

Ep #6: Widow Fog



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Krista St-Germain

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Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, episode six, Widow Fog.

Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, the only podcast that offers a proven process to help you work through your grief to grow, evolve, and create a future you can actually look forward to. Here's your host, certified life coach, grief expert, widow, and mom, Krista St-Germain.

Hey there. Welcome back to the podcast. I'm recording this on a Sunday afternoon for you and it's been kind of a fun weekend. My daughter had a sand volleyball tournament yesterday so we spent all day out in the sun watching her play volleyball.

And as soon as I get done recording this episode, we are going to continue our Netflix binge of *Stranger Things*, which we have seen already seasons one and two, but season three is about to come out at the time that I'm recording this and so my daughter and I are trying to catch up on it so we are ready for season three.

So today on the podcast I want to talk to you about widow fog. And widow fog is a little bit of a misnomer. We call it widow fog among the community of widows, but it could just as easily be referred to as griever's fog. It's really the fog that comes with any type of grief, but specifically on this podcast, I'm talking to you and you're a widow, so we're going to call it widow fog.

Before I get into that though, I want to take a couple of minutes and do some listener shout-outs because I love doing listener shout-outs. There's two that I want to read for you today. The first one is from BHorn1982 and she wrote, "Krista has helped me navigate through the waves of widowhood. She sincerely is here to help because she's been here. So very personal and gives me hope that this will get easier to get through. That I'm not losing my mind, that it's part of this journey. She's so kind and helpful. I've personally worked with her and she's never hesitated to answer

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any of the questions that I have and the what if and what about moments that we all widows go through. I cannot thank her enough. From all the way in Ohio, you are amazing. Thank you sincerely."

You are amazing too, Brandy, and I appreciate your kind review of the podcast. The next review is from a listener who calls herself FreecellHD and the title of her review is Fellow Widows Dive In. It reads, "Krista says out loud what I as a mom of two teens and a widow of almost three years struggle with, journal about, and wish friends understood. I'm so excited to have her in my corner. I'm sorry for her loss. Thankful that she has learned to see her gift in life coaching, through such a devastating life circumstance. Through podcast number three so far. So far so good. Can't wait to hear more."

Thank you so much FreecellHD. I appreciate that and to all of you, I really do appreciate that you took time to write a review. It's so helpful in helping other widows find the podcast and it helps me figure out too what it is you want to see in the podcast. What you like, what you don't, what's helpful, and what you want more of. So keep those reviews coming.

Okay, let's jump into the concept of widow fog. Now, if you've never heard of widow fog, or griever's fog, or widow brain, griever's brain, those terms are all interchangeable, then you might be wondering if you're crazy. And that's primarily the reason I wanted to talk about what widow fog is, why it happens, and give you some ideas of what you can do about it.

Because if you don't know what it is and you're just experiencing some of the symptoms, you might be thinking you are crazy or at the very least, might be frustrated and might be worried that what you're experiencing now isn't going to change. So I want to assure you that you aren't crazy. This won't last forever, and let's talk about it. See if you recognize yourself in any of these scenarios.

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Maybe before your husband died, you were the type of person who was on top of all the details. Very organized, always on time when paying the bills, kids got to their appointments on time, never missed a commitment, and since your husband passed, that is not your experience at all. Now you're missing appointments, now you get late notices in the mail, even though you have the money to pay your bills, you just occasionally forget.

Perhaps you tell someone you'll call them back and never do. The little details that you used to be on top of now just seem to slip through the cracks on the regular. Or maybe you do some things that embarrass you when you think about them because you don't know why you do them. So you notice that when you get home you put groceries that belong in the refrigerator in the pantry, or you've lost your keys for the third time, or you've forgotten to pick your kids up from latch key.

Things that just aren't you at all, you are suddenly doing and you don't really know why. One of my clients told me her widow fog was about toilet paper. She would go to the grocery store and she always thought she needed more toilet paper and every time she bought toilet paper, she would go home and she would see she had already a mountain of toilet paper.

And so toilet paper mountain just grew and grew, but yet every time she went back to the store, she still thought she needed more toilet paper. Another widow told me her concentration was so bad that she had to quit her job because her job required for safety reasons her to be able to focus and because she kept catching herself in moments where she was in a daze of sorts, she knew that she wasn't safely able to do her job until the fog lifted.

For some of us, it means being in a conversation and all of a sudden not knowing what we were saying, not knowing where the conversation was heading, forgetting what our point was, completely feeling like we're

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spacing out. For me, I noticed it when it came to reading. I wanted to read. I've always been a voracious reader, and especially when it comes to self-help, I wanted to read as much as I could about grief.

And even though all of these titles sounded so useful to me, for quite a while when I would start to read, I couldn't retain any of it. It was like I was just going through the motions and following the words. I was recognizing the words but I wasn't really able to retain them. And so I found it very frustrating to want to learn and absorb, but my brain just didn't want to cooperate with me.

I also remember kind of what I would describe as a generalized haziness or almost a disassociation. And it wasn't denial. It wasn't as though I didn't think my husband had died. I knew it had happened, but I remember feeling very detached for a while, as though I was watching someone else's life unfold. I was there but I kind of wasn't there.

Often in the beginning days of grief, our body and our brain try to protect us by numbing things down a bit so that we as the bereaved don't feel the full impact of the loss immediately. And so it can feel like things are dampened, or we might feel a little numb, or everything feels hazy. Tinny. As though life isn't in full stereo anymore. It's just kind of got a dampener on it.

This can also be felt if you were working before your husband died and you go back to work and you struggle to concentrate when you're back at work. Maybe you're in meetings and aren't able to track the conversation or find yourself zoning out or notice that you've been staring at your computer for however many minutes and you haven't gotten any work done until somebody comes by and says your name or asks if you're okay, and that kind of snaps you back into the present moment.

It can feel very dreamlike and also very inconsistent. So sometimes it will last for quite a while and then you will feel it lifting, and you will think okay,

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maybe it's gone now and then boom, it's back. And our inability to predict when it's going to end or if it's going to end can be really frustrating and disheartening.

It's also more difficult in this state to make decisions. It's more difficult to access our willpower. We often feel physically and mentally exhausted. So let's talk a little bit about what's actually going on here. And first of all, let's just acknowledge that just like Facebook relationship statuses, the brain on grief is complicated. It's just complicated. There's a lot going on.

One of the most informative books that I found on this subject, which you can read if you are not experiencing widow fog, it's called *Before and After Loss: A Neurologist's Perspective on Loss, Grief, and our Brain*. It's by Lisa Shulman and Lisa is a neurologist. It's part memoir. Basically, she tells the story of her own grieving process of her husband's diagnosis and subsequent death, and then everything that happened to her in her grieving.

And then combines that with her perspectives as someone who really understands brain science. And we don't need to get into all the details of how the brain works to understand what's going on with widow fog, but I do think that it's really key to understand that what's happening is a protective process. It is an adaptation that we have evolutionarily to help us survive when we are presented with emotional trauma.

And I think usually - and this is one of the things that Dr. Shulman in her book explains so well, that when we think of trauma, usually we think of brain trauma specifically, we think of something that happens physically. Like an actual traumatic brain injury. And we think about the types of consequences that come from sort of physical energy, but what we don't think about as much is that emotional trauma is still trauma.

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And that's what our brain is trying to recover from is the trauma of the loss that we have suffered. And it doesn't mean that because you've got widow fog that something is wrong with you. It's really most likely just a product of your brain's natural reaction to trauma. And so things of course are all out of whack, just like they would be with a physical injury. If someone breaks a bone, we expect that it's going to take time for that bone to heal, so we should also expect that the same is true when we've suffered an emotional trauma, that it's going to take time for our brain to heal.

Science has advanced now to the point where we can do functional MRIs, fMRIs that are basically fancy brain scans that show us activity in very specific areas of the brain, and studies have been done on the brains of those who are grieving and those who are not grieving, and it's very easy to see that lots of changes are happening as a result of grief within the brain.

When the brain's going through grief, it experiences increased activity in the regions responsible for processing physical pain, emotional regulation, memory, multitasking, organization, learning. When we're grieving, we have this flood of neurochemicals and hormones. And when our hormones get out of whack, our sleep can be disturbed and we can experience fatigue and increased stress and anxiety.

And when all of those things combine, our brain function takes a major hit. The effects of grief can also be seen in increased cortisol levels and cortisol is basically a hormone that's released when we're stressed. It's a considerable part of the grief process as a whole, and when we have excessive cortisol, the prefrontal cortex, the part of our brain that regulates emotions and memories, sometimes we also call it the executive functioning part of our brain, it already has a limited capacity before grief.

But with too much cortisol in the system, it's even less able to process and so it's no wonder that we struggle. It's no wonder that we're overwhelmed. It's no wonder that we can't absorb our environment in the same way we

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could before. And this is the foundation of what we've come to call widow fog.

So, if you've ever had any of the symptoms of widow fog, now you know you aren't crazy. You understand a little bit more about how that comes to pass and now what do you do about it? First, you start by showing yourself some compassion, by understanding that it's something that you've done wrong. It isn't something that's going to last forever. It doesn't need to be another reason you beat yourself up or another thing that you worry about.

And then once you've shown yourself some compassion and understanding, I encourage you to try as much as possible to find some humor in it. Laugh wherever you can. When you can get a little chuckle at something silly that you've done because of widow fog, it feels so much better to you than letting it be frustrating or judging yourself for it or worrying about it, or feeling embarrassed about it. Just laugh it off if you can.

And then of course - and this is widow fog or no widow fog - take good care of yourself. Find those outlets that allow you to process what is going on for you. Journaling can be magical. Art, any sort of creative outlet. Meditation, yoga, exercise. Anything that contributes to the mind-body connection can be amazing. Making time for not just the work of grief but those activities that when you're doing them, time passes. Those activities that when you're doing them, you just forget about what's going on.

As much as you can, take time for self-care. Get as much sleep as you can. Get support where you can. Support groups can be wonderful. Individual counseling, life coaching, figure out what support you need and take that time for you. You are worth it and there's nothing wrong with you if you're experiencing widow fog.

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Alright, that's what I have for you today. Thanks so much for listening to the podcast. If you would, I would love it if you would just take a couple of minutes to rate and review the podcast because ratings and especially reviews really help a podcast become discoverable, and I want widows everywhere to find this free resource so that they can get the same help that you are getting.

So if you would take a minute to rate and review, I would be most appreciative and of course, to make it fun and to give a little incentive, I will be giving away five \$100 Amazon gift cards over the next few weeks, and for full rules on how you can win one of those gift cards, go to coachingwithkrista.com/podcastlaunch.

Alright ladies, widow fog or no widow fog, remember, I love you and you've got this. I'll see you on the next episode. Take care.

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of *The Widowed Mom Podcast*. If you like what you've heard and want to learn more, head over to coachingwithkrista.com.