

Understanding Grief in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic

By [Kendra Cherry](#) |  Reviewed by [Amy Morin, LCSW](#) on April 13, 2020

The global coronavirus pandemic has created a new reality marked by grief and loss. Weddings, concerts, meetings, travels plans, school events, and more have been canceled in the wake of the virus. It has forced us to process both individual and collective grief in the face of an uncertain future which we are powerless to control.

“We are all dealing with the collective loss of the world we knew,” explained grief expert David Kessler in an [interview](#) with Brené Brown for her "Unlocking Us" podcast.

The disruptions in the normal routines and rhythms of everyday life contribute to the lingering unease and sadness that we are all feeling. Not only are we mourning the loss of thousands of lives, but we are also mourning the loss of normalcy, from seeing our co-workers to engaging in the mundane routines that we previously took for granted.

Any Type of Loss Can Trigger Grief

Grief is typically also associated with death, but it can follow any type of loss. For example, people often experience grief after a divorce or a job loss. Some of the things that we are grieving as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic include:


- Job loss
- [Financial anxiety](#)
- Loss of safety
- Worry about loved ones
- Social distancing, [quarantine](#), and feelings of isolation
- Changes in daily habits and routines
- Special plans and events that have been canceled
- Clashes with family members over how to protect yourself
- Worries about how to pay rent, utilities, and other bills
- Sadness over how the pandemic will affect the world
- Fears for the future

You May Be Experiencing Anticipatory Grief

Not only are people now grappling with the loss of normalcy, but also with [anticipatory grief](#), or the feeling that greater loss is yet to come.

Anticipatory grief is a type of grief that occurs before a loss, often after a person has a prolonged illness. The person who is ill and their family and friends may experience a period of grief as they emotionally prepare for the inevitable death.

People who are experiencing this type of grief can feel sadness over the impending loss, fear of what will happen, anger over the situation, and feelings of isolation and [loneliness](#).



In the backdrop of COVID-19, fear about the short-term and long-term impact of the pandemic can contribute to these feelings of grief and anxiety.

Grief After an Unexpected Death

In addition to the anticipatory grief that people may be experiencing, people may also be struggling with the grief caused by the unexpected death of a loved one.

Under normal circumstances, we turn to others in our lives for support. We might gather with friends and family to cry, share happy memories, and offer care and support to one another. The coronavirus pandemic has wreaked havoc on many of these rituals.

This inability to engage in traditions that support the grieving process can make it that much more difficult to cope. Factors associated with the nature of the virus itself can also complicate the emotions that people experience.

If you have lost a loved one to COVID-19, you may experience:

Feelings of Guilt

You might be left with regret because you could not be there to support your loved one in their final moments. While these feelings are difficult, it is important to remember that this is not a situation you could control.

Lack of Closure

The grieving process usually involves a period of saying goodbye after the person has passed away. When dealing with a highly contagious illness, the bereaved are often deprived of this important step.

Social distancing means that friends and family cannot gather to hold a funeral, memorial, or another religious service. Rather than a traditional funeral, many families are faced with a small graveside service with only a very small group of mourners.

Family members who have been exposed to the virus may be quarantined and unable to see their loved ones or attend a burial service.

The inability to spend time with loved ones afterward can make it more difficult to come to terms with the reality of death.

Loss of Traditions

Whatever your religious background or beliefs, the rituals and traditions that take place after death are designed to honor the deceased and offer emotional and instrumental support to those who are grieving. For some, these traditions may be deeply spiritual in nature, so not being able to perform these final rites can be yet another source of distress and loss.

Feelings of Isolation

One of the greatest challenges of grieving in the age of COVID-19 is the isolation that the disease creates.

Grief can be an isolating experience under normal circumstances, but social distancing and quarantine have made the process lonelier still. Loss is a reminder of how many things are out of our control—and sudden and unexpected loss can bring on feelings of anxiety and fear along with that grief.

Not only are people unable to be there to offer comfort to others, but they are also forced to grieve alone. Instead of basic human comforts such as the embrace of a friend, people are cut off from trusted social support networks in their darkest moments.

Signs of Grief

It is important to remember that grief is a normal reaction to a loss. We all experience grief at some point in our lives. While we might expect feelings of shock, numbness, sadness, anger, and anxiety, signs may be less clear for those experiencing anticipatory grief.

Some signs that you might be coping with grief in light of the pandemic include:

- Trouble focusing on normal tasks
- Sleeping much more or less than usual

- Feelings of anger and irritability
- Headaches and upset stomach
- Fatigue or low energy
- Re-experiencing feelings of past grief
- Engaging in activities such as eating, drinking, or online shopping to cope with anxiety
- Avoiding thinking or talking about the pandemic

The good news is that people tend to be resilient in the face of grief. Once the immediate crisis has passed, people are usually able to reach a place of acceptance where they are able to adapt and find ways to cope with their loss.

Related: [The Physical Effects of Grief](#)

Ways You Can Cope

No matter what type of loss you have experienced, it is important to remember that your feelings are valid and that you are not alone in this. If you are not sure how to manage your feelings of grief, there are some things that you can do that may help.

Practice Self-Care

In the immediate aftermath of a loss, caring for yourself can seem like a monumental task. Focus on the basics and make sure that you are eating, staying hydrated, and getting enough rest. Don't put too much pressure on yourself to maintain normalcy in the face of a crisis.


Related: [How Proper Self Care Can Reduce Your Stress Levels](#)

Give Yourself Time

Giving yourself time to feel without rushing yourself through the process allows you to work through the pain of loss. Reaching a place of acceptance takes time, but in doing so you are able to acknowledge that your loved one is no longer physically here, but that you will always have the memories, joy, and love that you shared with that person.

Remember That Your Feelings are Valid

There is no right or wrong way to feel after you lose someone. The shock and disbelief that follow an unexpected death are often followed by a sense of numbness. Feelings of anger, regret, sadness, and depression are also common. The fact that you were not present for the death can add to the sense of unreality.



In a world that seems turned upside down, you might not experience grief the same way you might have under normal circumstances. Try to remember that grief is personal and everyone experiences it differently.

The familiar [stages of grief](#) outlined by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler are not meant to be a linear process. While it can be helpful to understand the different stages of grief, it is important to remember that these emotions don't necessarily follow a sequential timeline. You may go back and forth between these feelings throughout the grieving process.

The important thing is to give yourself some time to work through these emotions at your own pace. It takes time to integrate this loss into your life, but this is especially true when your normal daily routines have been disrupted.

Even if you have not personally experienced a death related to the pandemic, don't dismiss what you are feeling. It's important not to engage in a comparison of losses. You may not have lost a loved one, but experts like David Kessler stress that the losses you are experiencing now are valid and legitimate. You have experienced loss and you have the right to grieve and feel those emotions.

Reach Out to Family and Friends

The illness has also decimated the normal grief support systems that people rely on after a loss. Guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) discourage any event of 10 or more people—including funerals.

While you might be tempted to shut everyone out in the midst of your grief, it is important to reach out. Find ways to memorialize what you have lost. If you have lost someone, write a letter about your loved one's life and their impact on you.

Ask friends and family members to also share their memories and experiences. No one should have to experience grief alone. While you might not be able to gather together with others for support, you can connect virtually through Facetime or Zoom.

COVID-19 might rob you of the physical presence of loved ones as you grieve, but you can still maintain an emotional connection to people who will support you during this time.

Find Support

If you are struggling to deal with feelings of grief, talking to a mental health professional can be helpful. Many therapists are now offering online therapy options in order to follow the CDC's physical distancing recommendations. If you have already been seeing a therapist, talk to them about switching to [online therapy in light of the coronavirus pandemic](#).

It is particularly important to reach out to a professional if you are having trouble coping. You may be experiencing what is known as complicated grief. This condition occurs in about 7% of people who are grieving and is marked by an inability to think of anything but the loss, excessive avoidance of any reminders, or even thoughts of suicide or self-harm.

If you are having suicidal thoughts, contact the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at **1-800-273-8255** for support and assistance from a trained counselor. If you or a loved one are in immediate danger, call 911.

For more mental health resources, see our [National Helpline Database](#).

Explore Coping Techniques

Even if you cannot meet with a professional to talk about grief, you can still practice coping strategies on your own. Mindfulness, journaling, visualization, and meditation may be helpful for managing some of the anxiety, stress, and anger that you may be feeling.


Writing about your experiences as the pandemic unfolds may also be helpful. Some of the grief and anxiety you might be feeling is caused by losses that seem ambiguous or too large to think about. Giving voice to your experiences by writing about what is happening in your life, the things you have observed, how the world has changed, and how you feel about those events may help.

Write about what's happened, but also note how you are managing the situation. Paying attention to your efforts and strengths may help you feel more [resilient](#) and capable in the face of emotional upheaval.

Related: [How to Become More Resilient](#)

Check-In With Others

While virtual meetings can never replace real-life support, regular phone calls and text messages can help bridge the gap. If you are grieving, make it a habit to reach out to your loved ones each day. If you want to offer support to someone who has experienced a loss, be sure to reach out however you can.



Text messages can be a great way to check-in and let the person know you are thinking about them, but a phone call can help provide an even more personal connection. Try to listen without judgment or criticism.

You can also help support others by offering to make phone calls for them, dropping off care packages, leaving prepared meals at their door, or picking up groceries.

Online support groups can help fill the gap for those who are quarantined or alone due to social distancing, but it is important to use caution. Research suggests that while such groups can be helpful at times, it is fairly common for people to become overwhelmed by too much information or even distressed by the emotions of others.

A Word From Verywell

Grief is a normal response to loss, but the COVID-19 pandemic has upended many aspects of the normal grieving process. Even if you have not yet experienced a direct loss, don't assume that what you are feeling is not grief.

Whether you are coping with job loss, financial instability, loneliness, or a general sense of [anxiety about coronavirus](#), the emotional upheaval caused by coronavirus may trigger feelings of

grief and loss. How you deal with what you are feeling can depend on a wide variety of factors including your overall resilience and social support systems.

Give yourself permission to mourn and treat yourself and others with kindness during this difficult time.

Helpful Links

[How to Support Someone Affected by Coronavirus](#)

[Practicing Empathy During the Coronavirus Pandemic](#)

[How to Cope With Loneliness During the Coronavirus Pandemic](#)

[How to Be a Good Partner During Quarantine](#)

[Coping With Missed Activities During the COVID-19 Pandemic \(From Verywell Family\)](#)

[How to Optimize Your Immune System to Fight Disease \(From Verywell Fit\)](#)

Article Sources

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