LOSS AND GRIEF DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic is forcing many of us to change the way we go about our daily lives. With those changes, some of us are experiencing a wave of losses: economic, social, physical and emotional. For some, these losses may build up and lead to feelings of grief. Why is it important to accept and allow these feelings? Only by acknowledging the grief we're going through can we take steps to heal.

It may come as a surprise to realize that grief can be a reaction to events other than death. Such emotional reactions may include shock, numbness, denial, anger, fear, anxiety, panic and guilt as individuals learn to live with loss. Even authors such as Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler, who have described **grief as occurring in stages**, point out grief is not linear. It's normal to experience a variety of emotions, and grief is often described as being like a roller coaster. Another analogy is what Dr. Alan Wolfelt phrases "the wilderness of grief," a journey that's very unpredictable and difficult to navigate.

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UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

In linking our feelings of loss to grief, it's helpful to first have an understanding of the various types of grief.

Ambiguous grief is a loss that occurs without closure or clear understanding and often results in unresolved feelings. The rapidness of our lives changing during the pandemic has caused many to be left with a real sense of unease. The losses we are experiencing are not typically acknowledged as losses by our friends and families, such as losing our confidence in the future, losing our security that we'll graduate by a specific date or losing our feelings of control over our own lives. All of these are losses that we may grieve, but we have no rituals or even language to acknowledge them as such.

Latent (hidden) grief is often associated with caregivers of individuals with dementia. It attributes caregiver burden to the hidden grief that comes with losses associated with dementia, such as loss of memory, loss of relationships as they once were, or loss of mobility. Each time the person living with dementia changes, they and those around them grieve those changes. The thought is that addressing the hidden feelings of grief can diminish the burden. Similarly, losses, both big and small, can build up and lead to overwhelming feelings of loss, sadness, powerlessness, anxiety and depression.

Anticipatory grief refers to our feelings of grief even before a loss occurs. For example, we may be worried about a very ill family member and already feel that we are grieving them. Or we may be anticipating even more loss of income and financial insecurity. Even though our worst fears may not come to pass, anticipating them can lead to legitimate feelings of grief.

LOSSES AND COVID-19

COVID-19 has brought dramatic changes to our lives, including many losses, such as:

- **Economic security:**
  The pandemic has resulted in large unemployment numbers, a fear of further job loss and an economic recession.

- **Health:**
  Fears of contracting COVID-19 have led to increased health risks for the most vulnerable. Of particular note is secondary harm for people who need care but are avoiding hospitals, or for those who can't access their doctor easily due to increased demand due to the pandemic. This situation has also highlighted existing and persisting health inequalities. The heaviest burden of this pandemic will be felt by those facing the greatest economic, health and social inequities.

- **Food security:**
  Food is both a necessity and a source of comfort. The financial crisis, closure of social services and increasing pressure on our safety net has resulted in a growing number of Canadians living in hunger.

- **Friends:**
  Despite the virtual connections available, for many the inability to connect with friends and family in the same physical space has led to isolation and loneliness. Humans need connection.

- **Ceremony/tradition (graduation, funerals, weddings):**
  The traditional markers for milestones have been cancelled or shifted online, leaving many with unresolved feelings.

- **Stability/safety:**
  The home environment does not provide safety and security for everyone. Cases of domestic and child abuse are currently on the rise.

- **Sense of personal freedom:**
  While physical distancing measures are now a necessity, they may leave individuals feeling like a prisoner in their own homes.

- **Future dreams:**
  With the turmoil of the pandemic, many have put future plans and hopes on hold. This loss of hope can be particularly painful.

- **Death:**
  Many have lost a family member or friend to COVID-19.

- **Academic stability:**
  For parents and students alike, the added stress of homeschooling, concerns about impact on their future education and uncertainty of when and how schools will reopen has created great strain.

It's not surprising that we may be going through a multitude of feelings.

WAYS TO COPE

- **Name it.**
  In naming our feelings as grief, we can begin to understand the underlying emotions it brings and address them. Emotions are not right or wrong. However, we need to recognize that we'll experience such feelings as denial, anger, frustration and sadness, and that we need to feel the depths of our pain in order to work through our grief. Responses to loss and how people experience and express grief vary greatly by individual. It's also important to remember grief is a process, not an event or a race. With support and the willingness to do the difficult work, we can get through it.

- **Validate it.**
  We need to recognize all feelings and acknowledge them as important without judgement. Suppressing our feelings or feeling guilty for having them doesn't allow us to take steps to resolve them. Encouraging ourselves and those around us to mourn all losses, big and small, is key.

- **Mourn.**
  To assist in further understanding the difficult journey of grief, Dr. William Worden developed ***The Four Tasks of Mourning.*** Again, these are not linear, and everyone's journey is unique. While the tasks were created around mourning the death of an individual, they can also be applied to other loss.

  They include:

  ◊ To accept the reality of the loss.
  ◊ Experience and process the pain of grief.
  ◊ Adjust to the world without the deceased or with the loss.
  ◊ Find a way to maintain a connection to the deceased/loss, while embarking on your own life.

- **Celebrate the good.**
  While COVID-19 has brought great uncertainty and loss, we can also find meaning in the good it may have brought into our lives: closer ties, time for reflection, realization of what is important to us and what our priorities are. Spending time writing in a journal and acknowledging the things for which we're grateful can be a simple yet valuable exercise.

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- **Routine.**
  At a time when life feels particularly chaotic, setting a routine is important and ensures we have a mixture of social, physical and educational activities in our day. Routine doesn't mean rigidity, but it can offer a sense of control.

- **Self-care.**
  Time constraints still exist. Virtual work, study, child and elder care, and even socializing can result in a hectic schedule. Ensure there's still time for self-care (however that may look). Taking a walk, exercising and meditating are all ways we can be kind to ourselves. A sample meditation is available **here**.

- **Avoid comparing.**
  It's easy to compare ourselves to individuals who are coping differently with the current situation. Especially when we're already feeling low, it can drain us of our limited energy and can lead to resentment towards others and towards ourselves. Instead, focus on your own strengths and coping strategies. Listing your strengths and issues you have overcome is an effective way of highlighting and celebrating your own ability to cope.

- **Lean on friends/family.**
  Encouraging students to socialize virtually is important. Free applications like Zoom and FaceTime provide a platform for human connection. For those that have developed "Zoom fatigue," a simple phone call may provide that needed human connection.

- **Seek support.**
  Now more than ever, it's important to reach out and seek the support of professionals. Find information on services available through the Canadian Mental Health Association **here**.

  CMHA Ontario's **BounceBack** program is also a great option for support with mild to moderate symptoms of anxiety or depression, such as feeling low, stressed out, worried, depressed, irritable or angry.

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