

# Bereavement and grief in the COVID-19 pandemic

**"Grief does not change you... It reveals you."**

**John Green wrote, in *The Fault in our Stars***

As it is becoming clear in the emerging COVID-19 pandemic, it is increasingly likely that we will all begin to experience the loss of known others to the virus. For many, it will be a close other, perhaps a family member or friend.

Short of a sharp, incisive and unlikely interruption to the spread of the disease, there is much grief on its way to every corner of the globe in the coming months.

While we speak of grief as an undesirable emotion, it is also a vital one. It is a powerful way of honouring and re-affirming the value of the person we have lost and what that person stood for. It is also a mechanism that helps us to adjust to the new order that we face. For this reason, interrupted grief typically leads to interrupted adjustment.

But because of the deep pain that is the hallmark of grief, it is an emotion that we are almost hard-wired to try and avoid. In their book *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler outline the stages of the process of grieving that is typical from the time of the loss to its acceptance by the bereaved.

Other writers have noted that when we grieve, while we are processing the loss of the loved one, we are also processing the loss of our sense of immortality. We are brought face-to-face with our own frailty and the impermanence of life – realities that we hate to acknowledge.

There is no universal grief formula. We all have different coping styles, emotional predilections and levels of resilience. Grief can take months or years. But most of us are likely to cycle through some or all of the stages that Kubler Ross and Kessler delineate. The stages might be seen as ways in which we stagger the process of grieving as our emotions allow us to forge ahead. The principal stages are as follows:

1. **Denial:** This, the most primitive response, manifests as a denial of the significance of the loss. "She was old and frail. It is better that she has passed on."



2. **Anger:** If we can't change the loss, the action-oriented emotion of anger allows us to do something that we hope will make the loss feel less profound. "Why is our health system so pathetic? If it were not for them, she would probably still be alive."
3. **Bargaining:** This is often a last-ditch effort to convince ourselves that we have some measure of control. "I have lost my mother, but at least my father is still strong and healthy."
4. **Depression/Despair:** When we have given up the hope of control, it is usual to feel despair at our helplessness. "There is no reason to get up in the morning in the face of what is happening."
5. **Acceptance:** We surrender to the facts and take hope in the valuable relationships that have survived. "I so miss my mother, but I am surrounded by wonderful people who inspire me to come out of this stronger than I was."

Kessler has also proposed in his most recent book a sixth stage to the grieving process, namely finding meaning. Already, we can see how the world is finding meaning in the sweeping losses wrought by Covid-19: The shared songs across the piazzas of a shattered Italy; the long, rich conversations around the world made possible by seamless technology, the renewal of a sense of community and mutual support in drawn-out social isolation; the regrouping of disparate families, far more appreciative of one another than ever before; a new appreciation of the ability to work, play and eat in the company of valued others.

With the above in mind, the following are useful guides to processing grief:

1. **Try to remember more than you try to forget:** Grief is about squaring up to the scale of your loss. Remember how valuable the departed person is. Don't let denial encourage you to forget them.
2. **Emotions need motion:** Like all emotions, grief passes through us as we experience it. Like all emotions, it is released as much as it is felt. When we let them through, they do their work and move along. And we do so in turn.
3. **Schedule the grieving:** If the grief is getting in the way of other things that really have to get done, schedule grieving time so that you can give it space but also encourage it to not interfere with daily life. Some people find value in setting aside a quiet, contemplative 20 minutes a day to focus on what was lost. For many, that stops the sadness from invading when it is most unwelcome.
4. **Stay connected:** It is natural to take from a loss that connection is dangerous. It almost always leads to pain. But the pain of being disconnected will always be more damaging than any lost connection will. Force yourself to spend time with valued others despite your grief.
5. **Take basic good care of yourself:** Ensure you exercise, sleep, eat and challenge yourself socially and intellectually consistently - through life, not just through this passage of grief. Don't do these things because they feel good. Do them because you just have to.

