

## Ep #23: Widowhood and the Motivational Triad



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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[The Widowed Mom Podcast](#)

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Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, episode 23, Widowhood and the Motivational Triad.

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, everybody, welcome back to another episode of the podcast. I've got some good stuff for you today. I hope you feel that way every week when you listen to the podcast, that I've always got good stuff for you. But I'm excited about this topic because I think it's going to lay the foundation for you to understand why you're doing a lot of the things that you're doing, but also understand what you need to do to change things, so that you can create something new in your life.

So, before we get into the topic, I'm going to read a review. Actually, I'm going to read two. The first one is from Rebecca. And Rebecca wrote, "Krista has really helped me to have a different but positive view on life. Her podcasts help me get through the week. Thank you." Rebecca, you are welcome I see you. I appreciate you. Thank you for taking time to submit that review.

And then I also wanted to read one from Elena. And Elena wrote, "I look forward every week to your podcast. Thank you for helping us gain the strength we need to move forward and deal with our grief." Elena, you're welcome. However, I am not helping you gain strength that you need. You already have the strength that you need. I'm helping you uncover it. But I promise you, it is already there.

Sometimes we just accidentally get in our own way and my job, as the host of this podcast and as a life coach, is just to help you guys get out of your

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own way so you can see what is already there, you can see that you already have everything you need. And it's my privilege to do that.

So, if you like this podcast, if it's helping you and you haven't hit subscribe, I highly recommend that you do that because if your brain is like mine, you do not need one more thing to think about. So, subscribing also helps the podcast become more discoverable when people are subscribing to it.

Okay, so let's talk about the motivational triad. I'm going to teach you about the motivational triad for two reasons, mainly. Number one, I want to show you why you're doing what you're doing. And I want you to understand this so that you can show yourself some compassion, some understanding. Because if you're doing things that you don't want to do or you're wishing you could change or you're frustrated by your behaviors or your perceived lack of progress, if you're beating yourself up, I want you to stop.

We can never make progress in the face of self-criticism. And so understanding why you're doing the things that you're doing is the foundation to squashing the self-criticism. Also, many of you are attaching your identity or your personality to your thoughts, to your emotions, to your behaviors. You're making your past mean something about your future. And this will hold you back every single time.

So I want to teach you how your primitive brain is wired so that you'll know why the parts of life that you can control are unfolding as they are and so that you'll stop beating yourself up for it and you will know that different is doable. And then, if you want to create something new in your life and move from surviving to thriving or drifting to designing, which I bet you do, or you wouldn't be listening to this podcast, I want to show you how, because we can't create a future we love until we learn to flip the script on the outdated motivational triad.

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And right now, it's holding you back and I'm going to show you how that's true, because it's the way we're wired. And if we want to create something else, we have to change it up and do the opposite of what our survival instincts are telling us to do. So, let's talk about the motivational triad because, as it exists, it's unhelpful for us as widows, and if we want to move forward, then we need to understand what's happening here.

First, I bet you are wondering, what is the motivational triad? Great question. I am so glad you asked. The motivational triad is three things; seek pleasure, avoid pain, be efficient. Animals and humans were all designed with these three principle motivations, which I'm calling the motivational triad. And these three motivations increase the odds of our survival, or at least they have over time.

Seek pleasure, avoid pain, be efficient, these three motivations have made sure that we were properly nourished, that we procreated, and they have helped us minimize and avoid threats to our survival. So let's break them down.

So, seek pleasure, basically this means eat food have sex, okay, seek pleasure. All animals do this. Humans do this. We have to do this if we want to live, if we want to continue as a species, we must be nourished and we must procreate. So it is built into our wiring.

And for the most part, it's necessary. However, it used to be much more necessary. It used to not be so easy to come by proper nourishment. But we don't have that problem anymore, do we? Food is available everywhere. In fact, food is not highly processed. It has concentrated manmade substances in it that are designed to be addictive in nature.

What used to be a necessary motivation for us isn't so necessary anymore. We don't have to work to seek pleasure in food. We don't have to go kill anything to eat, we just have to go to the grocery store. It's not so hard,

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right? But it is an important part of the way that we're wired. So seek pleasure is one of our major motivations.

The second leg of that motivational triad, avoid pain. As a species, we are prewired to avoid things that might hurt us. Pain equals death, fear equals death, rejection equals banishment from the tribe. We innately know that we want to avoid pain and that avoiding pain is helpful for our survival.

And the third leg of the motivational triad is, be efficient. We want to expend as little energy as possible, not only with the way we move our bodies, but also including what we do inside our brain. And this is why we're so heavily governed by autopilot.

We don't really need to concentrate on most of what we do during a given day. We don't have to think about how to brush our teeth, we just do it. We don't have to think about how to drive our car, we just get in and drive because our brain is designed to be efficient.

Now, when we were learning those things, we had to think about them a lot. We had to use a different part of our brain. The more we practiced, the more we thought about it, the less we had to think because pathways were created in our brain. Our brain was designed so that once we've learned something, the higher part of our brain can delegate it to the lower part of our brain, and then it gets put on repeat, it gets put on autopilot.

This is efficiency in the brain. This is good for human survival. Be efficient, burn less calories, both with physical energy, with mental energy. So this is the motivational triad. It has served us well over time in that it has helped us stay alive as a species. But here's where it breaks down for us as widows. Here's where it keeps us stuck.

Seeking pleasure, our desire to seek pleasure, for many widows, means we're jumping into new relationships that we really don't want to be in,

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means we're seeking the dopamine hits that come with activities that are designed to be addictive in nature; Netflix, social media, concentrated and processed substances that are found in food and alcohol, smoking, gambling.

It means we're seeking pleasure in doing things that maybe aren't what we really want in the long-term but feel great in the short-term. Maybe it means we're moving to a new city or we're buying a house or we're shopping. For me, it was about buying things in the beginning. I bought a lot of things after Hugo died. I also ate a lot of things; comfort food. And I watched a lot of Netflix. I was seeking pleasure.

We also avoid pain in different ways. So for some, that means we avoid putting ourselves out there in new experiences. We try to make everybody happy at our own expense. We try to preserve relationships that we really don't want to be in. Maybe we avoid new relationships. We avoid ending bad relationships. We don't try new things. We don't try new careers. We don't investigate new passions because those things are scary.

We stay safe. We stay in the cave. We think, "Ooh, fear is bad, don't do things that cause fear." If you've ever seen the movie *The Croods*, I think it is one of the best illustrations of this part of our brain at work. Nicholas Cage's character in that movie, *The Croods*, he's the dad, the caveman Dad, his name is Grug. And he tells the best stories to his children in effort to try to protect them.

His whole goal in life is just to keep his family alive. He wants them to stay in the cave where he can protect them and keep them safe from all the creatures outside of the cave that could kill them. And so he tells this story about Crispy Bear and he says – you should YouTube this, it's really worth it if you haven't seen the movie.

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He tells this story of Crispy Bear and he talks about how Crispy Bear was alive because she listened to her father and lived her life in routine and darkness and terror. And she was happy and then she had, you know, one terrible problem, which was that she was filled with curiosity. And one day she wanted to go climb a tree and she saw something new and died. And he's very dramatic.

This is the motivational triad of avoiding pain. This is the dramatic survival instinct that associates anything new with pain, and therefore a threat to our survival. This is the part of our brain that, every time we think about the next chapter of life and the changes that we might need to make and the fear that that brings up for us, that our brain says, "Nope, stay in the cave, bad idea, you shouldn't do that, it's not good."

And this keeps us stuck because when we think fear is a problem, do we go towards it? No, of course we don't. So we need to reconsider this, and I'm going to tell you how.

Alright, the third part of it, be efficient – so that this can mean for us as widows is that our brain gets stuck in this autopilot, right? We have these patterns of thought, of belief, of emotions, of behaviors. Our brain is good at it and we can end up, if we're not careful, getting stuck there. We can exist in that space where we no longer relate to our old identity, but we also don't create a new one.

And we continue looking to the past for evidence of who we are instead of looking to the future and deciding who we want to be because efficiency is all about the thoughts that have already been thought, right, the feelings that we're used to feeling, the behaviors that we're used to doing. Our brain's desire to keep us efficient means that we just keep repeating. And this can be really challenging when a lot of what we used to be so comfortable and familiar with has changed.

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So if you find yourself in limbo because you're believing the story that you don't know who you are because your partner's no longer here or because you don't have any evidence that you can create something new, then I want you to have hope. This is just the effect of your brain trying to be efficient.

You're not doing it on purpose. It doesn't mean that you're resigned to doing it forever. It's just that you've thought and felt and behaved in ways long enough that neural pathways have been created and your brain wants to believe that your thoughts about who you are are true because that's the easy path, that's the efficient path. And until we decide to change what we want to believe about ourselves, we just keep recreating the same. We keep recreating the identity crisis.

And one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself is to realize that who you've been in the past has nothing to do with who you can be in the future. You are not your past thoughts, your past feelings, your past actions. You are not your past. But as long as your brain is operating in efficiency and until you decide that you don't want to live in the past anymore, that you don't value efficiency over intention, you will keep repeating the same old patterns.

And you must know that, from a survival perspective, your brain prefers to repeat existing patterns simply because it's more efficient than change. If we want to create something different, we have to think something different, we have to feel something different, we have to take different actions, and we have to understand the motivational triad and see how it holds us back.

Our brain is saying, seek pleasure, avoid pain, be efficient. And if we don't challenge that, guess what we're recreating; exactly what we have, and maybe worse.

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Okay, are you following me? Seek pleasure, avoid pain, be efficient; it's helped keep us alive until now. We can be grateful for that. But we want to do more than drift through life, right? We want to design our life, and that's going to require a different triad.

So, how do we flip the script of the existing motivational triad? Remember, right now, the motivational triad is seek pleasure, i.e. food and sex, avoid pain, expend as little energy and effort as possible. So, the new triad has to be this.

First instead of seeking pleasure, we need to seek discomfort. What does this look like? If you're used to eating for pleasure, start seeking the discomfort of choosing what you want in the long term over the pleasure you could experience in the short term. Give up immediate pleasure so that you can experience long-term pleasure.

I want you to think of something that you want to accomplish; anything. Maybe you want to get up 30 minutes earlier so you can exercise before you start your day. Whatever it is that you want to do that's different than what you're currently doing, expect your brain to prefer you don't do it. And get ready to choose discomfort on purpose.

So when the alarm goes off and it's 30 minutes earlier than you're used to getting up, expect your brain is like, yeah, no. And choose the discomfort of doing it anyway. My teacher, Brooke Castillo, taught me that discomfort is the currency to your dreams. And after Hugo died, I wore a bracelet with the word, "Discomfort" on it for almost a year to continue reminding myself that I wanted to choose discomfort on purpose.

I chose discomfort when I made healthier food choices and ultimately dropped four clothing sizes. I chose discomfort when I decided to become a coach and leave my comfortable corporate job and everyone thought I was nuts. I chose discomfort when I removed myself from the marriage and

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family therapy masters program because I knew that even though it felt safe, it wasn't what I really wanted. It wasn't what I knew I needed to do to help other widows change their lives. I chose discomfort on purpose.

So I want you to consider what is the discomfort that you need to choose and what would be the benefit to your life if you chose it on purpose? So that's number one, instead of seeking pleasure, we seek discomfort.

And I bet you can guess what number two is, right? Instead of avoiding pain, we need to open up to it. We need to go toward it, let it pass through us. We need to learn the skill of fully processing pain. And then we need to question whether fear really is something to be scared of.

Our primitive brain associates fear with danger. It genuinely is just trying to keep us safe. But there is no danger from the pain of grief other than not processing it or trying to avoid it. When we bury it or numb it with substances, we try to distract ourselves from it with projects and work, we try to busy ourselves away, that's what's causing us harm. Feeling a feeling when we know how isn't dangerous.

And I get it that you might not want to hear me say that you should go toward pain, and you might think you've had your fill, but chances are good that if you're thinking that, you probably haven't really been allowing pain. You've been accidentally resisting it because nobody taught you the skill of allowing, and in that case, there's some work to be done here, and that's good news.

Now, I'm not suggesting you create pain where there is none. I'm not saying that you should look for it or wallow in it or, you know, throw yourself a pity party. I'm saying that we can't truly create what we want until we learn how to process the emotions we're experiencing. So continuing to busy yourself or drink yourself or shop yourself or work yourself or eat yourself away from pain just prolongs it.

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It may seem like it's helping, but the net consequence in your life probably is one that's taking you farther away from what you want instead of closer to it. And our primitive brain things fear equals risk of death.

So we have to know that any time we try something new, any time we try to grow ourselves to the next level or expand our idea of who we are, that we're going to feel fear. So let's just expect that. Let's just get good at feeling fear and let's just do things anyway, shall we?

Let's just know that it's just our primitive brain trying to keep us safe. It's just the way it's wired. It's just trying to protect us. Let's tell it to calm down and that we've got this. Let's not let primitive brain drive the bus. Let's use our higher brain to make decisions.

If you want to go back to school or change jobs, you're going to feel fear. If you want to start dating again, you're going to feel fear. If you want to reinvent your ideas of who you are and how you show up in the world, expect fear to come along for the ride, and that's fine. Bring it. Just don't hand it the keys and let it drive. I promise, you're not going to get very far, right?

Okay, so instead of seeking pleasure, we're going to seek discomfort. Instead of avoiding pain, we're going to open up to it, we're going to go toward it. We're going to process it. We're going to allow it so that it goes through us instead of trying to get away from it.

And then thirdly, instead of trying to be so efficient, we need to recognize the value that comes from exerting effort with intention. Our brains are capable of change; new thoughts, new feelings, new action patterns. We don't have to just keep recreating the things from our past.

Neuroplasticity is real. There's plenty of science that shows us this, but we have to work at it. And this is why I teach what I teach and what I help my

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clients do when we're coaching together. We have to work toward new ways of thinking so that we can create new patterns that we can put on repeat.

We have to stop defining ourselves by who we were in the past, by those outdated thoughts and beliefs that aren't serving us anymore, or we're just going to keep creating the same feelings, behaviors, and results. And we need to practice at that. This means work.

I teach all my clients exactly how to do just this, right? How to see what they currently believe is optional, especially when they can't see it for themselves, how to decide what they want to believe on purpose and how to work up to those beliefs in a way that is not forced or artificial make-believe affirmations or woo-woo, right?

There's a science to rewiring your brain. It's so worth the effort of doing and we must do it if we want to design a future that's different from our past. We just need to remember though that our primitive brain would rather not. It would prefer that we just stay efficient and safe.

So, here's my challenge to you; flip the script on the motivational triad by seeking discomfort on purpose. Know that it is the currency to the life that you want. Open up to pain so you can process it fully and decide to do the work of being intentional with your brain instead of settling for the old habitual thought patterns that your brain is so well-versed at thinking.

I promise you, this is the way to create what you want out of life. And, of course, this is what I do, all day every day as a life coach for widowed moms. This is it. Well, it's not it, but this is the foundation. There's so much more, but this is the foundation.

So if you want help with this, if you want to figure out how to rewire your brain, if you want to figure out how do I flip the script on this motivational

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triad, then I want you to go to my website, [coachingwithkrista.com](http://coachingwithkrista.com). Click, "Request a consultation," fill out the application and let's see if my Mom Goes On group coaching program is a good fit for you.

I promise, you have nothing to lose and a life you love is so possible for you, for you, not the other women listening; for you. Okay, alright, I love you, you've got this, and I'll see you on the next episode. Take care.

Ready to start building a future you can actually look forward to? Get a free copy of Krista's Love Your Life Again Game Plan, and learn her three-step process so you can stop feeling stuck and start creating your next great chapter. No matter what you've been through, your past does not have to define what's possible in your future.

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