

Managing Bereavement around the Coronavirus (COVID-19)

As the full impact of the Coronavirus unfolds, some people in our community may be faced with the death of loved ones. Physical distancing and travel restrictions could mean that it will be difficult to gather as we traditionally would for funeral rites. For example, in other countries we have seen in some cases people have not been able to say goodbye to their loved ones if they were in isolation. There can be a wide range of thoughts, feelings and reactions to the loss of those we love. Some helpful information and resources are below:

Bereavement

Bereavement is the experience of losing a loved one.¹ The bereaved are commonly defined as close friends or family members, but loved ones can be any important person (or animal) in one's life. The loss of close relationships often affect people more strongly, and in different ways, than they expect. The importance of loved ones in our lives is one of the reasons that their death can have such a significant impact.

Grief

Grief is a term used to describe the natural reaction to the loss of a loved one. It is an emotional response, and also more than that; it's the way our whole mind and body react to losing someone important to us. Since every close relationship is different, people experience grief differently. The special circumstances around any particular loss can be very different depending on the nature of the relationship with the deceased. Losses associated with COVID-19 could also be complicated by physical distancing protocols such as limiting large gatherings, difficulty travelling to services, and the possibility of not being able to be with loved ones who are quarantined or in isolation. While people can experience a range of reactions, the following occur predictably:

- A sense of disbelief
- Sadness
- Frequent thoughts and memories of the deceased
- Difficulty concentrating or being interested in anything other than the person who died
- Confusion, difficulty thinking clearly
- Sense of disconnection from others
- Yearning or longing
- Doing things to try to feel close to the person who died, or trying to avoid reminders that they are gone

Acute grief can feel excruciating and never-ending. Also, immediately after a loss other feelings such as anger, confusion, and difficulty returning to a normal routine may seem unexpected. As painful and disruptive as these thoughts, feelings and behaviors are, they are our body and mind's way of giving ourselves space and time to learn the full impact of the loss, to accept the new reality, and to build new meaning in our lives.

The Process of Adapting to the Loss

It takes time to adapt to all the changes that happen when someone close dies. People cope differently with loss and the time to adapt depends on our relationship with the deceased and how central they are in our lives. For example, for couples who lose a partner, adapting to the loss entails not only the emotional and mental work of coming to terms with the death, but also with the practical work of finding solutions to everyday tasks such as taking out the trash and grocery shopping. Adapting is also affected by rebuilding ongoing relationships and returning to social participation in a community. The presence of close friends, loved ones,

¹ These are broad recommendations based on questions commonly asked. They are not intended to be comprehensive, and do not replace medical advice or public health guidance. If you are concerned about COVID-19 infection or exposure, speak to your primary care provider about testing and additional precautions for your family. If you feel you may also benefit from additional mental health support and guidance, ask your primary care providers for mental health referrals.

and family members is important in helping bereaved people through this process, yet the necessity of physical distancing due to COVID-19 can make this difficult. Keep in mind that physical distancing does not mean emotional distancing, and staying connected with loved ones online, by text, or telephone is an available option.

While everyone's reaction to death is deeply personal, there are commonalities. One is to find a balance between feeling the pain acutely, and then moving away from that pain. Bereaved people need this break from the intense pain to feel positive feelings in the process of learning to live with the loss. However, it's common to feel uncomfortable having positive feelings. Survivor guilt is natural after someone we love dies, but it's important not to let it take over. Here are some things that might be helpful to a bereaved person:

- Find ways to stay connected to the deceased by taking time to remember their accomplishments, or their love and caring
- Find pleasurable activities for yourself and make it a point to engage in them intentionally
- Find ways of marking the transition, such as celebrating a tradition
- Take good care of yourself with exercise, good sleep, and healthy food
- Writing about your experience can be helpful to some, though not all
- Accept help, or ask for support

When to Seek Help

Though extremely painful, most people experience a gradual lessening of grief intensity as they adapt to the loss. Adaptation doesn't happen all at once. It takes time and can occur in fits and starts. The timeline for this process is different for everyone. Generally speaking, the acute period might last from anywhere from weeks to several months. However, for some, the process of adapting can be derailed and grief intensity remains high. This is the condition referred to as "complicated grief" or "Prolonged Grief Disorder." Here are some of the things that can derail the healing process when they are prominent:

Maladaptive Thoughts

- Catastrophizing (believing that the worst is going to happen)
- Ruminating (going over a thought without completion)
- "If-only" thoughts ("Monday morning quarterbacking"; thinking too much about what could have been different)

Dysfunctional Behaviors and Bodily Reactions

- Avoiding reminders that this person is gone, such as the burial site or objects of the deceased
- Avoiding people that remind the person that their loved one is gone
- Disrupted healthy eating, exercise and social contacts
- Attempting to escape from the painful reality of the loss by spending excessive time with mementos of the deceased
- Physical pain

Emotional Dysregulation

- Difficulty managing painful emotions
- Irregular sleeping patterns
- Feeling unable or unwilling to experience positive emotions

Remember that these thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and bodily reactions are normal during grieving, but if you find yourself focusing on them a lot you might want to seek additional professional mental health support.

Resources

The Center for Complicated Grief <https://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu/for-the-public/resources/>

Sources Referenced for this Handout

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