

Revisiting Grief During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Phenomena of Disenfranchised Grief

Here in the United States the most widely accepted model and process for dealing with grief is the 5 Stages Model developed by Swiss born Psychiatrist, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross MD. Dr Ross introduced the Stages of Grief model in her 1969 book, "On Death and Dying".

THE 5 STAGES OF GRIEF

- 1-Denial (Shock)
- 2-Anger (Depression)
- 3-Bargaining
- 4-Depression (Grief)
- 5-Acceptance

It was long believed that individuals would pass through each of these stages until ultimately reaching a place of acceptance with the time frames for each stage varying for each individual.

In recent years some additional factors have emerged and have come to be accepted as well.

- Grieving is not necessarily a linear process and not everybody will experience all 5 stages.
- Everyone will experience at least 2 stages (According to Dr. Ross' later work).
- Grief is highly individualized and people grieve differently.
- Grief is not only about the death of a loved one and encompasses many types of loss.
- There is no right or wrong way to grieve.
- If you never fully grieved a first loss you will likely be unable to complete any other grief process.
- Addiction compounds matters. In recovery when the chemical "feelings stuffer" is removed a flood of emotions is likely to emerge related to a compilation of losses from many years earlier.
- "Delayed Grief Syndrome" is often seen in addiction treatment clients.
- Those in recovery may grieve in a stacking/overlap way (multiple/cumulative losses at once).
- Individuals may or may not be able to identify the individual or particular losses.
- Either way this grieving is still therapeutic and healing.
- Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is effective in helping to process grief.

Other losses that impact people and involve grieving:

- Divorce
- Relocation
- Adoption
- Foster care (both directions)
- Job loss
- Incarceration
- Property loss, robbery, fire, flood, tornado, earthquake
- Loss of limb, body part, health
- Life threatening diagnosis
- Loss of dreams
- Loss of the future (plans etc.)

The Rise of Disenfranchised Grief During the Pandemic.

Disenfranchise: “To deprive of a right or privilege”

- Grief: is an individual’s reaction or personal response to a significant loss. Grief has emotional, physical, behavioral, cognitive, social, cultural and spiritual dimensions and often includes an intense heavy sadness in response to a meaningful loss.
- Disenfranchised Grief: Grief that someone experiences when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be socially sanctioned, openly acknowledged or publicly mourned. This has been happening more and more with the loss of lives related to COVID-19. Restrictions and distancing requirements have kept loved ones separated from their dearly departed. In person rituals and traditional ceremonies have been scrapped or attendance greatly limited and we have seen the rise of a brand new phenomena, virtual funerals.
- Many instances of disenfranchised grief are not typically acknowledged or may not be “acceptable” in society Other examples/losses: Therapist, patient, teacher, coach, neighbors, colleagues, same sex partner, lover, extramarital affair, ex-spouse, foster parents, step parent, In laws, celebrities, idols, pets, perinatal deaths, abortions, suicide, addiction overdose deaths.
- There is no workplace bereavement leave for most of these losses which may affect an individual as much or more than those for which leave is authorized (family).
- Factors in disenfranchised grief related to-COVID-19 include: Lack of closure, Loss of ritual, lack of close proximity, sense of regret, unable to be there for loved ones in person, loss of tradition, need to find ways to memorialize; resort to use of alternative customs/creation of new rituals.

Signs of Potential Pandemic Related Grief

Trouble focusing on normal tasks,: Sleeping much more or less than usual, Feelings of anger and irritability, Headaches, upset stomach, Fatigue or low energy, Re-experiencing feelings of past grief, Engaging in activities such as eating, drinking, or online shopping to cope with anxiety, Avoiding thinking or talking about the pandemic.

Anticipatory Grief: Occurs in advance of an actual loss, perhaps during the course of a loved ones extended or prolonged illness. We are seeing more of this these days as well as loved ones lose their battle with the virus after a period of time.

How are you dealing with and processing grief? Some helpful tips:

Writing, journaling, sharing with others, zoom meetings and gatherings, individualized rituals, write goodbye letters and burning them, sending notes to heaven inside balloons, making scrap books, video tributes, drawing, painting and other creative expressions.

For assistance with grief and grieving contact:

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