Grief and COVID-19: Mourning Our Lives From Before the Pandemic

The pandemic has led to a series of losses, from our sense of safety to our social connections to our financial security. Psychologists point to ways we can heal.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an epidemiological crisis, but also a psychological one. While the situation provokes anxiety, stress and sadness, it is also a time of collective sorrow, says Sherry Cormier, PhD, a psychologist who specializes in grief and grief mentoring. "It's important that we start recognizing that we're in the middle of this collective grief. We are all losing something now."

Many people are reckoning with individual losses, including illness and death due to the novel coronavirus, or loss of employment as a result of economic upheaval. But even people who haven't lost anything so concrete as a job or a loved one are affected, Cormier says. "There is a communal grief as we watch our work, health-care, education and economic systems — all of these systems we depend on — destabilize," she says.

The crisis isn't just shaking our faith in those systems. It's upending our understanding of the world around us, says Robert Neimeyer, PhD, director of the Portland Institute for Loss and Transition and professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Memphis. "The losses include our sense of predictability, control, justice, and the belief that we can protect our children or elderly loved ones," he says. "Those are among the losses that can be addressed by mental health professionals."

Grief and loss experts share what they know about the ways we're mourning now — and how to help those who are grieving.

Grief is natural, and most people are resilient

Though grief is difficult, it helps to recognize that it's natural and useful, says George Bonanno, PhD, a psychologist who heads the Loss, Trauma and Emotion Lab at Teachers College, Columbia University. "Grief is really about turning inward and recalibrating, and thinking: 'This is not the way the world is anymore, and I need to adapt,'" he says. "It's okay to feel grief over what we're losing. When we do that, it allows us to let grief do its job, so that we can move on."

His research suggests that once a crisis has passed, most people are able to bounce back and move on with their lives. Grief is also transient, even when we're in the midst of its clutches. People should expect to fluctuate between moments of sadness and mourning, and moments of acceptance or even happiness, he says. "People who cope well with loss usually move in and out of those states. It's OK to allow yourself to be distracted and entertained, and even to laugh."

Shaking our sense of self

Research from the bereavement literature shows that the nature of a person's attachments has an effect on their grief reactions. Of course, we aren't only attached to other humans, Neimeyer says. "We're capable of losing places, projects, possessions, professions and protections, all of which we may be powerfully attached to," he says. "This pandemic forces us to confront the frailty of such attachments, whether it's to our local bookstore or the routines that sustain us through our days."

Many of the losses we're experiencing now are so-called ambiguous losses. "These lack the clarity and definition of a single point like a death," Neimeyer explains. And that lack of clarity can make it hard to move forward. As the pandemic has evolved, people have had to confront a series of losses: The loss of a sense of safety, of social connections and personal freedoms, of jobs and financial security. Going forward, people will experience new losses we can't yet predict. "We're talking about grieving a living loss — one that keeps going and going," he says.

We don't only grieve for what's missing, but also for the ways in which those losses affect our senses of self, Bonanno says. "You can experience grief over anything that feels like a loss of identity." Research shows, for instance, that losing a job can trigger a period of prolonged grief distinct from anxiety or depression. That prolonged grief seems to be related to the impacts of job loss on self-esteem and belief in a just world (Papa, A., et. al., Journal of Loss and Trauma, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2013).

It helps to "name and claim" our grief

With almost the whole world confronting losses large and small, how can people cope with grief? For starters, mental health providers can help patients "name it and claim it," Neimeyer says.

"People often have a vague sense of anxiety or wordless suffering. We can help them wrap language around that," he explains. "We can ask people to consider what they're losing in the context of this pandemic, what they can do to strengthen those ties."

It's not a fatalistic view, he says. Rather, it's an organized way of taking action to help people cope with their losses, whether that's their jobs, relationships, sources of self-worth, self-efficacy or other.

Cormier suggests people keep journals to put words to losses, and to help identify ways to move forward. As the work of psychologist James Pennebaker, PhD, at the University of Texas at Austin, has shown, writing about emotional upheavals can improve both physical and mental health (Perspectives on Psychological Science, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2018).

"Name what you're losing, individually and collectively, and write about your personal strengths and coping skills," Cormier suggests. "Most of us have never been through anything like this, but we've been through other challenging transitions. It can help to

write about how you got through a divorce, or losing your job, or other challenging transitions. How did you heal and recover?"

Social connections are still important

It's well established that social support can be critical in helping move on from grief, rather than get stuck in it. That poses a problem in an age of physical distancing, when people are isolated in their homes away from loved ones. "During this time, there may be an erosion of social support and the meaningful social roles that buttress our identities," Neimeyer says.

Psychologists can encourage people to stay connected with their social support networks through phone calls, text messages, video chat and social media. And those reminders should continue even after we emerge from isolation, says Erika Felix, PhD, a psychologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who treats and studies survivors of trauma and disasters.

"One thing we've learned from disasters is the ongoing importance of social supports. The lesson is to keep checking in on people, and keep the support going even after this period of lockdown ends," she says. "For some people the stress will continue after quarantine ends, especially if their jobs or relationships are affected."

Psychology can embrace its purpose

While many people will be resilient to the changes wrought by COVID-19, this global crisis will test others in major ways, says Felix. "As things return to normal, most of us will also return to a kind of normal, albeit changed by going through this experience. But there is a subset of people who will be chronically disrupted and will need support in recovery," she says.

Psychologists may have to build their expertise on grief and trauma to meet that need, through continuing education in areas such as disaster mental health, psychological first aid and trauma-focused therapies, Felix adds. "When working with people who have experienced trauma, it's important to know your strengths and to know what you can and can't do."

But the field is up to the challenge, Neimeyer adds. "One thing about crisis is that it can galvanize creativity and commitment," he says. "Psychology has a purpose and direction in this crisis that is quite clear. We can retreat from it, or we can embrace that moment."

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