

A New Existence: Living with COVID-19

When life went virtual in the spring, the Wendt Center never imagined the massive changes and enduring uncertainty that would result. As the summer heats up and we look to fall, the depth of our missing community BBQ's, outdoor music festivals, mask-free gatherings of friends, and the return to school and work intensifies. This is our new existence. This is grief.



Grief changes the context of our existence and therefore we must change within that context. Collectively we are learning to live within this new existence. This new way of being is layered with new challenges and uncertainty. We have lots of questions and not a lot of answers. One of the challenges of this moment is that we have no idea when, if ever, this will end. As the days continue to slip by, we recognize that it is unlikely for our pre-COVID self and life to return. This is when the despair and torment can set in; this is ambiguous loss.

Pauline Boss coined this term to describe a loss that lacks closure or has many unanswered questions associated with it. In the context of COVID-19, our grief is rooted in a lack of certainty about when or if things will return to the way they were before. Human beings often seek clarity or concrete answers; we like to solve problems. Ambiguous loss requires us to sit with unanswered questions. This is uncomfortable.

"Ambiguous loss makes us feel incompetent.
It erodes our sense of mastery and destroys our belief in the world
as a fair, orderly, and manageable place."

- Pauline Boss

Ambiguous losses often goes unacknowledged, so we disown feelings, isolate, and even find ourselves avoiding celebrations and chances to connect with our loved ones. Ruminations about the future can become consuming. We might feel disoriented, oscillating between hope and hopelessness along with fears and anxiety about how to exist with so much uncertainty in our lives. It can be common to get "stuck" trying to figure out what's wrong instead of focusing our attention on what's next.

How do we sustain ourselves when there are so many questions and such a sense of uncertainty?

Don't forget the basics.

- The foundations of stress management are quality sleep, healthy eating, hydration, and exercise. When you can't focus on anything else, focus on these basic building blocks of wellness. Focus on the next minute or hour when things get overwhelming.

Find meaning.

- COVID has brought a complexity of emotions, some comfortable and some incredibly uncomfortable. When existing within this ambiguity, find ways to say, "Yes, AND..." Pauline Boss notes that, in ambiguous loss, relationships are both absent and present simultaneously. This is true with COVID. There may be uncomfortable feelings about the fear, the loss, the disruptions, AND... simultaneously, there may be appreciation for other aspects. Within grief, pain and joy can coexist. Look for small ways to say "Yes, AND..." This can increase our tolerance for the uncertainty.

Connect with others who can relate.

- When we are not at our best, it can be tempting to isolate from people and activities we typically enjoy. When we cut ourselves off because we "don't want to bother" others, we lose the opportunity for people to show up for us. Showing up for someone builds connectedness and warm feelings both for the giver and for the receiver. Feeling connected to another being can help, even when things are hard. If you are struggling with uncomfortable feelings or experiencing ambiguous loss, create a support network with the community of people who can sit with you in the discomfort.

Practice compassion.

- As we exist during this time of uncertainty, we need to expand our compassion for self and others. Most of us are doing the best we can right now. It's important to acknowledge this effort and to expand our grace with ourselves and others. Grace for missteps, grace for different choices, grace for uncomfortable feelings. One way we can do this is to enter into conversations—with others or with ourselves—with curiosity. "I wonder what this is trying to tell me? I wonder why I am feeling this way? I wonder..." Compassion and grace are wonderful ways to help mitigate the anxiety and guilt we feel when uncertainty is prominent.