

## Coronavirus Has Upended Our World...It's OK To Grieve

We are now worried about a lot of things in a very different way – our children—no matter their age, fragile elders, relatives, friends, the economy, and of course our own health and wellbeing. Will life ever return to "normal? It may feel like a free-fall. What we once held as solid is no longer something we can rely upon.

The coronavirus pandemic sweeping the globe has not only left many anxious about life and death issues, it has also left people struggling with a host of less obvious, existential losses as they heed stay-home warnings and wonder how bad all of this is going to get.

To weather these uncertain times, *it is important to acknowledge and grieve lost routines, social connections, family structures and our sense of security* — and then create new ways to move forward.

We need to recognize that mixed in with all the feelings we are having of anger, disappointment, perhaps rage, blame and powerlessness – is **grief**. Left unrecognized and unattended, grief can negatively impact every aspect of our being — physically, cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually.

Yet with our national focus on the daily turn of events as the coronavirus spreads and with the chaos it has brought, these underlying or secondary losses may escape us. People who are physically well may not feel entitled to their emotional upset over the disruption of normal life. Yet, *it's important to honor our own losses even if those losses seem small compared to others*.

**We can't heal what we don't have an awareness of.**

### Recognize our losses

Whether we have named them or not, these are some of the community-wide losses many of us are grieving. Consider how you feel when you think of these.

**Social connections**—Perhaps the most impactful of the immediate losses as we hunker down at home is the separation from close friends and family. Children aren't able to play together. There is no in-person social engagement, no hugging, no touching which is disruptive to our emotional well-being. Separation from our colleagues and officemates also creates significant loss. Our work environment is like a second family. Even if we don't love all the people we work with, we still depend on them.

**Habits and habitat**—With the world outside our homes no longer safe to inhabit the way we once did, we have lost our "habits and habitats," as we can no longer engage in

our usual routines and rituals. And no matter how mundane they may have seemed - whether grabbing a morning coffee at the local café, driving to work, or picking up the kids from school – routines help define your sense of self in the world. Losing them shocks your system.

**Assumptions and security**—We go to sleep assuming we will wake up the next morning, that the sun will be there and your friends will all be alive and you will be healthy. But the spread of the virus has shaken nearly every assumption we once counted on. And so we're losing our sense of safety in the world and our assumptions about ourselves.

**Trust in our systems**—When government leaders, government agencies, medical systems, religious bodies, the stock market and corporations fail to meet public expectations, it can leave citizens feeling betrayed and emotionally unanchored. We are all grieving this loss.

**Sympathetic loss for others**—Even if you are not directly affected by a particular loss, you may be feeling the grief of others, including those of displaced workers, of health care workers on the frontlines, of people barred from visiting elderly relatives in nursing homes, of those who have already lost friends and family to the virus and to those who will, including those whose stories you may see on social media and in the news.

## **4 ways to honor your grief**

Once you identify the losses you are feeling, look for ways to honor the grief surrounding you.

### **Bear witness and communicate**

Sharing our stories is an essential step. If you cannot talk about what's happened to you and you cannot share it, you cannot really start working on it. So, communicate with your friends and family about your experience. It can be as simple as picking up the phone and calling a friend or family member, and simply asking for and offering a space in which to share your feelings without either of you offering advice or trying to fix anything for the other.

Grief is not a problem to be solved, it's a presence in the psyche awaiting, witnessing.

For those with robust social networks, gather a group of friends virtually to share these losses together. Using apps, such as Zoom, Skype, Facetime or Facebook Live, virtual meetups are easy to set up on a daily or weekly basis.

**Write, create, express**

Whether you are an extrovert or introvert, keeping a written or recorded journal of these days offers another way to express, to identify and to acknowledge loss and grief.

Art therapy can be especially helpful for children unable to express well with words, for teens, and for many adults. Make a sculpture, draw a picture, or create a ceremonial object.

Use your breath to blow your sadness, fear, and anger into a rock and then throw it away...into an empty field, a body of water, the garbage. Somewhere that it will not hurt you or someone else. What this does is take all that intense, painful energy out of the body and into an inanimate object that is symbolically thrown far away.

**Meditate**

Regular meditation and just taking time to slow down and take several deep, calming breaths throughout the day also works to lower stress and is available to everyone. For beginners who want guidance, download a meditation app onto your smart phone or computer. There are many free options available. Some suggestions are Breethe, Headspace: Meditation & Sleep, Breathe2Relax.

**Be open to joy**

And finally, make sure to let joy and gratitude into your life during these challenging times. Whether it's a virtual happy hour, tea time or dance party, or a parking lot lunch staying in cars with windows down following social distance, reach out to others.

If we can find gratitude in the creative ways that we connect with each other and help somebody, then we can hold our grief better and move through it with less difficulty and more grace.

*Adapted from* STEPHANIE O'NEILL