Loss & Grief in COVID-19: Navigating the Grief Process

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Our Agenda

- Loss & Grief: General Overview
- Purpose of Grief
- Impact of the Pandemic
- Questions & Discussion
- Navigating the Grief Process
- Supporting Others in Their Grief
- Review of Resources
- Questions & Discussion
Basic Terminology

- **Bereavement**: experience of having lost someone or something of value
- **Grief**: natural response to loss that impacts a person across multiple dimensions
- **Mourning**: process of experiencing and expressing grief while adapting to a loss
Grief is...COMPLICATED

- Universal experience yet unique to each individual
- Nonlinear with fluctuating course
- Embodies many conflicting experiences
Grief is...MESSY

- Unpredictable with no precise timeline
- No systematic progression through distinct stages
- Wide range of reactions that change over time
Grief is...AWKWARD

- May be isolating even when support is available
- Want to engage with others but often feel disconnected
- Wish to be supportive but don’t know what to say or do
- Avoid mentioning the loss for fear of upsetting the person
Types of Loss

- **Primary Loss:**
  - Individual loss resulting from a significant life events (e.g., death of a loved one, loss of job)

- **Secondary Loss:**
  - Consequence of primary loss (e.g., companionship, sexual intimacy, fiscal stability, sense of security)

- **Systemic Loss:**
  - Destabilization of reliable systems we depend upon (e.g., economy, healthcare, education)

- **Disrupted beliefs:**
  - Significant change in our understanding of the world (e.g., meaning and purpose, control)

- **Ambiguous Loss or Living Loss:**
  - Ongoing loss with no clear end point (e.g., personal autonomy, social connections)
Types of Grief

- **Normative Grief:**
  - Natural response to loss that promotes adaption

- **Anticipatory Grief:**
  - Expected losses yet to come

- **Disenfranchised Grief:**
  - Loss that is not publicly recognized or socially validated

- **Prolonged or Complicated Grief:**
  - Uncontrollable circumstances compound the loss and make it difficult to accept
  - Enduring symptoms include disbelief, persistent longing, and rumination that result in impaired functioning

WORDEN, 2018; BERTUCCIO & RUNION, 2020; ZHAI & DU, 2020; MHTTCN, 2020; IMAGE BY PCHVECTOR FROM FREEPIK
The Purpose of Grief

- **Purpose**: helps us accept and adapt to our new reality after a loss
- Multi-dimensional response involving emotional, cognitive, behavioral, physical and spiritual components
- Each person’s experience is unique and influenced by the nature of the loss, their stage of life, cultural and spiritual factors, and their personal history of loss.

OTIS-GREEN, 2011; WORDEN, 2018; IMAGE BY GERD ALTMAN FROM PIXABAY
Common Grief Reactions

- **Emotional:** sadness, anger, anxiety, guilt, blame, loneliness, helplessness, relief, numbness, yearning for the deceased

- **Cognitive:** confusion, disbelief, poor concentration, preoccupation with the loss

- **Behavioral:** sleep disruption, changes in appetite, social withdrawal, avoiding reminders of the loss, carrying/treasuring objects of the deceased

- **Physical:** nausea, fatigue, physical pain, shortness of breath, tightness in chest, weakness

- **Spiritual:** enhanced engagement and/or distancing from faith traditions, questioning religious beliefs

OTIS-GREEN, 2011; WORDEN, 2018; IMAGE BY FREEPIK
Impact of the Pandemic
COVID-19 Impact: Mental Health

- Remains an ongoing source of stress for many adults:

- Approximately 30% of U.S. adults continue to report symptoms of anxiety and depression:
  - Household Pulse Survey: [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health.htm)

- Resulted in multiple losses and grief reactions including ambiguous loss (ongoing), anticipatory grief (expected loss), and disenfranchised grief (hidden grief)

- Dealing with various stressors associated with the pandemic may make adapting to a loss more difficult

APA, 2022; CDC, 2022; BERTUCCIO & RUNION, 2020; IMAGE BY GERD ALTMANN FROM PIXABAY
COVID-19 Impact: Death & Dying

- Death from COVID-19 may be rapid and unexpected
- Regulatory precautions may limit or prevent family members from being present in final days or at time of death
- Safety restrictions may disrupt certain rituals (e.g., memorial service) that typically provide social support during the mourning process
- Sheltering-in-place orders may result in heightened feelings of isolation and loneliness for survivors
- Introduced various challenges surrounding death that may disrupt the grieving process, thus increasing the risk of prolonged or complicated grief

JORDAN ET AL, 2022; LEROY ET AL, 2020; VERDERY ET AL, 2020; IMAGE BY FREEPIK
Questions & Discussion
The Grief Process

- **Acute Grief**:  
  - Intense emotions (sadness, anger, guilt)  
  - Frequent thoughts/memories of the loss or deceased  
  - Sense of confusion and disconnection

- **Adapting to Loss**:  
  - Accept the reality of the loss  
  - Restore sense of well-being (meaning, purpose, future-oriented)

- **Integrated Grief**:  
  - Lasting form of grief associated with permanent loss  
  - Ongoing connection to the deceased
Navigating the Grief Process
Navigating Grief: Milestones

- Experiencing Emotions
- Honoring the Loss
- Integrating Memories
- Restoring Wellbeing
- Interpersonal Connection
Experiencing Emotions

- Seek to accept the permanence of the loss as well as the experience of grief
- Allow yourself to feel a full range of associated emotions without judgment
- Understand negative emotions will recede at times and permit yourself this respite
- Try to fully experience positive emotions when they occur as this is part of adapting to loss
Honoring the Loss

- Work towards not avoiding reminders of the loss including associated people, places and things
- Create and/or participate in events or rituals that honor the loss
- Share the story of the loss with others as you are able and at your own pace
Integrating Memories

- Learn how to live with reminders of the loss
- Memories may serve as a living connection with the deceased
- Integrate memories of loved one into your life in a way that is beneficial for you (e.g., enriching, promotes growth)
Restoring Wellbeing

- Try to look towards the future and envision how to move forward
- Re-establish your own sense of meaning and purpose
- Consider new possibilities for happiness and fulfillment
- Take active steps to progress your life while recognizing this may be a slow and fluctuating process
Interpersonal Connection

- Try to stay engaged and connected with family and friends
- Share memories of loved one and listen to others’ memories when able
- Accept comfort and support from others
- Understand relationships may not be reciprocal while grieving

THE CENTER FOR PROLONGED GRIEF, 2020; SHEAR, 2020; IMAGE BY FREEPIK
Navigating Grief: Derailers

- Thoughts
- Emotions
- Behaviors
Thoughts

- Persistent belief that the death was unfair or should not have occurred
- Imagining scenarios in which the loss did not occur (“If only…”)
- Concern about inability to adapt to loss and progress
Emotions

- Survivor’s guilt that prevents you from experiencing positive emotions
- Feelings related to concerns that you didn’t do enough for the deceased prior to death
- Anger and blame directed at self or others (e.g., caregivers, medical staff)
- Difficulty regulating intense emotions
Behaviors

- Continued avoidance of reminders of the loss
- Inability to accept support or connect with others
- Inability to begin moving forward in some ways
Guidelines for Providing Support

- Understanding the grief process is helpful
- Be present, listen and validate their emotions
- Encourage them to ask for support but also be specific when offering help
- Continue to reach out in the months following the loss
- Sensitively share knowledge and advice if requested; encourage professional assistance if warranted
- Find ways to offer hope including identifying what’s been effective for them when facing adversity or loss in the past

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GRIEF REQUIRES WITNESSING.

David Kessler
Professional Assistance

- Potential indicators: excessive symptoms, subjective distress, impaired daily functioning, compromised relationships, and/or safety concerns
- Many evidence-based therapies are available for a range of issues (e.g., anxiety, depression) including prolonged/complicated grief (Prolonged Grief Disorder Therapy or PGDT)
- *Psychology Today: Find a Therapist*
- *National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255*
  [https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/](https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/)
Center for Prolonged Grief

- For the Public: [https://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu/for-the-public/complicated-grief-public/overview/](https://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu/for-the-public/complicated-grief-public/overview/)

- Resources & Handouts for the Public: [https://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu/for-the-public/resources-2/](https://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu/for-the-public/resources-2/)

- For Professionals: [https://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu/professionals/complicated-grief-professionals/overview/](https://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu/professionals/complicated-grief-professionals/overview/)

- Webinars for Professionals: [https://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu/professionals/training/webinars/](https://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu/professionals/training/webinars/)

- Dr. Shear: *Understanding Grief & Loss in the Time of Coronavirus* (2020)
Additional Resources

- The Dougy Center for Grieving Children & Families: https://www.dougy.org/
- Sesame Street in Communities: https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/grief/
- Speaking Grief: https://speakinggrief.org/
Contact Information

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In Conclusion...

- Grief is a natural response to loss that helps us adapt and move forward
- Process is unique to each person and requires time
- COVID-19 resulted in multiple losses and challenges that may complicate the grief process
- Working towards milestones may help you transition through the grief process
- Recognizing and resolving derailers may prevent you from getting stuck and disrupting this process
- Acknowledging the loss and its impact is helpful when supporting others in their grief

Image by @Bekindbella from Instagram
Questions & Discussion
References


- Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies. *Deciding when to seek treatment.* [https://www.abct.org/Information/?m=mInformation&fa=DecidingWhenToSeek](https://www.abct.org/Information/?m=mInformation&fa=DecidingWhenToSeek)


References


References


