



## Conscious Life presents

### Parenting a Child Through Crisis

Guest: Kristina Kuzmic

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#### **[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson**

Welcome to this interview. I'm your host, Meagen Gibson. Today I'm speaking with Kristina Kuzmic, a cheerleader for fellow humans. Her videos about juggling all of life's challenges have provided her audience with encouragement, hope, and humor. She's quickly become a viral sensation, with 2.9 million Facebook followers.

Kristina is a sought-after international keynote speaker who has a unique way of connecting with audiences of all ages. Her second book called *I Can Fix This and Other Lies I've Told Myself While Parenting My Struggling Child* is out now, and is all about raising a child with mental illness, and how to support ourselves and our loved ones through it. Kristina Kuzmic, thank you so much for being with us today.

#### **Kristina Kuzmic**

Thank you for having me.

#### **Meagen Gibson**

I'm so excited to talk to you. I loved the format of this book, and I listened to it because I know you, and I wanted to hear you tell me this story, in your voice. I think a lot of people feel that way because of your content and they're so familiar with you. My only advice to people is just don't read it while you're driving or on the treadmill because the tears will make it hard to see.

But in the chapters of the book, you outline the lies that you told yourself. I think that anyone can relate to, or remember thinking a lot of these things when they're facing adversity.

I have a ton of questions about the book. But first, I'd love it if you could explain in your own words what the book is about, why you wrote it, and why you call it a love story.

#### **Kristina Kuzmic**

I am a mother of three, and my oldest child started struggling with mental health right around 13,14. It got really, really bad. He was suicidal, and we had to call the police on him at one point and have him in a psychiatric hospital. It got really bad and really scary.

**[00:02:00] Kristina Kuzmic**

I have this rule with my family and friends where I will not post anything on social media, or say it when I'm touring, or anything, without their full permission. So when we were going through this, nobody knew other than my inner circle. I wasn't going to talk about it because I wasn't even asking for permission, and I didn't think he would ever talk about it. Then eventually he decided to talk about it, so we wrote this book together.

It was the book that I needed when I was up at night and I couldn't sleep because I was scared of losing my child. I got books from friends, books that were written by doctors and therapists, and all of those were great, but what I needed was another parent to be brutally honest, and admit how much this sucks, how scary it is, and all the complicated feelings. So that's where the book came from.

I wrote the first ten chapters, so you hear from a mother who's lost, confused, clueless, making mistakes, and trying to learn. Then in the very last chapter, my son wrote, so you get to hear from the kid who was struggling.

**Meagen Gibson**

Thank you for that, because I could have told people what it's about, but it means so much more when it's coming from you who wrote it and experienced it.

The first lie in the book, that you say you told yourself, was I can fix this. You provide a definition of curiosity there that is, quote, led by pure love and the willingness to get very uncomfortable. Curiosity is a huge part of mental health recovery to me, what does this mean to you? And why was it so important for you to include it in the book?

**Kristina Kuzmic**

When I first noticed my son was struggling, I thought, I know what this is, and I thought that for two reasons. One, I had years ago, right after college, I worked as an assistant theater director in a high school. I was around teenagers all the time. I was like, when it comes to teenagers, I'm gonna rock parenthood, I'm gonna be so good at it. A little cocky and naive. Also, I had gone through my own mental health struggles. So with the combination of that, I was like, okay, I know exactly what this is and what it needs.

I was coming from a place of assumption instead of curiosity, and that was my first mistake. And by the way, even if I had a perfect diagnosis for him, and it happened to have matched the perfect diagnosis that I had had, which was not the case years ago, every individual needs something different. That was the first mistake I made. And when I realized that... I think a lot of times, we humans, not just parents, don't come from a place of curiosity, and we don't even realize it.

Also, if there is fear attached, then our go-to is, I gotta fix this, I gotta figure it out. That franticness and control destroys curiosity, because curiosity requires patience, silence, listening, pondering, and being willing to accept something that doesn't match our preconceived idea. And it's uncomfortable.

**[00:05:09] Kristina Kuzmic**

So, as I wrote in the book, I had to learn to stand in awe of his story. Not what I thought his story was, not what I wanted his story to be, not what the world told me a story should be. I had to learn to stand in awe of his authentic story.

**Meagen Gibson**

I love that. You then go on to very, very skillfully detail that curiosity is not equal to questions. Sometimes the way that we think we're going to be curious is by barraging our people with questions. What is the difference between questions and curiosity?

**Kristina Kuzmic**

I feel like the questions a lot of times are statements with a cute little question mark at the end. I think in the book, I compare it to putting on the workout outfit, but not working out. A lot of times at that point my questions sounded like, "Why aren't you? You used to be such a good student, why are you failing classes now?"

To me, it sounds like a compliment and I'm asking a question, but really, it screams, "You're not good enough." Or "You're smarter than that, what can I do to help you get on the right track?" Again, look at me being a good, supportive mom who wants to learn how to get him on the right track, but really, I am making a statement. This is coming from my own fear, my own ego, my own... Like, "Hey, knock, knock Luca, can you hear me? You're making a lot of mistakes."

It's not at all coming from, I need to just sit and listen and observe and believe you. A lot of times, even when we ask questions, we ask the question, but we're not even really listening. We're asking the question while we're getting the answer, we're already thinking of our next question, because, again, fear and control take over. For some people, it might be something else, but for me, it was fear that took over.

That is a really hard thing to suppress, but I don't think it's possible to fully embrace coming from a place of curiosity unless we just completely shut down or put aside, even for a few seconds, the fear, and the ego, and all that stuff.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely, and I know as a parent myself, I've fallen into the trap of asking questions and noticing later that there was only one answer that would have been acceptable to me, which is not a real question. That's the trap. I'm not asking a question, I'm setting a trap, is what I'm doing, if I'm honest with myself later.

**Kristina Kuzmic**

Yeah, I wrote in the book later, when I got better at supporting my son, how I would say to him every once in a while, I still do this, and with my other kids too, "Help me understand what it's like to be you?" Because that's a completely different way to ask a question. I'm basically saying, I want to learn, but also I trust you. I trust that you know who you are, what you need, and what you feel. And I just want to listen, I want to learn. And that conversation with my children has been so powerful.

**[00:08:21] Kristina Kuzmic**

With my youngest one, he's ten, I think he was eight the first time, I said to him, "Hey, Ari, walk me through your day, from the moment you wake up?" And as he would tell me, "Well, I get up and then I start getting dressed." I immediately would go, "Okay, but how are you feeling?" And I found out all these things about my kid that I didn't know.

These feelings he was having throughout the day instead of, again, nothing wrong with asking this, but this is what we parents do. "How was your day?" Or I thought it was... I was even taking it a step further by going, "What's the funniest thing happened today? What's the best thing that..?" You know I'm going to learn, but there's something about just sitting back and being curious about what that person feels in and out. What is it like to live inside their body? And then not following it up with, Oh, let me fix all the problems you just listed.

**Meagen Gibson**

Just being present, it's very, very hard. As you're speaking, I'm also noticing how little we do this for the adults in our lives. We talk about parenting a lot, both of us are parents, but people in general, employee versus employer, how many times, instead of coming to somebody with a bad performance review, or coming to our partner and saying something like, "Why didn't you get dinner started?" Instead, "Walk me through your afternoon." Yeah. "What does your world feel like right now?" Then it becomes really clear the answer to your original question.

**Kristina Kuzmic**

I did that with my husband once after I did it with Ari. I'm telling you, it has made our marriage better, that one question, "Walk me through your day." Because we're all busy and we all have our own stuff, but just hearing their perspective. A lot of times we humans assume that if something's bothering us, it should bother somebody else. Or if something makes us happy, it should... Just realizing again, standing in awe of their story, that they're an individual with their own story, their own fears, and their own past trauma and experiences, is such a powerful thing. It's a beautiful gift to give to somebody.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely, and something I'll remind people as their objections are coming up to what you're saying, and what I'm thinking is that you don't have to agree.

**Kristina Kuzmic**

Nope.

**Meagen Gibson**

It's not required to hear someone and understand someone's story, you don't have to agree with them at all. It's not even implied.

**Kristina Kuzmic**

No. In fact, I remember one conversation specifically where I asked my oldest son, to help me understand what it's like to be you. And he's telling me stuff, and so everything inside me is like, okay, but if he knew this, then he would, you know, I'm already judging it. Well, curiosity and judgment don't work together.

**[00:11:06] Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, you think you're stressed, I'm late on a paper, and all of the things that feel enormous when you're a kid.

**Kristina Kuzmic**

Or me being the Miss Fixer, "Well, if you just do this, then actually, you wouldn't have to worry about that in the after..." No, that's not helpful to people, they don't want that, and that's not what humans want.

**Meagen Gibson**

They do not. Some of the most beautiful parts of the book, for sure, for me, were the parts where Luca was struggling, not only mentally, but in his behaviors, in the way that were impacting you, and the rest of the family.

I think a lot of people, and a lot of parents, with relatives, kids, parents, doesn't matter, friends that have substance use disorder, anxiety and depression, things like that, and mental health struggles, can relate to these big behaviors that they're not only ashamed of, that it's happening, and it's so confusing and overwhelming.

One of the things that you say in the book is what I've heard lots of experts say, which is every behavior is an attempt to communicate. Why was that important for you to know and remember when all of these things were going on?

**Kristina Kuzmic**

Especially as a parent, we see our children behave a certain way and we go into, Oh, my gosh, my kid is gonna grow up to be an entitled, horrible, blah, blah, blah person. So we just wanna fix the behaviors, but what is behind the behaviors?

I write in the book how I had to realize, that I had to always start asking myself and pay attention to whether my child's negative behavior, whatever that may be, requires a consequence or requires help. Cause I do believe, I know a lot of times these days, people are anti-consequences. Real life there are consequences for certain behaviors. And if my son continued on the path he was, he would have likely ended up in prison or dead.

But if we're not dealing with the root of the problem, what's the point? I also had to learn to understand his language better, you know, while he was screaming at me, "You effing blah blah blah." He would emotionally abuse me at the time, I didn't even use that term until my therapist pointed out, Well, if the husband was talking to you that way, what would that be called?

**Meagen Gibson**

What would you call it? Yeah.

**Kristina Kuzmic**

Holy crap, that's emotional abuse. I had to realize that while no I do not condone that behavior, I need to still look underneath. And what was underneath is what he was really screaming when he was going, f you whatever, was, "Mom, I want to die, help me. Please help me. Please help me."

**[00:13:48] Kristina Kuzmic**

So always going to the root of the problem, it's so easy. Even now, I struggle with my kids where there's a negative behavior, and I just want to fix the behavior, and really, it does nothing. It does nothing. It might help in that 1 second, but if we're not dealing with the root of the problem, things are only going to get worse.

Also, I write in the book a lot about how in every interaction with my child, I have a choice to either control or connect. But you can't do both. By the way, I've tested it out for all of you, you're welcome. I've tried many times. You cannot do both. When my child's behavior is negative in some way, is dangerous in some way, if I am going straight into control mode instead of taking time to connect, my kid won't even open up to me about what's really going on underneath. My kid will pull away.

So finding those ways, which is very, very complicated, to stand your ground, and not put up with certain behaviors, but still connect, and go to that deep place where we're realizing, where is this coming from? I don't believe there are bad children. I really don't. I believe that there are hurting children. They're children who are in pain. And some kid's pain shows up as overachieving and being the good kid, and that can be dangerous, too, in the long run. And some kid's pain shows up as the typical stuff you see on TV, like the kids on drugs, and they're stealing, and they're running away from home.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, absolutely. Also, you wrote in the book that it's not personal. It's so interesting because so much of the pain that I hear from people on the other side of the interaction, on your side of the interaction, is that's why it hurts so bad. They aren't thinking of us, it's not about us. There's a part of us that needs it to be about us, if they knew how much this hurt me, if they knew how damaging this was to me, they wouldn't do it.

I think what you would say, and please correct me if I'm wrong, is that their pain far surpasses their concern for us. That's why it's not about us, because that's how much pain they're in, that it supersedes any concern about our welfare or the impact on us. Would that be fair?

**Kristina Kuzmic**

Yeah. One of the things that my son wrote in his chapter was how I took out all my pain on my mom. This always makes me tear up when I say it, Because I knew she wouldn't leave me. And that's a weird, messed up compliment, but I was the steadiest person in his life, and he was in so much pain, and he felt like he couldn't hold it in.

He didn't know what to do with it, he hadn't learned healthy coping skills yet, and so he took it all out on me. And really, it wasn't about me, it was about him needing to get this pain out, and feeling safe with me, safe to do it.

I know that's messed up in a way, but that's the thing, it's not. It had nothing to do with me. He tells me all the time now, I never hated you. He said it to me every day for years, and I believed it. It's like, I never hated you, I hated myself. I hated myself. But it's easier to say I hate you than to admit to myself I hate myself. One of those is way easier.

**[00:17:19] Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. I'm thinking about the people watching at home and listening to us, and what I want them to know is that this practice of understanding, connection, and curiosity over correction is... You begin it early, and you don't have to get to crisis to get there.

I remember viscerally because it was the week that Covid began and lockdown started. I was in the bread aisle at Publix, shout out to the Southerners who are watching. In the bread aisle, when my son's teacher called to tell me about yet another misbehavior in class. I started bawling, and I had to have an intervention with myself that night where I was like... You know, my kid was not in crisis, but it felt like one, and I was like you get it together, you can't have a meltdown every time your kid breaks somebody else's crayon. It's not about you, it's about what he needs.

And in order for you to get what he needs, you've got to pull it together and figure out your own stuff. So there are invitations for us to do that every day in our interactions, not just when our kids get to crisis.

I'm not in any way, shape, or form implying that you weren't doing that always. I know you, you're a fantastic parenthood.

**Kristina Kuzmic**

But I do think, I say this all the time, I'm a much... I hate to even say better, because I think parenting is hard no matter what. And not only are we gonna mess up, we're supposed to mess up, because it'd be weird if we didn't. We're human. So I'm not gonna say better, I will say I'm a much healthier parent to my youngest because of everything I learned through Luca, and my daughter, who's also older.

But the idea of connecting and understanding curiosity, I would say that was maybe at 30% with the older two. Because I was raised differently, I think a lot of people, of us, were raised where it's like if your kids misbehave, a good parent makes sure there's a consequence, and we gotta nip that behavior in the bud before it gets worse, and that attitude.

Whereas with my youngest, I would say, you know, I still mess up, but I'm probably at 80 or 90 when it comes to really connecting. I noticed that whether it's something big, like trying to get your kid to open up about their mental health struggles, or even trying to get your kid to convince them to try a therapist.

Or whether it's something little, my youngest one of his jobs every day is he unloads the dishwasher, that's his thing in our house. There's a dishwasher, full of dishes every single day because we're cooking a lot. I notice even with him on days where I'm in that control and blah, blah, blah mode, and I ask him to do it, there's more of a, ugh.

But when I spent the time to connect with him, and by the way, connecting doesn't mean something that has to take hours and hours. We're all busy. Connecting sometimes just means them knowing that we are here, and we're listening, and we care, and we accept them for who they authentically are, and we believe them. You know, just these little moments throughout the day.

**[00:20:31] Kristina Kuzmic**

But when I feel like I've had that day of connection with him, he does, it's not even like an argument, anything, I'll say, "Oh, bud it's time to unload the dishwasher." He's like, "Okay." I mean, it's weird how much just that one simple thing is so much more powerful than any consequence, or lecture, or whatever.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah.

**Kristina Kuzmic**

If you respect you and listen. It doesn't come from what we were taught it comes from, it doesn't come from us being the authority figure. Yes, they need somebody to be in charge, but you gotta have that connection with your kid.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, or when they super do need you, or when they're scared, or when they've messed up. My husband and I have been having this conversation a lot lately, there's some adults in our life that don't... They parented differently than we parent. So there's some conflict there.

I keep telling my husband that what matters is that our connection to our kids is at the forefront of everything that we do, and is the only thing that we will not sacrifice. It is impenetrable, regardless of other people's judgment, shame, anxieties, and projected worries. All the things that they tell us are going to happen to our kids if we don't change the way that we parent. We're like our parents... Or our kids adore us and can connect with us and come to us with anything scary, big, awesome, that's it.

**Kristina Kuzmic**

I saw something on Instagram the other day, I forget who wrote it, but it was something like, I want my kids when they screw up, when something bad happens, I don't want my kids first thought to be, oh, my gosh, my mom is going to kill me when she finds out. I want the first thought to be, I need to call my mom. And it gave me goosebumps because that's what it is.

Again, in Luca's chapter, which, by the way, I had no idea what that was going to look like, his chapter. I was reading it for the first time as the rep draft was being written. He wrote in it that one of the things that helped him was always knowing from childhood that his home was a place where we could talk about anything. Anything. And that is so huge.

Sometimes parents are like, they're too young to be asking this question, let's shut this down, I'm uncomfortable. Well, welcome to motherhood, it is uncomfortable. But other times, they feel dismissed because, "Hey, Mom, I'm feeling depressed." And the mom's like, "Oh, come on. Look at how great your life is. You have so much to be grateful for." That's not coming from a place of curiosity, that's not.

Those are the moments, I think that helped us even get to a place where Luca and I were, because we had that foundation, as much as I screwed up, and I screwed up a lot, at least we had that foundation. He even wrote in his book, which is interesting, I mean his chapter, how I would come to him all the time. "How can I help? What do you need?"



**[00:23:32] Kristina Kuzmic**

Sometimes it came out way more critical, the way it came out of my mouth, depending on his behavior. But I always ended each conversation with, "Hey, I'm here if you need to talk, if you need anything, I'm here. I'm here." He wrote in his chapter how even though he was dismissing me every time, "Get the f out. I don't care." Ignoring me, whatever, he said, "My mom said it so many times that it was instilled in my brain. And then when I needed her and I was desperate, I needed somebody, it was so instilled in there that I went straight to her, without even thinking it through, it was just an automatic reaction."

Again, it's just putting those things out there, and like you said, connection is the main thing, focusing on any way we can, to connect with this human being. And if you think about it as adults, with your boss, or in the relationship, with the marriage, wherever, you are more likely to do your best, and want to do your best, and want to open up and be honest and authentic, all that stuff, if you feel connected to that person. Instead of feeling like that person's constantly watching what you're doing, what they need to fix about you, and where you need growth. It's a completely different relationship.

**Meagen Gibson**

100% and one of the things that I'm thinking as you're talking, and when I was reading the book, is that Dan Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson always talk about the power of repair, and that there are no perfect parents. Every parenting book, that's worth its salt, says there are no perfect parents. Here's a great parenting model, and you're always going to mess it up somehow, you're always going to fall short, and no one's a perfect parent. That idea of repair, and what I hear in that is repair, I'm trying, I'm going to try to meet you, I'm going to stay curious, and I'm always here. I'm not, you know... It's so powerful. And on the days that you messed up, and the days I messed up, coming back later and being, "Hey, so that was not a ten out of ten effort on my part. I see where I may have misstepped."

**Kristina Kuzmic**

I think apologizing is one of the most important things a parent needs to just accept and do. A lot of us didn't grow up with that, because apologies for a very long time were looked at as a sign of weakness. I'm supposed to be the leader of who knows, and if they see me as someone who messes up, then they won't know that I'm whatever, or they'll use it against me.

And really, it's the most beautiful thing we can give our child, not only because we're working on that connection, but sometimes now when I mess up, I'm like, "Oh, my gosh, this is awesome, because I just modeled to my kid that they don't have to be perfect. And someday when they're parents and they mess up, they won't beat themselves up because they'll be like, my mom screwed up, too." So, in a way, I get excited, not when I mess up big time, but something little, because this is such an opportunity to show my child that they don't have to put the pressure on themselves, that I put on myself as a young mom, forever.

I also wrote in the book how I don't believe there should be an expiration date on my child's need to hear "I'm sorry" from me, because something I've noticed a lot is an adult will go to their parent and go, "Hey, I really want to talk about this thing that happened when I was six, and I've been carrying it and the way you reacted," unfortunately, a lot of times the parent will go, "Oh, my God, are you serious? That was 30 years ago. Oh, my gosh. S sorry I wasn't perfect."

**[00:27:12] Kristina Kuzmic**

What a difference it would be if that parent just went, "Tell me more, three words. Tell me more, I want to hear. I'm so sorry, I had no idea. I wish you'd come to me earlier." Just those tiny little changes literally changes a person's life, they change a person's life. They change the way they see themselves, they change the way that your relationship with them. I've told my kids, there's no expiration date. If you have something that gets brought up randomly, or in therapy, or wherever, talk to me about it. Let's not have any elephants in the room, let's talk about it all.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, absolutely. I had a boss once whose son was in therapy, and the therapist, was like, "Okay, can I talk to you?" She came in and she was like, "Well, I want to give you a gold star and a sticker." She was like, "What?" Because he was really upset, and she's like, "Why am I getting a gold star?" "Because he was really upset that you won't let him have Doritos in his lunch, he is mad as hell about it. So I'm going to bring him back in, and you're going to authentically... You're going to give the best apology you've ever given in your life."

And she was like, "Why? And she was like, "Because that's all that matters is that he feels like you're taking this seriously and that you care, and his concerns are valid, and that you're willing to see his perspective." They were just like ahhh. And she was like, all right, pull it together, six year old comes back in, "Go ahead and tell her why you ran...." That's the whole thing. Again, we don't have to agree, we just have to understand how to listen and how to apologize.

On that note, you said that things really started to improve with Luca when you stopped trying to work on Luca, and started working on yourself. What did that look and feel like?

**Kristina Kuzmic**

That's the one thing I would say that I didn't realize about motherhood for a very long time. Luca's turning 21 next month so I've been parenting for a while. The one thing I didn't realize until everything went down with Luca, is how many unhealed parts of myself I was bringing to parenting. I thought a lot of these things were fixed. But, man, when your kid is struggling, or it doesn't even have to be that, it can be other things in parenting, it definitely triggers some stuff, and we don't even realize that.

I realized how much of the stuff I was raised with, created my own insecurities. And now I'm bringing that into parenting and putting this pressure on what my children are supposed to behave like, or react like to me, or whatever. And it has nothing to do with them, it has to do with stuff from when I was ten.

And then also my own insecurities... I write in the book how I would get so angry, and then over the years, I got really good at not being the yeller, I would get mad, and I would keep my voice calm, and I would walk out of the room, and do all the right things, but inside I was still boiling. It wasn't like I was really calm, I was just faking it.

And through a lot of work, I realized, Oh, my gosh, I'm not even that angry at my kids. It has very little to do with my kid's behavior. What my anger was screaming was, You're not good enough, Kristina. Why are your children behaving this? What does their behavior say about you, Kristina? That's what my anger really was. So I was like, Man, I got to deal with that. And once I started dealing with that, and my own issues, of feeling uncertain and all that stuff, Oh, my gosh, all of a

sudden, I wasn't as angry when my kid did the same behavior they did two years ago, that would piss me off. It's crazy how that works.

### **[00:31:00] Kristina Kuzmic**

There are so many examples of that I could give, but that's the thing, as painful as it was to watch my kids suffer, I had to accept that I had no control. I had no control over taking away his depression or anxiety. I could provide the support that I could afford. I could learn how to speak to him differently and all that, but ultimately, I had no control.

When he was using substances to medicate, drugs, and all that, I had no control. No kid has ever stopped doing drugs because mommy said, "Hey, can you stop doing drugs now?" I had no control. And when I started throwing consequences his way, guess what? A depressed kid doesn't really care a lot of times because he didn't care if I took away this or that. He wanted to be dead anyway.

The only thing I could control throughout all of this was me. That's it. And once I took all that focus that I had on fixing him and controlling him, and controlling the situation and went, Whoa, I'm going to control this, and I'm going to fix this. And that's where all of my focus is going to go. All of a sudden, I became a better parent. It's like it was just a natural thing, just suddenly our relationship was closer, and it was all about that.

And the other part that I need to learn to control is how I treat myself. Because, man, we are awful, awful, awful to ourselves.

### **Meagen Gibson**

It's interesting that you said that, there are two things I want to follow up with. One is that inner critic voice, and so many of us get away for so long without understanding we have one, until something like this happens, and we're confronted with just how horrible that voice in our head is, and how relentless.

And if we don't notice it, the world will show... Especially every parent has a hard... But mothers are very quick to get blamed for the results of their children, their actions, their behaviors, their outfits, and how clean their t-shirt is. We're the ones that take the blame, time and time again the world will criticize you and then you internalize that.

And our inner critics, I always say, are not... We don't come up with them, we are fed those lines, and those voices for years, and years, and years, and years, until it becomes the dialog that we have as a companion. Until somebody, something, or someone, or some event points it out, and then we're like, wow, that is loud, I've never noticed it.

### **Kristina Kuzmic**

And by the way, all those people who are criticizing us are just as flawed, and messed up, and clueless as we are. That's the thing, the judgment we are ever considering taking personally, or whatever, from other people. Who are these people? They are people who are just as messed up as we are. Can I read you... I copied and pasted something from my book that I'm going to put up because I need the reminder. I have it right here.

**[00:33:57] Meagen Gibson**

A wise woman once said...

**Kristina Kuzmic**

It's funny how I wrote the book, and I'm like, I should read that chapter again because I need to relearn that lesson. It's not like I have any of this mastered. But this is what I wrote.

Learning to separate the self-judgment from my kid's struggles, mistakes, meltdowns, setbacks, and poor choices allows me to genuinely listen and empathize instead of immediately rushing to fix, rescue, or reprimand. It's almost impossible for me to show unconditional love and offer unwavering encouragement to someone when I'm operating from a place of self-rage. Every encounter I have with someone is influenced by the aspects of myself that still need healing. The relationship I have with myself affects all other relationships I'm a part of.

And that has been so freaking true in my life.

**Meagen Gibson**

I wrote that in my notes, the relationship with myself is the thing that... Yeah, exactly. You're right, you need to relearn it, I'm still relearning, I wrote it down because that's the whole crux of it.

And what's interesting, too, is I don't think the majority of people have been given permission to have their own relationship, response, and emotional experience to whatever the crisis is. I met a woman at a social engagement a few months ago, and she is battling an illness, and she said, you know, I'm really struggling with my adult son, and he's making all these decisions and yada yada, and I said, well, what is his emotional response and relationship to your illness?

And she said, I have no idea. And I said, He might be having his own experience. And she was like, I don't even think... He doesn't think about it, I don't think it even occurs to him that I'm unwell. And I was like, Oh, that's all that's happening. He just doesn't feel like he can take it up, take up enough space because you're already dealing with it. The last thing he wants to do is give you his emotional experience of your illness.

And I think about that with Luca, that it didn't occur to you that you were allowed to have your own needs around your responses, and your reactions, and your history to Luca's problems and experience. You had... You were... Your focus was, I have to fix this, I have to do this. You weren't even thinking of yourself, if I can assume.

**Kristina Kuzmic**

Yeah. And I think a lot of times in those situations, we feel like we're being bad people, or we're being selfish, or something, if we go, I am struggling right now, this is hard on me. We feel like people are going to be like, are you kidding me? You're whining right now about how you feel, your kid is suicidal, are you kidding? You have no right to complain about your own stuff right now. You better go help your child.

Well, both things can be true. And by the way, I'm helping my child more by making sure that I'm in a good place, because he needs somebody steady to lean on. And if all my focus is on him, then I'm not steady.

**[00:36:58] Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. One of the most poignant moments, too, for me in the book, was when you had your birthday party, and you had a lot of conflicting emotions around that, you were like, How can I go to my birthday party when my son is... Correct me if I'm wrong, but he was in a treatment center at that point, is that correct?

**Kristina Kuzmic**

Literally, three days before the party I called the police on him, three days before, so I was going to cancel the party. Then he ended up in ER for a day, waiting for a bed to open up in a psychiatric hospital. He hated me, and was so mad. And then he was in a psychiatric hospital a day before my party, and I was going to cancel. I didn't because my mother, and my sweet mother-in-law was like, "You should, you know there's no visitation time hours during that time, so you need to be strong with people who love you."

And basically, I go through with this party, and I'm feeling awful, and I'm faking the smiles and everything so that other people wouldn't feel awkward. And a friend pulls me onto the dance floor and I dance my ass off. I'm literally... I remember dancing, and dancing, and dancing, and it felt really good. And then I write in the book, how right after it felt really good it felt really bad, because what kind of a mother has a party for herself, and dances while her son is in a psychiatric hospital against his will, wanting to kill himself?

I felt so disgusting and guilty, and then Zach Anner, who I know you know, I don't know if you knew that that was him, but I mentioned in the book...

**Meagen Gibson**

I was the one that submitted... Kristina put an ask me anything question box on her Instagram Stories the other day, and I said, Is the Zach you mentioned Zach Anner? Because, I knew it, that sounds like Zach.

**Kristina Kuzmic**

He's amazing, so I'm talking to Zach, who has become like a brother to me. And I'm telling him, I just can't believe I had that party, and I feel so guilty. And by the way, I bet you if we did a survey right now, every mother would feel guilty for doing something like that, or at least most.

And Zach said to me, "Oh, my gosh, are you kidding me? You did him a favor." And I was like, "What are you talking about?" And he said, "When I was in high school, I was struggling, and I put my mom through a lot. And if on top of everything I did then to my mother, if I knew she canceled something that she was excited about because of me, I'd still feel guilty about it now, decades later." He said, "By going through with that party, you gave Luca one less thing to feel that he destroyed." And I remember completely, chills all over my body, literally someone lifted this backpack of guilt.

And then later, I talked to Luca about it, and he agreed. In fact, we did a People Magazine interview recently, and he even mentioned it in that interview. He said, I don't have it here to quote him exactly, but he was like, "I'm so glad she did that, because at the time he felt like he had destroyed so many things." And he still, to this day, sometimes will say, "I'm so sorry for everything I put you through." And I keep reminding him I've forgiven him, I mean, I've forgiven you, you got to forgive yourself bud, you haven't forgiven yourself.

**[00:39:55] Kristina Kuzmic**

So anyway, this idea that we convince ourselves that if our loved ones are suffering, that means we have to suffer as well, as if only our suffering can show that we care and love them, like, that's how you show it. So my mindset was, once Luca is good, I'll be good, once Luca is happy, I'll be happy, once Luca is fully enjoying his life, then I'm allowed to enjoy my life.

And what Zach taught me is that it's a hell of a lot of pressure to put on somebody, and that's not fair. So by taking care of yourself, you are doing your children a favor, you're doing them a favor.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. And that's really what I wanted to hear you say, I'm so glad you said it, thank you very much, I'll pay you later. I have several people in my life who suffer from substance use disorder, and mental health issues, that I love very dearly. I've had this exact situation and interaction play out in my life. One of the things that I've developed is this mindfulness exercise where I imagine myself releasing them of my expectations. Because we think about our disappointment, or our broken hearts, our worry, and our anxiety, it looks like they don't care about anyone, it looks like they have no cares in the world.

But when you contemplate the guilt, the shame, and the burden that they feel about, A, not wanting to be alive, and B, the hurt that they're causing as a result of that. I've communicated this to several of them, I release you of it, it's not your burden to carry anymore. By taking care of myself, by learning about boundaries and exercising them, by communicating clearly, by staying curious, I am releasing them moment to moment from all of those expectations that I didn't even realize I was thrusting on them without their permission, about who they had to be in order for me to be okay.

**Kristina Kuzmic**

I think part of that, too, and I wrote about this in the book, is accepting that, for me, my value cannot be attached to any specific outcome. I think that's so important because that's another way that we set that expectation on people, or whatever. It's like, I have to be a certain way so that she won't feel guilty. I have to be a certain way so that she won't be crying every... You know what I mean? It's so hard, especially as a parent, to detach your own value from an outcome. But I had to. Because, yes, Luca is still here, but he could have easily been gone. And in the last few months, since the book came out, I've spoken to so many parents whose kids are gone, and they can spend, you know, and they do, hours and hours, what if this, what if that, what if I had. And it's completely not just useless, but it's such self-abuse.

But if you accept that you have no control, you have no control over the outcome, and your value cannot be attached to it, then I just feel like it's healthier for both parties.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. All right, Kristina, this has been fantastic. How can people find out more about you and your book? *I Can Fix This*.

**Kristina Kuzmic**

I am pretty much everywhere on social media, [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), and [YouTube](#). What else is there? [Tiktok](#)... @ Kristina with a K, last name Kuzmic.

**[00:43:25] Meagen Gibson**

And do you call yourself an author, a comedian, or a creator? How do you define yourself these days?

**Kristina Kuzmic**

I never know what to fill out on the doctor forms, my kids never know what to fill out when it's mother's occupation, I don't know, I have no idea, content creator. Everything feels weird. I felt like I couldn't call myself an author because I only had one book, now I have two, so maybe I can call myself an author.

But basically, I set this goal for myself early on when we first met, that's still true, and it's, I want to be for others what I needed when I was at my lowest. And so whether that comes through books, or touring, or videos I post, that's the goal. I don't have a title.

**Meagen Gibson**

I just wanted to make sure I wasn't omitting it because I didn't think you did. And you defy all niche definitions, box categories, and borders. I wanted to make sure I wasn't leaving something out.

**Kristina Kuzmic**

No, you are not.

**Meagen Gibson**

Fantastic. Kristina, thank you so much for being with us.

**Kristina Kuzmic**

Thank you for having me. I appreciate it.