

May 2020

GRIEF, LOSS, AND DEATH DURING COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people are experiencing grief and loss, and many have died. None of us could have fully predicted the impact of this global situation. How can we identify persistent feelings that seem to have no name? How do we navigate grief and loss and find a way to cope? How do we help our loved ones who are struggling?

Types of Loss

There are a lot of people feeling a variety of emotions right now – apathy, fear, anxiety, disappointment, depression, loneliness, grief, and loss. During this time people have lost loved ones to natural causes and/or COVID-19, and many people are also experiencing a variety of other losses including; loss of financial security, loss of control, unemployment, canceled events (weddings, graduations, birth celebrations, etc.), and loss of connection to others. All of these losses can impact our emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing.

What Is a Living Loss?

A living loss is grief without a death. Because of COVID-19, people have lost parts of their everyday lives as they stay at home and limit in-person socializing. Experiencing grief is not limited to a physical death and is a normal response to the loss of the life one used to live before a life-changing event, such as a crisis or pandemic. We grieve when important things in our lives are suddenly taken away.

Social and physical distancing can be difficult when social connectedness and physical touch can bring us greater comfort and improved wellbeing. Many of those who live alone or are separated from loved ones, may be feeling “touch starved.” Instinctually, we need connection and positive touch (such as hugs, etc.) to mentally and physically thrive.

What Are Some Symptoms of Grief?

The grief you feel with a living loss and/or a death can be very similar. People can feel a variety of grief symptoms including:

- Sadness, heaviness, and anxiety
- Problems sleeping or chronic fatigue
- Irritability, restlessness, and problems concentrating
- Change in appetite and digestive issues
- Increased irritability
- Numbness and detachment
- Preoccupation with loss
- Chest pains, sore muscles, and headaches
- Inability to show or experience joy

Stages of Grief

There are five stages of grief according to the Kubler-Ross Model:

1. Denial & isolation
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

Denial is the first reaction to learning about a loss, a crisis, or death of a loved one and causes one to deny the reality of the situation. “This isn’t happening, it can’t be happening,” people often think. Denial is a common defense mechanism that buffers the immediate shock of the loss or crisis, numbing us to our overwhelming emotions. We block out the words and hide from the facts.

When the reality and the pain of loss begin to re-emerge, these intense emotions are deflected, redirected, and expressed instead as anger. **Anger** may be aimed at inanimate objects, complete strangers, friends, or family. Anger may be directed at our dying or deceased loved one. Rationally, we know the person we lost is not to be blamed, and we know that many are struggling during this time. We feel guilty for being angry, and this makes us even more angry.

Bargaining is a normal reaction to feelings of helplessness and vulnerability and is usually an attempt to regain control. Guilt often accompanies bargaining. We start to believe there was something we could have done differently to have helped our situation. This is usually expressed through “If only” statements, such as:

- *If only we had sought medical attention sooner...*
- *If only we hadn’t put off doing XYZ...*
- *If only we had flown back home sooner...*

During our experience of processing grief, there comes a time when our “what ifs” start to calm down and we slowly begin to look at the reality of our present situation. We start to feel more abundantly our loss. In those moments, we tend to pull inward as the sadness grows. We might find ourselves retreating, being less sociable, and reaching out less to others about what we are going through. Although this is a very natural stage of grief, dealing with **depression** after loss can be extremely isolating.

Acceptance does not mean that we no longer feel the pain of loss. However, we are no longer resisting the reality of our situation, and we are not struggling to make it something different. We begin to work within the confines of our new reality to find different ways to move forward. Sadness and regret can still be present in this phase, but the emotional survival tactics of denial, bargaining, and anger are less likely to be present.

How Do We Cope with Loss During COVID-19?

Coping with loss is ultimately a deeply personal and singular experience — nobody can help you go through it more easily or understand all the emotions that you’re going through. But others can be there for you and help comfort you through this process. Strategies to cope with grief and loss are not one-size-fits-all. Some strategies that have been helpful are:

- **Acknowledge your grief.** People tend to be overwhelmed by something they do not recognize. Recognizing the symptoms and admitting the feelings of grief will help normalize the response. It is OK to grieve, no matter the circumstance.
- **Take a break from the news.** Whether you’re watching the nightly news or scrolling through social media feeds, viewing sad and depressing news coverage on the pandemic only feeds your grief. Instead, disconnect for a time and be mindful to access credible news sources.
- **Take care of your body.** Some ways you can take care of yourself include moving your body, lessening caffeine intake, being out in nature and getting fresh air in your lungs, and getting a good night’s sleep.
- **Reach out and connect with others.** It is important to have strong social support when you’re experiencing grief. Call or video chat with a loved one and check in with people you haven’t heard from in a while.
- **Focus on what you can control.** Challenge yourself to stay in the present. Perhaps your worry is compounding — you are not only thinking about what is currently happening, but also projecting into the future. When you find yourself worrying about something that hasn’t happened, gently bring yourself back to the present moment. Notice the sights, sounds, tastes and other sensory experiences in your immediate moment and name them. Engaging in mindfulness activities is one way to help stay grounded when things feel overwhelming or beyond your control.

How to Support Someone Who is Grieving

Avoid Rescuing or Fixing

It can be so difficult to know what to say to someone who is experiencing grief. We do our best to offer comfort, but sometimes our best efforts can feel inadequate and unhelpful. One thing to remember is that the person who is grieving does not need to be fixed. In our attempts to be helpful, we tend to try to rescue people from their pain so they will feel better faster. Although the intention is positive, this approach can leave people feeling as if their pain is not seen, heard, or valid.

Don't Force It

Another method people often use that tends to go wrong is forcing people to talk about their feelings or pain when they are not ready. We want so much to help and for the person to feel better sooner, so we believe that pushing them to talk will help them process their emotions more quickly. This is not necessarily true, and it can actually be an obstacle to their healing if we try to rush them to open up.

Listen

Be willing to sit in silence. Don't press if the grieving person doesn't feel like talking. Often, comfort for them comes from simply being in your company. If you can't think of something to say, just offer eye contact, a squeeze of the hand, or a reassuring hug. Put the emphasis on listening instead and ask your loved one to tell you how they're feeling.

Be Genuine in Your Communication

Don't try to minimize their loss, provide simplistic solutions, or offer unsolicited advice. The emotions of grief can change rapidly so don't assume you know how the bereaved person feels at any given time. If you've gone through a similar loss, you could share your own experience at the appropriate time. But remember that grief is an intensely individual experience. No two people experience it exactly the same way, so don't claim to "know" what the person is feeling or compare your grief to theirs. It's far better to just listen to your loved one or simply admit: "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care and that I'm here for you."

Make Yourself Accessible

One of the most helpful things we can do is to offer space for people to grieve. In doing this, we are letting the person know that we are available and accessible when they are ready to talk. We can invite them to talk with us but remember to provide understanding and validation if they are not ready to talk just yet. At that point, you can remind them that you are available when they feel ready and not to hesitate to come to you.

Know Your Resources

If you or someone who know is feeling particularly anxious or struggling with their mental health, it's ok to reach out to a mental health professional for support. We do not have to be alone with our worry or grief and it can be comforting to share what we are experiencing with those trained to help. Reach out to [The Crisis Text Line](#) by texting TALK to 741741 or [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at 1-800-273-TALK to speak with a crisis counselor or mental health professional. The [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\) National Helpline](#) at 1-800-662-4357 has information on support and treatment facilities in your area.

*For additional information regarding AAVMC's wellbeing initiatives, please contact:
Makenzie Peterson, Director for Wellbeing, mpeterson@aavmc.org or 202-371-9195 (x162).*