

Coping with Grief During Challenging Times

Tips for understanding grieving and how everyone's situation is unique

A loved one dies, and the world is at a standstill for all who mourn. Grief can be devastating, and the standard bereavement leave is three days off. If there is one thing we can all agree on even in these discordant times, it is that the grieving process lasts much longer than 72 hours.

Death isn't the only thing we grieve. There are many types of loss. Loss of time with family and friends, and even the loss of those everyday things that have been temporarily paused during the pandemic. Grieving has and should occur no matter what the circumstance. It's a unique process that's both necessary for recovery, and different for everyone. The weeks bulletin focuses on grieving a loss through death. It will provide information on the grieving process itself, suggest ways to talk respectfully about grief, and help us understand what is meant by "complicated" grief.

We don't want to talk about it (but we should)

Thanatologists, certified professionals who study death and loss, tell us that we are a largely "death-denying" culture. We don't like to talk about death. We don't even like to say someone died – rather, they "passed away," "crossed over," or "are no longer with us." Just the thought of death causes anxiety for some.

The problem with ignoring something is that it doesn't go away, at least not where death is concerned. And there is evidence to suggest that not talking about our grief and not allowing ourselves to mourn has a debilitating impact on emotional health.

Forget about stages – grief is not linear

You've probably heard of "the five stages of grief." Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Known as the Kubler-Ross model, from the book *On Death and Dying* by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, these stages were observed not in individuals who were experiencing the death of a loved one, but rather individuals who were diagnosed with a terminal condition.

Over time, Dr. Kubler-Ross's work with terminal patients was conflated with the experiences of individuals experiencing loss, and this arguably led to an oversimplified, not to mention misleading, view of the grief process. Dr. Kubler-Ross herself expressed regret that her five-stages model had become so popular in its misapplication.

Grief is not linear – there is not a projected course of emotional experience that every person undergoes. There are as many ways to grieve as there are people in the world. While the Kubler-Ross model may be useful shorthand that characterizes some common emotions experienced during grief, not everyone who grieves experiences denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – and certainly not always in that order. The other thing to remember is that grief lasts a lifetime, in one form or another. The loss of a loved one is not something we “get over” by ticking off items on a list. This doesn’t mean it will always feel as raw, or our emotions as intense, but even as we work through these difficult emotions, grief remains, only it takes on a different shape. Co-existing with our grief is healthy and normal.

Complicated grief

It’s true that grief can be seen on a continuum and exists in some fashion throughout our lives. However, when people begin to struggle to move forward in a healthy way after a period of time, they could be experiencing complicated grief. Complicated grief is an ongoing, heightened state of mourning that keeps you from healing, and integrating the loss into your own identity. Signs and symptoms of complicated grief may include: Intense sorrow, pain and rumination and an inability to focus on anything other than a lost loved one.

If someone is experiencing severe problems in their personal relationships and in the workplace over a substantial period following a significant loss – say, 12 months or more after the loss – it may be indicative of a more complex kind of grief which requires a higher level of intervention and care.

- **COVID-19 isolation**- There is little research on the experience of grief in isolation. But one concern is that people mourning alone will be more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and complicated grief. Complicated grief can and does occur even with a strong support network. But without the recognition and reinforcement of others, people may struggle even more to adapt to their new normal. The consequences of seclusion can have other side effects, too. Social isolation in general is associated with longer-lasting grief and decreased mental and physical health.

For people who are grieving alone, a guided meditation practice can be helpful for addressing the anger and anxiety that come with death. People may also find meaning in journaling or altar-building. Since public funerals might be limited during this time, grievors can adopt private rituals that have a personal meaning. This can help bring comfort and help us process our emotions. And though nothing can replicate an in-person interaction, having someone to check in through text messages or phone calls on a regular basis is essential to maintaining a connection with the outside world.

- **Disenfranchised grief**- When someone feels guilty about expressing their grief because of who or what they are grieving, or when someone is told that they need to “get over this,” that’s disenfranchised grief. We disenfranchise, or marginalize, someone’s grief when we make that person feel that they are being unreasonable in their grief.

A common example of this is those who lose a beloved family pet – it might be “just a cat or dog” to you, but to that person it was a member of the family unit. Another example of commonly disenfranchised griever would be a deceased person’s mistress or lover – right or wrong, “the other man or woman” is frequently excluded from memorial services and often feels as though they “don’t have a right” to mourn. A counselor can help anyone process their grief, but counseling can be especially beneficial when it comes to treating disenfranchised grief.

Online resources for grief & loss

Modern Loss (modernloss.com)- “Candid conversations about grief. Beginners welcome” Modern Loss features articles, lists, and advice on just about every type of grief and every aspect of the grieving process. The website’s content is written and largely curated by non-clinicians – these are easy-to-read, down-to-earth, and often very emotive and raw accounts of grief and living with loss. You may not agree with everything, but you may also find something that’s meaningful and true for you.

The Order of the Good Death (orderofthegooddeath.com) -“Accepting that death itself is natural, but the death anxiety of modern culture is not.” The Order of the Good Death is an informal movement to demystify death and the dying process. Their website includes articles, videos, and links to social media posts that are “death-positive” with the hope of alleviating people’s fears of and reluctance to talk about dying. Just the thought of death can induce profound anxiety for some individuals, especially children. The Order is committed to helping people understand that death is a part of life, and something that need not frighten us.

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