief. If you choose to stay sad, that's okay. It's not necessary though. And when you've lost your child, you are not betraying them. I think families often feel like they're betraying their child if they laugh if they're happy and you're really not. And you just try to become okay with that. But you're right, Jaison, that's one of the hardest things for parents who have lost a loved one.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** I mean, it seems like just you allowing yourself to want to be happy, likely has a lot of barriers, right? Obviously all the things you talked about, but also just, you know, societal norms of what we think people expect us to act or how we think people expect us to act and things like that. So if it feels like, you know, that would be a really difficult thing to kind of overcome?

**MICHELE BENYO:** Very hard. And, you know, when we start to act lighter again, then the people around us think we're all better and the other thing families experience is the loss of their support system for that reason. So part

of it kind of becomes you know, when I act like I'm better than people don't know how much I'm still hurting. And that's a challenge too.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Yeah. That makes sense. That's all heavy stuff. So Michelle maybe just tell us about, you know, certainly this experience is life changing in itself, but as you've sort of continued your journey trying to help other parents has that sort of changed you in any way, transformed you in any way?

**MICHELE BENYO:** Yes. It really just kind of solidified and directed in a particular direction. The conviction that I already had about parenting well, because my website, my program are called good grief parenting. And it really is about how we respond to children when they're experiencing grief, whatever it is. And then how do we raise children who recognize that grief is a normal, natural, healthy part of life and that the better we learn to accept it and cope with it, the better we can face all of life. I've just acquired more of a conviction to that belief and have figured out, okay, if someone, if I want to help someone do this, what do I give them? What are the pieces I can give them that will be simpler, easier rather than being this huge challenge. And I have been able to do that and have been able to see families lives be changed. And so, you know, with my daughter, I tell her now she's grown. I say, I wish I'd had the advantage when you were three of everything that I've gleaned over the years that I have now. But so I have to look at the families that I am able to make a difference for now. And help parents understand that it's a daunting thing, but it really isn't that difficult to make a huge difference in your child's life to grow up whole and happy.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** So Michelle, I ask this question to all my all my guests. Is there one feeling that you have as a parent that you'd rather not feel?

**MICHELE BENYO:** Yes. I still have what I call temper tantrum moments. You know, I'll get off this interview and I'll say, I don't believe I just talked to Jaison like this was nothing, like this was anything else. Because after 21 years of my son being gone, I still have my temper tantrum moments where when I stop and think about the fact that I lost him at the age of six, and he'd be, you know, 28 now. And he would have had that life and my daughter would have had her brother and everything would have been different. I just really cannot accept the fact that we had to grow up without him. It still just absolutely is not okay. And so I have my temper tantrum moments when I just want my son back and I will never get past that, but I don't live with that every moment of every day, you know?

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Yeah I mean, it just to show how difficult it all is, very difficult. So you already talked about sort of you touched upon what your hope is for the families that you actually help. Do you want to expand on that at all in terms of what your hope would be for your audience?

**MICHELE BENYO:** Yes, you know, and I, and I said this a bit too. I work with parents who have lost a child and are raising bereaved siblings, obviously because those bereaved siblings have such unique needs throughout their whole life. This sibling bond is so strong and people around them don't see it and don't see all the secondary losses. But what I give to the families that I work with really is basic awareness of emotions and how are early, our children and early childhood are shaped to cope with those difficult moments in life. And so I would really just say to all parents in your audience, that even though you, I hope have not experienced this devastating loss those, some of you most likely have there's a lot you can take from this. And I do have one resource to help parents or any adults who want to help young children learn how to cope with loss better. It's called the good grief guide and it's available at my website at [www.goodgriefparenting.com](http://www.goodgriefparenting.com), just right there on the front page. You can get it that will just help you to adjust maybe some of your thinking, which I had before I had to deal with it head-on about what's okay to do with children experiencing loss so that we can feel better equipped as parents. And so this is really appropriate for any parent who wants to help their child deal with loss. And I hope that you'll take away some of that from what you've heard from me today, and then go get my resource for you.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** No, that's great. And you know, we were talking earlier that you know, loss doesn't have to be death. It can be all sorts of different things. The tools that you provide can just help equip parents better to deal with that.

**MICHELE BENYO:** Yes.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Well, thank you so much, Michelle. I really appreciate your time today.

**MICHELE BENYO:** Thank you, Jaison. I appreciate the opportunity to talk to your audience. Thank you.

[Outro]

Thank you for listening.

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