

Ep #20: Cognitive Bias and Widowhood



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With Your Host

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Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, episode 20, Cognitive Bias and Widowhood.

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've got something super useful for you this week. We're going to talk about cognitive bias and what you need to know. If that's a term you've never heard before, don't worry, I'm going to explain it to you, break it down. It's all going to make sense. You're going to see how it's playing out in your life and you probably don't even know it's happening.

But I want you to understand it because I want you to be able to put it to good use and make it work for you instead of against you because my guess is that it's working against you right now and you don't know that yet, so I'm going to teach you all about it.

So, before we do that though, I'm going to read a listener review. We are ticking up there – my goal, I've told you before, I want a million widows to listen to this podcast. And considering there are 11.5 million widows out there, over 11 and a half million of us, I think that's a reasonable goal. My next baby goal is to get 200 reviews on the podcast. Not just ratings, I'm talking Apple Podcasts, 200 reviews. So if you listen on Spotify, this really isn't relevant. But if you're listening to the podcast in Apple Podcasts, you have an Apple device and you haven't given a review of the podcast where you actually type in words that say what you think of it, I would be so grateful if you would do that because that's what helps other people find us in iTunes, or it's now called Apple Podcasts.

Ep #20: Cognitive Bias and Widowhood

So, this review that I want to read today is from a woman named Barbra and the title of her review is, So Soothing. And she wrote, “I’m not a widow, but have gone through a difficult divorce and have grieved the end of a 26-year marriage, along with the ramifications for the rest of the family. And I find the content that Krista offers through this podcast, as well as emails I receive from her. Very soothing and inspiring. Love her calm voice and loving energy.”

Thank you, Barbra. And if any of you just got a little bristly that someone came here to listen to this podcast because of divorce – I know sometimes that really can cause interesting reactions among widows, I want you to know, Barbra, I think it’s amazing. Grief is the natural response to loss.

Grief is not just the natural response to loss as it relates to death. It’s not specific to death. It’s loss. So I am so glad that what I’m offering you is helping you through your loss, even though it’s different than the loss of some of the other listeners. And honestly, everyone’s loss is different. That’s why grief is such a unique experience. But I’m glad it could be useful to you, so that’s great.

Okay, let’s talk about cognitive bias. I wonder, first of all, if you’ve ever heard the term cognitive bias. This is an important concept to know because it’s altering everything you see and experience in the world.

So here’s what’s happening in your brain; there is so much data, raw data in the world, that it would be impossible for the human brain to absorb and process all of it. So we have to have some ways to deal with that. We can’t have our brain be on overload and basically run out of processing space.

So it cannot process all of what’s happening in the world and it has to have a way of deciding what data in the world is relevant to us so that it knows what to worry about, what to process. And it does this with something called the reticular activating system.

Ep #20: Cognitive Bias and Widowhood

I like to think of the reticular activating system as a bouncer at a night club. Now, get that image in your mind. The bouncer is out there at the night club. It's deciding who gets to go into the club and who doesn't. It's filtering who gets in, who has to stay out.

Our brain does this too. So, think about a time where you have been keenly aware of something that is new. So, like for me, when my daughter started playing volleyball, volleyball was not in my conscious awareness until my daughter started playing it. I didn't play volleyball. I was never interested in volleyball. I didn't pay attention to volleyball at all.

But when my daughter started developing an interest in it, all of a sudden, I became very aware of volleyball. I started hearing more about it, noticing more people who I worked with whose children played this sport. I was becoming more aware of the sport in my community and just starting to see it more often.

Now, was volleyball there any more now because my daughter was interested than it was before she was interested? No, of course not. Volleyball was just volleyball. But now, my brain was looking for volleyball because I had sent the message that it was important. I was paying attention. It's the same reason why you can hear your name in a crowded room. You hear white noise, someone says your name, you perk up.

Or the last time you bought a car, it seemed like the day after you bought the car or researching the car that, all of a sudden, the car was everywhere. There were many more of those cars on the road than there used to be. But we know this isn't true. We know this isn't true.

This is the reticular activating system at work. This is what causes cognitive bias. Cognitive bias happens when we have a belief, a thought – really a belief is just a thought we've thought enough times that it becomes a belief. We have a thought or a belief and because our brain is a perfectly

Ep #20: Cognitive Bias and Widowhood

functioning brain and it goes about doing what brains do and using its reticular activating system, it starts gathering evidence in line with our thought, with our belief. It starts looking and filtering for evidence to support what we believe.

Maybe you've had someone in your life who you just didn't like, and your thought about them was that they were inconsiderate. And so then, what you probably began to notice is that you saw a whole lot of inconsiderate behavior from that person. In fact, what you may not have realized is that your brain was likely blocking behavior that wasn't inconsiderate from you. It was filtering it out. It was showing you what you believed to be true which then strengthens your belief. It creates a cycle of belief.

So you think the thought, "He's inconsiderate," and then your brain shows you more and more evidence, "Yep, see what he did over there. See how he said that. Yep, a considerate person wouldn't have done that." And now, you've put him in a box and all you can see is an inconsiderate person.

Meanwhile, right under your nose, he could be doing some things that actually are quite considerate, but you can't see them because of the reticular activating system. So the bias develops cognitively. That bias to believe your thinking sticks.

So I want to talk about how this can impact you as a widow in some specific ways that I see my life coaching widow clients being impacted by this. So think about some of these situations and see if any of them apply to you.

If you've ever had the thought, "Other people don't understand..." it's a common thought among widows, right? We tend to think that no one understands what we're going through. When you've had that thought that other people just don't understand, then because of the reticular activating

Ep #20: Cognitive Bias and Widowhood

system, your brain starts filtering for evidence of all the people who don't understand, all the ways in which other people don't understand.

It shows you more evidence of that. It blocks from you evidence to the contrary, things that don't fit your thought that other people don't understand you. And something else is actually happening here too; our thoughts are what create our feelings, not other people, our thoughts. So when we think the thought that other people don't understand us, then chances are good that we feel lonely or misunderstood, something along those lines. What have you felt?

The way we feel is the reason we do what we do in the world. So when we feel lonely or misunderstood, what do we do? Well, we don't get right out there and share our most vulnerable secrets with everyone. When we're feeling lonely and misunderstood, most of us will isolate. Most of us will not open up to people. Most of us will not share what we're actually going through. We'll just fake it. We fake it, don't we?

We keep people at an arm's distance. We don't invite them in. And then we create more evidence for our thinking that other people don't understand us. We don't even give them the chance to understand us, not because there's something wrong with us, not because we're bad people, but because our thoughts are not serving what we want in life.

We think we're just making an observation about how other people are in relation to us, that they haven't gone through grief and we have, they've never lost their husband and we have. They're saying things that we don't think are indicative of the types of things that someone would say if they understood us.

And so we start deciding that other people don't get it, and then we don't feel good because of that. And then the way we act creates more of it. So now we've got two things working against us. We've got cognitive bias,

Ep #20: Cognitive Bias and Widowhood

where our brain is seeking evidence for the thoughts that we have, and blocking evidence to the contrary. And, because of the emotional state that we're creating for ourselves, we behave in ways that take us farther away from the reality that we want.

Here's another one. How many of you have ever thought you're a terrible mother or you're not a good mother or you should be a better mother? And you just think you're making an observation about the interaction that you just had with your child. It doesn't matter if they're grown or young, teenagers, it doesn't matter.

Something doesn't go way you expected it to go, words are exchanged and then you decide that that is evidence and proof that you are not a good mom. And then your brain goes to work if you think that thought long enough.

Your brain is always looking for evidence, "Oh yeah, hey, remember last week when you yelled? Remember when you lost your patience that one time? Remember how you slammed that door? Remember when you took them through the drive through and fed them fast food and who knows what?"

Your brain starts showing you. And all of a sudden you're like, "Yeah, I really am a terrible mother." And it's difficult to see anything else. So cognitive bias is not your friend with a thought like this. It's not your friend at all. I want you to be very skeptical of the evidence that you seem to see about other people, about you.

Our brain is so powerful, so powerful, and there are so many things happening that we really aren't consciously choosing. It's really possible that you're a better mother than you think you are but that your brain is just doing what good brains do and using its RAS, it's reticular activating system, RAS, and giving you evidence of what you think.

Ep #20: Cognitive Bias and Widowhood

So then, let's talk about the emotional side of that. You go thinking, "I'm a terrible mom, not a good mom." That probably makes you feel guilty, inadequate, something along those lines. It's not the thing you did as a mom that makes you feel guilty or inadequate. It's your brain. It's the sentence in your mind telling you that you're a terrible mother.

And then what do you do when you feel guilty or inadequate? You're probably more likely, as humans are, as parents are, when we feel guilty, to avoid our children, to avoid any sort of conflict or parenting, to shy away from it, maybe not to set consequences or not enforce them.

Maybe we give in, we give them what they want because we're feeling guilty or inadequate. Maybe we overindulge them. Maybe we buy them things they really don't need or we can't afford because we're trying to get our way out of the guilt and feel better about ourselves.

And then you're actually creating more evidence that you're not the kind of mother that you want to be. You aren't your best mom, but it isn't because of you and it isn't because of whatever it was that originally happened before you told yourself you were terrible.

I'll give you another one, and I see this one a lot, "I'll never find anyone like my husband." Now, I don't believe you will ever find anyone exactly like your husband because there was only one of him, right? He was a unique human. You are a unique human. I am a unique human. There are no carbon copies of any of us.

But I want you to think about how this feels when you say it, "I'll never find anyone like my husband." You probably feel pretty committed to that belief, pretty certain of it. And what happens if you're certain that you'll never find anyone like your husband? You won't look.

Ep #20: Cognitive Bias and Widowhood

If you do look, you'll compare everyone you ever see to him, everyone. And your brain in the background is doing its homework like a good little brain. "Yes, see, he's not as good as your husband. See, your husband never would have done that. Can you imagine? None of these are as good as your husband."

Anyone that could potentially be a great fit for you, a wonderful partner for you, your brain will block them because you're believing, "I'll never find anyone like my husband," and your brain is out there just trying to help you, just trying to filter the information that's relevant to you. And the result of that for you is a bias in your brain, a cognitive bias.

Okay, I'm going to give you one more because I hear this one too. Ladies, I know what you're thinking. Actually, I could go on, I've got a lot of them. Maybe I'll give you two more. Okay, "There's something wrong with me." Have you ever thought that, there's something wrong with me?

And then, when you think that, I bet you probably feel shame, "There's something wrong with me." And then think about how shame makes you behave in the world. When we feel shame, we are so hard on ourselves. We start criticizing ourselves. We start fault-finding. We hide, we isolate, we do what I like to think of as the shame spiral, where we just create this negative spiral and follow it down and down and down and down.

We don't show up authentically in social situations. We're very, kind of, false and guarded, all because of shame, all because of shame. And shame is just caused by our thought that there's something wrong with us. And we actually create that with our brain. And then, the razz in the background doing it's thing, "Oh yeah, there's something wrong with you. Remember what you did over here? Look, you can't even do that simple thing. There's definitely something wrong with you. Well, if there wasn't something wrong with you, I bet you could have probably done that already, but you can't." It will just continue to show you.

Ep #20: Cognitive Bias and Widowhood

How about – I really will end on this one – being a widow is hard. Now, if we got all the widows in the world in the room, I bet a lot of them would agree that being a widow is hard. It doesn't matter, that's not the point. We could all find the truth in that.

But knowing how the brain's filtering system works, is that a way you want to think? I propose no. Unless your follow-on thought is being a widow is hard and I'm up for it, or being a widow is hard and I'm harder, unless you have a really powerful empowering follow up thought, but otherwise, a thought like that, being a widow is hard, how does it feel to you?

Think it; being a widow is hard. It feels kind of overwhelming and depressing and – I'm struggling to come up with the word. I feel like a pressure in my chest. It feels heavy. Being a widow is hard. And then how do we show up in the world when we feel that way? We don't take productive action from overwhelm. We overcomplicate things. We spin around. We make things harder on ourselves, don't we?

And all the while, our brain in the background, "Hey, this is hard. Remember when you used to do this together? That was easier then, wasn't it, but now you've got to do it by yourself and this is hard. And all this is hard and this is hard, and by the way, other people don't understand me, there's something wrong with me. I'm a terrible mother and I'll never find anyone like my husband."

These are the things that are going on in the unsupervised brain that most of us are walking around with. These are the things that my mentor always says, "An unsupervised mind is like a toddler running around with a knife. It doesn't mean to hurt anything, but you better watch out. It's going to do some damage. You need to manage it."

Ep #20: Cognitive Bias and Widowhood

I like to think about it as an unsupervised toddler with a Sharpie marker as opposed to a knife. It feels a little less frightening to me. But I think it's the same concept.

We are all walking around and we're thinking these thoughts and we're not really understanding how powerful our brain's filtering system is and how easy it is for our brain to find evidence of what we're looking for and how consistently we can literally not see what is in front of our face because our brain is working. It is filtering as it was designed. It needs to be efficient, that's why it has a filtering system.

So I want you to just give yourself permission to start noticing how the thoughts you're thinking are coloring your world. The thoughts you're thinking have created a bias of the way that you see yourself, the way that you see your life, the way that you see other people in the world, not because there's anything wrong with you, not because I want you to blame yourself for it, because I want you to see how powerful your brain is so that you can develop a healthy level of skepticism and you can start deciding, are these things that I'm allowing my unsupervised brain to find evidence for, are they serving me? Are they useful to me?

I'm going to say they aren't, alright. I'm going to say they aren't. That's why cognitive bias is such an incredibly important concept for widows to understand because, if you want to create something other than more evidence of what you're already thinking, you're going to have to change your thoughts. That's a process. It requires work.

This is what I do with coaching. I help my clients identify what's working and what's not, mostly what they're choosing unconsciously, and then make some conscious decisions and do the work of actually believing what they want to believe, even when they don't, so their brain will start finding evidence for that and then they will start creating consciously and on purpose.

Ep #20: Cognitive Bias and Widowhood

And instead of believing that they're a terrible mother, which actually makes them a less amazing mother, believing an amazing mother, which makes them show up in their children's lives and be exactly the kind of mother, more of the kind of mother, that they want to be, stop believing there's something wrong with them or that being a widow is hard or other people don't understand them or any of those things that just seem like observations that hold us down, that we're holding ourselves down by thinking and believing.

Alright, that is cognitive bias in a nutshell. I hope you enjoyed it, it was useful. And hey, I record these a little bit ahead of time, so I'm working right now on my new small group coaching program. But if that's something you're interested in, it will have a rolled out probably by the time you hear this. So if you're interested, you can send me an email, check the show notes, we will get you all of the details. There is an application process to work with me in this small group.

It's not going to be right for everyone, right? Nothing to be afraid of to apply though if it's something that you're interested in, if you really do want to see transformation in your life and you want to figure out how to make tools like this work for you and actually apply them, then that's what we're going to do in this small group; six months of transformation and new chapters of life that we can actually look forward to.

Alright, remember, I love you, you've got this, and I'll see you on the next episode. Take care, bye-bye.

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.

Ep #20: Cognitive Bias and Widowhood

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