
Wellbeing

Collective grief in a time of change

by AMANDA WALLIS

During these uncertain times you may have noticed that your emotions are heightened – or that you don't even know what you are feeling. This is completely normal and understandable as we adjust to changing circumstances and different daily lives.

Many of us are grieving at the moment, and we may not have expected that. We might expect grief when we experience the passing of loved ones. But grief is inextricably linked with loss and we are each facing unprecedented loss right now: the loss of routine and normalcy; the loss of physical touch and connection; the loss of economic stability; and the loss of freedom and exploration. For some of us, we may be grieving the loss of weddings, of family birthday parties, or of university graduations. For others, we may be grieving the loss of health, of work, or of income. We may be fearing the loss of loved ones, or pre-emptively grieving for losses that may occur in the coming weeks and months. All of this grief is valid, and you are not alone.

Over the past weeks, you may have found yourself forgetting, for small moments, about the state of the world. Maybe you woke up this morning and you had a few peaceful moments before remembering that it was not a normal workday. Maybe you watched TV last night and were completely absorbed in the story so that, for 40 minutes, the words “physical distancing” did not even exist. Maybe, when you

remembered, you felt that gut-wrenching realisation wash over you. This is grief. In the same way that, when we lose a loved one, our daily routine eventually continues, so too are we forced to continue amongst this grief. The laundry still needs doing, and our email inbox still needs clearing.

HERE ARE SOME TIPS TO HELP YOU MANAGE YOUR GRIEF OVER THE COMING DAYS AND WEEKS:

Acknowledge your feelings

- Take time in your day to sit with your feelings. Observe the emotional mood that you are carrying with you and label what it is you feel. What is most important here is that you regularly allow yourself to feel what you are feeling and, through doing so, you give it permission to pass.
- Realise that grief does not always present in the same way. If you are familiar with the [“Five Stages of Grief”](#) then you will know that your grieving may go through stages of denial, anger, bargaining and sadness, all of which are natural reactions to loss. Eventually, “acceptance” will bring with it a sense of control, but be aware that these feelings may come and go. The “stages” do not present in linear order, and even after “accepting” a loss more deeply, we can still have flashes of anger or despair.
- Share your emotions. Write what you are feeling down or share it with someone close to you (if you feel comfortable to do so). Sharing these feelings relieves the burden on your shoulders, and can also relieve the suffering of others by recognising that you both feel the same way.



We are all in this together

- For the first time in our lifetime, we are all being impacted by a greater threat. Try to avoid ranking yourself on some sort of “[hierarchy of grief](#)” compared to others. This threat may not affect us all equally, but we are all grieving in some way. Do your best not to discount your own, or others’, feelings.
- Show self-compassion and compassion to others. Be gentle with your feelings and try not to place high expectations of productivity on yourself. Everyone manifests their grief in different ways; try to be accepting and tolerant if you, or the people around you, are acting differently than you would under normal circumstances.
- In the same way that you should acknowledge your own feelings, acknowledge how other people are feeling. You do not need to “fix” everything or offer a silver lining (e.g. “At least we are still healthy and able to work from home!”). Sometimes the people around you simply need to feel seen and supported (e.g. “I know this is difficult, and it’s understandable you feel frustrated – I’ll call you back tomorrow to check in on how you are doing”).

Minimise anticipatory grief

- “Anticipatory grief” comes with the uncertainty about the future and imagining the worst that can happen. Now more than ever, it is important to focus your energy on living in the present. If meditation and mindfulness are not your thing, try simple grounding techniques when you find your mind racing: breathe deeply and focus on what you can see, hear, and feel in the moment. Find certainty in the realities of your “here and now” and focus on these certainties rather than the “what ifs”.
- Focus on what is in your control and let go of what is not. If it helps, make a list of what you can do to help the current situation (e.g. “I can stay at home, wash my hands, and practise social distancing”) and gently nudge away any feelings that relate to external circumstances. You cannot control other people or “fix” the pandemic, but you can do your bit to make it better.
- Find balance in the positives and negatives. For every “worst case scenario” you ponder, also consider the “best case scenario”. Read up on positive stories of community spirit as often as you read the doomsday headlines. There is no guilt in feeling joy in times like these, so stock up on laughter and connection where you can, instead of refreshing the news headlines.