

## **GRIEVING WELL DURING COVID-19**

### **Responding to Loss with Resilient Perspectives and Practices**

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#### **Recognizing Our Cumulative Losses**

During the past two years of this global pandemic, we have all suffered multiple and cumulative losses. According to John Hopkins University, as of Dec 2021, 5.3 million people have died of Covid-19 worldwide. We know from research the more sudden and unexpected a death the more difficult it can be to process the loss. This is especially true when a person dies young or was otherwise healthy because this goes against our assumption of how the world “should be.” The ripple effects of Covid-19 have also led to many other deaths due to war, migration, sickness, and community violence. We have also been living through a time of significant losses of other types. Many have lost jobs, a sense of routine, access to healthy coping habits, a sense of trust in institutions, mental health, important relationships, or even have a lost sense of safety due to systemic, racial, political, and economic turmoil. Considering the many sudden, traumatic, cumulative, and at times seemingly invisible losses we have faced due to Covid-19 we need to make space to grieve well.

Depending on our cultures and contexts we normally expect to be able to be beside our loved ones in their final moments, to attend their funerals, and to share food, stories, and to embrace one another to assist us through the pain. Yet for many even these normal grieving practices are part of what has been lost.

Many of us have not been able to travel home to see ill loved ones due to border closing, backlogged visa processes, or other necessary Covid restrictions. For some, this has meant being blocked from returning before their loved one passed. For others the barriers have not been national borders but the borders of the ICU walls preventing them from being with their loved ones in their final fight for life. For some this has meant not being able to attend a service or a funeral in person. Being prohibited from these normal practices makes it especially difficult to process how a sudden death is a reality when we have not seen a body or a coffin to help us process the finality of the loss. The inability to practice physical accompaniment in the face of loss is another tragedy that has robbed us of vital sources of comfort.

All this grief can feel too big to face. Humans are inclined to avoid pain and uncertainty. We are naturally compelled to push ahead, distract, or numb ourselves when circumstances feel overwhelming and out of our control. However, if we do not address the pain, it will end up causing us compounded physical, emotional, occupational, and relational problems over time.

#### **Responding Resiliently to Our Losses**

At Headington Institute we focus on prevention, and building resilience in the face of stress and trauma. We can do our best to prevent traumatic loss, but when crisis happens, one of the ways we

show our resilience is by being able to make choices about how we respond to the suffering. We can retain our agency by choosing to move towards and through the pain in emotionally regulated ways. We do this by learning to recognize, name, and mourn our losses, while also discovering ways to become re-oriented to our lives to even deeper connection. When we understand that growth can emerge out of suffering, we can face the loss with self-compassion and resilience.

### Resilient Grief Perspectives and Practices

The following practices were developed out of my doctoral dissertation on Complicated Grief and have been used in a multicultural communal faith context to enable people to grieve well during this global pandemic. May these ten practices enable you and your community to respond resiliently to your losses.

1. Slowing down to count your losses. Carve out time in your schedule to pause and make room for intentional grieving. Practice compassion towards yourself as you recognize and name the many and diverse losses you have been carrying.

Practice: If you would like, you can write in a journal or speak to a friend about the various losses you have faced. Remember to write down and recall the people who have died and the various circumstances of loss from this season.

2. Recognizing where you might be holding the grief in your body. Our entire bodies are the organs of our emotions. We feel our grief not only in our thoughts or emotional reasoning, but in our bodies. As you take time to note the various losses you have faced, think about the way your body has been carrying these losses.

Practice: As you listen to your body what might it be speaking to you about the grief you are holding? Commit to doing something this week to tend to your body. Make more time for rest, movement, exercise, stretching, time in nature, etc.

3. Allowing space for a range of emotions. Our grieving process is as complex as our relationship was with the person who died. In many communities and cultures, it is primarily acceptable to display sadness or longing for the person or situation that has been lost. The reality is loss can unleash a vast array of emotions including anger, anxiety, fear, relief, joy, despair, guilt, etc. There are no "bad emotions" there are just "big emotions". We can experience multiple feelings at the same time and the ability to name and safely express those emotions is key to expanding our emotional regulation and resilience.

Practice: If you have access to paints or colors, draw a large circle; then, take time to paint with the different colors that represent the emotions you are carrying with you. Fill the circle with the colors that represent your various emotions from this season. Notice the variety of feelings that emerge and become integrated on the paper before you.

4. Telling the story. Telling a full story of our loss is part of what can help us heal, especially when we are able to connect the chronological facts of what happened with the emotions we felt and feel related to the event. Often at funerals and memorials part of what is healing is to hear the stories that enable us to make sense of how the person died and what their life meant. Although

many of our communal times of grieving have been blocked, we still need to find ways to tell these meaning-making stories to help us heal.

Practice: Write down in a journal or speak to a trusted person or group of close people about the story of how the person(s) died. Try to narrate a beginning, middle and end and include as many emotions as you feel ready to express. You can also write the story of how you lost a job, a relationship, etc. If you want, you can share memories of the person's life and what the person meant to you.

5. Continuing the Conversation. One of the most painful parts of sudden loss is not having had the chance to say goodbye or to have had the chance to finish a conversation that was incomplete or was interrupted.

Practice: Take some time to express out loud or on paper anything you want to say to the person who died, to the situation, or even to God/ the Divine. It does not have to be positive, just honest and from your heart. You can even express questions and doubts. If possible, find a setting to express this that is representative of your connection to the person or situation.

6. Negotiating a continuing bond. Although the person has died the attachment never has to die. The question is what kind of attachment bond do you want to carry with you from your relationship with the person? You can continue to cultivate a healthy internal bond that never has to die by remembering the healthy parts of the person you want to continue to hold onto. At the same time there may be aspects of the attachment that were hurtful to you that you want to mourn and release. It's okay to make room to wrestle with the disappointments and hurts of the relationship while also figuring out if there are parts you may want to hold onto and cherish.

Practice: Is there a symbol or object that represents your connection to the person who died that you might want to carry with you as a sign of the ongoing bond you have together? When you see this symbol, you can recall the words the person said to you, memories you shared, foods and recipes you enjoyed, and life lessons you cherish.

7. Working towards an acceptable meaning. Speaking with family, friends, a therapist, or a faith community leader to help you "make meaning" of the loss may be a lifelong process, but a crucial one for those who wish to find healing. For many this can mean tapping into transcendent and spiritual understandings of suffering, post- traumatic growth, and the afterlife. In many faith traditions, it is about making room for the expression of lament, gratitude, and mystery. Often at funerals part of what is healing is to hear how the community is making meaning of the death in the context of some larger narrative. You may also need to look for communities or persons within your organization that are able to hold a more robust and nuanced narrative of suffering.

Practice: What are the questions you struggle with as you think about your loss(es)? Where and with whom might you continue this meaning-making conversation?

8. Re-engaging life. Although you can carry an internal attachment to the person forever it is also crucial that you connect with a community of people who are alive with you now. Little by little it is important to make new memories, and to contemplate future goals. It may take time to revisit places or situations that remind you of the person who died, do so compassionately and gradually.

Practice: Think about who is a safe person you can connect with this week? What kind of connection are you needing at this moment (i.e., going for a walk, having a coffee, planning a zoom call)? What activity/hobby might you want to try that will help you to re-engage your life in a pleasurable way? What is a dream or future goal that gives you a sense of motivation and purpose?

9. Recapturing healing grieving rituals. Many cultures have found ways to grieve effectively throughout history using rituals, symbols, and communal practices. When someone is facing loss, it can be very reassuring to have clear expectations on how the community will grieve and provide for the family of the person who has died.

Practice: Recall the wealth of cultural grieving rituals or practices from your community or country. What obstacles have prevented you from accessing these practices? Are there any ways you might creatively adapt some version for the current circumstance for yourself or others who might join you?

10. Seeking professional accompaniment. If you discover you are having trouble re-engaging with life and find yourself avoiding situations in ways that affects your daily functioning, you may be experiencing Complicated Grief/ Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD). When losses are traumatic (e.g., covid related deaths), it can be especially painful to mourn when our pleasant memories are also paired with our traumatic memories of the person who has died. If you can relate to feeling stuck in your grief in this way and it has been at least six months after the passing of your loved one, you likely need additional support.

Practice: One of the most courageous things we can do is to admit that we need help getting through a difficult season. Who can you speak to this week to get professional help with your grief? Is there a licensed therapist, psychologist, or medical doctor you can consult with about your grief experiences? Through these links you can find a few additional resources for specialized support related to Complicated Grief/ Prolonged Grief Disorder:

<https://prolongedgrief.columbia.edu/for-the-public/resources-2/>

<https://prolongedgrief.columbia.edu/for-the-public/find-a-therapist/>

#### **Related Sources:**

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