

Coping with loss during COVID-19

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Hi, and thank you for joining us for this recorded webinar, coping with loss during COVID-19. My name is Erica Hanlon. I'm a licensed professional counselor and life coach. And we recognize that a lot of people right now are experiencing some kind of loss. So that's what we hope to help you with today.

Today we'll explore:

This presentation will review the grief process, what it looks like, what many people experience, because a lot of times understanding grief helps us cope with it better. Grief can be really confusing. Understanding some of those typical reactions can then help normalize your responses and help you move forward. We'll also discuss how COVID-19 is changing how we grieve. Loss is looking a little bit different right now. Grief is looking different. How we grieve is looking differently. And so it's important to acknowledge those differences and provide you with solutions to help you move forward through your loss so that you can start to heal and get to the other side.

About grief

So let's talk about grief, what it is. Grief is a normal human response. It's something that happens to all of us if we have any kind of relationship that we value, if we have anything in our lives that we value because nothing is permanent. And at some point or another we will experience some kind of loss, but grief is often characterize as a feeling, which really isn't exactly accurate. Grief is all the feelings. It's a lot of feelings. It's more than just a feeling. It's really, I think the best description for it is that it's a process. It happens over time and it's really unpredictable. The way you think and feel can change from day-to-day, hour-to-hour, even moment-to-moment. And I think this is really part of what makes grief so hard because it's so unpredictable. It feels like a real roller coaster ride because one moment you'll think you're doing just fine and then next, you're overwhelmed with sadness, anger, confusion.

I heard a metaphor once that grief is like being in a little row boat in a middle of a storm. And you have all of these waves and they keep capsizing your boat. And you get back in the boat, you're rowing along, you think you're okay, and then here comes another big wave and it knocks you over. What I really like about this metaphor is it talked about how the storm does start to subside. You'll get knocked over and capsized less and less frequently, but there will still be times in the future where you're thinking, "Okay, I'm doing all right." But then a big wave will come out of the blue and it will capsize your boat. And that's okay, that's part of just what grief looks like. It

will hit you out of the blue sometimes when you're thinking better. that's completely normal. It's what happens. It's also important to recognize that grief, again, isn't just a feeling, it affects all areas of your life. So let's talk about that a little bit more.

How grief impacts you

So grief impacts you on all levels. The most obvious level that most people think of is the emotional level. It causes you to experience lots of different feelings. You may experience shock, you may be really, really upset. You may have no feeling, right? Sort of an emotional numbness. A lot of people experience anger, and a lot of people also experience guilt. We have a lot of remorse, we have kind of like, "if only" types of thoughts. If only I've done this, if only I've said this. Why did I do this or that. Psychologically, grief puts a lot of strain on our brains. It really takes a lot of energy for our brains to process grief. And so we'll see this show up in other kinds of ways psychologically. You may experience brain fog, memory problems. You may have a difficult time focusing for a while.

And then the most common one that a lot of us are really familiar with is denial. A lot of times when we first learn about of loss, our brain sort of rejects that reality. And we experience some form of denial like, "No, no, no, they must be wrong," "There was a mix up," "There was some kind of confusion." That is a just typical psychological response to a loss.

Socially, grief looks a little bit different for everyone, but many of us do tend to withdraw from others. That is a typical response. Even though we know that social supports are really helpful and critical in helping us move through grief. It is pretty typical for many of us to withdraw a little bit and want some alone time. But maybe that looks different for you. Maybe socially, you want to reach out to others even more.

Now, physically, grief again, it doesn't just put a strain on your brain, it puts a strain on your body. And so you may see some physical changes. You may see an uptick in illnesses. Maybe you get more colds or flus. You may see a change in your appetite or change in your sleep. You may experience aches and pains you don't normally experience. This is because our brains and our bodies, they're really wired closely together. We have that brain-body connection.

And then spiritually, this looks again, pretty different for everybody. But you may have questions about your religious beliefs or you may have just questions about how you have typically view the world. You may notice yourself asking, "Why did this happen?" "Is life really fair?" You might find yourself questioning some of those beliefs that you've typically had about yourself or the world.

Grief is different for everyone

So grief looks different for everyone. There have been sort of these typical, you probably heard of stages of grief. We've started to move a little bit away from that in the mental health community. Because a lot of people took those stages and felt like they were almost prescriptive, right? I need to be moving through denial, anger, up to acceptance, right? I need to be moving through these in a

certain way and then in a certain order. But what we know is that when it comes to grief, there are no rules, there is no timeline, there's no one right way to grief. Everybody experiences grief in their own way. There's no timetable for it. And again, some days may be good, some days may be bad. Everybody shows their grief a little bit differently. And here's the thing. You don't get over grief. You get through it. And again, this is going to look differently for everybody. And some people, maybe this is their first loss. This is their first time navigating these feelings. Other people may have had losses in the past and then experiencing this current loss during COVID-19 brings up all of those past feelings. So they feel kind of flooded with all of those feelings. And that can even cause more confusion about what it means to be experiencing this loss.

Moving through grief

So as you move through grief, we use this term, moving through grief. Because a lot of us, we don't like experiencing these feelings. It doesn't feel good, right? So we try to avoid it, we try to numb it out. We try to get around it. We try to skip ahead to the other side where we feel like we're doing better. But when you do that, when you resist feeling those feelings, what happens is you prolong the grief process. And I mentioned before, a lot of times we've talked about stages of grief in the mental health community. But grief doesn't like to be predictable. So you may find yourself going through these experiences in your own way. You may go through them in a certain order, you may bounce around between them, you may go through them repeatedly.

As I mentioned before, a lot of people experience shock and denial when they first learn that somebody has died. Again, you might think, "No way, it can't be. There was some kind of mistake." This is just your brain's way of coping. This is a typical, normal response. Then what tends to happen is that the feelings start to come in. And the feelings can be really overwhelming. It can be like those waves capsizing your little row boat. You can feel like you're getting thrown off course, you're being thrown into the water, you have to upright your boat and try and get back in. And this can feel really overwhelming and confusing. And your feelings can feel really confusing. I mentioned before that emotional roller coaster, right? You think you're doing okay, and then all of a sudden it hits you, kind of out of the blue.

I heard a really beautiful story once of a woman who lost her mother, and she was, she kind of moves through grief, she was doing really well, she was having a good day. I think it was even couple years after her mother had passed away, and she was in a grocery store. And she saw, I think it was avocados, in the produce section, she saw some avocados. And she, all of a sudden, had a memory that her mother had this recipe with these avocados and that she had never gotten a recipe from her mother, that she was never going to be able to make that dish the way her mother had made it because she didn't get the recipe. And she broke down in the produce aisle in the grocery store.

So this is often what grief looks like. You're doing okay, you see something that seems relatively neutral, innocuous, like an avocado, and you have a thought that then floods you with all of these feelings. But eventually, you do move forward into acceptance. I love the metaphor that loss of a loved one is

a little bit like losing a limb. It's a little bit like an amputation. You learn how to live without the limb. You move through a life, you problem solve. You work it out, you find a new life, right? You find the meaning in the loss, but every now and then, you will experience some kind of phantom pain and that's okay. It's just part of what it looks like.

Loss during COVID-19

So let's talk about what loss looks like right now during COVID-19 because it does look different. COVID-19 has not only changed the way that we're living, it's changing the way that we're dying. And it's changing the way that we're grieving. So we know that right now because of protocols, safety protocols, many hospitals are not allowing visitors. So you may have to miss your loved one's final moments or you may have to say goodbye virtually by FaceTime or some other kind of video chat, or just by a phone call. So you're having to say goodbye in a way that you maybe wouldn't have before.

The other thing is that a lot of times after we lose a loved one we sort of gather together with other loved ones. And right now, because of social distancing and different restrictions based on where you live, you may not be able to do that. You may not be able to be with others who are grieving with you. And you may not be able to attend the kind of services you typically would, like a memorial or a funeral due to restrictions on how many people can be gathered in one place.

Ambiguous loss

So these traditional markers of loss like funeral services, like being together with loved ones, like memorial services, saying goodbye in person, right? All of these traditional markers help us get closure when we lose somebody we love. And we don't have that right now. Many of us aren't able to have that. And for some of us, this can lead to something we call ambiguous loss.

Ambiguous loss leaves you searching for answers. You feel like you didn't get closure on that relationship. You feel like you didn't get closure on that loss. And this can lead to feelings of helplessness and frustration and it can be a risk factor for something we call prolonged grief disorder. It's important to just recognize this as a potential risk factor so that you can seek help if you feel like you're not able to process through your grief. If you feel like you don't have that closure, then it's even more critical that you are reaching out and seeking professional help.

A new way to grieve

So as we mentioned, grief is going to look a little bit different right now. If you've lost a loved one and you're not going to be able to attend the funeral because of maybe travel restrictions or restrictions on how many people are allowed to be gathered in one place. You can ask that funeral location if they are streaming their services. You can also organize a virtual memorial with loved

ones. You can connect with loved ones online, even if you're not able to physically together to give each other hugs. And you can also talk to a mental health counselor by phone or by video chat. Many mental health professionals are offering these online services as an alternative to meeting face-to-face.

Take care of yourself

As I mentioned before, grief is really hard on your brain and it's really hard on your body. It creates a significant strain on both. So it's even more critical that you're taking care of yourself. And what this can look like is making sure that you're getting plenty of sleep. Grief can really be exhausting. So be sure that you're getting enough rest. You may need more sleep during the first couple of weeks after your loss. And exercise might sound like the last thing that you want to do, but it's really important to move your body, helps you heal. And we're not talking about having to do any sort of intense exercise, but maybe try going for a walk, do some yoga, do some kind of physical activity that you've enjoyed doing in the past. Do something that kind of makes you feel good. Your body was designed to move and it can help you start to move through this.

It's also really important to eat well. When we're grieving, a lot of times we want to turn to food as a way to sort of numb out our feelings. It's really easy to over eat. Or it might be tempting to skip meals. Maybe you've completely lost your appetite. Make sure that you're feeding your body and you're feeding it nutritious meals. Small, healthy meals. This again will kind of help you start to heal and move through this. Your body is under a lot of stress. Eating small, healthy, nutritious foods will help you start to heal.

And we know that it might be really tempting to turn to unhealthy ways of coping. And for everyone, this looks a little bit different. Maybe it's over eating, maybe it's drinks, drinking alcohol excessively. Maybe it's using drugs, maybe it's online shopping. Maybe it's not getting off your couch, and you're just binge watching all of the online television shows. Again, this looks different for everybody. But unhealthy coping responses, especially if they continue pass a couple of weeks, can create new problems for you and they can complicate that grieving process.

Allow for feelings

So what about these unpredictable feelings, right? Remember, when you try to avoid the feelings, they tend to last longer. So as much as you want to avoid your feelings, or act like everything's okay, you're trying to skip ahead to a part where you're feeling better, it's really important to let yourself feel. Now, while a lot of us are really good at avoiding our feelings, you're probably never actually taught how to feel them. So here are some ideas. Give yourself permission to feel your feelings whatever they are. And share your feelings with others. Talk to other people about what's going on with you. I encourage my clients to actually find the feeling in their bodies and then take deep breathes into that part of their body, right? Trying direct the oxygen down to that part of the body

that hurts. It won't necessarily make it go away, but it can actually make that sort of tightness, that pain, loosen a little bit that tightness in your chest or that knot in your stomach, however that's showing up for you. It's also important to recognize that it's completely normal to have recurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks about your loved one as you are moving through this grieving process.

What to do with feelings

So let's talk more about what to do with your feelings. And again, what works for one person won't necessarily work for other people but I think one of the best things you can do is to simply get your feelings out and your thoughts out of your brain. A lot of times we sort of swirl around in sort of a mental tornado and we try to sort of solve it just inside of our brains, which isn't very helpful.

A lot of times processing those feelings by just getting them out of ourselves, getting those thoughts out is really helpful. So you can write them down in a journal. You can talk to friends, family, coworkers, anybody you trust. You can find a support group online, or maybe a Facebook group or some other kind of social media group online. There are lots of those available. Where then you can share what's going on with you with other people who are experiencing similar losses right now. And then it's also, it can be really helpful just to talk to somebody, ask for help. Ask for help from a mental health professional, from maybe a religious leader, maybe somebody you really respect and trust.

But again, help you move through those feelings by accepting them, allowing them, and then where do you put them? Put them on paper, put them out of you through a conversation. You'll be amazed at how that helps you heal.

Supporting others

And maybe you're listening to this and you're like, "Hey, I'm doing okay, "but what about other people?" because we often know that loss is not just for you, right? You're not the only one experiencing loss right now. Lots of people are experiencing loss. Maybe you've jumped on this webinar because somebody you know has lost a loved one, right? And they're grieving and you don't know how to support them. So many of us are worried about saying or doing the wrong thing, right? We want to fix it, we want to fix the other person's feelings. We want to make them feel better. But actually the best thing you can do is give the person permission to be sad and upset, and I don't mean like you're saying, "Hey, I give you permission to be sad and upset." We just give them the space to do that. We allow them to do it without trying to fix it by saying things like, "Hey, you know what could've been worse," "Hey, you still have so and so, right? "Look at all the good things in your life." A lot of times when we say those things, we really mean well, right? We're really trying to be helpful, but it can undermine that person's experience. Instead, what we do is, all we have to do is just be with the person. Even if you're not able to be with them in person right now physically, you

can reach out. Ask them how they are doing. Let them know that you're there for them that if they want shoulder to cry on, if they just want to vent out their feelings, they can do any of it, all of it with you, that you're a safe, supportive person, that you'll listen without judgment. And recognize that the person may be in the middle of that emotional rollercoaster. They may be experiencing a lot of anger, they may say things that you don't agree with, or that you find it to be offensive, and so it's really important not to take that anger personally or any of those things that they say personally, right? And then ask the person what it is that they need. That's it, you don't have to fix it, you don't have to solve it, their grief is not a problem to be solved. All they need from you is to be a supportive, non-judgmental person who's there for them.

Honoring your loved one

So how can you honor your loved one? How can you do that? And I think that there are a lots of ways to do this, the list on this slide is by no means comprehensive. But these are some of our favorite ideas. You can donate to a favorite charity. Maybe that person had a cause that they were really passionate about. Maybe you can donate to that charity for them. You can write a poem, you can plant a tree, you can create a photo album. You can write a goodbye letter. And this is a letter you never have to send, but again, remember, getting those thoughts out, getting those feelings out onto paper can be incredibly healing. So write them a letter, say all of the things that you didn't get to say. Maybe you can even continue to write them letters afterwards, right? Let them know what's going on, what are they missing out on. It can feel like you're still able to talk to that person. Or you can also share memories through social media.

Thanks to the magic of social media, we can collect memories about our loved one from people who maybe haven't even seen them in a really long time. I have a friend who lost her mom about a year or so ago and I commented that I remembered her mom in high school, because we are high school friends, driving us to a movie and talking about an actor in a movie and how she had a major crush on this actor. And it turned into this whole big conversation about, "Oh, my gosh, yeah, mom was so obsessed with that actor "and we should watch that movie tonight." And so you don't know. You share a memory with somebody and it can bring up all of those wonderful memories that they have and all kinds of wonderful feelings and thoughts. So collect those memories through social media. It can be really powerful.

Moving forward

So in conclusion, it's really important to let yourself heal. The only way to get through grief is to go through the grief. You can't go around it, you can't skip over it. And you don't want to stay where you are, which is in a stuck place. You have to move through it. And that looks like taking your time, letting yourself feel all of your feelings, allowing yourself to heal, not comparing your reactions to others because this is a personal journey. And remembering that grieving is part of life. And finally,

know that we are here for you. You are not alone during these tough times. We are here for you 24/7, you can reach out anytime.

So that concludes our webinar for today. Thank you for attending. If you have any questions or concerns, again, I can't emphasize enough, we are here for you 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. You're not alone, call us anytime.

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