

Managing loss during Covid-19.

While many people are familiar with the grief that occurs after a death, anticipatory grief is not often discussed. What is anticipatory grief and how has it impacted during the pandemic?

Anticipatory grief is a feeling of grief before an impending loss. It's often experienced by those who are approaching the end of life, but is also felt due to non-death-related losses.

The loss of a job, where we worked so tirelessly. The ending of a romance that was still in the early enough stages that we hadn't shared it publicly. The decline of our own or a loved one's mental, emotional, or physical health. The ending of a marriage, or a meaningful friendship. A failure to meet a private goal no one else knew we were trying for. The loss of personal safety that comes from experiencing a crime or accident. Or the moral injury that comes from a public mistake.

Sometimes our hidden losses can be experiences we choose not to share with the world. In these cases there are no rites or rituals performed. There are no traditions or cards to mark them and so we walk through our grief in a more isolated way.

When we consider the impact of COVID-19, we're collectively experiencing an emotional state of anticipatory grief where we've acutely been feeling this sense of loss.

We'll have experienced periods of disbelief and possible denial in the early days of lockdown, that this situation has come to what it has in such a short span of time.

Feelings of sadness due to the many changes that have happened in our lives. The sudden loss of security and normality where our institutions and businesses have been forced to close. The restrictions on meeting others that have been imposed on our relationships. These losses can trigger feelings of frustration and hopelessness and that our sense of freedom has been violated.

These emotional states, similar to the grief we feel when we lose a loved one, are certainly not experienced in an orderly or linear manner. In fact the motions of circumstantial grief can be just as chaotic. There may have been days where we felt better accepting the situation than others.

There are also levels of apprehension and anticipation about what lies ahead which may complicate our feelings further. Unlike bereavement, anticipatory grief lacks a sense of finality. This is the reason why many people have found the pandemic extremely challenging.

We have a hard enough time as a culture honouring the grief that stems from the death of a loved one, even though we do at least acknowledge that publicly through the rituals of funerals and memorial services. It's not surprising we can find it difficult to deal with other losses.

What measures can we take to support our emotional and mental wellbeing during this pandemic?

Here are 10 tips to combat the hidden losses of a lockdown

- Give yourself time to process what you're feeling and monitor any psychological and physical symptoms you may experience. To support you, keep a journal which will help you express overwhelming emotions and track causes of stress while recognising repeated triggers and symptoms to reduce their impact on you.
- Taking time out to practise self-care during the pandemic is imperative. Find out which self-care strategies work best for you. Learn how to apply them and implement them into your routine.
- Consider taking a break or limiting how you use social media, especially if current affairs and news updates provoke feelings of anxiety. This may include un-following or switching off notifications on devices.
- Avoid isolation and connect with trusted family and friends, albeit virtually for now. Communication is vital as others aren't aware of what's happening internally for you. Expressing what support is required from them is essential for self-care.
- Include some physical activity throughout the day, such as a walk, exercise or yoga. Exercising produces endorphins, the body's feel-good chemicals, which have a positive impact on your mood, cognitive functioning, energy levels, and overall sense of wellbeing.
- If there's anything we've learnt during this pandemic it's that specific facts are unchangeable. Focus on aspects you can control such as following expert advice and protecting yourself, your family and local community.
- There are many peer and support groups available online. Connect with others if it supports your wellbeing and enhances your personal growth.
- There's greater awareness of mindfulness and meditation practice, which presents an opportunity to detach observations from our environment and instead draws attention to the present. Neuroscience research confirms a mindfulness practice increases the connection between the amygdala and prefrontal cortex parts of the brain, both of which support us to be less reactive to stresses.

- Although highs and lows are inevitable in life, when we adopt a kinder mindset toward ourselves and practise self-compassion we discover our worth is not contingent on our successes and achievements. Instead, we accept our personal history which is unchangeable. Self-compassion allows us to acknowledge and accept responsibility, and acts as a catalyst towards our growth.
- Discover a sense of meaning during this period. What lifestyle changes could you make to enhance your personal growth? This may be an opportunity to explore a past interest, or learn a new hobby.

It's important to note anticipatory grief is a normal process in the continuum of grief. However, in some cases this grief can be intensive and interfere with your ability to cope.

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