



Grieving in Uncertain Times

For most of us, life came to a screeching halt about two weeks ago when directives from public health officials introduced physical distancing. This new way of existing is designed to keep us physically healthy, but the impact on our emotional well-being is still unknown. Loss of control, increased anxiety, a fundamental change to daily life, a new normal with no instruction manual: reactions to a pandemic or a grief event? Perhaps both.

For those who were already grieving the death of a loved one, life was significantly altered, even shattered, before the pandemic even began. The sense of sadness, anxiety, and isolation—now present on a global scale—were already states of being that now might be significantly heightened.

Grief impacts every aspect of life and doesn't pause for a global pandemic. Grief related to prior losses can become reactivated and there are new loss experiences, some related to COVID-19 and some unrelated. We can't postpone grief like we can a wedding, a fundraiser, or a school exam.

What's more, the public health recommendations around physical distancing impact our normative grieving practices: hugs, large gatherings, and even some religious practices (such as washing the body) are now prohibited. The collective act of grieving has fundamentally been altered.

So how do we grieve when what we know, what we rely on, is not allowed?

First, tend to yourself and those grieving with you.

Be gentle with yourself: Grief can make you feel like you are on a roller coaster. Feelings are unpredictable and can change. Allow yourself to feel with no judgment of those feelings. Feelings are never wrong, but they can be uncomfortable, new, overwhelming or big. There is no right way to feel when grieving; it changes minute by minute and day by day. It just is. Let it exist.

Monitor your grief: You may notice that your grief feels stronger or more intense at different times of day. Get a piece of paper and create a log for your grief experience -

What time of day does the grief feel intense?

What were you doing at the moment?

What did you notice about your body?

Practice visualization to manage the rollercoaster of feelings: Experiment with this until you find something that works for that day. Here is an example: like our feelings, clouds are always moving and look different each day. When you notice a feeling, take a deep breath in and visualize yourself putting that feeling on a cloud that is in the sky. As you exhale, visualize moving the cloud across the sky. Give yourself the chance to try this with several breaths. Sometimes it takes a few tries before you notice any kind of shift in your body.

Try some grounding exercises: Anxiety is common when grieving, and the uncertainty and distancing stemming from the health crisis may be increasing anxiety for many. Grounding exercises can regulate your body when feeling anxious. Set a timer to check in with yourself throughout the day and practice one -

Take a slow sip of cold water.

- Take another sip and hold the water in your mouth for a few seconds.
- As you swallow the water, see if you can track it through your throat.
- Take another sip, seeing if you can track it further into your stomach.

Breathe in through your nose while counting to four.

- Hold that breath while counting to four.
- Breathe out through your mouth while counting to four.
- Repeat this five times. Notice how you feel before, during and after.

Create a schedule: Structure can help. This doesn't have to be complicated or rigid—just choose set times in the day when you will move, rest, drink water, or connect. Show yourself grace if you miss a planned time.

Maintain emotional connection with loved-ones—living and deceased.

Be strategic with social media: While it can help us feel connected and collectively share memories of the person who died, it can also quickly flood us with grief reminders. Set a timer when you log onto social media. When the timer goes off, allow yourself to take a break. If you notice that engaging on social media makes you feel worse, give yourself permission to take a longer break.

Ask for help: Think of specific ways that people can support you in your grief and reach out to people that you know can provide what you need -

Who can you call when you can't sleep?

Who can cry with you on a video chat?

Who can you "eat dinner" with virtually?

Who can send you funny videos?

Who can read to your kids by phone?

Try journaling: Writing is a great way to tend to yourself and stay connected with family and friends. Create a virtual journaling group. Each day, members will respond to the same prompt about their grief journey and connect virtually afterward. You can choose to share or not. The writing can be done virtually or offline. Set a time limit and be sure to note how your body feels before, during, and after.

Give virtual hugs: While connecting virtually, hug a pillow while the other person hugs one on their end.

Practice radical transparency: Be honest about what you are feeling, with boundaries as you deem necessary for emotional safety. Many people might think that they are the only ones feeling lonely and anxious right now. With people you trust, use courage to be the first one to share vulnerable feelings. Grieving is a collective process and while your grief is unique many people are grieving at this time, for many different reasons.

Continue a relationship with your loved one: When someone important dies, the relationship with that person doesn't end--it changes. A significant part of grief is redefining the relationship with our loved one. This can look like writing letters, participating in rituals, or sharing memories.

The current public health crisis has resulted in a collective grief experience—grief related to how life used to be. For many, that is layered on top of other specific losses: deaths of relatives, loss of job/income, loss of connection to others, and more. By naming this as grief, we give ourselves permission to feel the range of emotions and tend to ourselves, our families, and others with the compassion and gentleness that is required of a grief experience. Be gentle and be kind.