

Acknowledging Loss during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Understanding Grief in Yourself and Others

We often associate the term *grief* with physical death, but it is a natural and predictable response to many kinds of loss. The sources of loss in this particular time are varied and multiple, and our usual avenues for processing grief may not be available to us.

Change management models encourage us to acknowledge grief as part of any organizational change process. The dramatic adaptations in how we do our work may diminish a sense of competence we enjoyed only weeks ago. We miss our teams and must alter how we communicate and

connect with our colleagues. Some of us wonder how the future will redefine the positions we have held and that may alter our sense of professional identity. And, we may have lost financial security through losses in investments or a partner or family member's loss of employment.

This sense of grief is compounded with our personal losses. The plans you made for vacations and holiday traditions normally celebrated in community are being altered or delayed. Weddings have been cancelled. Our kids miss their teachers. Our high school seniors will never celebrate the milestones they have looked forward to. And many of our favorite activities are no longer options because of necessary physical/social distancing.

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Find links to resources on the COVID-19 OWL
<https://www.oregon.gov/DHS/Pages/COVID-19-Communications-Toolkit.aspx>

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on our personal and professional lives will continue to result in loss as our evolving reality takes shape. One day we will see some opportunities and alternatives in these losses. As people in the helping professions, we often jump ahead to solutions and silver linings. Those approaches can make us effective helpers and personally resilient. Still, it's important to consider the value of taking time to reflect and grieve. Be open to acknowledging, fully experiencing, and working with your reactions. Understanding grief may help you to extend grace to yourself and others in these difficult times.

Grief Processes There is a complexity and fluidity to grief that often make it hard to navigate. The difficulty lies in the unique nature of each sorrow journey, but some elements are commonly experienced:

- ▶ **Non-Linear:** There is often a desire to assign a model to grief (e.g., Kübler-Ross 5 Stages). Most of the time this stems from our longing to control and predict a process that is out of our control and varies greatly from person to person. Do not expect your process to be straightforward or the same as someone else's.
- ▶ **Multi-Dimensional:** Grief is usually perceived as an emotional experience. The reality is that symptoms of grief can be expressed cognitively, physically, spiritually and emotionally. You may experience grief as mental fuzziness,

fatigue, aches and pains, a struggle for meaning, and/or mood changes.

- ▶ **Cyclical:** Grief is not a one-and-done experience. You may find yourself experiencing the same symptoms repeatedly, only to have them stop and then start again out of the blue with no conscious awareness of why.

- ▶ **Developmental:** As we move through the pandemic and life moves forward, don't be surprised to find yourself revisiting this experience and making meaning from it in different ways. This can be especially true for children.

- ▶ **Cumulative:** Each loss can prompt memories of other losses—both resolved and unresolved. Losing jobs, identities, social networks, loved ones and homes may lead you to revisit other traumatic losses from your past.

Grieving Styles Different styles of grieving are sometimes associated with gender and often reflect our cultural experiences. These differences simply reflect how we process loss and vary within groups. Individuals alter their grief responses based on the type of loss and situations.

- ▶ **Instrumental** grief is demonstrated when the person keeps busy, feels less outwardly oriented and more inwardly focused. Instrumental grievers tend to emphasize responsibilities, logistics, planning, or task-based activities.

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► **Intuitive** grief is when the person readily expresses feelings, processes outwardly, and reaches out for emotional support from social networks and relationships.

People are sometimes judged harshly for grieving in ways divergent from mainstream gender norms. Men who cry may be judged as weak while women who don't cry may be judged as cold. Remember, grieving styles are not an either/or proposition, and both styles may be evident to different degrees in the same person.



Types of Grief There are many kinds of grief. These are just a few that you may find relevant in this time.

► **Anticipatory** grief relates to the awareness or fear of losses to come. With our current state of uncertainty, we may fear losing jobs, our homes, and that overwhelming anxiety about losing loved ones to the COVID-19 virus.

► **Assumptive** grief is that ache we experience when we have lost those things that we believed were a stable, consistent, or predictable part of our lives. This includes professional opportunities as well as those planned vacations or life milestones we were counting on celebrating.

► **Complex** grief occurs when a person has a difficult time processing the loss and becomes unable to move forward emotionally, cognitively, or physically. People are struggling to metabolize the current levels of transition and upheaval. It is natural to focus on familiar coping responses yet grieving can only be delayed for so long before we feel its physical and psychological impacts.

► **Disenfranchised** grief occurs when the loss is perhaps not recognized or acknowledged socially for what it is. We might participate in downward comparisons to minimize the pain: "At least you haven't lost...like those other people." It's the perception of loss by the grieving person that triggers grief, not how society views the loss.

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Enhance Your Coping Capacity

There are numerous variables that can affect our ability to cope and many of them are learned. Although some coping behaviors are healthier than others, there is no specific **right** way to grieve. It is our ability to adapt our responses that contributes to our resilience. As noted earlier, there is no

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magic checklist of actions that you can complete to accomplish grief, but you are not powerless. This is a menu of responses you might consider in navigate loss.

- ▶ **Reflect and Acknowledge:** Initially you may have focused on resolving logistics and addressing emerging issues. If you have found time to breathe, it may be beneficial to pause, identify the losses you are experiencing and gauge your own responses.
- ▶ **Culture and Support Systems:** The nature of this pandemic means that there is a sense of isolation from those very elements we might usually turn to for support: family, culture, faith, and community. Finding creative ways to tap into these resources from a distance, such as phone, internet and video chat services can fill that void.
- ▶ **Previous Experience:** As mentioned, loss is cumulative. You

may be able to identify losses that you have successfully navigated in the past. What helped you metabolize the grief? You may also find that survival skills from your past no longer work for you or aren't relevant in these unprecedented times. Trying to cultivate new coping skills in mid-crisis is not ideal, but you might reach out to others for suggestions.

- ▶ **Address the Physical:** Grieving sometimes manifests as physical pain, changes in sleep patterns, eating habits and other symptoms. Listen to your body and address areas of concern such as incorporating stretching and movement into your workday.

- ▶ **Family Dynamics:** How your family “does grief”, the status of family relationships, and living in close quarters during social distancing can significantly impact how you deal with current events. Even within the



same family, individuals process grief in unique ways. Keep in mind that family norms and roles may change.

- ▶ **Professional Support:** In addition to grief, you may be experiencing anxiety or depression. Sometimes social service providers resist engaging in the very programs that

they encourage others to utilize. You deserve all the care and support you provide for others. Remember you have access to help, including mental health benefits, the Employee Assistance Program, as well as government and community assistance programs.

Resources & Tools:

You are not alone. The entire world is grieving. That is both tragic and poignant. Much of humanity is responding to the suffering with compassion, innovation and creativity. There are new ways to access support to help ourselves and our loved ones navigate these times. It starts with self-awareness and recognition. Please give yourself grace as you acknowledge, experience, and work with your natural reactions to grief. Explore the links below to learn more about grief and its processes.

You deserve all the care and support you provide for others.

- [ADEC – Conversations around loss related to COVID-19](#)
- [Cascade Centers Employee Assistance Program](#)
- [Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress – COVID-19 Resources](#)
- [Covid-19: Grief, Loss of the Assumptive World and Meaning Making](#)
- [Covid-19 and Non-Death Loss](#)
- [Grief and COVID-19: Mourning our bygone lives](#)
- [How ‘Anticipatory Grief’ May Show Up During the COVID-19 Outbreak](#)
- [Self-Care through a Resilience Lens](#)
- [Supervising with a Trauma Informed Lens](#)
- [That Discomfort You’re Feeling is Grief](#)
- [Trauma Aware DHS](#)
- [What’s Your Grief: A resource site for exploring feelings of loss during the pandemic](#)