

Experiencing COVID-19 pandemic as a type of grief or loss

Grief is a natural response to loss that often involves strong, overwhelming emotions. Grief is universal, but it is also very personal. The type of loss (death, breakup, job loss, illness, natural disaster, pandemic, etc.) will influence a person's experience (Mayo Clinic, 2016). According to clinical social worker and therapist Dr. Robert Weiss, in times of crisis like the coronavirus outbreak, we grieve "the loss of our freedoms, a predictable future, and the lives and roles left behind" (2020). Grief is further compounded by the stress and fear about many things for which we have no control, including health, family and friends, work, the country, ways of life and living, and even one's own death (Weiss, 2020). Weiss suggests applying Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' universal process of grief to understand better the shared experience of COVID-19 related grief across the country.

- **Denial.** Loss often occurs with a sense of shock, numbness, and hopelessness. As a result, it is not uncommon for people to have difficulty accepting what happened (Smith & Kostelic, in review; WebMd, 2018). In the case of COVID-19, it does not necessarily mean that people are in denial that it is happening. Rather, they are in denial of the ways in which life will be different moving forward and find it difficult to imagine a new normal. Denial is a way that humans can temporarily deny emotional and even physical pain to help them cope (Weiss, 2020). Amid COVID-19, Weiss (2020) provides the following examples of denial: "This whole thing is overblown." "It's the same as the flu." "I'm not (old, immunocompromised, obese, etc.) so I'll be fine."
- **Anger.** It is normal to feel angry during times of fear and loss. Anger can feel empowering, so people use anger to gain control over fears of the unknown that are often associated with loss. For example, some people will point fingers, get mad, ignore rules, or engage in power struggles versus accepting and dealing with loss (Weiss, 2020). According to Weiss (2020), people who are angry because of COVID-19 might say things like: "This is all China's fault." "I don't care what the governor of my state says; I'm going to work today." "Forget what they told us. I'm having some friends over."
- **Bargaining.** As denial breaks down, people often begin to have "what if" or "if only" thoughts and dwell on what they could have or should have done to prevent the loss (Smith & Kostelic, in review; WebMD, 2018). Bargaining often comes with guilt; therefore, it is common for people to move between stages of anger and bargaining (Weiss, 2020). During the coronavirus, some people will beat themselves up for not socially distancing sooner or for taking that one last trip across the country. Weiss (2020) provides additional examples of bargaining related to COVID-19: "It's OK to spend time with others as long they wash their hands before they see me." "This will be over by Easter, and then we can go back to normal." "I know when people look sick. I will be fine as long as I stay around people who are healthy."
- **Depression or despair.** When the facts and reality begin to sink in and there is no more room for denial, feelings of despair and even depression are common. In despair, you feel hopeless and even purposeless. You may feel sorry for yourself. You can't see the light at the end of the tunnel. You recognize that your attempts at bargaining did not work. Grief and depression look similar, but the intense emotions that come with grief should lessen over time. Weiss (2020) shares that despair during COVID-19 may present in the following ways: "I can't go to work or earn money."

Pretty soon I'll be broke and homeless." "The epidemic is the new normal. I can say goodbye to my hopes and dreams." "I am high-risk and likely to die alone." It is important to reach out for support from family, friends, neighbors and/or health professionals if you are feeling despair or depression (Smith & Kostelic, in review).

- **Acceptance.** Acceptance occurs when you fully acknowledge and accept the reality of what has happened. At this stage, you are no longer denying or fighting facts. Rather, you are learning how to cope and live with the loss. Weiss (2020) provides the following examples of acceptance related to COVID-19: "I can't control the pandemic, but I can do my part by sheltering in place, washing my hands, and staying positive." "The fact that I can't leave my house doesn't mean my life has to stop. I can work from home, connect with family and friends via internet, and enjoy extra time with my [family]." "The world is going to change, but maybe when all this is over, we will be kinder to one another."

Because there is not a typical loss or response to it, Kubler-Ross recognized that complex emotions cannot be easily organized under key words like denial, anger, bargaining, despair, and acceptance. Not everyone will go through these stages, all five of the stages, or even experience the stages in a certain order. Kubler-Ross' stages of grief can, however, help people better understand reactions to loss that many people experience. If you think of the stages as a tool, they can help you identify what you or someone else might be feeling. This can help you to help yourself and others to be better prepared to live with loss.

References:

- Kessler, D. (2020). Finding Meaning. Retrieved <https://grief.com/the-five-stages-of-grief>
- Kübler-Ross, E. (1972). On death and dying. JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association, 221(2), pp. 174-179.
- Mayo Clinic. (2016). What is grief? Retrieved <https://www.mayoclinic.org/patient-visitor-guide/support-groups/what-is-grief>
- Smith, A. & Kostelic, AF. (in review). Living with loss: Understanding grief. FCS Extension publication.
- WebMD. (2018). What is normal grieving and what are the stages of grief? Retrieved <https://www.webmd.com/balance/normal-grieving-and-stages-of-grief#1>
- Weiss, R. (2020). Covid-19 and the grief process. Retrieved <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/love-and-sex-in-the-digital-age/202003/covid-19-and-the-grief-process>