

Grief & COVID-19

“ Social distancing has meant you’ve no longer had in person classes or the grades you expected. You might have lost a job or had to move. How you spend your time, hang with friends, date, or engage in activities has all changed. Trips have been cancelled; celebrations are off and plans are up in the air. The loss of normalcy is profound.

Some are worried about their health or have parents, grandparents or other loved ones who may be at risk. Some are impacted financially as their families deal with job losses. Some are stuck in high conflict homes. Many are away from their families—whether they be in other cities or across the world. Others are following the news and grieving for those suffering in the hardest hit countries.

No matter how much you’ve been impacted, we can acknowledge there’s grief involved.”

<https://medium.com/ualberta-arts-insider/how-are-students-handling-things-during-covid-19-ac2d63eb0b3d>

Our lives changed dramatically this year. We’re facing many types of loss as we live through the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether it’s the small things we’re missing or major life changes—it is natural to feel a sense of grief.

Grief is a type of emotional suffering that can include a mix of feelings from disbelief and shock to sadness and guilt. It can feel very painful. There’s no right or wrong way to grieve, but there are some things that can help in the face of loss.

Acknowledge What’s Been Lost

The pandemic has ruined a lot of things for people. You’re allowed to be upset about it and mourn no matter how big or small it seems. It can be helpful to start by recognizing and acknowledging what we have lost along the way.

Normalcy and Predictability

The need for physical distancing meant everything changed in just a few days. The way we interact, go to school, work, shop and spend our time. Routines, habits and plans were all interrupted in ways we did not anticipate. The loss of predictability can shatter our sense of control. And the loss of our normal is understandably laced with grief.

Cancelled events

There may have been special events you were looking forward to. A trip, a graduation, a birthday, a concert, other special occasions. You might feel robbed of the chance to experience these times in your life. Cancellations may have also taken away opportunities to meaningfully connect with friends or family.

Employment, roles, opportunities, time

Many are losing jobs or the chance to work this summer, which also comes with financial losses and stress. Others have lost opportunities related to their studies, travel, volunteering or personal development. If you've lost roles that are important to you, you might even feel like your sense of identity is shaken. Some may experience a sense of falling behind or losing time to accomplish what they wanted to do.

Freedom and Physical Connection

Physical distancing means we've all had to sacrifice some of our freedoms. You may have lost the ability to do what you want, see who you want and go where you want. Your favourite hangout, restaurant, coffee shop or store might have closed. You might miss some of your friends or family you can't see right now. You might be longing for physical touch or simply the act of being around other people. You might be missing out on important moments in other people's lives. Loss of freedom and physical connection leads to many other losses.

Illness and death

While Canada is working hard to limit the spread of COVID-19, many people are still getting sick and some are dying. You might feel scared or worried about the possibilities of getting sick and what that might look like and mean, particularly if you or someone you know is at higher risk from the virus. Perhaps you already know someone who has gotten sick or passed away. Without the ability to physically be with each other during illness, death and mourning—the layers of grief can be even more profound.

Communal Grief

“There is a communal grief as we watch our work, health-care, education and economic systems—all of these systems we depend on—destabilize” ([Weir, 2020](#)). If you're following the news from around the world, you may also be hearing stories of death and loss, fear on the frontlines, social injustice or political division. With pervasive suffering comes grief.

Name And Allow Your Feelings

“ Grief responds to awareness, attention, and expression. You will feel better if you mourn. Mourning is being aware of your grief, giving it the attention it needs and deserves, and expressing it outside of yourself.” ([Wolfelt, 2020](#))

Grief during the pandemic is both normal and natural. Common reactions might include: denial, sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, numbness, apathy, resentment, helplessness, regret, loneliness, fear, disbelief, shock and even relief. Our feelings can change moment to moment, or at times we might feel stuck in one emotion. It often feels like a roller coaster because there can be many ups and downs and changes in how we feel.

Grief is exhausting. It can take a big emotional toll on us and can also affect our habits like how well we eat, sleep, connect with others and take care of ourselves. It can make it harder to concentrate or feel motivated.

It can feel scary to acknowledge our negative emotions but naming and feeling them is what helps us move through them.

Know That Grief Is A Process

You may have heard about the five stages of grief, something first described by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in 1969. It includes denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. These are common reactions but not the only ones and not everyone will experience them. We also know grief is not linear and emotions don't follow a certain order. However, it's still helpful to understand what these five stages can look like during the pandemic. Here's a few examples summarized from [Dr. Robert Weiss \(2020\)](#).

Denial: Rejecting reality, often for self-preservation or to deflect pain

- This is an overreaction
- It's the same as the flu

Anger: Hostility, irritability, often an attempt to feel a sense of control over our fears

- I don't care about the restrictions; I'm going to do what I want
- The government should have prevented this

Bargaining: When we start to acknowledge the reality, but still want a sense of control

- We'll be back to normal next week
- It's okay to spend time with others if they don't have symptoms

Know That Grief Is A Process *continued...*

Depression: When reality sets in, often with feelings of hopelessness

- There's no hope
- I can't do anything
- Terrible things will happen

Acceptance: When we fully acknowledge the facts and surrender

- I can't control everything, but I can do my part
- I can't do exactly what I want, but I can find new ways to live my life and connect right now

Remember it is human to have these types of reactions and to experience a variety of feelings. Sometimes we feel a sense of acceptance and then feel we're back at square one. Grief is a process we all go through in the face of loss.

Express Your Grief

Talk about how you're feeling with people you trust. Be honest. You can talk about what you miss, what's been hard, what you're worried about. If you're not comfortable talking to people you know, try an online support group.

You can also express your feelings on your own through journaling or other creative outlets like music or art. Another way to connect with your feelings is by reading stories, watching movies or listening to music.

Connect With Others

Connecting with others is not limited to talking about your grief. It can be helpful to talk about other things or just have some lighthearted fun. Connect in the ways that work for you whether it's through social media, texts, group chats, phone calls or online games. If you feel unmotivated, try to book these times in advance or ask someone to check in on you. It is important not to become emotionally isolated.

Modify or Postpone vs. Cancelling Events

When possible, see if you can find new ways of marking special events that were cancelled. For instance, hold a virtual celebration over a video group chat. Mail a card. Drop off a meal or gift. Support friends by expressing your disappointment if they had to cancel a special event. Rather than fully cancel, try postponing events to a later date—even if it's a bit of a wait.

Create New Rituals Around Death

For those who have lost someone during the pandemic, there is profound pain in being separated from loved ones in sickness, death and mourning. We don't have the opportunity to be physically close or hold funerals in the way we're used to. But it is still important to connect with others, to share stories and pay tribute to those we lose, and to have a chance to laugh and cry together. You can reach out over the phone or video. You can send emails or letters that can be shared collectively.

If you want to hold a service—consider a livestream—something you can organize yourself or a service provided by some funeral homes. You can also plan a future memorial service, once people can gather again.

Individually you can create rituals including finding readings, photos or music that pay tribute to the person you lost. Other ideas might be putting together a slideshow, a book of memories, making an art project or planting a tree. You can do things that remind you of the person like eating their favourite food or watching a show they liked. Feel free to be creative and find things that fit for you. Remember there is no one way to grieve the loss of someone you love.

Be Compassionate

It's easy to be hard on ourselves during tough times. Perhaps we're not as productive as we want to be or maybe we feel like we're falling apart. Self-criticism only makes things worse. Remember how much has changed and been lost through this pandemic. There are many stressors that affect everyone differently. Approach yourself with the same kindness and understanding you would with someone you care about.

Practice Self-Care

Do things that make you feel good. Perhaps that means creating a routine and doing things you know are good for you such as regular sleep, meals and exercise. Perhaps it's allowing yourself to slow down. Maybe it's doing something you enjoy like talking to a friend, baking, watching tv, reading a book or going for a walk. Maybe it's limiting how much news you're consuming. Self-care looks different for each person—find what you enjoy.

Look For Meaning

The sudden shut down and slow down of our lives can be an access point for self-reflection. Reflect on your values and what's important to you. Finding meaning through these experiences can help them be more bearable and provide direction about what's important in your life.

Remember Your Resilience

We are wired to deal with adversity and overcome. Remember how you've gotten through hard times in the past—identify what helped and what strengths you have that got you through them. Remember that we all have the capacity to handle more than we think.

Sources

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<https://medium.com/uAlberta-arts-insider/how-are-students-handling-things-during-covid-19-ac2d63eb0b3d>

* Created by U of A Counselling and Clinical Services. For additional resources, visit: uofa.ualberta.ca/current-students/wellness/mentalhealth

