

Grit 'n' Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules

Episode #16: The Power of Play and Grieving

Amy:

How do we forget how to play? Because we were once children. How do we lose that?

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Hey, this is Cheri Gregory, and you're listening to Grit 'n' Grace: Good Girls, Breaking Bad Rules.

Today, my delightful co-host, Amy Carroll, and I are talking with Lucille Zimmerman, Licensed Professional Counselor and author of *Renewed: Finding Your Inner Happy in an Overwhelmed World*, about the importance of play, grieving, and forgiveness.

Cheri:

Why do you think that those of us who are recovering perfectionists, people-pleasers, and those of us who are HSPs ... Why might we have a hard time with *play*?

Lucille:

Well, Cheri, I'm going to go ahead and just start off with the reason I wrote my book, and that was when I was going through my counseling program it was intense. It was intense academically, and it was intense as I had to rework through a lot of my own life history and issues, because a lot counseling programs believe that unless you deal with your stuff, you're not going to be effective for anyone. I kept hearing this from mentors and counselors: they kept saying, "You need to do self-care." I kept sayings, "What is self-care? I have no idea what that is."

I was an absolute, ultra-perfectionist. I feel like I looked the part. I acted the part. I always had a smile on my face. One of the first times I went in to talk with the Director of the Counseling program, I just had this big smile on my face. And he's like, "Have a seat, tell me about your life." I was like, "It's good. It was all good, perfect life." And he started to laugh. It's so funny now because he saw right through me. As the years went on I did come to understand what self-care was. Self-care is really different for a lot of people — what helps us and what heals us.

Play, I think, is critical for everybody. It's hard to describe what play is. Have you guys heard the word *flow* from Mihály Csíkszentmihályi. He says that *flow* is whenever we're doing an activity where we lose track of time and yet it's challenging and it's sort of where we're gifted or we have a zeal for that area. In that sense I think it is similar to flow.

You ask me why play is hard for perfectionists and people-pleasers, and I think it's because our culture really values exhaustion. And working is like a status symbol. And so to ever take a break would be that would just be crazy for our culture to look at.

Amy:

Absolutely, I think back to the days when I was mothering young children, and that's the time that we should play. I had a friend I was so jealous of. I would watch her play with her children and she was so good at playing and I was so bad at playing. And what's up with that?

Lucille:

God biologically programmed us to need to play. All animals play, babies play, children play. You're right, we lose it. I think it's critical for our creativity and our being able to come up with good ideas. The brain is so interesting because a totally different part of the brain comes online when we're playing as when we're working. We need that downtime. I'm sure you guys have all had this experience of having your best ideas when you're gardening or taking a shower or jogging. It's because our brains actually open up and become broader. They think better when we're playing.

Cheri:

I'm just thinking to myself how guilty I used to feel — and I still have to kind of battle this sense of guilt, I have to talk myself out of it — that I would stop working, and stop producing and just do this what feels like wasteful activity that I have nothing to show for afterwards. I can feel myself getting anxious just thinking about it. What are a couple of your favorite things to do that you would qualify as play?

Lucille:

For me, and this is going to sound silly — you know these little succulent plants that you see everywhere?

Cheri:

Yeah.

Lucille:

One day I just decided to go to the Garden Center and pick out a few plants, they were like \$2 a piece so I got three or four, and I bought some desert potting soil and just a little dish, and it was so easy to put together. Then I bought a pack of moss and just covered it. It took like 5 minutes and it gave me such a thrill inside. It was creative, it was life giving. And then I started making them for friends.

Another thing I love to do, is on Animoto, the program Animoto, I love to just take pictures and put it with some of my favorite songs.

Another way I love to play would just be hiking, or reading, or just being in nature.

What are the ways you guys love to play?

Cheri:

The thing that gets me in a play mode is my pets because they're just so cooky and they make me laugh so much. I could spend hours doing the laser pointer thing with either one of our cats and they just make me laugh so hard, and I lose track of time, which I think is part of play — that we aren't on a timer, and we aren't on a schedule. I feel good afterwards.

How about you Amy?

Amy:

I love being outside like Lucille, I love to walk in the woods and things like that. I don't do it nearly often enough is what I'm realizing even as I say it. I also love to decorate. It's just one of those creative outlets, painting a room or going shopping at Home Goods. Those are at the top of my list.

I love it, Lucille, I think that we in our culture would define play and productivity as opposites, and what you're saying is that they're not opposites at all.

Lucille:

No, and I have the perfect quote by Brian Setton-Smith, he says, "The opposite of play isn't work, it's depression."

Cheri:

Let's go ahead and shift topics from play, which many of us have no idea how to do well, to something else really important that a lot of us also struggle with: ***grieving***.

If I could go back in time and pick a class to take in Elementary and High School, I would find a grief class because it seems to be the thing that is guaranteed in this life, that ... I don't know about you ladies, but I don't feel like I was taught how to do it, or had it modeled for me.

So, what happens to any of us, if we act like we can just avoid grieving?

Lucille:

First of all, I'm so glad that you're talking about this. This is a huge issue, and our Western Culture really doesn't do a very good job of letting people grieve. I know there have been times in my life where I wished I had a cave that I could just go in and cry and scream, but our culture doesn't offer that. I know you've probably heard about the Jewish culture, how they have what they call "Sitting Shiva" and for seven days people would just gather and be with the person who's grieving. They don't necessarily talk, they're just with them. I think we're missing that.

I love this quote, it says that, "Grief is not a problem to be solved. It just means that you love somebody." If we bury our emotions, we bury them alive, and they wait. Grief waits.

When I lost my mom when I was 18, I just pushed it down, and put on the smile and tried to go through life. But pain is pain. I just think that humans are so creative in the ways that it leaks out. It can leak out in workaholism, or in substance abuse — so many different ways.

We need to grieve, and one of the most helpful ways I ever found to grieve my mom was I had made her like a saint. One thing I did was I just made a collage. And on the right side I just tore out magazine pictures or images that I printed off the Internet and wrote words that were descriptive of her, all of her good traits. On the left I had to do her faults, and that was a way for me to kind of accept who she was and to help... I don't know, it was weird how it helped me to not forget about her, for certain, but to let her, I guess, rest. That was one of the best ways I learned to grieve.

Another way would be journaling and writing letters. Even if you're mad or sad.

Oh, and this is a huge point with grief. There is the grief sad part, but another huge aspect to grief is the anger because it's the line in the sand that says this is not okay that you lost your mom so young or whatever. Women tend to do sadness and sorrow but we don't tend to do the anger part. That's important.

Cheri:

I coined the word for myself, "angrief" after my mom died. I was completely unprepared for how angry I was, because she and I weren't particularly close, ever, and I thought losing her wasn't going to be particularly difficult, and I found myself pretty much angry at everybody and everything, and pretty much had to put up a warning sign for three months.

Lucille:

I'm so glad you said that because there is something called *complicated grief*, and that's when you have to work through, "why wasn't she what I needed her to be," or whatever it was. There is that anger and there is that boundary saying *things weren't as they should have been*.

Amy:

I think what both of you are expressing is just the unexpected parts of grief. And I think as perfectionist, I don't like the unexpected. I like the planned and the controlled. And my mom has worked in hospice care and end of life care for decades, and yet when she lost her mother and her brother within a year, she said, "Even though I've studied grief and I've helped other families with grief, it came in such unexpected ways."

What are some of the unexpected things you experienced in your grief?

Lucille:

For me? I could be going along just having a perfectly good day, and I might just see something that reminds me of my mom, or smell a certain smell, or hear a song, and songs are really powerful, aren't they? They take us back.

How about you Cheri, with your mom?

Cheri:

Probably the most surprising thing for me is jealousy. Seeing other people who still have their mother. Mothers and daughters laughing together. I've had to really talk myself down and realize that it's okay to have a longing but to feel the level of outright envy that I find myself in, and then needing to pull back and practice some of that self-care that we talked about earlier.

For me, my tendency as a perfectionist is to shame myself, "How can you? How dare you? How can you look at a beautiful mother and daughter having a beautiful relationship and have this terrible reaction?" Then work myself to death as a punishment.

Lucille:

I think that's so normal. Grief takes up so much head space, doesn't it? I mean it's hard to even go to the grocery store or to get gas. It's just so hard, and so we do need to be graceful to ourselves. And I like to say "mother ourselves", and talk to ourselves like, "You know what? It's horrible that you lost her and things weren't right. I feel so sad for you, and I feel so sorry for you right now. It's going to be okay, we're going to get through this."

It's almost like I'm talking from a motherly part of myself to myself.

Cheri:

God's had me on a journey of what I've called "re-mothering" for the last couple of years, and just listening to you I'm tearing up because that's what we need so much is that kind of compassion, and that kind of tenderness with ourselves. I don't think I've ever behaved better because I beat myself up.

Lucille:

Absolutely.

Amy:

It's neat because I think about that self-mothering that you're talking about and that really extends ... I'm thinking I haven't had -- I haven't lost my parents you all have, but I had a period of infertility, and it's that same grieving. I think about my friends who are single that would love to be married and there is a grief that comes with that too.

And so the things that you all are talking about really can extend in so many directions in a woman's life.

Lucille:

For sure, you're right. I'm so glad you said that because we don't have to have someone die to grieve something.

Cheri:

I think we can kind of segue-way here into forgiveness. I think grief and forgiveness have a lot in common. Or sometimes grief lasts longer than it needs to because there is a lack of forgiveness. I discovered about 4 years ago that my mother was depressed my entire life. Although that was very difficult to learn it absolutely opened the door for forgiveness because I realized for the first time that we were on the same side.

We both spent our entire lives fighting perfectionism. And the only way she won was by losing her memory to Alzheimer's disease. She fortunately became very calm and relaxed and completely non-anxious and non-perfectionistic.

I do wish that I could have had some conversations with her earlier on when she was in her full mind and memory. I would have loved to talk to her about her wrestling with perfectionism and people pleasing and that sort of thing.

Let's talk a little bit about forgiveness and why it might be that those of us who wrestle with perfectionism and people-pleasing find it especially hard to forgive.

Lucille:

I think you just nailed it when you said that grief and forgiveness, they do go hand in hand. Some of us more than others. For me when I lost my mom, I was a teenager, there was a lot going on in addition to that, a lot of trauma, and so I turned to guys, booze, and drugs. I really acted out, and then my mom died, and I had a really hard time later on a people-pleaser, perfectionist, saying, "Why wasn't I a better teenager? Why wasn't I there for her?" A couple things helped me to forgive myself.

I had to tell my story, and our family wasn't one to ever share our story or talked about emotions. It wasn't until I was 37 that I had to share my story, but I also had to do it with someone human. For so many years, I would sit in my bedroom and pray and cry and be ashamed. But one thing I've learned is that we get hurt in our real life relationships, and so it's in our real life relationships that we heal.

I needed a human to stand in and sort of be that Christ for me and share my story. And I needed to share all of it, the dark and the dirty, and someone reflect love back to me. That really was healing. My whole life I was just going to live with shame forever, but it went away. It was shocking how it went away.

Then another part of this is being able to see the good and the bad. I've realized that the healthiest people they don't see themselves as all good or all bad, they see themselves as a conglomeration of that.

Cheri:

That's actually really helpful. I remember reading in *Renewed* that one of the difficulties for perfectionists is that as soon as we make a mistake we then see yourself as all bad. It's that black and white, all or nothing thinking. And learning to live with the tension of being this combination of both is difficult but so important.

Lucille:

One of my favorite professors, I would walk in and he would just be goofy. He'd say, "Oh, I'm in my 50s and I have issues." Or he would just share his flaws, and I realized I was so drawn to him because of his goofiness, and silliness and imperfection. I know you guys know about Rene Brown; she says, "perfectionism really is like a two-ton wall of armor." We're in hiding when we're in perfection. It's really the opposite of connection which is what we all need.

Cheri:

Anything that you have as kind of a closing message to the women who are listening?

Lucille:

I had the experience when I was finished up with my counseling program and working in internships. I worked at one site where it was homeless indigent people, and then I worked at another site where it was probably the wealthiest church in our city, where women were dropping off their preschoolers with their Gucci's and their high heels. I was so intimidated by people who looked the part. Then I started working in that counseling center and I realized everybody's the same, they're just dressed differently.

If there is somebody out there who is thinking I could never share my story or tell my secrets or whatever, that is the key to healing is finding one person that is safe that you can tell your entire story to.

Cheri:

Often times the safest person is going to be someone like you who is a counselor. Many of us have family members who can hear parts, but for whom they're either not safe, or they're not equipped to hear the whole thing.

Lucille:

It's amazing what just one little thing a counselor can say that can be helpful. Years ago, I went to see a counselor because I was so sad my daughter was going away to college and all this counselor said to me that was helpful, she said, "Lucille, the first child leaving home is a monumental experience. Everybody is feeling it. It's just nobody is talking about it." That helped me so much.

Yes, counseling can be a gift.

Cheri:

Thank you so much Lucille.

Lucille:

Great, thanks you guys.

Amy:

Thank you Lucille!

Cheri:

Two bad separate but related rules emerged from this episode:

First = "Play is slacking."

Second = "Grief is nothing but a pity party."

The truth is that *both* play and grief are essential to living a full life; they *both* serve as powerful tools for creativity and for healing.

On the webpage for today's episode, you'll find links to some great resources from Lucille, and you can enter the give-away for her book: *Renewed*. You'll find the web page at cherigregory.com.

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We hope you've enjoyed Episode #16 of Grit 'n' Grace, Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules. Next week, Amy and I share how we've been applying what we learned from Lucille about play, grieving, and forgiveness.

For today, grow your grit. Embrace God's grace. And when you run across a bad rule? Go right ahead and BREAK IT!!!