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# Grieving the Losses of Coronavirus

In addition to the tragic losses of life and health and jobs we are grieving the losses of weddings, sports and the ability to buy eggs or get a haircut.



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**By Lori Gottlieb**

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When it comes to the coronavirus outbreak, what's the word related to mental health that you hear most? If you said "anxiety," you're not alone. But if you were to sit (virtually, of course) in a therapist's office like mine or any of my colleagues', what you might hear just as often is the word "loss."

This may seem obvious, because many people are experiencing tremendous loss as a result of this global pandemic: loss of life, loss of loved ones, loss of health, loss of jobs and income. For those who are losing loved ones at this time, there is also the loss of the normal rituals of funerals and communities gathering to grieve together.

But what might be less obvious are the smaller losses that also affect our emotional health.

As a therapist, I always say that there's no hierarchy of pain — pain is pain. Suffering shouldn't be ranked, because pain is not a contest. I believe, too, that there's no hierarchy of grief. When we rank our losses, when we validate some and minimize others, many people are left alone to grieve what then become their silent losses. The thinking often goes: *You had a miscarriage, but you didn't lose a baby. You had a breakup, but you didn't lose a spouse.* It's hard to talk about these silent losses because we fear that

other people will find them insignificant and either dismiss them or expect us to “get over them” relatively quickly.

Right now, in addition to the tragic losses of life and health and jobs are the losses experienced by people of all ages: missed graduations and proms, canceled sports seasons and performances, postponed weddings and vacations, separation from family and friends when we need them most. We have also lost the predictability that we take for granted in daily life: that there will be eggs and toilet paper on supermarket shelves, that we can safely touch a door knob with our bare hands, that we can get a haircut and our teeth cleaned or spend a Saturday afternoon at the movies.

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So, yes, there is collective anxiety surrounding Covid-19, but there’s also collective loss. Here are some ways to help navigate through our losses.

## 1. Acknowledge the grief

Although anxiety is unpleasant, it can be easier to acknowledge anxiety than to acknowledge grief. That’s because there are two kinds of anxiety: productive anxiety and unproductive anxiety. We can turn our anxiety into something productive (using our worry to take actions such as hand-washing, social distancing, sending meals to elderly relatives, or calling a neighbor who lives alone) or unproductive (spending all day clicking on the latest coronavirus headlines). Either way, anxiety tends to be active.

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Grieving, on the other hand, is a much quieter process. It requires us to sit with our pain, to feel a kind of sadness that makes many of us so uncomfortable that we try to get rid of it. Even under normal circumstances, we do this to ourselves and our children. A child might say, “I’m sad” and the parent says, “Oh, don’t be sad. Hey, let’s go get some ice cream!” In the age of coronavirus, a child might say: “I’m so sad that I’m missing seeing my friends every day” and the parent, trying to lessen the child’s pain, might say: “But honey, we’re so lucky that we’re not sick and you’ll get to see your friends soon!” A more helpful response might be: “I know how sad you are about this. You miss being with your friends so much. It’s a big loss not to have that.”

Just as our kids need to have their grief acknowledged, we need to acknowledge our own. We tend to mistake feeling *less* for feeling *better*, but it helps to remember that the feelings are still there — they’ll just come out in other ways: in an inability to sit still, in being short-tempered (which is especially problematic in close quarters), in a lack of appetite or a struggle to control one’s appetite, in an inability to concentrate or sleep.

The more we can say to ourselves and the people around us, “Yes, these are meaningful losses,” the more seen and soothed we will feel.

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### 2. Stay in the present

There's a term to describe the kind of loss many of us are experiencing: [ambiguous grief](#). In ambiguous grief, there's a murkiness to the loss. A typical example could be a person whose spouse has dementia: you're still married but your spouse no longer recognizes you. (Your partner is alive but "not there.") Another might be the inability to get pregnant. (You're grieving the loss of a child you haven't yet had.)

With Covid-19, on top of the tangible losses, there's the uncertainty about how long this will last and what will happen next that leaves us mourning our current losses as well as ones we haven't experienced yet. (No Easter, no prom, and what if this means we can't go on summer vacation?)

Ambiguous grief can leave us in a state of ongoing mourning, so it's important for us to stay grounded in the present. Instead of futurizing or catastrophizing — ruminating about losses that haven't actually happened yet (and may never happen) — we can focus on the present by adopting a concept I call "[both/and.](#)" Both/and means that we can feel loss in the present and also feel safe exactly where we are — snuggled up with a good book, eating lunch with our kids who are home from school, taking a walk with a family member, and even celebrating a birthday via FaceTime.

We may have lost our sense of normalcy, but we can still stay present for the ordinary right in front of us.

### 3. Let people experience loss in their own way

Although loss is universal, the ways in which we grieve are deeply personal. For instance, one college student who's grieving the loss of a missed spring quarter might want to isolate in her bedroom, while another who's grieving the same loss might need a lot of family time. Similarly, one person in a couple might deal with loss by staying hyper-informed and discussing the latest news updates over dinner, while the other might want to binge-watch "Love Is Blind" and not talk about what's going on at all. For some, the loss of stability leads to a reckoning with mortality, while for others, it leads to a rehaul of one's closet or stress-baking.

In other words, there's no one-size-fits-all for grief. Even Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's familiar stages of grieving — denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance — aren't meant to be linear. Everyone moves through loss in a unique way, so it's important to let people do their grieving in whatever way works for them without diminishing their losses or pressuring them to grieve the way you are. A good rule of thumb: you do you (and let others do them).

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