

Ep #113: Disenfranchised Grief



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With Your Host

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Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, episode 113, Disenfranchised Grief.

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 truly look forward to. Here's your host, Master Certified life coach, grief expert, widow, and mom, Krista St-Germain.

Hey there. Welcome to another episode of the podcast. Just got back from vacation and a quick shout-out, I think I might have mentioned this in the last podcast episode as I was preparing to leave for vacation. But the boyfriend and I went and stayed with one of my clients or at one of my clients' homes in the Bay Area.

And it just so happened to work out that she was taking her boys on a three-week national park tour. So can we just pause for a second? Single mom, two young incredibly energetic and intelligent boys on a three-week national park tour by herself.

So shout-out to Suzanne for doing that. Much appreciated the opportunity to stay in her house. So we stayed in her house and then another one of my clients also who's now on my team, Jamie, who you've heard on the podcast before, *Surviving the First Year* and *Feelings Aren't Problems*, she was on both of those episodes.

But then Jamie took her girls and stayed in Suzanne's house for - she's actually there right now as I record this episode. And shout-out to her because it was the first vacation that she took, planned, and took her girls on since Eric passed.

Of course maybe they've done other small things in their state but flying halfway across the country and dealing with all the travel and booking a

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rental car, and what to some people might not seem like that big of a deal, but for her, some big victories.

So I'm just really proud of her for doing that. I'm really proud of Suzanne for how she shows up as a solo parent and provides just such amazing memorable experiences for her boys and also really grateful to know women like this, to be able to work with women like this. So shout-out to Suzanne and Jamie.

Alright, let's get into the episode. So I was recently interviewed by PsychCentral and answering their questions reminded me that I haven't yet talked about disenfranchised grief on the podcast. And while disenfranchised grief may not apply to every single listener, I think it's good for all of us to be aware of it so that at least we can be a better support to those who might be experiencing it.

And you might have even experienced it and just not even known it, and hopefully this episode will maybe validate some of your experience. So I'm going to explain what disenfranchised grief is, I'm going to give you plenty of examples so that you can recognize it. I'm going to share my personal experience with it, and then give you some suggestions on how you can support yourself if you're experiencing disenfranchised grief.

So first, what is disenfranchised grief? Disenfranchised grief is a term that was coined by Kenneth Doka in the 80s. And it's basically when someone's society denies them the need, the right, the role, or the capacity to grieve.

In other words, disenfranchised grief is when the loss goes against cultural norms and it's not seen as valid by those in the person's support network or community. It's not openly acknowledged, it's not socially mourned, or it's not publicly supported.

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And as you can imagine, this is not a small or simple subject. So for the purpose of making this podcast friendly, I'm simplifying things and I'm adding a bit of my own thoughts and experiences. And for those of you who are interested in grief theory or who want to learn more, I recommend that you go check out Doka's book, which is appropriately titled Disenfranchised Grief.

So before we break this down and give some examples, I think it's important to pause and remind ourselves that grief is in no way limited to a death loss. And while we most commonly think of grief as a result of someone's death, non-death losses are just as valid as death losses.

I like to think of grief as a person's thoughts, feelings, and actions following a perceived loss. Thoughts, feelings, actions following a perceived loss. And since perception is unique to the individual, then so is grief. So what one person believes is a loss might not be what another person believes is a loss. It's all about perception.

So let's break down disenfranchised grief and give some examples. Doka suggests that disenfranchised grief can happen when the loss isn't seen as worthy of grief. So for instance, a non-death loss such as the loss of a pet, or the death of someone you didn't know, a death of someone who maybe abused you or hurt you could be a loss that isn't seen as worthy of grief.

Or maybe it's the loss of something you really expected that was really important to you but that other people don't understand why it was so important. So maybe you had your hopes up for a job, maybe you had your hopes up for the perfect vacation, maybe you had your hopes up for something that was going to come to fruition that just didn't.

And to you, it's a big deal. But other people might not see it that way. Also, disenfranchised grief is when the relationship is stigmatized. So maybe someone was a partner in an extramarital affair and that person died.

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Maybe you're in a same sex relationship and you weren't open about that, or you were in an environment where people were not supportive of that relationship, but there was stigma around the relationship.

Disenfranchised grief can also be when the mechanism of death has stigma attached to it. So perhaps it's death by suicide, death by overdose. Maybe it's death by abortion. It can also be when the person grieving is not recognized as a griever.

For instance, maybe a coworker passed or an ex-partner passed. Or maybe you are a foster parent and you lost a foster child. Maybe it was a former foster child that isn't even in your house. Could be a non-relative. Maybe you were the grandparent.

Maybe you didn't know the person in real life because it was exclusively an online relationship or maybe you never met the person because they were a celebrity or a public figure. One of my former clients came to me after her ex-spouse died and she had been happily remarried since for a number of years, but the loss of her ex-spouse hit her really hard. And she felt very uncomfortable speak about that to those that she cared about.

So the loss isn't seen as worthy of grief, the relationship is stigmatized, the way the person died is stigmatized, the person grieving is not recognized as a griever, or also the way you are grieving is stigmatized. So maybe you aren't displaying any outward grief, or maybe you're displaying what other people believe is an extreme grief response.

So we can be judged by our culture and by others and we can judge ourselves in a number of ways. And this is the judgment that results in disenfranchised grief. And you can imagine the potential for intersectionality.

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So we could have a loss that isn't seen as worthy of grief and the person grieving is not recognized as a griever. Or we could have a stigmatized relationship and a stigmatized mechanism of death. There's endless possibilities for intersectionality.

So it's complicated. Imagine for a moment what it would have been like to be in Susan Klebold's shoes. If you've never heard of Susan, Susan is the mother of Dylan Klebold, who if you recall as I do because I was young when this happened and I just remember thinking, "Oh my gosh, it could have happened in my high school."

But Susan Klebold was the mother of Dylan Klebold who committed a mass murder and an attempted bombing in Columbine High, in Colorado in 1999. And then he and the other student then both died by suicide. Susan later went on to be an author and a very public advocate for mental health but she got death threats, she had panic attacks, she was looked at by many people as responsible for not seeing signs of her own son's instability and therefore to blame.

So imagine grieving the loss of your child, the loss of the children whose lives your child ended, that you never even knew, so much regret, public scrutiny and very little support from your community. So this is not an exhaustive list of disenfranchised grief. We could come up with probably 100 different types of scenarios that we would classify as disenfranchised, but hopefully it gives you at least the idea of the types of losses that can fall under this term.

I mentioned that I'd share my experience with disenfranchised grief and before I do that, I want to add that another way to think of disenfranchised grief using the model that I teach is that disenfranchised grief is when other people have thoughts that our grief is somehow less than or invalid, or we think they do.

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Because sometimes people share their thoughts with us and sometimes we just assume that we know what they're thinking. And the latter is what I struggled with unknowingly of course. I created an experience of disenfranchised grief for myself when I was a new coach.

Because after Hugo died, my family was - and my community and my coworkers, everyone around me was incredibly supportive. I got nothing but love and support. I cannot complain at all.

But when I decided to become a coach and I was considering coaching other widows, there was a time where I really worried that other people would think that my loss was less valid than theirs because Hugo was my second husband and because I hadn't been married to him for decades.

Now, no one ever said one word to me to suggest that this was true. No one ever looked at me crossways. I literally had no evidence for this story. And so what I later concluded and what I know now is that I was really just projecting my own thoughts about my loss onto this nebulous they, whoever they were.

I was very worried what they would think, even though no one had said a word. But what was happening is I was having thoughts that my grief was less valid because he was my second husband. I was having thoughts that because other women had met and married their late partners as young adults and I didn't meet Hugo until I was in my 30s, late 30s, that somehow that made my grief less valid.

And that matters because my own thoughts about other people potentially not accepting my story and my grief almost kept me from working with widows. I almost did that to myself. And I'm so glad I figured this out because if I hadn't, this podcast wouldn't exist. All the women who have participated in my Mom Goes On group wouldn't have been helped.

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And I tell you this story not because you're probably trying to become a coach but because I don't want you to make that same mistake. I can save you from potentially making that mistake, I want to do that. Maybe you're noticing yourself worrying about what other people think, but you're not questioning whether there's actually anything to worry about.

Frankly, I'll tell you that even if they are having thoughts about your grief, it's still nothing to worry about. But I also don't want you to put something on yourself like I was doing that almost didn't even exist in reality. I had no evidence for it.

I have a Mom Goes On member who someday I'm going to get her on the podcast, but she almost didn't join because her partner was a woman and she was worried that her grief wouldn't be accepted by the group. And I'm so glad she didn't let that stop her because now she's a second time masters member.

She's taken everything I teach and run with it and she's such a loving presence and a mentor to others in the group. So I don't want anyone, any one of you to let your thoughts about other people's thoughts stop you from getting the support that you want. That's why I share my little experience with that.

So if you're experiencing disenfranchised grief, here's what I suggest. And truthfully, I suggest this for all of you. If you're in grief, all of this applies, but especially if you're experiencing disenfranchised grief.

So remember, all of your feelings are valid, even if others don't understand. Doesn't matter. The more significant the loss was for you, the more intense the emotions will be. And that's all unique to you and to your perception of the loss. So don't tell yourself that you shouldn't feel the way that you do.

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And the more you can open up to the truth of how you feel, and of course, how we feel is caused by our thoughts, but it doesn't even matter because if we're already thinking those thoughts and we're already feeling those feelings, and the more we can open up to that, the more we can process those emotions instead of resisting them or avoiding them.

And then the easier it will be to integrate and adapt to the loss. Don't make it a condition that other people need to understand your feelings in order for you to process them and take care of yourself. If you make your grief dependent upon other people's support, then you'll always be trying to change something that you can't.

It's impossible for us to control or change other people, so don't make your feelings conditional upon the support or understanding of others. Remind yourself that you don't owe anyone an explanation.

This grief is your grief. You get to decide who you share it with, how you navigate it, all of it. It's yours. You don't need to explain it or justify it to anyone. If you want support from people who understand, I promise you it's out there. There are online support and social media groups for nearly every type of loss. You just have to look.,

And I think it's incredibly useful because connecting with other people who have a similar life experience can show you that you're not alone. That what you're experiencing is common, that nothing is wrong with you, and that's one of the biggest roadblocks I see for people who are experiencing grief is that they believe the lie that something is wrong with them.

So there's plenty of support available if you want it, even if it exists outside of your existing social network. And as the world of life coaching expands, there are more and more coaches specializing in areas of disenfranchised grief.

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Now, by no means is this an exhaustive list but some coaches that come to mind that maybe you don't even know this kind of support out there, one of my peers, Amy Watson is a coach for baby loss. She specializes in helping women who have lost infants or had miscarriages. That's what she does.

Another one of my colleagues, Amanda Kingsley, coaches women who have had abortions. It's her specialty is supporting women who have had abortions. Another peer, Dorothy, she goes by Breakup Coach Dorothy if you're looking for her online, coaches women coming out of a breakup.

Some breakups can be experienced as really, really hard because it's all unique, it's all individual. So the list of coaches and niches is just growing and growing. There are coaches for every need if you look and if you want one.

And little plug for my program of course, it's very welcoming and inclusive. Maybe you weren't married, maybe you were remarried but your former partner or ex-spouse died. If you identify as a woman, a widow, and a mom, then you're welcome in my group.

So I hope this little summary of disenfranchised grief was helpful to you. Maybe you saw some of your own experiences in what we talked about, maybe some people came to mind that now you kind of understand their struggles a little bit more or why it might just be a little bit harder for them based on their unique circumstances and that that's useful to you.

If you'd like a little bit more of this kind of podcast, let me know. There's plenty of grief theories we can talk about that might be helpful. Alright, that's what I have for you this week. I hope that wherever you are and whatever you've got going on, you remind yourself that I love you and you've got this. Take care. See you next week. Bye-bye.

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If you like what you've been hearing on this podcast and want to create a future you can truly get excited about, even after the loss of your spouse, I invite you to join my Mom Goes On coaching program. It's small group coaching just for widowed moms like you where I'll help you figure out what's holding you back and give you the tools and support you need so you can move forward with confidence.

Please don't settle for a new normal that's less than what you deserve. Go to coachingwithkrista.com and click Work With Me for details and next steps. I can't wait to meet you.