



UIC Counseling Center

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The Unique Grief of COVID-19

As we embark on month two of social distancing, many are feeling the far-reaching impact of this pandemic, which has disrupted life as we know it. In this issue, we explore the topic of grief and how it offers a lens for understanding what many may be going through.

A simple definition of grief is the reaction we feel following a loss. While grief is most often associated with the experiences we have after the death of a loved one, it has a much broader impact. We are living in a time of unprecedented, compounded loss; we are living with the reality that people in our communities are sick and dying, while grappling with loss of work, loss social gatherings with classmates and loved ones; loss of graduations/weddings/holidays/birthday parties; loss of routine such as gym workouts or coffee house writing sessions; loss of predictability and control. We are collectively facing the loss of the way things were in the past and a future we thought we knew, and many of us are in varying stages of grieving that loss.

The future may look uncertain, and that may give rise to anticipatory grief and anxiety. A unique aspect of the losses brought on by COVID-19 is that it continues to take away people and things that ground us, and you may be grappling with what else may be around the corner that you might lose. Our sense of safety and predictability in the world has been disrupted, and a common reaction to this disruption can be a profound sense of grief, as well as anxiety, fear, and anger. You will see in our Stages of Grief section just how diverse the grieving experience, anticipatory or otherwise, can feel.

Don't compare your suffering to another's. To the person reading this who has lost someone due to COVID-19, we see you and mourn with you.

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How tragic that the gatherings many cultures rely on to cope with grief –funerals, shivas, bringing food to others - are disrupted when we need others the most. To the graduate whose ceremony was postponed and whose family can no longer travel to join you in celebrating this momentous achievement, we understand what a disappointing loss this is for you. We certainly underscore this sentiment for our first-generation students, whose graduation is often not only personal, but a family and community milestone. To the person who is experiencing depressive or anxiety symptoms brought on by social isolation, scary news and disruption of daily routine, we recognize your loss. To the person who doesn't feel they have experienced loss but who sees it happening to others and feels burdened by "survivor's guilt," we understand how unsettling that can feel. You may inevitably find yourself comparing your experience to others, and your mind may compare how your level of suffering stacks up against that of your classmate or friend. This comparison, while common and automatic, is unhelpful and invalidates your experience. As a leading author in the field of grief recently [shared](#), "the worst loss is always your loss." Comparison robs you from feeling your valid and unique experience, preventing acceptance and making meaning of your loss.

There is power to naming and feeling your experience of grief and loss. An important part of grieving is to acknowledge, feel and accept that it's a part of your experience. It's not uncommon for people to compartmentalize their emotions right now, and the crisis nature of this pandemic may have people in the flight-or-flight (or freeze!) mode, which does not lend naturally to processing emotions. That is ok and adaptive. What we know is that if we never get around to acknowledging or processing loss, it doesn't disappear; rather, suppressing or compartmentalizing often leads to complications, including additional negative emotional and interpersonal impact.

Our hearts go to fellow UIC community members who have lost loved ones. We stand with those of you who have lost jobs or job offers, and who are missing what should be joyous occasions, without the chance to gather with peers and family to mark your accomplishment. Coping with loss is no easy task, even under the most ordinary circumstances, and we hope the information in this newsletter helps to provide some comfort and direction during this difficult time. ♦

Stages of Grief

You might be familiar with the “stages of grief” model, researched by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and Dr. David Kessler. This model has been found to apply across cultures, and importantly, research has demonstrated that the stages are not always experienced in a linear fashion. That is, the stages might jump around, or even sometimes repeat; some of the stages are entirely skipped or take varying amounts of time to work through. Though many of us may conceptualize grief as a response only related to death, we want to again validate that the many types of loss you may be experiencing as a result of COVID-19 can lead you to experience these stages.

Denial

Denial, shock, and numbness often occur as initial reactions to loss. In this stage, it can be hard to acknowledge loss as real, which in turn makes it difficult to adjust to change, make decisions, focus, or attend to daily tasks. Though many of us were aware of the coronavirus before it reached the United States, the way it arrived resulted in very abrupt and intense changes to our lives; it makes sense that such a change would result in thoughts of denial, such as “this doesn’t really affect my life” or “this will all be over very soon.” Denial is grounded in a wish for life as it were before the loss occurred, or an attempt to avoid distressing emotions related to the loss. Though denial is a common grief reaction, it is important to eventually acknowledge loss so that the process of grieving can continue.

Anger

Often when change or loss occurs, we are left feeling helpless, powerless, abandoned, disappointed, threatened, or frustrated. This is especially true in a pandemic, as loss of control and certainty underscore the experience of powerlessness. It makes sense to feel angry if you are feeling robbed of an experience with another person or event, and it also makes sense to try to find a person or entity to blame for your distress. Know that it is normal to feel angry about the loss itself or the ways it has impacted your life/worldview.

Bargaining

When we experience loss, it can be difficult to keep our brains from searching for alternatives. Bargaining can be related to something we wish we’d done in the past, (“I’d give anything to go back in time and say goodbye to my grandmother”) or

something we feel we could do now to change the loss somehow (“I promise to spend more time with my loved ones in the future if things will all go back to normal soon”). These are our attempts to undo the loss and regain control over our world.

Depression/Despair

This is the stage many people most associate with grief and loss. We tend to feel this way when the reality of our loss sets in, and we begin to feel both sad about our loss and hopeless about our future. For example, if you have lost your job, you may be despairing about how long it may be before opportunities for work reappear and what this means for your identity. If you lost the chance to say goodbye to friends or other loved ones, you may be confronted with the sad reality that you may never see them again. While sadness is often expressed through crying, other manifestations include quietness, lowered energy, changes in sleeping or eating patterns, or emotional withdrawal.

Sadness is also sometimes associated with guilt; it is common for grieving individuals to reflect on life before the loss and feel guilt related to missed opportunities for expression (e.g., love, anger, remorse, etc.) or change (e.g., repairing a relationship, studying harder for a test, etc.). We tend to deal with guilt and sadness in many ways, including denial, anger, and bargaining. While uncomfortable, allowing ourselves to process guilt and/or sadness is an important part of the grieving process, as it validates our feelings and our fears.

Acceptance

When you accept your loss, you are able to know that it was real and make peace with the impact of it. You can reconstruct your reality to accommodate for this loss and construct a meaningful way forward with life (Dr. Kessler has actually written more about how making meaning represents a sixth stage of grief). This may look like, “This pandemic has been difficult and is beyond my control, but my life can go on. I can adapt to this and learn something from it.” This does not mean there will be no more pain; you may still be reminded of your loss and feel sadness, anger, or guilt. What changes is that you can both acknowledge and validate your pain and more effectively cope with and make meaning of the loss throughout your life. ♦

Think about the losses, actual or anticipated, that you have experienced as a result of COVID-19. What stages have you already passed through? What stage are you in now? This type of mindfulness can help you to internalize that grief is a dynamic process that you can move through with time.

TIPS FOR COPING WITH GRIEF AND LOSS

Though the stages of grief are thought to be experienced similarly by all cultures, ways of coping with grief are often shaped by cultural norms and traditions. Though the following tips tend to come from the more Western lens of psychological research, we hope that some of them resonate with you, both as an individual and as a member of a community.

Call it grief. It's okay to own it, even if it might not seem as bad as someone else's loss. Comparing invalidates your grief and makes it more difficult to work through.

Be where you are. It makes sense if you want to avoid reminders of your pain and don't feel like you can fully process your loss right now. If you just need to survive right now, that's okay. Respect your grief process and the stage you are in.

Connect to your disappointment. Eventually, it helps to take time to connect to your sadness, disappointment, or heartbreak - it helps us to move through our grief to feel the negative feelings. For example, if your graduation was postponed, try thinking about what graduation really meant to you and allow the loss of that to hurt. [Writing](#) can be an especially helpful way to connect to these feelings. Ultimately, remembering and processing your experience will help you move forward and integrate the loss into your life.

Find another way. For some, making meaning out of loss by creating alternative rituals to celebrate or mourn can be an important part of grieving. If that sounds like something you're ready to consider, you may benefit from exploring creative, culturally informed, and flexible ways to work through your loss.

What can live on? When we are able to accept our loss, it can be helpful to consider how meaningful parts of what or who we lost may live on. For example, if you are feeling loss related to the end of your college years, you could consider whether something special about that time of life could come with you into the next stage.

Take care of yourself. See our [self-care issue](#) for ideas!

Accept help or ask for support. Though COVID limits our ability to be in the physical presence of supportive loved ones, it is important to stay emotionally connected to others. You may feel comforted by talking with others who are experiencing a similar loss, as well as those experiencing a different loss who can widen your perspective. Even if you don't want to go into the details, sometimes it helps to call a friend or relative and say, "I'm going through a hard time right now, and I need..."

Give yourself time. This may take more time than under more normal circumstances. Grief is a process to get through, not get over - be patient with yourself, you will get through this.

UPCOMING WORKSHOPS/EVENTS

FEELIN' GOOD FRIDAYS WORKSHOP SERIES

FRIDAYS FROM 11:00AM-NOON, STARTING APRIL 3RD

Join us online for our final weekly workshop on self-compassion! [Click here](#) for more information.

GRADUATION GRIEF WORKSHOP

MONDAY, APRIL 27TH FROM 10-11AM AND

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 29TH FROM 12-1PM

A common response to the COVID-19 outbreak has been a sense of loss. Please join us for the Graduation Grief workshop to have a space to understand and process this loss, while feeling supported by other UIC students also graduating during the time of COVID-10. Click [here](#) for more information and to register.

COVID-19 VIDEO ADVOCACY PROJECT SUBMISSIONS

We are asking for UIC students, faculty, and staff to submit brief video recordings of themselves responding to violence and discrimination against Asian American communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Click [here](#) for more information!

UNITED PEER SUPPORT NETWORK GROUPS

MEETING WEEKLY AT THREE DIFFERENT TIMES!

Looking to feel more connected during this time of isolation? Our peer-led support groups are now meeting online and are open to any student! [Click here](#) for more information and to register.

"GRIEVING ALLOWS US TO HEAL, TO REMEMBER WITH LOVE RATHER THAN PAIN. IT IS A SORTING PROCESS. ONE BY ONE YOU LET GO OF THE THINGS THAT ARE GONE AND YOU MOURN FOR THEM. ONE BY ONE YOU TAKE HOLD OF THE THINGS THAT HAVE BECOME A PART OF WHO YOU ARE AND BUILD AGAIN." – RACHEL REMEN

Additional Resources for Grief and Loss

[What's Your Grief? A Comprehensive Resource for Grief during COVID-19](#)

[Grief Journaling Prompts](#)

[Self-Care Guide for Anticipatory Grief](#)

Videos/Podcasts

[Loss and Grief During the Coronavirus Pandemic](#)

[David Kessler and Brené Brown on Grief and Finding Meaning](#)

Further Reading

[That Discomfort You're Feeling is Grief](#)

[Managing Grief Around the Coronavirus](#)

[Grief and COVID-19: Mourning our Bygone Lives](#)

[Understanding Grief in the Age of COVID](#)

[How Anticipatory Grief May Show Up During the COVID-19 Outbreak](#)

[Grief and Fear After a COVID-19 Death: Managing a Double Trauma](#)

[Saying Goodbye in the Age of Physical Distancing](#)