

Homeschool CEO Podcast Episode 57

Healing from Grief and Trauma Due to Losing Your Child with Megan Hillukka

25:28

SPEAKERS

Jen Myers, Megan Hillukka

Megan Hillukka 00:01

So, it can be so easy to think that we have to keep going the way we are for other kids. But we forget that our kids actually know a lot more than me. Like we're trying to hide everything. And our kids can see a lot more than we think that they can. And what I always tell people is if you want to be the best mom for your kids, if you want to be that mom that you want to be, you have to take care of yourself. You have to take care of your emotions. You have to take care of your grief. You have to slow down and pushing through does not help.

Megan Hillukka 00:37

Welcome to the Homeschool CEO podcast, the podcast dedicated to entrepreneurs who want to successfully homeschool their kids while running a profitable business. In this podcast, we'll reveal the truth of what it really looks like behind the scenes of an entrepreneur who homeschools and how to make it all work. If you're an entrepreneur who currently homeschools or you want to start, you are in the right place, my friend. With 16 years experience combining entrepreneurship with homeschooling, I'm your host, Jen Myers, and this is the Homeschool CEO podcast.

Megan Hillukka 01:19

Losing a child is every parent's worst nightmare. Many grieving moms feel lost. They feel stuck, maybe that they're doing the whole grieving thing wrong. How are you even supposed to keep living when you feel like a part of you has died? Grief is such a normal experience to a very painful loss. And today I am talking with grief coach and homeschool CEO, Megan Hillukka, about her journey through grief following this sudden, unexpected passing of her daughter, Aria. Today's episode is encouraging and inspiring for anybody who has been through the tragic heartbreak of losing a child. Whether you lost your child through pregnancy, childhood, or even adulthood, Megan is going to walk us through how we can process that grief while still loving and remembering the memory of your child. Let's get started.

Jen Myers 02:24

Alright, Megan, welcome to the show today.

Megan Hillukka 02:27

Hi, Jen. I'm so excited to be here and chat with you.

Jen Myers 02:31

I am too. I am too. We've actually been friends for over a year now. And I think that you know, I remember sitting in California with you and you saying, "You know what? I'm going to homeschool this year." I'm like, "Welcome to the club, Megan." You are now a homeschool CEO. Do you remember that? We had coffee.

Megan Hillukka 02:47

Yeah, yeah, I remember talking to you about Homeschool CEO. And I was like, that is - you know what I've never thought about that way. The reason why I do business and the reason why I do homeschool is for that lifestyle that you're talking about and business first. And I just love everything you're talking about. So.

Jen Myers 03:05

Thank you. And I love having you here. Alright. I know I already introduced you a little bit earlier. But tell our audience a little bit more about you.

Megan Hillukka 03:12

Yeah, my name is Megan. Obviously, I am a homeschool CEO. Like Jen said. That's why I'm here. I am the mom to six children, one of them has passed away. And then I also work with grieving moms, guide moms through grief and through their experience of loss. I've been married to my husband, Justin, for 10 years. And yeah, just trying to balance all the things like I was just talking with Jen earlier. That seems like that's the you know, the life of everything, balancing work and school, you know, homeschool and doing the mom things and everything and trying to keep your stress levels down and helping others and all the stuff.

Jen Myers 03:52

We get it. It's a juggle, you know. It's just all the things and sometimes we're setting one thing down so we can pick another thing up. I totally get that. You know, Megan, you have such, such a powerful story. And it's one - you know, a lot of times people will come to me and I will - I'll rip open this emotional toolbox. I'm like, oh, I've done that. I've been there. Yep, I have the this bizarre past that just includes all of these crazy things. However, one thing it does not include is the loss of a child. Can you tell us a little bit more about your backstory? Because that kind of brings us to where you are now.

Megan Hillukka 04:30

Yeah, for sure. It's been almost five years. I was 23 years old. And I was 36 weeks pregnant with our fourth child. So, my third child - people get a little bit confused when I start saying this. I was pregnant with my fourth child but my third child died. She died. She was 15 months old and she died in the night suddenly, unexpectedly. And I was due in four weeks with my next daughter. So, she died of Sudden Unexplained Death in childhood. It's just similar to SIDS, but it's after a year. It's considered sudden, unexplained death in childhood. So, there's no reason, no cause, nothing. Yeah, just thrown into grief. And having another baby four weeks later was like, how do you grieve one child and say hello to another within such a short period of time?

Megan Hillukka 05:22

I was diagnosed with PTSD after she died, because I was the one that found her in the morning, and really was thrown into like, my whole life was shattered. My foundation of my life, everything. Everything I knew to be true in life was shattered. And I had to rebuild my life. I had to work through all of the grief, the trauma. I was like, I didn't, I didn't know that your mental health could be taken away from you in one second. I had not really struggled too much with mental health before then. But all of sudden with the trauma it was just like, I don't even - like I'm going crazy. What's wrong with me? I'm broken. That's all these things felt. And that's what it felt like to me.

Megan Hillukka 06:06

And I did so much work. I, I did so much work with my trauma I did EMDR for it. I spent a lot of time healing the trauma. And I don't live with trauma anymore today, because of the EMDR. Because I did that work, and spent that time caring for myself and my mental health and holding space for what was going on inside of me. And so yeah, that's kind of what I tell people a lot is like the grief work is exhausting. It is tiring. It's painful. It's messy. It's ugly. It's not very fun. But it is absolutely necessary. Absolutely a part of my grief journey and why I believe I am where I am today, because I spent that time caring for myself. And my grief.

Jen Myers 06:58

That is so good. So, can you kind of explain a little bit more? I know you said EMDR. Correct? What is that?

Megan Hillukka 07:06

So, it's called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. So, with trauma, I always give this, this example. It's really, really simple, simplified. It's not actually like, scientifically correct. It just made sense in my brain. To me, when I was first learning about trauma. It can get really complicated, like when you learn all of the actual terms and stuff, but I think of your left side and your right side of your brain. They have these pathways and connections, right, that communicate with each other. And imagine with trauma that it's just snapped in half, that those right side and left side, all those pathways cannot communicate with each other. And so, your body can't tell. You know, it snapped when you're in that state of fear, terror, anxiety, worry, stress, and your body can't calm down, or know that it's safe or that that event has passed because it can't communicate with itself.

Megan Hillukka 08:05

And so, EMDR is - it's a back and forth movement from your right side to the left side of your brain. So, I had buzzers in my hand that buzzed back and forth to help rebuild those pathways in my brain. Some people look at a laser and go back and forth with their eyes. Some people tap on the right side, left side of their body back and forth. I liked the buzzers because I could go back to the memory fully in my mind. And I got to lead that like nobody forced me to do anything. So, it wasn't re-traumatizing to me. But sitting with those buzzers and replaying what happened and not even just what happened, but any time that I had felt that experience in my life of fear or panic, I brought, you know, brought up other memories of things that happened in my life. So, we reprocess those and rebuild those pathways so that your brain can tell your body, you are safe, it's okay to feel calm. You're, you know, this isn't

happening over and over and over again. Your other children are not dying again over and over. And so, it was life changing for me to do that. And I highly recommend it to a lot of people.

Jen Myers 09:16

Wow, yeah, I can, I can only imagine. Because when you're - when you experience that kind of trauma, you're - it's almost like you're stuck, like your life stops right there in that moment. And I know you do incredible work with other moms who are grieving the loss of a child and helping them walk through that. Can you tell us a little bit about how you help them? Like, what does that journey look like? Because I know that there are moms out there right now that are probably listening to the podcast and haven't made that first move to go seek help because they don't know what that journey looks like.

Megan Hillukka 09:50

Yeah, for sure. And it can be really scary so that that stops a lot of people from getting that help because it's scary. It's scary to feel like, maybe you're going to let go of your child. It can be scary to, if you've never been one to sit and feel your emotions, to sit down and feel your emotions. So often we're told to keep busy, to push through, to move on, to put your chin up and keep going. And all of those things really are really not helpful in grief because you need to sit with it. So, how I help moms is I, number one, hold that space for them. And that space of I know this pain as well. And obviously, I don't put my grief on them. My grief is my grief. Their grief is their grief, that I can hold that space. And it's helpful to know that the person you're working with, knows that pain as well, right?

Megan Hillukka 10:46

But then I have a framework that I go through with them. It includes - so it's like a program that they get when they work with me. And they get it weekly. And it's called Carrying Grief. So, it's C-A-R-R-Y. The C is curiosity, because there's no - so I created this because there's no like step-by-step plan with grief. Right? Everybody has their own journey. But what I really wanted to do is help people on the emotional level, help people with their thoughts, and help them get super curious and interested about their own experience. And that's how they can move through grief and learn to carry both grief and joy. So, the Curiosity is learning to get curious about your emotions and your thoughts? And what's going on, what are your triggers? What's going on with you? You know, why do you act the way you do? And really leading with curiosity instead of judgment. Because a lot of times we think, "Oh, I'm not grieving correctly. I'm not doing this right. I should be further along. What's wrong with me?" All of these things that come up that we, we judge ourselves. And that judgment, just - you just want to shove everything back under the rug, you know, instead of taking it out and holding space for it and being like what's going on here? Because if we don't get curious, we can't change anything.

Megan Hillukka 12:00

And so then, the next section is awareness. And this is where we have to get curious to become aware. And so, awareness is all about the thoughts, the emotions - like, we tend to have three emotions that we feel, we cycle through and how, you know, we have a habit of feeling those emotions. So, what are those emotions that you're in a habit of feeling? What are the thoughts that you keep looping on and thinking about over and over and over? And then I have a whole framework about your identity and what like the event that happened. You have a thought about the event. You have an emotion because

of the thought. And then we act from that thought, and then we have a result. So, we go through that whole section in the awareness too.

Megan Hillukka 12:42

And then it's Relearning how to process emotions, because I believe all of us know as children how to, but we're taught as we grow up, it's not safe, it's not okay, don't do that, you're bad. All of these things. So, relearning how to actually sit with the emotions. And then the second R is releasing. So, letting go of anything that's no longer serving you. This can be really scary, because it can feel like you're moving on or you're forgetting, or you're, you know, so many things that come up. But it's really, like, for example, guilt. Guilt comes up a lot with moms, because you feel like, you know, it was my fault. It's my job to keep my child alive, keep my child safe. And when you start to feel that guilt, if you, then you start to connect to your child through that guilt and that suffering. And then if you think of letting go of guilt, you're like, "No, if I let go of that, that means I'm letting go of them." And so, as you process the guilt and work through it, when you get to the releasing, you get to decide that this guilt is no longer serving me, and I'm ready to let it go. Keeping this guilt is keeping me more in a place of suffering, and I'm not willing to be there anymore.

Megan Hillukka 13:54

So, it's totally a choice. Like, everything that I talk about is a choice you get to make, but it's really giving you the reins back in your life. So, you get to choose rather than just being in this place of continual suffering without getting a choice in it. And then the last one is You learning to love yourself. Who were you before your child died? Who are you now and who do you want to be in your future? So, it goes all deep into that, but that's kind of the framework that I guide people through. It's really all about understanding that grief is normal, normal response to loss, there's nothing wrong with you. You're not going crazy. You're not alone. And knowing that there are tools to help you and you don't need to suffer the rest of your life.

Jen Myers 14:41

I feel like so many moms need to hear this message. What would you tell them? I know you kind of touched on it, you know, to be - you know, so many people just tell them be strong, keep busy, keep going especially when they have other kids in the home and that's what a lot of our moms have as homeschool CEOs. They tend to have other children in the home as well. What would you say is maybe the first step that they need to do or acknowledge? Or what, what would you say to them when they're like, "You know what? I know it's painful. I know, it's messy. I don't have time for that, because I need to be here for my other kids"?

Megan Hillukka 15:16

That's like - the first thing I want to say, coz I know when you're this type of woman, it's hard to slow down. It's hard to acknowledge that you're falling apart on the inside. You want to put on a mask and pretend that everything's okay. So many moms tell me that over and over and over again that, "I have to - I put on a mask, everybody thinks I'm fine and I'm falling apart in the inside." It's like, they're, they say that, "I'm trying so hard to hold my world together, and everything's falling apart around me." And I would say, first of all, like, acknowledge that you're human, and it's okay to be a human, and that you're going through something so, so painful, and that it's so, so hard.

Megan Hillukka 15:59

So, it can be so easy to think that we have to keep going the way we are for other kids. But we forget that our kids actually know a lot more than me, like we're trying to hide everything. And our kids can see a lot more than we think that they can. And what I always tell people is if you want to be the best mom, for your kids, if you want to be that mom that you want to be, you have to take care of yourself. You have to take care of your emotions. You have to take care of your grief. You have to slow down and pushing through does not help.

Megan Hillukka 16:36

An analogy I like to use is, imagine that you have a giant beach ball, you're shoving that giant beach ball underneath the water. It's like when you're trying to push through and keep busy and like, it's almost like you're pretending that your child didn't die that this huge, life changing, life altering event didn't happen. So you're like, okay, I'm just gonna get back up and get back to normal. Quote unquote normal, though there's no normal. So, you're shoving this giant beach ball under the water. Number one, it's exhausting. So tiring to pretend that everything's okay when it's not okay. And you are so exhausted, pushing it down, pushing it down, just gets bigger and bigger, and then it explodes. It comes out. Your life falls apart. Your health falls apart. Your mental health falls apart. Your relationships falls apart. You lose your job, whatever it is. Or I guess, you don't lose your job because you work for yourself, but in this community.

Jen Myers 17:35

But they can lose their business, though.

Megan Hillukka 17:36

Yeah, you could lose your business. And you know, so many different things because you're not taking care of what's going on inside of you. You're not taking care of those emotions. And I just, I know that it can feel scary to slow down. I know it can feel like you don't have any choice but to keep going. But I promise you, if you don't take that time to care for the grief and the emotions, it will catch up to you in some way or another. It will absolutely take out your health. It will take out relationships, all of those things that I mentioned earlier, because it's still there under the surface. And the best way you can love your children is to care for that inside. And then you can give your children the best of you.

Jen Myers 18:26

So, so good. Okay, last question. How would you describe how you feel now five years after the fact, after you've done the work? What is different about you now on a daily basis than it was before you did the grief work?

Megan Hillukka 18:42

Everything. So, like I was talking about like in that section of who you were, who you are now and who do you want to be. Like when Aria died, I would look at who I was. And I grieved that. So, I wanted to be who I was before. I would look at pictures of myself and just cry and cry and cry because I thought that joy was gone for me. I would look at a picture of me laughing and I'd be like, "I'm never going to be that joyful person again. I'm never going to have a laugh that will just come out freely because it's

always going to be you know, there's always going to be this weight there and it doesn't feel - it feels kind of forced, like it's not real."

Megan Hillukka 19:21

Especially after Aria died I was - my, my trauma was so bad. I was, I had a huge stress ball in my chest. I could not function without like other people helping me. I needed so much help. My husband could not leave me with my kids overnight because I couldn't stay with them overnight by myself. There was so many things like just - Right away, Aria was constantly on my mind. Obviously, the emotions came in huge waves all the time. It was like one thing to the next. It felt like grief was on my shoulders, over my head every single day. I couldn't even function, hardly. That's what it felt like. You know, my life was grief. My life was learning to care for myself and learning to live with it.]

Megan Hillukka 20:09

And now as I've done the work as I process the emotions and heal the trauma, my grief and my life have meshed so that when grief comes to me, because I will grieve the rest of my life and grief to me is not a bad thing. It's a beautiful thing. That is the remembrance of my daughter. When grief comes to me now, I don't fight it. I don't judge it. I don't tell it shouldn't be here. I know it's going to come. It doesn't come as often as it did in the beginning. It doesn't come even as intense as always, but it comes in. For me it's like, oh, yeah, this is a reminder that I love my daughter, that she existed, that she was here, that she's a huge part of my life. And then it's also a reminder, like, grounds me back to what matters to me, what's important to me in my life, what do I want to focus on in my life. It really brings me back to what matters for me. So, I have that. And then I - grief doesn't hover over my life every day like it did before.

Megan Hillukka 21:17

That does not mean I've forgotten Aria. We talk about her every day in our house. My kids talk about her. We talk - me and me and my husband, we talk about her. She's -there's pictures of her. Like we have not forgotten her. We don't move on. We're not going to move on. But grief does not rule my life. And I have so much joy, so much happiness, so much hope and like I can - I have that space for all of that stuff because I've done the grief work. I would not be here - I really don't believe I would - I would be here if I didn't take that time to sit with the emotions and the pain and process all of it. Because, like for me, even holidays and birthdays, and her death date, which is coming up in May like it - they're not as painful or overwhelming because I'm not scared of them. I'm not scared of the emotions that will come that day. Because for me, it's like, whatever emotion comes that day is the emotion that comes that day and I know how to handle them. So, it's fine. I don't have to dread them for days, you know, weeks and months beforehand, which is very normal. It's a very normal thing for moms to dread it for months and be riddled with anxiety for months beforehand. Because - am I going to be back to where I was? You know, go backwards. But I've just, I've learned how to live with grief. I've learned how to carry it. And I also know how to carry joy. And yeah, like everything has changed. I, I would never want to go back to who I was. Ever.

Megan Hillukka 22:51

And I'm so glad because you have the most beautiful smile and you bring - I know, on a podcast like, you can't see the video chat that's happening behind the scenes. But seriously, your face glows. You

are so happy and so joyful and such an inspiration. And this conversation has just been fantastic. Thank you so much. Megan, tell our audience where they can find you online.

Megan Hillukka 23:12

Yeah, I have my website is meganhillukka.com. I also have a podcast called Grieving Moms podcast that I have a lot of solo episodes. Sometimes I have guest episodes. But just a lot of teaching and tools. My goal is to give moms tools to be able to live again. I want to help them stop suffering. And really, the things that I have learned through my grief journey, through coaching moms. So, I talk a lot about all that kind of stuff. I also have a mini program that's called Stop Talking, Start Feeling. And it's all about processing the emotions, sitting with emotions, thinking about emotions differently, so that you can begin to learn, to connect with your body and get those emotions out. So, they focus on sadness and guilt. And you can go to www.stoptalkingstartfeeling.com to check that out. And I appreciate it. Like all what you said before that, I was going to say thank you. And it's been really fun.

Jen Myers 24:08

Awesome. Awesome. Thank you so much, Megan.

Jen Myers 24:11

If you, my friend, had been through the loss of a child, please know that we're here for you. If you know anybody else who has experienced the same heartbreak, would you please consider sharing this episode with them? Just letting them know that they're not alone and that others have successfully walked the road before them, may be the exact encouragement that they need right now. And, of course, for additional information on processing grief following the loss of a child, please check out Megan on the Grieving Moms podcast. You are not alone and we are here for you. We'll see you next week.

Jen Myers 24:53

Hey friend, I just want to say thank you so much for tuning in today. If you loved what you heard, please be sure to head over to Apple podcasts and leave a review. I really appreciate it. And for more information on connecting with other homeschool CEOs just like you, be sure to check out our website at www.homeschoolCEO.com and as always Team Homeschool CEO, you ladies inspire me. Thank you for always showing others what is possible. You guys are awesome. See you next week.