

#57 – Nevertheless She Persisted with Widowed Mom Jenny Lisk

Donna Ferris: [00:00:00] Welcome to Bounce Back Stronger, the podcast that explores ways to find peace and purpose no matter what happens. I'm your host, Donna Ferris, and today's guest is author, podcaster, and widowed parent advocate, Jenny Lisk. A little about Jenny. Jenny Lisk is the founder of the Widowed Parent Institute and the author of Future Widow and Widowed Parents Unite, 52 Tips to Get Through the First Year from One Widowed Parent to Another.

Jenny's work, which includes the Widowed Parent Podcast, has touched the lives of many parents navigating life after loss. She's here today to share invaluable insights from her own experience, as well as the collective wisdom of the parents she has interviewed and worked with from around the globe.

Jenny, thank you so much for being with me today. It's an honor to speak with you.

Jenny Lisk: Thank you, Donna. I've been looking forward to this.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, me too. Me too. And I have to say, thank you so much for sending me a copy of [00:01:00] Future Widow. Of course. And I read it on a road trip we did this weekend to D. C., and I kept tearing up, and my husband kept going, Are you all right? Are you all right?

And there was one part that made me tear up the most. It was early in the book, and actually, it was when you were writing about how you were going to help yourself write the memoir, and you were going to wear this shirt, and you were going to get multiple copies of the shirt.

And can you tell me what the shirt said and why that was so important to you?

Jenny Lisk: Yeah, absolutely. The shirt says, “Nevertheless, She Persisted.”

Donna Ferris: This makes me tear up now.

Jenny Lisk: And yeah, I wrote that in the preface of the book, actually, because it kind of framed, writing, this. I never thought I'd be a memoir writer, right?

Writing a memoir is hard. And I learned a lot about the process. I should have known that the genre is obviously vulnerable by definition, right? But I didn't.

But to your point about the shirt, [00:02:00] I was trying to write this book. And I kept thinking, I'm going to write, an hour every morning, or I'm going to write every Saturday morning for a half a day, or all these different things I tried the things people suggest writers do. And I was getting frustrated because I wasn't getting it done.

And it wasn't just a time thing, right? It was like there was some internal roadblock that was making me think, or, use the excuse to myself, I don't have time. And finally, I was like the only way I'm going to get this done is if I clear my calendar for the month of August, and this would have been August of 2019. And write a thousand words a day. And I don't know if that's too many words or not enough words. If I can stick to it, by the end of the month I should have 30,000 or so words. And I'm gonna get this shirt that says, "Nevertheless, She Persisted."

Because I'm gonna have to persist and push through these roadblocks to do this. The other thing I did was to keep myself accountable and posted on social media what I was [00:03:00] doing. At first, I posted every day, and then I kind of went to every other day. And I was like, okay, today I wrote 1,005 words, I made it.

And, maybe, I wrote some things about what I struggled with that day. In terms of the writing, I tackled this part, or I tackled that part, or I'm really wondering how to do this part, or I'm hitting my head against the wall, or whatever it was, right? And a couple, I think one day I was like, I didn't make it.

And so then the next day I was like, all right, I did 2000 words today, so I'm good now.

Donna Ferris: That's amazing.

Jenny Lisk: And yeah, and the thing, and I don't know if you people are listening here who are wanting to write a book or, or thinking about it, but, this is kind of, I mean, first of all, it's an accountability tool for me, and it was terrific.

Secondly, it gave me something to share with my people, right? My friends, my family, all the extended lifetime of people you're connected to on Facebook, right? Of what I'm working on with this book. That's terrific. Not coming out

for a year or however [00:04:00] long in the future, right? And then following along and people starting to say, wow, I can't wait to read it.

I'm so excited, so it's kind of early marketing essentially, but I'm not saying that cynically. I'm not saying I was just doing it like just to be marketing. I mean, I'm just saying there are lots of benefits to being kind of open and giving some behind-the-scenes in the author's journey as you go along.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, and you give people a model, too, for their own writing, to see somebody going through that and writing about it. Because it's hard. I mean, I wrote a memoir, too. It's hard to write a memoir. And especially when you're dealing with difficult things, like, you were dealing with.

Jenny Lisk: Yeah, one of the interesting things about memoirs is - Julie Lifcott Hames is an author. She's written mostly about parenting things, but she wrote a memoir as well. And I heard her say a long, long time ago, memoir is an act of service. And I really tried to keep that affixed in my mind. As I worked on this and in fact, I put it on a sticky note.

People who are listening can't see I'm pointing to the area above my [00:05:00] desk here, and I put this sticky note, and I said a memoir is an act of service, and I put it up there, and every time I was like tearing my hair out. Why am I writing this book anyway? Maybe I should just trash the whole thing. I look at that sticky note, and I'd be like, all right, why am I writing this? Because there are other people who are coming after me, I was 43, Dennis was 44, our kids were 9 and 11, and he was diagnosed with glioblastoma, which is a terminal Brain cancer. Now, I say terminal. Very, very low, single-digit survival rate.

I actually do know somebody now who has survived. Like somebody I met later who's lived 20 years now, and she's cancer-free. But that's like the huge exception to the rule.

And so my point is that I knew there would be people coming after me with spouses who were gravely ill or terminally ill or dying or had died who had kids who were asking themselves, what do I do now? Right? Like, I don't know how to do this. I didn't sign up to [00:06:00] be a widowed parent. I have two kids, and we have sort of a quote-unquote normal life, whatever that means.

Normal can look in lots of ways, but normal does not include dead parents. And I just felt like I don't know how to do this job that I wasn't expecting and didn't ask for.

Donna Ferris: And you looked for books to help you and did a lot of research. So it's not like you didn't try to find something, but sometimes when you don't find what you need, you got to write it.

Jenny Lisk: Yeah. Yeah. I'm kind of a book person like that. I went to Amazon and I typed in, I don't know what the search term was, but something like, where's the book that's going to help me solve this problem. Like the book, that's going to give me all the answers.

Right. And I didn't find anything. And what I didn't know at the time also was that there are grief centers in many communities. I like to call them kids and family grief centers. They usually have, names like Kate's Club or Judy's House or Dougy Center. They have names for the work they're doing in the communities.

But essentially it's a like a local grief support program for kids and for families. And if they're large enough, [00:07:00] sometimes they have separate adult programs as well where they have support groups for different ages of kids. Teenagers oftentimes they'll have young adults. Like I said, sometimes they'll have programs for adults.

Sometimes it's just maybe for parents of the children in the programs. Sometimes it's for other adults in the community with other types of losses. Sometimes they're big enough to have groups broken down by type of loss or amount of time since the loss happened, or even groups for men and groups for women groups for different types, child loss, spouse loss, sibling loss different kinds of things.

Anyway most of these have groups for, small kids and grade school kids and high school kids. I didn't know about them at the time. The other thing is, and by the way, I'm a member of the organization that's the National Alliance for Children's Grief, of which all these centers or members too.

They're doing terrific work. Also, here's what I kind of have been thinking about a lot. Even if your kid went to one of those programs, like [00:08:00] once or twice a month and maybe if they went to a therapist every week and there are actually things called grief camps that you can go to in the summer for a few days, like Camp Aaron is a good example.

It's like summer camp with some summer camp stuff like a ropes course or a, campfire or singing or whatever and some like grief stuff and let's talk about our

dead people and let's do things with pictures to make memories and like grief stuff woven in with regular kid stuff.

Anyway, even if your kid went through that camp and went to a therapist and a grief group and that's a lot of grief work by the way, and those are all really good supportive things to do even with all that one time I wonder if I add up all the days like how many days out of the year is that there's still like 300 other days in the year where the kid is not doing any of those things.

Donna Ferris: That's right.

Jenny Lisk: And it's all on the parent, me, and my listeners, my readers, people who are still raising their kids in [00:09:00] their teens, and their partner died. It's all on the parent, right, to figure out what to do to serve their own kids. And so I think there's still a huge need in helping parents with their own parenting and help their own kids on top of what grief centers are doing with kids in their programs.

Donna Ferris: And that's if the kids are willing to talk about it.

Jenny Lisk: Well, that's true. Right? And that can be tricky. One of the things that I learned, I had to learn all these things, right? I was an IT person before I spent 20 years at a large tech company doing like project management and things like this.

And I was a competent enough parent at regular stuff, quote unquote, regular, kid stuff. But, this idea that, like, even if the kid doesn't want to talk about it, whatever it is, the particular, the problem, the feelings, the situation, that it's important to send the message to them that the door is open to those conversations, [00:10:00] right? Even if you bring something up and they're like, ah, mom, I don't want to talk about it. No dad, go away, whatever. You're sending the message that the door's open. And so maybe they do want to talk about it tomorrow or next week or next year, right? You're sending that message that the door is open for this topic and for other hard topics too.

And that's an important message to be sending. I think for all parents. And in this case, parents in this context.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. And it's hard for kids to talk about it or to handle grief because we don't really do it very well in this Western culture, right?

Jenny Lisk: That's true. That's true. And, that's one of the reasons why it's helpful for kids to go to some kind of grief support program.

Like, for example, I mentioned the Dougy Center, which is in Portland, Oregon. If anybody's listening in Portland, Oregon, and you, or somebody who has kids who are grieving, it's a terrific program. And there are programs like that in other communities. But for example, lots and lots of [00:11:00] kids report that at school, they're kind of, like, things might be awkward.

Other kids don't want to talk to them because they don't know what to say. Maybe they even get excluded. Like, maybe the kid is even like, I just want to do video games and soccer with my friends, but the other kids are sort of treating them like with, like a fragile item or something, right?

They don't want to say anything about the death, so they don't say anything at all. So then the kid is like, excluded from their friends. Excluded, but sort of that subtle, subtle kind of awkwardness at a time when they really need their friends the most and so being able to participate in a camp in the summer or in an ongoing program every month or every however twice a month with other kids who kind of get it because they also lost a parent and sometimes kids who lost a sibling might be in the same group.

Where even if you're not talking about death and sitting here having this conversation about specifically about the death, you're just with other kids who get it, and there's a [00:12:00] certain comfort and support in that. And that's a really important factor that I think it's overlooked a lot.

Donna Ferris: That's a really good one. What, what other things do you think we could do to make it easier for families that are grieving?

Jenny Lisk: Oh, well, depends which direction when you say we do you mean like supporters like the people around them or do you mean people around them?

Donna Ferris: Around them. I think that's something that people do really struggle with.

They don't really know what to do. I think you mentioned what to say, but they don't know what to do.

Jenny Lisk: That's a good one. And I learned a lot. Like, I was one of the people before all this, in the before times, right, who didn't know what to say

didn't want to say the wrong thing. Just kind of, it's easier to clam up and hide, and that way you aren't doing anything wrong, right?

Yeah, and so then being on the other side of this experience, going through eight months, Dennis was sick and then he died, and then we had all the time after. And seeing, how people, what they said, what [00:13:00] they didn't say, who said things, the people who come out of the woodwork, sometimes it's the people you expect, and sometimes it's people who you're maybe sort of tangentially related to, and they, for whatever reason, step up, maybe they have comfort level and experience based on something in their own background. So actually this is an area that I've started to write and support on called griefallies.com which might be a good link for your show notes because I put a bunch of stuff there.

Donna Ferris: Oh, that's awesome.

Jenny Lisk: Some of it is like the what to say, not what to say kind of stuff. Anything that starts with “at least,” just like erase that whole sentence, right?

Donna Ferris: I love that.

Jenny Lisk: That's an example.

Donna Ferris: Oh, that's amazing.

Jenny Lisk: A whole bunch of practical ideas that go beyond casseroles. So like when it comes to bringing food, for example maybe somebody sets up a, a meal train. We had people set up a meal train for us, and people brought food three times a week, which was terrific.

And also [00:14:00] sometimes people, when they would bring their dinner, they would throw in some, like, fresh fruit. Or some dessert or snack items. And like, hey, I thought you might like to have this around for breakfast or for lunch. Like, even though their assignment was to bring dinner on Tuesday, they threw in some extra stuff, which was great, because I wasn't going to the grocery store.

And I wasn't doing that stuff. and speaking of not going to the grocery store, lots of people like to say, and I have to stop myself from saying it too, let me know if I can do anything to help. Right? And people say that because they truly mean it.

Like, I will try to do almost anything, so let me know, and then, I'll try to do it. It's genuine. Also, they don't want to overstep, or assume, or things like this. The thing is, when it gets received, and I had no idea until I was on the side of receiving this - that's too big.

I don't know. Unless it's like your sister or something. Right? First of all, you either know that she will do anything or secondly, what she's good at? And so you're not going to ask her to do the things [00:15:00] she's not good at. Right?.

Donna Ferris: Right.

Jenny Lisk: It's just such a broad statement that I would find myself thinking, okay, now I have to be nice and thank them.

And I do thank them. And I do appreciate it. And also I'm thinking to myself, I don't think I'm going to be able to call because I don't know what you want to do.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. It's too much energy when you're in that space.

Jenny Lisk: Yeah, maybe I don't know what I need, first of all.

Donna Ferris: Yeah.

Jenny Lisk: Secondly, getting a little more specific, right? If somebody says, if you've ever need anything from Costco, let me know. Okay. That sounds specific, but also, I know going to Costco is a pain, and I know you gotta drive there, and there's a big line, and there's a lot of people, and you don't go to Costco every day.

I don't know where your Costco is. My Costco is not, like, on my regular route. So, it's a trip. If you had said to me, let me know if you need something from Costco, I'm not going to say, "Oh, I need cat food and toilet paper, desperately. Can you please go to Costco for me?"

Because you're probably in the middle of taking your kids to soccer practice and finishing your work and figuring out what you're doing for dinner and whatever all you're [00:16:00] doing. Right? Carrying that example through, one time, one of my neighbors texted me and she said, I'm at Costco right now.

What do you need?

Donna Ferris: That's a good one.

Jenny Lisk: Yeah. And then I was like, “Oh, now I'm like, I'm not bothering her.” Right? She is already there. She can put three more things in her cart and bring them to me. Same idea was when another neighbor texted me and she said, I'm going to go into the grocery store in the morning.

Text me your list. I'll drop it by your porch around 10 a.m. if that's alright.

Donna Ferris: That's perfect.

Jenny Lisk: And I was like, great. She's already going. I'm not bothering her. And so that kind of stuff where you can get specific is I find the most helpful way to, to be supportive.

Donna Ferris: That's really good advice.

And you're right. I think when you're going through grief there's a lot of energy that's lost, right, in all of that. Any type of interaction can be exhausting. So getting more specific with your interactions with [00:17:00] somebody, around wanting to help them is probably really helpful all around, right?

Jenny Lisk: Yeah, because, let me know what I can do to help, it gives me a decision-making burden. Right? What, first of all, what do I need? Secondly, what sorts of support or help or whatever are you likely to want to provide or be able to provide or whatever? Like, it adds this decision-making burden.

Now, I would add, there's, one exception would be like, if one person wants to become the point person And that person sits down with me and says, okay, I've got a bunch of people who want to help with stuff. Can we brainstorm a little, can we figure out what you need? Can me and that one person spend some time, a close friend, a close neighbor, a close sister, somebody close sit down and brainstorm the stuff that maybe you're not thinking about.

So, for example, in my case our house was in the middle of being remodeled when Dennis went in for his first surgery.

Donna Ferris: A kitchen remodel.

Jenny Lisk: Yeah. We had some water damage in the kitchen and it was like all in the crawl space and mold and like all this terrible [00:18:00] stuff. And so at the point in the project when he went in for his surgery, we had no stove.

We had no sink. The refrigerator was plugged in on the deck. Like, I think when we left to go to the Doctor's appointment. We left the floor installers in the house, like banging on things to install the floor, right? So the house was kind of in disarray. And so, you know, one of my friends and my sister sat down and said, okay, can you give us sort of a brain dump on what you think needs to be done?

Because we've got some parents in the community who have either some DIY skills or some of them have some contractor skills or some of them, have some contractor connections. And can you give us a list and we'll organize a work party. And so I didn't have to field, "Oh, can I do this? Can I do this? Can I do this?"

I just gave one brain dump and they organized all these people to do all these inside things and outside things, painting and installing the new doorbell and like this whole list of things. And so the point being, if one close person says, let's have a brainstorming session, like I wouldn't have thought of, "Oh, [00:19:00] maybe I should ask people to do all these inside and outside house things that wouldn't have crossed my mind." But brainstorming with one close person and then pushing it all off to her delegating and then she could field somebody wants to help. Oh, do you want to paint on Friday? Oh, no. Would you rather bring you know, put on yard gloves and weed on Friday or dig things or whatever, that was super helpful.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, that's a great idea.

Jenny Lisk: I want to say one more thing on this topic of grief allies.

I mean, I could say lots more, but I think what people struggle with is that people really want to fix quote unquote air quotes for the people who can't see me fix the problem, right? And me too. Right? I have, how many times have I felt like, oh, I'm going to put off writing this condolence card because if only I can think of the magic words, somehow I can make the problem all better with magic words in my condolence card.

Well, of course I can't. Right? And in this case with the spouse who's gravely ill, nothing anybody could say or anybody could do would fix the actual fundamental underlying [00:20:00] problem. Nobody could change the diagnosis with their words. Nobody could, have a magic wand and change the fact that he was going to die and I was going to be a widowed parent, right?

Nobody could like fix the actual problem. But what they could do and what you can do with your words or your actions is fix the sort of surrounding practical problems, right? Also, a problem is that the kids need to get practice. Well, you can fix that for me. Right? Another problem is that I don't have sink.

Well, you know, you can call your contractor friend to come put my sink in and you fix that problem for me. And so where you can't fix the actual problem, I think it's important that we give ourselves permission to say, look, this is what I want to do and I can't, and that's okay. And so, what can I do? What other, things can I do that can be supportive and helpful, because there's plenty you can do that's supportive and helpful, even when you can't take away the actual, underlined problem.

Donna Ferris: Right, I think what you're getting to is we can feel like we can throw our [00:21:00] hands up because we can't really help the real problem, but you can ease the experience of the people that are affected.

Jenny Lisk: Yeah. And by taking some of those other problems off my hands, it frees me up to do, you know, to grieve or to talk to people to get support.

Donna Ferris: Or do the things that you have to do to kind of get through the period.

To persist.

Jenny Lisk: Yeah, like the shirt, right? Persisting. Exactly. And, it just makes the things that you can do easier. And that's enough.

Donna Ferris: It is enough.

Jenny Lisk: And I think once we give ourselves that permission, then it, removes that barrier to acting, right? I mean, and I'm not joking, how many condolence cards I never wrote.

I didn't intend to not write them. I just kicked it down the road, right? Like, oh, well, maybe next week I'll, and maybe it's not even quite as explicit in my mind, but just like, I can't think of what to write right now. This notion that [00:22:00] if I magically push it down the road a week or a month or six months or who knows how long, maybe I'll have the right words then, which is of course silly.

And the ultimate effect is I never sent the card, even though that wasn't what I intended. And so if I give myself permission up front to say, I'm going to write

this card, I'm not going to try to think I have to solve any problems with this card. I just need to let my friend know that I'm here, and I care, and I'm sorry they're going through this terrible thing.

Donna Ferris: And the cards matter. The going to the funerals matter. I can remember the people that came to my fiancé's funeral. I can remember almost every face. Even though I don't remember much of what I said or anything else, I remember the faces.

Jenny Lisk: Yeah, yeah.

Donna Ferris: You know?

Jenny Lisk: Yeah, it's amazing which parts we remember, which parts become important.

And I'm glad your friends showed up for you like that.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, and it's like you said that it was somewhat uneven, right? And I think it has nothing to do with the [00:23:00] relationships, it has to do with how comfortable we are with grief. And whether you've been there, whether you've been there before.

Jenny Lisk: Some people who showed up for me were sort of acquaintances at the time. I remember one person, she's now a friend, of course, right? And she was someone connected in our school community. And so it was more like a friend of a friend kind of thing. And her kids were older, so I didn't really know her. But she started sending me a card like once a week.

In the mail. And sometimes it was just I'm thinking about you. Sometimes she'd throw in a little Starbucks card and she'd say, because he was at the hospital a lot and there was a Starbucks in the lobby, right? And so she's like, Hey, you can get yourself a little treat when you're at the hospital.

Sometimes she'd throw in a little, Cold Stone ice cream gift card - take the kids out for a little treat. Right. And sometimes it was just a card saying whatever, I don't even remember what she said, but it was the overall care and thought. Just hey, someone's thinking about us, and they haven't forgotten, and we've been dragging on week after week, month after month, during all this illness, and eventually hospice. And, she's still [00:24:00] thinking about us and just knowing that is enough no matter what she says.

Donna Ferris: When people have a death, I actually have started to give them something that they can do outside. It's something that's joyful, like go to the movies and I know I have a friend that they love the Waffle House, so I gave them a Waffle House gift certificate.

Yeah. Trying to find ways to just lift yourself a little bit is really helpful in those post days rather than you don't need another bouquet of flowers because they die or plants. And I do have a lot of lovely plants out of the grieving that I did at that time and thank you for everyone who sent them.

But, I would have liked a little bit of happiness. I think that's good for people going through difficult time.

Jenny Lisk: Yeah, and it's a little different too, right? I don't know what it is exactly, but, somebody sent me a card for, like, Fandango or something, the movie ticket place, exactly.

Donna Ferris: That's what I did.

Jenny Lisk: And yeah, and, I don't think I even used it for like two years or something, but then I was like, "Oh, I have this card in the drawer." And I think I hadn't even been to the movies for a while before that. But, you know, [00:25:00] I have this card in the drawer. And there's a movie we wanted to see. Let's do that. And so those kinds of things, which I would never have thought of until I went through all this and saw the variety of ways people responded. And that's one of the reasons that I've tried to put out some stuff on this to be helpful because well, first of all, people started reaching out to me and saying, hey, you know, like neighbors or other people that I knew and they knew I had been through this and they'd say, oh, my friend's husband just died and they have two little kids or my colleague's wife just died and he has two teenagers.

What should I do? How can we be supportive? And I started individually answering. Right? And then I was like, okay, this is happening enough that I think I should put some stuff together. And if it's somebody that I'm close to, I'll be like, okay, read this first. And then let's talk. So then we don't have to like reiterate all the basics and stuff, but then if they have more questions or want to brainstorm or something, that's fine.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. That's funny. Cause I wrote my memoir [00:26:00] to get through. That was totally to get through a difficult time. That was the main reason I just needed to figure out I needed to write my way out of it. But the

second book I wrote, the Bounce Back Stronger book, was for the reason you just said.

People would ask me about what they should do or what some of the things are that helped you get through that difficult time and I was like here just have it And I have coloring pages in my book. So I give them crayons too. I'm like here. That's fun. The joy of doing that.

You can write a book that you wish you had.

Jenny Lisk: Well, yeah. And you know, it's funny because, I mean, not funny. None of this is funny, but anyway. But that's what we say. I know, right? It's, odd. It's my original idea and and the book that I still haven't written.

Is going to be called the Widowed Parent Handbook.

Donna Ferris: Mm hmm.

Jenny Lisk: And it's going to be like - somebody [00:27:00] likened it to the “What to Expect When You're Expecting” books. Yes! But it's like, “What to Expect When the Other Parent Dies” kind of thing. Like the non-fiction magnum opus. But the problem is that it's tricky because if there were an answer, well that would be an easy book to write, right?

It's not like I can say, do X, Y, Z and A, B, C, and you'll be fine.

Donna Ferris: What I did is I said, this is what worked for me. So I'm also sober. So one of the things they always say is take what works and leave the rest So that's what I started off with take what works and leave the rest and add to it. Like if there are things that I'm missing or you want to write up your own book, You should. I mean, this doesn't end.

This is an age-old thing - sorrow and suffering don't end. We just have to get better at it. And that is all you're trying to do. So it won't work for everybody, but something will.

Jenny Lisk: I'd like to think that I could hopefully structure it [00:28:00] to be helpful, like between bringing in other people's stories, bringing in interviews with experts, maybe having some models, you know, sort of key principles, things to, to know.

And so to try to help like, okay, there's not an answer, but here are some things to be thinking about, some things to try, some things that might work for your family. I don't like, really like the word case study here, but it's kind of some case study stuff. I decided to start with the memoir, "Future Widow," because I knew that this nonfiction book would be a much bigger lift, and I knew it wasn't ready to write.

That yet. And I have this podcast, the *Widowed Parent Podcast*. And that in a way is research inputs into that ultimate book. Right. I mean, some of the people I interviewed are widowed parents sharing their stories. Some of them are experts on different topics, all different aspects of this whole puzzle.

Right? And so I've started to make an outline. I need to identify gaps and then go look for people to interview about those gaps and all the things. But I thought, I can do the memoir first [00:29:00] because that's my story and I may as well kick it off with my own story.

I knew it was going to be a while before I wrote this other book. And so I wove some things into the memoir, but it's not exactly a teaching memoir. I know that's kind of becoming a hot genre these days, but in a little bit of that aspect, we're weaving in the things I wish I had known that I think then I sort of.

Principles that might generally be applied by other people too,

Donna Ferris: I noticed that you put a little bit about talking to kids in the memoir as you go through these things.

Do you want to take a moment about that? That one really struck me because I know I didn't do a really great job at it, and I wish if I had to go back I would have done a better job of talking my way through this with my kids

Jenny Lisk: This is one that I think was the hardest for me to figure out. How do I talk to them specifically? And how honest should I be? And what I've learned subsequently, and therefore I made it into the book, and what I talk to people about is it is really important to be honest with kids about difficult situations, and probably [00:30:00] especially about difficult situations. One way you can do that is to let their questions be your guide.

And there's kind of a rule of thumb if a kid is old enough to ask a question. They're old enough to get an honest answer. One of the ways I see people running into trouble with this is especially with so-called stigmatized losses. So

losses due to suicides and overdoses and sometimes homicides, people don't want to be honest with kids about that.

And it's always out of the best of desires, right? To protect them, protect them from some hard information, bad situations, difficulties, everything. Right?

Donna Ferris: Right.

Jenny Lisk: The thing is, kids will, first of all, they might just think things don't quite add up, or they notice that adults get quiet when they come in the room, right?

And something's not right here. I don't know what it is, but something's off, right? Eventually, they'll learn the truth. And maybe [00:31:00] it's because some other kid tells them on the playground.

Donna Ferris: That's right.

Jenny Lisk: Maybe it's because they've become old enough to google things, and they google their name, or their dead parent's name, or they google something, and they find a news article about their parent that died with some tragic circumstance that's public information that they find on Google.

But, so first of all, as a parent, like, you don't want your kid to find out these things, these terrible things, at all. It's like, you can't make it better, but you could make it worse, because if you're telling them yourself that there's more support and you have an opportunity to support them, whereas if they find out the exact same information on their own, on Google, or from a friend, or from wherever, then they don't have your support when they're hearing that information.

That's one part. The other part is it tends to undermine the trust that they need to have with their surviving parent. It's kind of this: if they lied to me about this really important thing, what else would they have lied to me about?

Donna Ferris: You break a real [00:32:00] bond in a way.

Jenny Lisk: Yeah, and it turns out, and this was fascinating, this grief person who works at Our House Grief Support Center in Los Angeles, Lauren Schneider, I interviewed for one of the episodes a while back, and she's the first one that I heard talking about this. That bond of trust between the kid and the

surviving parent is super important, both for their own sake. And also, as the basis of the kid's ability to form trusting relationships throughout their lifetimes.

Donna Ferris: That's right.

Jenny Lisk: Right? So you're hoping that when your kid grows up, they're going to be able to form trusting relationships with future partners, future friends, future colleagues, future citizens of the world. Right? Like you want them to be able to have the capacity to trust other people. And that can be damaged if the parent hasn't told them the truth about, for example, the suicide of their other parent, or anything else even telling, like, the fact that the parent is going to die. If you know that they have an illness that's terminal, and you tell them, [00:33:00] oh, they're going to fix it, they're going to fix it - it's just a very difficult situation.

Like I said, you can't make any of it better, but you can make it harder.

Donna Ferris: And you're also modeling how to handle these things in all of this, interaction. And really, you can't do much else for people, but model behavior you hope they take on. And, and so that's another one to kind of remember.

It's just like when you curse in front of your kids, and then that's the word that they say; it's the same stuff.

Jenny Lisk: The other thing I want to add is that if anybody's listening and thinking, "Oh no, I've really messed this up," you can go always go back. It's kind of the no better, do better kind of thing.

And you can always go back and say, look, there's something I need to tell you. I want to apologize. I thought I was handling it the right way at the time. I've learned these things, right? It's never too late. Reopen the door. Ideally, it will be open from the beginning, and the kids and family grief centers that I mentioned and actually, I'll give you a link because the National Alliance for Children's Grief [00:34:00] has a lookup tool, like, where you can look by your zip code or your city or whatever, and you can find programs near you and I believe it's at childrengrief.org And so you can always call a grief center and like ask for some guidance. And actually the Dougy Center, which I mentioned is in Portland, Oregon. They're also a national leader in this space. And anybody, even if you're not in Portland can call them and ask for some advice on talking with your kids.

So, you could call them up and be like, look, I need some advice. This is what happened. This is what I'm struggling with. Can you help me figure out how to talk to my kids and talk to an expert and kind of learn some things? So Dougy.org is where you can find them and I think they're, they're terrific and do a lot of good work in this field.

Donna Ferris: Sorry, is it two G's?

Jenny Lisk: D O U G Y. Okay. Yeah, Dougy.org. And yeah, like I said, I highly recommend them, and they got a lot of resources on their website, too, and a good podcast.

Donna Ferris: That's awesome. Is there something I forgot to ask or that you want to mention before we close?

Jenny Lisk: You know, I [00:35:00] think we've covered most of it. I would point people to the resources that I have at the Widowed Parent Institute. And so just at widowedparentinstitute.com/resources for free things including for grief allies and information for supporting people and then for widowed parents too. Tips and advice and stuff like that.

And I would suggest starting there. Listen to some of our podcast episodes. If this topic is something that would be useful to you or people.

Donna Ferris: Pass it on.

Jenny Lisk: So, yeah, absolutely.

Donna Ferris: Well, thank you so, so much for all that you're doing and for being with me today. I learned a lot

Jenny Lisk: Yeah. Well, thank you for having me.

Donna Ferris: Absolutely.

That's all for today. If you want to learn more about Jenny's books, podcast, and the Widowed Parent Institute, 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 [00:36:00] Sylvie are listening, I just want you to know how proud I am of you and I love you so much.

Bye now.