



Episode 577: Sherry Walling on How to Use Movement to Ease Pain and Grief

Child: Welcome to my Mommy's podcast.

This episode is sponsored by Onnit... You know those times when you're so into what you're doing that you can't think about anything else? The times when you're at your most focused and productive? Psychologists call that feeling of being in the zone "flow state," and Alpha BRAIN from Onnit is the ultimate way to get there. A world-renowned nootropic supplement with over one million bottles sold, Alpha BRAIN promotes cognitive functions, including memory, mental speed, and focus. It can help you remember names, zero in on complex tasks, and think more clearly under stress. Alpha BRAIN contains amino acids and plant compounds that promote the brain's release of alpha waves, which are associated with greater creativity and productivity. At the same time, it supports neurotransmitters, chemicals that relay information in and from the brain. If coffee and energy drinks make you jittery, you can rest easy knowing that Alpha BRAIN is caffeine-free. But, if for any reason you don't like Alpha BRAIN, you can get your money back. Just give us two weeks. If at that point you don't feel like Alpha BRAIN is a fit for you, just tell us why, and we'll refund your money on the spot—no return necessary. Right now you can save up to 30% off when you go to onnit.com/wellnessmama

This podcast is brought to you by Inside Tracker. I'm loving this because we now have access to more data about our health than we ever had. But sometimes it's hard to know what to do with all the data. And that's why Inside Tracker provides you with a personalized plan to build strength, speed, recovery, and optimize your health for the long haul based on your own data. It's created by leading scientists in aging, genetics, and biometrics. And Inside Tracker analyzes your blood, your DNA, and your fitness tracking data to identify where you're optimized and where you're not. You get a daily action plan with personalized guidance on the right exercise, nutrition, and supplements for your body. And when you connect Inside Tracker with your Fitbit or your Garmin, you'll also unlock real-time recovery pro tips after you complete a workout. It's like having a personal trainer and a nutritionist in your pocket to interpret all that data and give you recommendations that are best for you. And for a limited time, you can get 20% off everything in the Inside Tracker store. Just go to [Insidetracker.com/wellnessmama](https://insidetracker.com/wellnessmama).

Katie: Hello, and welcome to the Wellness Mama Podcast. I'm Katie from wellnessmama.com and wellnesse.com, that's wellnesse with an E on the end. And I am here with Dr. Sherry Walling who is a clinical psychologist, a podcaster, an author, and a mental health advocate. Her company Zen Founder helps entrepreneurs and leaders to navigate transition, rapid growth, loss, conflicts, and a lot of other things. She also hosts a podcast by the same name, and is author of the best-selling book "The Entrepreneur's Guide to Keeping Your Shit Together", and her soon-to-be-released new book "Touching Two Worlds", which explores strategies for navigating loss.

And that is what we talk about in this episode, all about how to use movement to ease pain and grief. And we talk about how she got into the Flying Trapeze as an adult and why, her personal story around grief, and how it's led to her helping many, many others, tips for navigating the experience of grief with kids, and why our language around this is so important, including words that we can use to help them understand how to process their emotion.

We talk about ways to use movement to ease grief and pain, what somatic-trained therapists are, how we can move our feelings through our body using certain types of movement, ways to encourage our kids to talk, and

how to support them through it, one of the biggest factors in someone not becoming significantly depressed from grief. And so much more including her encouragement to dance every day at the end.

This was a really insightful episode. She shares very vulnerably about her story and all that she's learned in her work, and her personal experience. And if you have ever experienced grief, I feel like we all have in some way, this episode will be helpful for you. So, let's join Sherry. Sherry, welcome. Thanks so much for being here today.

Sherry: It is a delight to have this conversation with you today, Katie. Thanks for having me.

Katie: Well, I got to check out your book. And I'm so excited for the topic that we're gonna go deep on today. But before we do, I have a note in my show notes that you are in love with the flying trapeze. And you might be the first guest I've talked to you who has experience with the trapeze. So I just want to hear a little bit about how on earth did you get into that?

Sherry: So, yes, I am in love with the flying trapeze. And I also do aerial fabrics, so silks, a hammock. When people think of like Cirque de Soleil, sometimes they think of these fabrics dangling from the ceiling, and that people climb up and down and do tricks on. So I started about four years ago, right around my 40th birthday, when I really felt like I needed a really physical practice. It was actually very tied into the conversation that we're going to have about grief, because I needed something that helped me to feel strong, and alive, and expressive. And circus arts really fit the bill for me.

Katie: That's awesome. I have a thing where I try to do something that's out of my comfort zone at least once a year, sometimes more often, which has led to voice lessons, and belly dancing, and things like that, but nothing quite as daring as trapeze. So I'm super impressed.

Sherry: Well, the trapeze is available to you. So anytime you want to come to Minnesota, we'll get you up on a trapeze rig.

Katie: I might take you up on that. My kids have tried it and they loved it. They are good at getting me out of my comfort zone for sure. But the topic I'm so excited to talk to you about today is the topic of grief. And we're gonna go in several different directions with this. But I think most people have had some experience of grief in their lives, probably on a spectrum of small to, like, really intense grief. And you've now literally written the book on this. And it stems from your personal experience. And I'm sure it's a tough topic, but can you maybe walk us through what led to you writing this book?

Sherry: Yeah. So I have been a clinical psychologist my whole career. So I've been thinking about grief, thinking a lot about trauma. But it was really my own experiences with grief that tipped me to do a deep dive into this subject. I, within a six-month period, lost my dad to esophageal cancer and my younger brother to suicide. And both of those losses really rocked me in different ways. They created a lot of change within me. And they really reshaped the way that I see and understand what humans do when we grieve. So it's a very, very personal book. There's a lot of myself, my heart, my family, my stories, in the book. But I also am trying to think about grief as a psychologist in ways that go beyond my own experience, but offer some help to others who are having similar experiences.

Katie: Yeah, it's a tough topic to tackle, but I think, as in many areas of life, your own experience and kind of that metaphor of walking through the fire, but carrying water for others who are experiencing the same thing can be so powerful, because you have that ability to connect with people on that level. And I haven't lost parents or siblings yet, but I had a pretty severe trauma in high school. And it took me a lot of years to realize

that a lot of my health problems actually were stemming from the stress that was still from that trauma. And it wasn't until I dealt with that, that I actually started to see my health issues resolve. And so that was kind of what, for the first time, was a first-hand experience for me of that mind body connection. And just how profoundly things like grief and trauma can actually impact our physical bodies as well as, of course, our mental health, and our kind of spiritual health in all aspects, because those things are so connected.

And another thing I really resonated with as a mom is talking about grief with your children. Because I think often, as parents, the tendency is to want to shield them from the hard things and kind of protect them from those painful experiences. And I love that you bring this up as an important part of healthy parenting. But can you elaborate on that and explain what you mean by that?

Sherry: In a way, Katie, I've come to think about conversations about grief with my kids in a similar way to I think about conversations about sex with my kids, right? There's this sense that, like, this is a really important topic that gets really deep into the heart of who you are as a person. But you're not necessarily ready to dive into the deep end as a child. But the more conversations that you have about a topic that is nuanced and complicated, and in some ways, somewhat adult, the better equipped kids are as they go throughout their lives to cope with the many, many griefs that they are going to experience. You know, I think a lot of people minimize the effect of grief itself on children. You know, they kind of think, oh, they're too young to understand, or they get relegated to the sides. People don't bring their children to funerals. And so kids aren't a part of that conversation. Which really is a disservice to them when they become adults, and they are confronted with significant loss, and they don't have a framework for what it looks like and for how to cope with it.

Katie: Yeah, maybe let's walk through some of the ways we can start incorporating that. I think that's a great comparison to compare it to the conversations around sex. And I talk a lot about parenting from the perspective of wanting to raise kids who are able to be self-sufficient, and to have the foundational tools to live an adult life in whatever area they choose successfully, and to maintain their creativity and their love of learning. And that, for me, has certainly led to a different parenting approach than I was raised with, and that often, you know, parenting books recommend. And I think this is another piece of it that I had not really fully considered and haven't maybe been giving them the best foundational tools for. So I'd love to hear, are there some practical ways that we can kind of bridge that gap with our kids?

Sherry: Yeah. So lots of children's stories involve death. You know, Disney movies are ripe with opportunities to talk about loss. And one of the things that I've observed that is both a source of frustration and an opportunity is that, in many of these children-oriented stories around death, the person who is the hero in the story, often a child who's experienced a loss, there's maybe like a scene of them with one glistening tear at a grave side, but then they, like, jump into action. And they go right to saving the world, or building a robot, or doing whatever hero's journey task they're given. And what's missing from those depictions in children's media is any kind of a grief process. And so one of the conversations that I've had with my kids, and they were... My youngest were eight when we kind of began this journey towards deep grief.

And so this was a really lovely time to have a conversation around, "Hey, you see this character in 'Big Hero 6,' in 'Frozen II,' in 'Star Wars.' You see this character and how they're coping with the loss of their parent. Like, what do you think about that? Do you think that they're feeling the feelings associated with death? Or, you know, what do you think comes up for them that maybe we don't get to see in the movie? What do you think's happening in their head and in their heart?" And so that's a really lovely point of conversation that comes up often in, you know, media exposure, that just begins to help kids to be grief literate, more than buy

into this social narrative that when you experience a loss, you go to a funeral, and then you get back to work the next day.

Katie: Yeah, I love that idea of using things like movies that are not maybe, like, first-hand experiences, but still, they can empathize with the feelings that are going on and understand the experiences there. And I think that also brings up an important point about, even our language with our kids in less intense times. Like, I often hear parents tell kids, if they're crying, or they're hurt, like, "It's okay, don't cry." And that's something I've paid attention to and tried to model with my kids, is not to shut down their feelings when possible. And I would guess this is even more important with something as big as a loss. But to try to ask them how they're feeling rather than project on them how they're feeling, and then echo back to them, like, "Oh, I understand that you're feeling really, really sad right now." And not try to take that feeling away, but let them actually feel it.

Because I know, as an adult, I realized resisting a feeling tends to have it stick around longer. Whereas being allowed to feel it and talk about it... I'll even ask my kids, you know, "Where are you feeling it in your body? What does it feel like?" Just to give them tools, rather than trying to kind of shut down those emotions. I know, for me as an adult, especially, it was a kind of long process, embarrassingly a little bit, to learn how to actually feel my feelings, as silly as that sounds to say.

Sherry: Well, you talk about that mind body connection. And that's where it'll get you, right? When you're suppressing those emotions, when you're kind of stuffing them into a corner of yourself. And it usually doesn't work. It comes out some way in some somatic expression, or it comes out later in life when there's some other developmental cue that reminds you of that loss or that trauma. It will get you. That's a little bit dark language, but, like, unprocessed grief, unprocessed loss needs to have its due, needs the time and attention to heal, and to become integrated into our sense of self and into our lives. And when we don't give it that, whether we're 15 when it happens, or 40, or 7, it wreaks some havoc. So that invitation that you're giving to your children is so lovely, and I think such a huge part of becoming grief literate as kids. Which is to say, what are you feeling? Let's give it some space. Can you describe it? Can you draw it? Where does it live in your body? Let's give that emotion really a sense of honor and reverence.

And I think sometimes people are afraid that if they honor negative emotions, if they give them too much air or too much fuel, that they'll take over. And really, in my experience, it's the opposite. The more you give space, the more you give fuel for someone to feel anger, sadness, fear, the more that those emotions settle, and they find a place within us, and they aren't as powerful as we think they might be. They're certainly less powerful than if we try to suppress them.

Katie: Are there kind of predictable stages of grief? And if there are, I would guess maybe the length or the experience of each one varies. But as a psychologist, are there stages that you see people go through when they're experiencing grief?

Sherry: Yeah, so Elisabeth Kübler-Ross is sort of the grandmother of grief in the psychology world, psychology, psychiatry world. And she was really lovely at helping to identify that grief has different parts. So, you know, quite famously, most of your listeners will be familiar with denial, anger, acceptance, bargaining, those kinds of terms. And one of the challenges of her work and the part of her work that she's since sort of distanced herself from and say, "Hey, that's not what I meant," is this idea that grief proceeds in a predictable sort of stair step way. You go through one phase, and then you kind of graduate to another phase, and you graduate to another phase. It really doesn't function like that. The gift of her work was to say that grief is many things. It's not just sadness, it's not the glistening tear or the weeping widow. It is anger. It is negotiation. It can be

really heady, right, trying to make sense, that sense of bargaining, and trying to figure out, like, how do I cognitively in my mind make sense of what's happening?

So, stages? No. Different components? Absolutely. And sometimes those components change within one day, right? Sometimes you start the day feeling heavy and sad. And then maybe you move into joy, because something sparks within you, and you're like, "Man, I'm really glad to be alive." That can also be part of the grief experience.

Katie: And you mentioned, like, in movies, kids are portrayed as, like, they have this moment of grief, and then they spring into action. And that that's not necessarily the healthiest model for kids. But it seems like from reading about you, you also had very intense few years where you were experiencing this intense grief, and also still were a mom, and still had a business, and were writing a book and had to kind of also jump into action in a lot of ways. So I'm curious to hear how you navigated that, because I get the question, you know, without as intense of an experience, like, how do you do it all? How did you get through that? But also, how did you hold space for your grief during that time?

Sherry: Yeah, it's such a good question. And it's so nuanced, and it looks really different for everyone. So I absolutely will talk about my experience, but also with the caveat of, everyone needs a different thing, in a different order, with a different level of energy and intensity. So it's not like, hey, here's the roadmap for you. So any listener, you know, you kind of have to find your way through it. For me, I would have days in the deepest part of my grief when I really loved my work, when it felt so good to think about something, think about someone outside of my experience. And it felt really helpful to be able to just, like, give myself to my work. And so when I had a day like that, I honored it. And I let myself do that. I also had days where it wouldn't have been responsible for me to show up as a psychologist for someone else, because I was so in my own emotion, and I was in so much pain that it was hard for me to listen well.

So I think the thing that I learned that was helpful for me was to figure out in each day, what energy I had, and to really listen to that as much as possible. I will say that the one thing that was non-negotiable for me each day that I think was a game changer was a physical practice of movement. So whether that was circus arts, whether it was yoga, whether it was walking around the lake, that was a thing that really helped me to move emotion through my body, so that it could... I don't know, I think it just helped to fuel me in a way that was important. It was also really helpful for me to include my family in my grief, right? These experiences were also happening to my children. They loved my father, they loved my brother. So, we moved through it and sort of did a dance with it together. It wasn't something that I felt that I needed to hide from anyone in my life. It wasn't something that I had to kind of go off in the corner and, like, lick my wounds, and then come back out. It was very integrated into my life. And thankfully, I had clients, I had professional context, I had book agent, I had children and husband that could kind of roll through that with me. Because I expressed that that's what I needed. And that was important.

Katie: And you mentioned the word somatic processing or somatic experience. And then you've mentioned movement being an important tool. I know you're also gearing up for a TED Talk on the topic of how movement can really help ease pain and grief. And this is one of the things I was so excited we were gonna get to talk about today, because it was a part I missed for so long. I just had a kind of a blind spot to it. And I slowly realized, through reading books like, "The Body Keeps the Score," how they now understand and people like you now understand that physical pain or trauma, that can store physically in our body. And even having talked about that, I think the process of releasing that can be a tough one, or it's hard to understand, even once you maybe logically understand that that can be the case. So I would love to talk about this movement,

somatic processing component, and how people can use that to work through these things and not kind of get stuck in the experience.

Sherry: Yeah. So on one level, there are somatically trained therapists who really help clients think through where is the pain held in the body, and then they're creative about thinking through movement that helps unlock that very specific, individualized location of pain. So, for folks who are listening who are going through emotional experiences, and feel like, wow, this is really integrated in my body, finding a somatically trained therapist is a really, really incredible resource.

For the rest of us, or I guess for everybody too, though, the idea that we can move our feelings through with big movements became super powerful for me. It was something I knew cognitively, but I didn't really understand physiologically until I walked through these experiences. And it started with just being at the gym. Early on, in my dad's experience with cancer, we sort of knew he was terminally ill, but, you know, it was a long slog. It was 18 months of trying all of these different treatments. And I would go to the gym and do the battle ropes. You know, those big, heavy ropes.

And I would just slam them to the floor and kind of beat them out with my body. In my head, was thinking, like, "Fuck cancer." Like, that's all I was thinking. It was like a mantra. And I would say that in my head and just slam these ropes on the floor. And sometimes I would just weep. And I would just cry in the middle of the gym. I mean, blessings to the people who work at my gym because they were very, very gracious and kind. But I just needed that big, huge emotion to get out these feelings.

And then similarly, in my journey as an aerialist with the circus stuff, circus is just magical, because it's very emotional. It's like dance. It's expressive. It's creative and artistic. But it's also very big body athletic. And so I could go and just feel the strength of my own aliveness as I was holding my bodyweight, and climbing a piece of fabric all the way to the ceiling. And it was just this discipline, this sort of meditation in what it feels like to be strong enough to come from the bottom, back up to the living world. And so there became all of these kind of poetic analogies for me in my physical practice, that helped me reiterate, I'm alive, I'm okay, I'm in motion, I'm still here. And those were things that I needed when death felt very, very big in my world.

Katie: I love that. And I think it shows that importance of kind of that two-way street of... Like, for me, once I understood that... I think I always had this narrative that, like, oh, when I work through this, then my body will be healthy again, and it will work out. And I realized also the body is a very effective tool for helping to work through the mental stuff as well. And so it's very much a two-way beneficial positive feedback loop, when you kind of get that figured out. And I love also, you mentioned the battle ropes, and almost, like, the anger release that was happening with that. Because I noticed this in my kids and I learned this from them actually, as well. You know, kids naturally are great, I feel like, somatic processors. Like, when they have a big emotion, they feel it with their whole body, and they throw a temper tantrum. And certainly, that can be expressed in ways that aren't healthy, like hitting a sibling. But I've tried to walk that balance with my kids, of not shutting down the somatic expression of whatever they're feeling, but maybe just directing it into a safer way. Like, it's perfectly fine to have a temper tantrum. Let's go hit pillows, or let's go outside and just hit the ground, but not another person. And, like, kind of separating that.

But I feel like that helps them process so much faster through whatever those big feelings are that they're feeling. And then I had this, I feel like, very slow realization of, oh, maybe that works for adults too. And I had a therapist who was like, "Let's try some rage expression with you." And the first time just trying to get me to yell, I was kind of like, "Aah." And she's like, "No, no, no." And when I finally was able to actually, like, express that and let all those feelings come through, it was such a release. And I even, like, shook, like, all the

hormones of all that letting go in my body. And I felt so much calmer and more parasympathetic after that. And so I think that's, like, a valuable skill that I never would have expected, is like, sometimes you need to throw a temper tantrum.

Sherry: Oh, yeah. I mean, the power of, like, flopping on the floor, and making a lot of noise, and just letting your whole body feel is cathartic, and empowering, and I think really helps us to feel integrated. I think one of the, like, greatest lies that we have believed as a modern society is this separation of mind and body. Right? The mind-body dualism, and probably I think, is attributed to Descartes. But it's just absolutely unhelpful. And people like me, psychologists and mental health therapists, have kind of perpetuated that unintentionally, not maliciously. But we've given, I think, too much emphasis to the role of words, and this prefrontal cortex, higher order cognitive expression of our experiences. That's not to say I'm not a fan of therapy. I am. I mean, I'm a writer, I love words. But to pair those words with that more sort of back of the brain, more base, more embodied expression, I think, is really where we feel our most whole and our most integrated.

Katie: Do you have any tips for...especially most of our listeners are women, for finding the type of movement that might be, like, our particular way of processing through those things? Like, I have so much admiration for the stuff that you do. And, like, I've found it for me in lifting really heavy weights. And I'm actually realizing I have so much fear around even things, like, acroyoga, where I'm just picked a little bit off the ground or being in the air, which is an area I'm excited to kind of confront and work through. But any tips for finding a movement that helps you process.

Sherry: I think it is maybe that combination of things that you're, like, intrigued by and scared of. Because that tends to be where some of the juicy emotion is living, right? You have a curiosity. But I do think that things that take you to the outside of some of your own control, where you have to trust, even if it's floating, right, even if it's just being in water and practicing the sensation of letting your body just let go enough to float. That might be a starting point for a lot of people. I think yoga is really powerful because it does involve the integration of breath, and intention, and spirituality, with movements. That said, a lot of us are pretty comfortable at our yoga classes now. So thinking about how to take those base skills and use them in different ways, whether that's an acro, or in circus, or going back to, like, an adult ballet class. Maybe it's something you loved as a child, but you sort of lost that. I think that, you know, dance as a genre, because it does involve this emotional expression as well as the physicality, can be a really lovely spot.

Katie: Yeah. And it seems like for many people, dance might even be enough of the out of comfort zone experience, all in and of itself, to really trigger some of those things. I know, like, I can certainly admit to having it too, but dancing, especially in public, I'm like, "Oof, I don't know about that."

Sherry: Yep, yep. Yep. But to take it seriously... Because the thing I love about dance is, of course, it can be very, very technical. It can also be very, like, let it all go. Like, you're not thinking, you're just in the experience, but it is absolutely embodied, and it's hard to dance in a way that's not joyful. Even if you're doing something that's sadly expressive or expresses anger, usually on the other side of that is this experience of play, of joyfulness, of lightheartedness. And I think that's, in some ways, what we're trying to get to when we're doing these big body expressions, is, we're releasing that negative aspect, releasing the anger, releasing the emotion, in order to get to what's underneath that, which is a lightness, a playfulness, a joyfulness. It's a really important counterbalance to grief, especially.

Katie: Yeah. And I love, like, your multiple mentions of making this a family experience as well. My kids have had to process some big changes in the last couple of years as well. And that's one thing I've tried to figure out, is, how do I help them integrate this experience. And they're all really good about movement in their

various activities like pole vaulting. But I've started doing things like Saturday morning, we call it soft rock Saturdays. We put on, like, 80s music. And while we're cooking breakfast, it's just like a ridiculous dance party. Just trying to think of like, how can I help them in their own way to figure out what's going to help them process.

This episode is sponsored by Onnit... You know those times when you're so into what you're doing that you can't think about anything else? The times when you're at your most focused and productive? Psychologists call that feeling of being in the zone "flow state," and Alpha BRAIN from Onnit is the ultimate way to get there. A world-renowned nootropic supplement with over one million bottles sold, Alpha BRAIN promotes cognitive functions, including memory, mental speed, and focus. It can help you remember names, zero in on complex tasks, and think more clearly under stress. Alpha BRAIN contains amino acids and plant compounds that promote the brain's release of alpha waves, which are associated with greater creativity and productivity. At the same time, it supports neurotransmitters, chemicals that relay information in and from the brain. If coffee and energy drinks make you jittery, you can rest easy knowing that Alpha BRAIN is caffeine-free. But, if for any reason you don't like Alpha BRAIN, you can get your money back. Just give us two weeks. If at that point you don't feel like Alpha BRAIN is a fit for you, just tell us why, and we'll refund your money on the spot—no return necessary. Right now you can save up to 30% off when you go to onnit.com/wellnessmama

This podcast is brought to you by Inside Tracker. I'm loving this because we now have access to more data about our health than we ever had. But sometimes it's hard to know what to do with all the data. And that's why Inside Tracker provides you with a personalized plan to build strength, speed, recovery, and optimize your health for the long haul based on your own data. It's created by leading scientists in aging, genetics, and biometrics. And Inside Tracker analyzes your blood, your DNA, and your fitness tracking data to identify where you're optimized and where you're not. You get a daily action plan with personalized guidance on the right exercise, nutrition, and supplements for your body. And when you connect Inside Tracker with your Fitbit or your Garmin, you'll also unlock real-time recovery pro tips after you complete a workout. It's like having a personal trainer and a nutritionist in your pocket to interpret all that data and give you recommendations that are best for you. And for a limited time, you can get 20% off everything in the Inside Tracker store. Just go to [Insidetracker.com/wellnessmama](https://insidetracker.com/wellnessmama).

Any other tips related to making it a family experience? Because you mentioned you went to this, obviously, with your kids. Were there any things that were particularly helpful to them?

Sherry: We did do a lot of breathwork as a family, actually. And there's some really great apps that do breathwork for kids, or breathwork in general, that are accessible to kids. I really like the Othership app, which combines breathwork and music in a way that's sort of rhythmic. And then breathwork with children, it's fun because you can involve, like, different things on their bellies. We had stuffed animals that my kids would put on their bellies, and we just sort of lay on the floor and, like, watch our little stuffed animal sort of move up and down as we would inhale and exhale. And so I kind of pulled that from my yoga background. But, you know, there's some amazing science around breathwork. And kids are really into it, they like it. It's something that they can control. And it packs a lot of power without... You don't have to do, like, an hour-long session, right? You can do 5 minutes, 10 minutes, and have it feel really, really lovely for kids.

Katie: As a psychologist, how do you navigate the balance of... Like you mentioned, words are important, but we often lose sight of the body connection. And I've noticed, especially with my kind of teenage age kids, a lot of times, they don't really want to talk about it necessarily. How important is the actual talking about it? And is it enough to just support them and tell them, I'm here if you need me? Or do we need to kind of encourage the talking as well?

Sherry: I think the talking is important, because the talking, also the labeling of things, the storytelling around experiences, first of all, helps with self-reflection. It helps kids understand what they're going through when they have language for it. And one of the things that I've found... I'm sure you know this very well, but, like, especially with teenagers, is the face to face conversation is not a winner. But the side by side conversation is a little better. Or sometimes, like, you know, I live in Minnesota, we have a lot of lakes. We do a lot of canoeing kinds of things. Being in, like, a canoe where my kid is not looking at me, they're either behind me or in front of me, we're not face to face. That can be more of a recipe for a conversation than trying to sit down, and take them out to dinner, and be like, "Okay, so tell me how are you doing?"

Like, teenagers are not really into that. So the side by side, or in play, in motion kind of conversation tends to be helpful. I will say that language is important. And the way that we integrate language, the way that we download the language around the things that we're experiencing, does matter a great deal. So, in their own time, in their own way, encouraging that expression, even if it's not to us. Sometimes teens journaling can become a really powerful tool for them to label and be self-reflective. It just doesn't involve us as the conversation partner sometimes.

Katie: That's a great tip to encourage journaling. And what about, are there any other tips that you find, as a psychologist and as a mom, to give kids these foundational skills, even maybe not related to grief, but just in the way that we're relating to and talking to our kids, that can help them have these mental health foundational tools for later in life? Because I hear from so many people, and myself included, that we kind of had to figure these things out as adults, and because there was a crisis. And I think a lot about whether it be physical health, and also mental health, and even entrepreneurship. How do I help my children develop these skills at a younger age, so they're maybe not having to do it in crisis in their 20s like I did?

Sherry: Yeah, I think sometimes they're relaying our own experiences, right? It's the dinner time table conversation, where I decide to say, "I had a hard day because I just felt pretty sad today. Like, I was thinking a lot about grandpa." And I'm not trying to make a point, I'm just sharing from my own life. And then using my own experience as hopefully a model for what it feels like as an adult to say, this is my emotional state. This is what I wrestled with today. So I think sometimes we feel as parents, like, we have to teach these lessons intentionally. But if we can become the kind of parents who are just actively sharing, like, we're participant leaders, right? We're leading our family, but we're participating it. We're demonstrating the human experience. That has been really important.

And one thing that's maybe more specific to grief, but we have some grief rituals in our family now. So every time there's a birthday or a holiday, we set a place for my dad and for my brother, and they have a place at our table. And usually, we put a candle on top of their plate. And so there's this very visual reminder. It's not overwhelming. It's not, like, we don't weep and cry, you know, if we don't need to, but there's a reminder of this person that we've lost. And so, we're sort of demonstrating that's let's welcome here, loss is welcome here at our table. We're comfortable acknowledging this loss, and letting it be part of our Christmas, or our Thanksgiving, our birthday celebrations.

Katie: That's such a good point. I think, across the board in parenting, I've noticed that what we model is much more effective often than what we say. And words are important too, to your point, but even in much smaller things. Like, if you want your kids to like music, you do music and have music around in the house. Or, like, I love art, and I find if I just sit down and start drawing, often most of my kids will come sit down with me and start drawing. Whereas if I was just like, "Hey, you should draw," they would potentially resist it or not be interested. So I think that modeling piece is often much more effective than we think, especially in the moment. And I can think of, even in my own life, so many things my parents did when I was young, that I remember their actions, much more than that words.

I also love your languaging around it, how you said you felt sad versus that you are sad. And this is something another podcast guest mentioned, is, language being so important, and that anything that comes after the words "I am" is very psychologically significant. And that if we can acknowledge a feeling, but not integrate it as part of our identity, that lets us feel it as a thing and work through it versus kind of latch on to it as part of our core identity.

Sherry: Right. This idea that emotion states are...they're in motion. Sometimes I like to play with the wording around emotion and motion, right? Sadness is in motion. It's landing on me now. I'm holding it right now. It's come into my awareness right now. But it's in motion, it will move through, it will float away at some point, and another emotion will replace it. And so that sense of movement and the sort of dynamic nature of emotion, I think, is also really helpful, especially in grief. Because when really hard things happen, when there's trauma, when there's a huge loss for adults or for kids, it feels so big and so overwhelming. And it's really easy to believe that it will always be like that. And in fact, really, one of the strongest protective factors against someone becoming significantly depressed or experiencing sort of an unshakable, pernicious suicidal ideation, is the sense that the transience of time, right? You feel this now, and it's huge, and it's heavy, and terrible. That's not going to be here forever. So we can sit with it while it's here, interact with it, hold it, and have the confidence to know you're not stuck in this motion forever.

Katie: And another thing you've shared openly about is the grief of losing your daughter. And I think this is a different kind of loss. And it's one I've experienced as well, in utero. But I think a lot of women have had that experience. In fact, statistically, many, many women have lost a child, either pre-birth or after birth. And I mean, that, to me, is like a different type of grief that almost is so visceral and core. So I would love to hear how that experience was different for you, and if there's anything different that helped in the experience of that, and then moving through that emotion.

Sherry: Yeah. So we had a little girl in our family for almost four years. And we believed that that would be a kind of a permanent placement, but it ended up that she went back to live with her biological mother. I won't go into more details of that. But that is actually one of the things that's interesting about that kind of grief separate from the other kinds of grief that I've experienced, is that, the story around her is not my story to hold alone, right? She's a minor child and I'm no longer the guardian. So, like, I feel really careful about even telling that story because it doesn't belong to me in the same way. I think also there's some interesting things around grief when the person is gone, but not dead. So she was my daughter, she lived with my family. I brushed her hair every day. I made her breakfast every day. All of the mothering that we all do for our children was part of my life and a daily experience for four years, and then all of a sudden, it was gone. And then people are like, "Oh, like, how did she die?"

You know, like, we don't have a framework for the word grief when it's not death, which is ridiculous because of course, grief is a relevant term anytime there's loss. And I think the same with people who've lost children in utero, there's the sense of, like, it's a lesser grief in some way. Or sometimes in my world, we call it

ambiguous loss. It's a loss that doesn't necessarily fit in a neat category. And it can be extraordinarily traumatizing and I think demeaning, the way that our culture deals with these kinds of losses, because, you know, there's no funeral. Sometimes people have a funeral for an in-utero loss, which I think is really, really wise, because it really honors it as a full loss. But, like, we didn't have a funeral for my daughter. Nobody brought potlucks, there weren't cards, there wasn't like a community reaction. Because, you know, she just went back to live with somebody else. Of course, it's much more than that.

Katie: Yeah. And that brings up another good point, which is, if we aren't the person experiencing the grief, but someone close to us is, someone maybe has lost a family member who's not our family member, or goes through maybe a very significant breakup, or loses a child to miscarriage. What are some ways that we can be helpful? And like, be careful of our language. And, like, what are the things that are actually helpful to say? I feel like this is another societal thing, that's a fall down point. It's often very hard to know what do you say to someone in those situations?

Sherry: Yeah. And people say, even well meaning, really thoughtful people say, like, terrible things. So I think sometimes this is where words can be helpful, but are probably not the primary offering. So, if you know someone who has gone through a major loss, even the loss associated with divorce, it's lovely to bring something, right, to send flowers, to send a card that maybe just says, I love you, I'm thinking about you. This is where practical help is really lovely, right? Like, when people are in turmoil or in transition, like, they don't want to cook. So sending that UberEATS gift card or bringing over the pot roast, those kinds of things have traditionally been associated with what we do with people who've experienced death. But I think we can expand them to all kinds of losses.

Katie: Yeah, I think that's helpful. And that's a tough spot to be in, to not know what to say, but to want to help someone. And I think you're right, I'm sure I have both said, as the person trying to comfort someone, a thing that wasn't very helpful, and I've also certainly heard those things. So that's a really helpful guideline to have. And I love that we've gotten to talk so much about kids and family, and that you've shared some pretty significant grief experiences that you've had. I'm curious, as a psychologist, how you protect the mental wellness of your family and any other tips we can gain from you on how we can all do that for our families.

Sherry: Yeah, I think many of the things that probably you're well aware of, but just these rhythms of togetherness are helpful. So my kids are now teenagers, I have a 16-year-old and a 12-year-old. And so, one of the major, major, major wellness conversations in our life is around screens and screen time. And so, for us, just having really clear...we have kind of a clear schedule around screens, and then expectations that kids do lots of other things. Like, you can do a screen... You know, there's a checklist. Like, you have to have done your chores, practice your instrument, spend time outside, gotten some exercise, done something helpful. Like, there's all of these sorts of decisions, criteria for when you're then ready to use a screen for the day. And I think that helps them feel like they have choice control autonomy. Like, hey, this is on my terms, but also the requirements, so to speak, are clear.

Because I think one of the biggest threats to mental wellbeing that many kids experience is not only just what happens with the screen, but it's the sedentary nature of what it is to be on an iPad for hours a day, or to be in front of the TV for hours a day. And so making sure that kids stay in their bodies, that they stay doing things that help expand their creativity and are nourishing for their mind is of course a really important part of ensuring their wellness and wellbeing.

Katie: Those are great tips. And as we get close to the end of our time, a few other questions I'd love to ask. The first being if there is a book or a number of books that have profoundly influenced your life, of course,

obviously besides your own, which I will link to for all of you listening in the show notes at wellnessmama.fm. But any books that have really profoundly impacted you.

Sherry: My favorite book really as a mother is called "The Gift of An Ordinary Day." And it really is a gentle, gentle reflection on listening to your inner world and following your instincts as a mother, and also kind of writing the ebb and flow of parenting. So it's a really beautiful, just reflective book that has been a source of, like, great comfort to me in my parenting journey.

Katie: I love it. That's a new suggestion. I'll make sure to link to that as well in the show notes for all of you listening, hopefully, while you're moving, as we've maybe encouraged in this episode. And any parting advice for the listeners today that could be related to what we've talked about in the episode or entirely unrelated.

Sherry: I think I will go back to our conversation around dancing. It's to find some joyful movement every day. And no matter what that looks like for you, whether that's dancing alone in your bathroom, while you're drying your hair, getting ready in the morning, or taking the dance class or something that's more organized and structured. That joyful, expressive movement is such a beautiful part of who we are. And many of us don't quite get enough of it.

Katie: Well, like I said, that's a resistance point for me, so I will take your challenge and incorporate more of that in my own life, and hopefully, with my kids as well. I really, really appreciate your work. And I know how it can be uncomfortable to share those really vulnerable core parts, especially when we've had loss or gone through something difficult. And I really admire that you are using your story to hopefully help so many other people. And I'm so glad we got to have this conversation. Thank you for all the work that you do.

Sherry: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Katie: And thanks, as always, to all of you for listening and sharing your most valuable resources, your time, your energy, and your attention with us today. We're both so grateful that you did. And I hope that you will join me again on the next episode of the Wellness Mama Podcast.

If you're enjoying these interviews, would you please take two minutes to leave a rating or review on iTunes for me? Doing this helps more people to find the podcast, which means even more moms and families could benefit from the information. I really appreciate your time, and thanks as always for listening.