

Episode #35 – Overcoming Loss with Grief Yoga: Kim Bernardo's Journey

Donna Ferris: [00:00:00] Welcome to Bounce Back Stronger, the podcast that explores ways to find peace and purpose no matter what happens. Today, we're diving into the power of yoga and meditation, especially when life throws us curve balls. Our guest, Kim Bernardo, is an expert in helping people find peace and courage in the face of loss. With certifications in grief yoga, trauma-informed yoga, meditation, and yin yoga, Kim leverages her expertise and experience to guide her students to discover resilience and strength as they travel through the grieving process.

Kim, thank you so much for being on the podcast. It is wonderful to have you with us today.

Kim Bernardo: Thank you for having me. I'm excited for this.

Donna Ferris: It's good to have you here. We met through Instagram your handle is travelbalanced?

Kim Bernardo: Traveled and balanced, yep.

Donna Ferris: And maybe just take a second to talk about where that came from.

I'd love that.

Kim Bernardo: Yeah, so a couple of years [00:01:00] ago, when I was trying to find out, like, what my niche was with yoga, I wanted to combine my love for travel and yoga all in one handle. So I started doing that when the pandemic happened and then I shifted about two years ago to, grief yoga.

So I figured I'd keep the handle because people already know it and I still post my travels and stuff like that. So it kind of still works out.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, I think in a way, too, I mean, we, life is kind of a travel, right? We're having a journey. I, I think it still really applies. You know, we want to travel through life in a balanced way.

Kim Bernardo: That's a really good way to put it. That's a good way to think about it. Yeah.

Donna Ferris: And, and we did an event, I think around my first book on Instagram, which was great to do with you. And I resonate so well with, with your mission around you know, helping people through grief. Maybe spend a here so that everybody can understand how you came to this work.

Kim Bernardo: Yeah. So I've been a yoga teacher for almost, almost eight years now, teaching in Rhode [00:02:00] Island, all over the States. And I've been trying to find my niche for the past couple of years, but couldn't figure out what it was. In 2020, the end of 2020, my parents were diagnosed with different cancers. My mom was diagnosed with kidney cancer, and my dad was diagnosed with esophageal cancer.

They were diagnosed like maybe like three weeks apart. And so they ended up passing. My mom, three months later from that, and then my dad, six months from that. So it was three months apart for the two of them. Yoga is like what saved me during that time. Yoga and meditation are the two things I turned to throughout that whole anticipatory grief.

It was a lot to deal with, a lot of caregiving, and I needed some self-care and stuff like that. I'd go in the room for about 20 minutes and be like all right, Mom and Dad; I gotta go do this. It was a little break, and it really felt like a 5-minute meditation like that reset everything for me to turn my [00:03:00] thoughts around my frustrations.

If I was feeling a lot of burnout, I was working full time while caring for my parents. Those are the 2 things I turned to that really helped me. So, about a year after my parents passed, there was a training for grief yoga. And I had just been introduced to the book that Paul Dennison had written. And like a couple of weeks later, I got an email about the training, and I was like, Oh my God, I had never even known that this was a thing. So I dove right in mainly for my own practice to see what it could offer me. And the transformation that I had in that training and afterward really pushed me to want to share that with other people.

It was just like a different avenue that, like, I had never considered before that I love sharing with people. And I hear the same thing that people say, like, they never even knew it existed. So I'm glad that I can expose people to it and give them the tools to tell them on their journey.

Donna Ferris: So that's—an amazing story. And, of course, [00:04:00] I'm sorry for your loss. We've talked a bit about this over time. I think if you are going through loss, I think your Instagram is really, really helpful. You have a lot of really great resources and just allowing people to kind of express their feelings through this time, which is hard.

And, you know, it's a really, really difficult thing to have those types of losses in your life. And and you're relatively young too; I think it's really hard when you're young.

Kim Bernardo: Agreed. Especially since, like, I don't really know anybody in my life who's lost even one parent, maybe even grandparents, like, a lot of my friends have even lost, like, more than one grandparent.

Like, it's, it's like a weird thing to go through. Like, I'm only 34 years old. Like, you know, like, it's so weird.

Donna Ferris: It is. If it's at all helpful, my dad died when I was 25 and it was really, really hard for me. I found though that I was there for my friends as it happened to them.

And I kind of became the person that everybody went to when they had that experience. And it's funny, 30 [00:05:00] years later, now I'm writing this book called Bounce Back Stronger to provide the things that I wish I had when my dad died. So I think it gives us this purpose, right?

I think it's given you this purpose, which certainly, I would have wished I had my father all these years, but I wouldn't have gone this route and, and done this work without it. So, there is a lot of benefit to our lives, I think, as we go through these things and figure out the tools that help us.

Kim Bernardo: I agree. It's like a weird, like, I'm happy I found my niche, but like, I'm also like sad that I had to go through this, and they can't see this experience, you know,

Donna Ferris: I think they do, though. You know, I think that's one of the things that I really feel. I don't know if you have that in your experience, but there are so many times I can tell that they're there with me, and they, they, they leave me signs of, of being around.

Kim Bernardo: Yeah, those are so comforting. It's like validating. You're going through an experience and then you get that sign. You're like, all right. So, you know, it validates a lot.

Donna Ferris: [00:06:00] Yeah. Maybe let's talk a little bit about grief yoga. What is grief yoga? That would be helpful, I think.

Kim Bernardo: Yeah. Grief yoga uses yoga movement, breath, and sound to release any suppressed pain and suffering in the body and to reconnect to love.

It's a gentle class that's designed to help grievers through their journey. I use the yoga and meditation. I combine the two within my classes as well.

Donna Ferris: And why is movement so important in grief?

Kim Bernardo: So pain gets suppressed in the body either consciously or subconsciously. I think this isn't talked about enough, and it really needs to be expressed.

A lot of people kind of push down grief in general, and it'll show up in different ways throughout your experience. You might have aches and pains in the body or sleeping issues, insomnia, inflammation as well, like some things like that will just start to show up in the body and When you start to express that suppressed pain [00:07:00] in any sort of movement, not even just yoga, you're working out, if you're going for walks, running, it just allows you to release just that heaviness in the body.

I don't know how else to explain it, other than that, the heaviness in the body, you feel a release afterwards. And you don't even realize sometimes, like, until you do that exercise or workout, how much you're suppressing. And it'll continue to happen over time. Our whole journey with grief is just constant memories and dates and anniversaries and events and stuff like that, that they're missing out on, that brings it up in the body, especially before a big event. We start to feel it in the body. Just give yourself that time to just let it release.

It'll feel amazing for the brain, the breath, for every part of your body,

Donna Ferris: Yeah, I entirely agree with that. What might a student expect when they go to a grief yoga class? Like, how is it set up? Cause I think it's hard for people to access yoga for the first time [00:08:00] anyway, and then if they're going through something, you're not yourself in a lot of ways.

There's a whole internal dialogue that happens when you're grieving. So maybe give them a little bit of reassurance of how this works.

Kim Bernardo: So with grief yoga, it's set up in kind of like four different stages, but it flows all together. Like you don't even realize that the four stages are even happening and it's on my end to plan it that way.

But in the beginning, there's gentle yoga to just start to warm up the body, warm up the spine, seven different ways. And then you move into an in depth part called the expression, which is like the breath work and the sound to begin to release that suppressed pain. Use techniques kind of like punching out in front of you, pretending you're chopping wood with your hands into your waist, and just bringing your arms up and down.

It's just different ways to open up different parts of your body, the shoulders, the chest the lungs, the throat, just different areas that suppress pain. starts to get released. And then we start to come back to like more meditative flows [00:09:00] to bring down the height of the class.

It's still a very gentle class, but you go into a point with those techniques where it kind of brings out more of you emotionally and mentally, and not every single class either. Every class will be different, but those meditative flows bring you back more inward to do a little self-work.

And then we go back into more yoga, which is more the restorative part. We just hang out in poses for a little bit longer to marinate in them and settle what's happened. We go back to that inner work again and see what's come up.

I also like to end my classes with a 15-minute guided meditation just to have that extra 15 minutes to completely relax. You hang out in some bolsters and blankets and let yourself go to sleep if you want to. I know it's a lot of work, so I know some people fall asleep, and it's totally fine.

It's a compliment.

Donna Ferris: It is the best compliment. Are there certain postures that work really well in grief [00:10:00] that you would recommend? Because there are probably quite a few people that are yoga students here. So they'll know some of these poses.

Kim Bernardo: Yeah. So, three that I can think of off the top of my head – one is the child's pose.

It's very grounding. You go down on the floor and you just go inward. If you're in the middle of class and you feel overwhelmed or like you're going to cry, you don't want anybody to see it. It's a good time to just go on your knees, come down in child's pose, and go inward until you're ready to come out of it.

You can literally stay the whole time in child's pose. And then tree pose. It's another one that helps calm and relax the mind and the nervous system. It also helps with concentration, which is also good for the grief brain, especially in the early stages of grief- that grief brain just kind of fogs up everything.

This allows you to have a little bit more clarity. And then forward fold helps you ground down to the earth and just let everything go. Just let the shoulders release. It's just a really good release for the lower back, too. Some common areas grief gets [00:11:00] suppressed. Anything gentle and restorative honestly will work.

Something that doesn't overwhelm the body and allows you to move slowly, feel what the body is feeling, and let it express itself.

Donna Ferris: That's great. What are some other go to's for you when you're having a day that's difficult in grief? Like, what, what is your routine?

Do you have something that you follow?

Kim Bernardo: Yeah. It's probably more of the same few things. So creative outlets really work for me, like creating art. I'm kind of into dollhouses right now. It sounds really weird, but like wooden dollhouses.

Donna Ferris: Oh, I love that.

Kim Bernardo: And it's kind of like, letting me go back to my childhood, I guess, but so, like, painting like designing them, and then they kind of sit aside just to kind of admire just a different kind of outlet for me with my art, but I have gone to art classes and stuff like that since being on this grief journey, it's really helped me a lot.

I always turn to, like, journaling and reading about grief to help when I'm feeling really down, just to kind of get validation. [00:12:00] How I'm feeling, stuff like that, and always working out and doing yoga. That's like my number one thing. I turn to If that doesn't help, then the journaling is like afterward.

Usually the movement though, even brings up like different parts of grief I didn't even realize I had going on, you know?

Donna Ferris: I don't know if you've read *The Body Keeps the Score*

It's very supportive of yoga. It talks a lot about how yoga releases so many repressed feelings, not just grief but things that, you know, have happened to you in the past.

A lot of breakthroughs can happen as a result of that. Like you said, there are things that you may not even realize were affecting you in this way. Yoga will help you release them.

Kim Bernardo: Yeah. It's funny you brought that up. I had that on my nightstand for like the last year, but I keep forgetting.

It's in a huge pile of books that I have to read. And I literally said to my husband two days ago, like, I need to read this book. It will help me a lot with, teaching and stuff like that. And just for my own knowledge, and it's funny you brought that up.

Donna Ferris: [00:13:00] It's a sign. Yeah. My Reiki teacher would say your spirit guides are telling you to pick that sucker up. I waited a long time on that one, too. It was on my shelf for a long time. But, I did really appreciate it. He also talks about dancing as being a really helpful activity, which I am a big believer in.

I probably shouldn't tell you this, but every morning in the shower, I turn on the Al Jarreau playlist, which is a very happy playlist. I dance in the shower because I'm a big believer in stacking things, and I have to shower. If I dance and put that music on, it immediately puts me in a better mood.

I found it really, really helpful. Dancing is a big one for releasing stress.

Have you leaned on a community through your grief journey? How has the community that you've developed through your grief yoga work impacted your journey?

Kim Bernardo: Yeah, the Instagram [00:14:00] grief community is the best, and that's where I went. That's how we met, was through that. Yeah, that's right. It's just so supportive; there's no judgment and so much validation.

There are so many people, so you don't feel alone. My number one thing when I first went through this was, where the heck am I going to turn to? Especially during COVID times. So that led me to meet one of my really good friends. We text all the time. She lost her mom a few months after I lost my parents.

So you get it, you know, we just text each other to just like kind of vent whatever we're going through. We check in on each other to see how each other's grief is.

But also in person, like the grief community we created over here in Rhode Island, it's just been really nice to be in a room full of people who get it. I don't have to explain very much as I do with my friends about my grief. And hearing people's grief stories helps me with coping mechanisms that I can try and different ways of meeting people out here.

Donna Ferris: [00:15:00] Yeah, and I think giving to others when you can if you're grieving is really helpful too. I don't recommend it unless you're really ready for it, but I find it's really helpful. It takes you out of yourself because it's easy to get kind of stuck in there inside. So yeah, you found that too.

Kim Bernardo: I totally agree. And, like, after my grief yoga classes, I usually take the night off to just decompress. It's a lot. It's a lot of work on the emotions in the class while I'm dealing with my own emotions, too. Sometimes, it can trigger things, especially if it's near an anniversary or a big event my parents are going to be missing out on, and then I need time to decompress.

I always remind my students to take time for themselves. It might not happen that night. It may happen a few weeks later that you feel the effects of the grief yoga just kind of coming over you, and you need to give yourself that self-care afterward. It's heavy work. It's [00:16:00] worth it though.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. It's really awesome that you do it. It's a big gift.

Kim Bernardo: Yeah, yeah, it's been really nice to help other people in this journey, you know,

Donna Ferris: So Kim, if anybody wanted to reach out to take classes with you, how would they do that?

Kim Bernardo: I'm on Instagram and Facebook @traveledandbalanced, and I have an email at traveledandbalanced@gmail.com. Those are two ways you can

reach out to me. I also offer online classes once a month and in-person classes probably three to four times a month.

Donna Ferris: That's great. Well, I'll have all those links in the show notes so that you can reach out and definitely follow Kim on Instagram.

You've got the greatest grief memes. They're really, really helpful.

Kim Bernardo: Thank you.

Donna Ferris: And thank you so much for being with us today. I really, really appreciate it.

Kim Bernardo: Thank you for having me. I was very excited to do this and I'm glad to be, you know, [00:17:00] reaching out to other people, just exposing them to the possibilities in their grief journey.

Donna Ferris: That's all for today. If you want to learn more about Kim or sign up for her classes, those links will be in the show notes. Thank you so much for listening.

I hope this episode was helpful. If it was, please subscribe, drop a review, or share it with your friends and family. That's the best way to get it in the hands of those who may benefit.

And if my daughters, Sienna and Sylvie, are listening, I just want you to know how proud I am of you, and I love you so much.

Bye now.