



Grieving at Work

After a sudden passing in the family, Rita had a hard time adjusting to her “new normal” while balancing multiple responsibilities as CEO of her creative agency. Stevon and Juleyka discuss caring for ourselves during the grieving process, and Stevon shares tips for accepting help from loved ones.

Clip: She recognizes she has these responsibilities to other people and also wants to make sure that she doesn't distract herself from her own grieving process. Oftentimes that's what people will do. We will do the thing that helps us to not think about what's happening, and that doesn't really help us heal.

Stevon Lewis: What's up everybody? Welcome to *How to Talk to High Achievers about Anything*. I'm Stevon Lewis, a licensed psychotherapist. Today we're talking about grieving and learning to adjust to a new normal after a personal loss, something that can be especially hard for many high achievers who are used to always being on the go and getting things done. But before we start, I'd like to welcome Juleyka Lantigua, creator of our show. What's up, Juleyka?

Juleyka Lantigua:

What's up, what's good?

Lewis: Thanks for coming on, but let me introduce our guest. Today we have Rita with us. Rita is the CEO and founder of a creative agency in Chicago. After the loss of a loved one, Rita took some time off to grieve and be with family, but going back to work a few weeks later was not easy, and she's still trying to adjust to her new normal. Let's get into it.

Rita: My name is Rita Thomas. I am the founder and CEO of 110 North creative agency. So recently, I learned that my mother was in the hospital and she wasn't doing well. I live out of state. My sister and I immediately coordinated returning back home with our families and wanted to, of course, be there for her, to support her through what we thought would be a short hospital stay. Eventually we learned that her condition was very bad, and the likelihood of her recovering was very slim. She ended up passing away, and we had to move really quickly. So we were able to have her ceremony, and celebration of life is what we've been calling it,

instead of calling it a funeral because she lived life well and was an amazing woman, Shirley Vaughan.

So for the celebration of life, all of our family, we all got together and we listened to music and we ate delicious food, and each table had several photos on it from her life, whether it was her being pregnant with me, or her travels to Colorado Spring and being a military wife, her singing at a talent show in high school, looking kind of like Diana Ross. Just looking so happy and free.

My mother had her celebration of life on a Saturday, and I was back at work on Monday. With her being in the hospital, eventually passing, and us planning everything, that was like a three-week period. So after the funeral, I did feel as if I needed to get back into the swing of things. I'm not quite sure if I should have waited a little bit longer, or if getting back into the swing of my normal day-to-day, whatever that looks like now, so let's call it the new normal, was or is a good idea. So I did decide to start taking half days for this week. I don't know yet how long I should do that for or what makes the most sense, so it definitely is a work in progress.

I am only four days into being back fully, meaning having meetings with the team, contacting clients, initiating new conversations and pitches. I will say that as a CEO and a leader of a dynamic team, you're just being pulled in all of these different directions. And so I think one of the things in this moment that I am challenged with or by is being able to hold space for the grief while continuing to move through life with excellence. How do you do both and do them well? I've found myself creating the most space for grief and honoring my mother in the mornings because that's when we would typically have a quick chat every day. On a soul level, I miss her. So in those moments, I stop. I try to take a deep breath, I think about her. If there's something that I want to tell her, I believe that she's still around. So I may just say, "oh, I miss you." So just pausing.

My mother definitely is someone that everyone leaned on, so it's a loss that many people... She has 11 siblings, so it is a loss that we're all experiencing. And so that's been something that my sister and I have been talking through and processing, and also trying to support others, because we're her daughters, and so sometimes people call us and they want to vent, and what does that space look like? How do you create space for that but also not allow yourself to become super sad or distracted? So I'm also surprised that my guardrails and boundaries, they're a little more fluid than I thought they would be. In a lot of cases, I'm willing to do so because it does feel good to hear stories about my mother, even if it's in the middle of the workday. All of these different priorities, including my personal life...

And so keeping everything in motion is somewhat of a challenge because I'm a planner, but grief doesn't allow you to operate that way, or at least for me it hasn't.

Lewis: Rita, thank you for coming on the show and being so vulnerable.

As I listened to Rita's story, the part that stood out to me is the fact that her experience is very common for when we lose someone, especially when that loss is kind of unexpected or abrupt. There is a need to try to make sense of what's happened and adjust to it while also pushing ourselves to try and keep some semblance of normality in other areas of our lives. And I like the insight she has and awareness about being involved in that process as it's happening.

Lantigua: I want for her to be able to just stay in bed and watch documentaries all day, have someone bring her warm soup and toasted bread. My heart obviously goes out to her and her sister and her family for their incredible loss, but my heart goes out to her also because of her immense sense of responsibility. If that were me, I'd be like, "I quit life. See you in eight months."

Lewis: Speaking personally, when you lose someone close to you, especially as an adult in the midst of your own career, it's really, really difficult to get back to the swing of things, so to speak.

We'll get into this after a short break.

Rita, she recognizes she has these responsibilities to other people and also, I guess, wants to make sure that she doesn't distract herself from her own kind of grieving process. Oftentimes that's what people will do. We will do the thing that helps us to not think about what's happening, and that doesn't really help us heal.

Lantigua: Okay, coach, what do we do?

Lewis: What I think are some best practices in situations like this is one, to just have tons of self-compassion. To know that you're going to have some good days where you can feel accomplished, and you can push and go and accomplish things. And then you're going to have some days where like you said, "I want to just sit in bed, watch documentaries and eat warm soup and toasted bread," and be okay with both of those outcomes. Give yourself some opportunity to sit and live in both of those places. I think that's really, really going to be helpful for people to not beat themselves up over that, especially when we have responsibilities to others. The other thing is relinquishing control. We want to get through the grieving process because it doesn't feel good. We want to expedite that, and that's not really how it works. I don't know that we ever truly get over someone.

I'm using air quotes here, but I do think that we learn to be okay with them not being here physically with us anymore, and for us to still be able to go out and be great, as we need to in the world. And so I want people to employ a mantra of "miss and move forward." That's not to ignore or minimize the absence of the person, but it's saying that you get to acknowledge that they are no longer present here with you, in a way that still honors them...and allows me to continue to be the best version of myself I can be.

Lantigua: Yeah. So one of the things that is really weird and ironic in situations like this is that this is probably when folks like Rita need the most help and are least able to ask for it. I've had a couple of friends go through unbelievable things this last year, and they had no concept of how to ask for help. So being that friend, I just do stuff for them. Send them a meal, send them groceries, remind them to do little things to take care of themselves, because they were so deep into the grieving and taking care of the urgency in front of them that they just forgot themselves in that process. And so I think that one of the things that high achievers and overachievers have to be aware of is that we tend to go back to the, "I can just do it myself. I don't need anybody." Or, "I'm not going to burden someone else with this thing that obviously I can do myself." How can we put in place a system that eases us into getting the help that we need and deserve during a crisis?

Lewis: I like that you use the phrasing "a system," because that's exactly what it is. And Rita, you can hear it in her story when she speaks, has an immense responsibility to making other people's lives easier. And her being an owner of an agency, an entrepreneur, then she's beholden or responsible to employees and such, and family, and it is a system of things. It's, how do you allow others to show up for you when you are someone who's used to kind of doing for yourself and not being a burden? And so it's having them think about, early on in the process before adversity hits, how you are going to let people slide in? And sometimes it's about giving people, I want to say jobs or responsibilities. They don't have to be the biggest lift, but giving people an opportunity just to show up.

So if someone wants to go to lunch, maybe you let them plan it, maybe you let them pay for it. You don't always have to be the one to control the situation. And so as you start to practice those little things, then when you need a bigger lift from someone, it'll make you a little bit more comfortable because people have had an opportunity to show that they are capable of showing up and being effective for you. And I think that's part of the biggest fear is that if I allow someone to show up, it's going to end up costing me more, or causing me more work.

Lantigua: Well, don't keep score, right? It's very difficult for high achievers, and specifically for high achieving women to not feel like they have to maintain equity in all

circumstances. You do for me, I do for you. If I can't do for you right now, but you did for me, I'm indebted to you somehow, or I owe you from last time. And I think part of our growth is understanding that we are worthy of that support and that help, and that it does not have to always be paid back. It's not transactional. I have an amazing friend who's a high-powered executive in government, and she was taught in her family to keep count, so I had to adjust. And so what I say now is, "we have a joint account, and when you do for me, we put into that account jointly, and then when I do for you, we put into the account jointly, and whoever needs it takes it."

And every time she's trying to equalize the playing field, she's always like, "oh, but you did all these things for me." And I'm like, "yeah, it's all in deposit. Don't worry. It's all in the deposit, okay? It's all in there." But I know that about her because I was that person too, where I was like, "oh my God, I haven't paid her back," because she went and picked up my laundry or whatever it was that someone did. I'd always be like, "I need to do something in equal measure."

Lewis: And knowing your personality, I don't know that she has much say so in how she's going to adjust to that.

Lantigua: No, she will have the help.

Lewis: She cannot say "no." And I think that's the important part is that you build community around yourself of where there are people that you don't have to feel like you're going to owe or repay a debt to when they do show up, because that's just kind of the nature of the relationship. And so creating that village and identifying who those people are who will have license to be what you need when you need it.

Lantigua: I hope this reassures her, I really do, because she's dealing with a lot already.

Lewis: Juleyka, always fantastic to have you on the show.

Lantigua: I love coming here to talk about the things that actually matter. Thank you for inviting me.

Lewis: It makes me really proud when I see high achievers like Rita achieving on their own terms by having compassion for themselves, relinquishing control, and adjusting to change.

Lewis: And that's a wrap. Thank you so much for listening to *How to Talk to [High Achievers] about Anything*. We want you to be a part of our show.

We want to hear about your successes and challenges, your sacrifices and celebrations, and what's ahead on the journey for you. Send our Producer Virginia an email and we'll get your story on the show. She's at virginia@lwcstudios.com.

How to Talk to [High Achievers] about Anything is an original production of LWC Studios. Our show is produced by Virginia Lora, Tren Lightburn mixed this episode, Juleyka Lantigua is the Creator and Executive Producer. I'm Stevon Lewis.

On Twitter and Instagram, we're @Tal toAchievers. Bye, everybody.

CITATION:

Lewis, Stevon, host. "Grieving at Work" *How to Talk to [High Achievers] about Anything*, LWC Studios., November 13, 2023. Talktohighachievers.com.

Produced by:



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