



Understanding Feelings of Grief and Loss

If you are feeling out-of-sorts in the midst of the global pandemic you are not alone. There's a name for the emotional process—it's called grief and loss. When a loved one dies we are not surprised when we experience feelings of grief and loss, but these feelings can also extend to other life circumstances. Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross was famous for her behavioral model outlining five distinct stages encountered during the grieving process. According to [Grief.com](https://www.grief.com), website of former Kübler-Ross colleague and grief expert David Kessler, the stages include **denial**, **anger**, **depression**, **bargaining**, and **acceptance**. The order, intensity, and time it takes to go through the process are unique to every grieving individual.

It's easy to see why **denial** is a step in the process. Everyday news reports bring heartbreaking stories making it sometimes hard to fathom that we are in the midst of such a devastating crisis. It becomes even more surreal when that loss hits closer to home. Those who have permanently lost friends, family, and/or coworkers to COVID-19 have found that the typical grieving process has become even more complicated. The isolation necessary to contain the virus has prompted the abandoning of our cultural rituals around death, forcing people to die and mourn apart. This can create added or intensified feelings of sadness and guilt, especially when a death involves unresolved conflict. Then there's the phenomenon of survivor guilt experienced when someone recovers from an infection, but their loved one does not. We are treading in unfamiliar territory as we are forced to process these emotions without the ability to comfort one another in the flesh.

Those who contract the virus must go through the spectrum of emotions related to grieving the loss of their health. Uninfected people experience similar emotions as they endure the loss of routines, jobs, finances, vacations, rituals like weddings and graduations, and the overwhelming collective loss of the physical freedom to move around without restrictions. Feelings of insecurity about the future compound the grieving process with added emotions such as anxiety, which Kessler calls "anticipatory grief" in a recent interview with the [Harvard Business Review](https://www.hbr.org) (HBR). Kessler describes the process as envisioning an imagined future with worse case scenarios, much like a patient given a terminal diagnosis.

No matter how you label it, the entire experience can be emotionally exhausting and, at times, infuriating. The loss of control over our normal routines often triggers or intensifies new or existing feelings of **anger** and **depression**. Elected officials appear to engage in **bargaining** each time they set goals for a return to normal, only to reschedule as the viral curve follows its own timeline. Progress comes with moving through the process toward **acceptance**. With **acceptance** comes adapting to the

new normal where we find power in our ability to control what we can through actions such as social distancing, handwashing, and wearing masks. Specialists in the field agree that by recognizing and naming our losses we can work through them. As Kessler so succinctly stated in [HBR](#): “Emotions need motion.” That motion means finding new ways to cope and manage with grief and loss as we navigate these troubling times.

For example, lack of physical connection can be temporarily replaced through technology and innovation whether we explore new avenues, such as video conference software, or return to more traditional ways, including phone calls and letter writing. Creativity abounds as across the nation as we are seeing everything from drive-through senior graduation ceremonies to Zoom-based church worship services. Experts also recommend balancing out the feelings of grief and loss with moments of joy and gratitude in our personal lives. Activities such as exercise, singing and dancing, creative writing, and arts and crafts are all good suggestions to divert your focus from the crisis at hand. Seeing a grandchild smile on a video chat is still a joy, despite the distance. In closing, processing feelings of grief and loss is a highly individualized experience and we all need to remember to go easy on ourselves and others as we find our way through.

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LINKS

David Kessler Web Page @ Grief.com

<https://grief.com/the-five-stages-of-grief/>

Harvard Business Review Interview with David Kessler

<https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>

SOURCES

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

<https://afsp.org/story/managing-grief-during-a-pandemic>

The Atlantic /All the Things We Have to Mourn Now

<https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/05/grief-mourning-death-pandemic/610933/>

CNN: That uncomfortable coronavirus feeling: It could be grief

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/15/health/grief-loss-coronavirus-pandemic-wellness/index.html>

PBS: Four ways to take care of your mental health during the corona pandemic

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/watch-live-psychiatrist-takes-your-question-on-coping-during-covid-19>

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