

Ambiguous Loss: Grieving in the Time of COVID-19

Question and Answer

With regards to resiliency, we aren't just dealing with the pandemic, but also global climate change, extreme political rancor, racial injustice, etc. What kind of mindset - approach can help with walking thru this time?

As with all kinds of grief, each individual will have a unique response. Each person is going to have a different combination of things that will help them walk through this time. For me, I feel like a lot of support can be found in knowing the grief guideposts. Starting with acknowledging the pain of the grief, acknowledging that this it is true, and then feeling all the feelings, the anger, the sadness and injustice.

Once we allow our feelings we can then put that into action at some point. Ask yourself the questions: *“What do I need right now?”* and *“what is being asked of me today?”*. Thinking about what is being asked of you is a really important question when we start talking about racial injustice or climate change. What changes do I need to make as a result of this grief?

Acknowledgement is important, but that’s only the beginning. Feeling our feelings about those issues has to lead to action. And we have to nurture ourselves so that we're not doing that from an empty fuel tank.

For each of us, we have to ask ourselves, what is it that we are being called to do . At times we need a great degree of compassion and kindness, and also at times we need be fierce about our actions. Fierce compassion.

And whether you're grieving racial injustices or grieving climate changes, or you're grieving the political situation, or democracy grief – it is important to acknowledge that these are valid things people are experiencing and we can go back to the guideposts as a foundation for our own unique response to this type of grief.

In thinking about loss, what about the process of losing something where the person, place, or thing is not yet gone but slipping away? Is that still considered ambiguous loss?

Yes, that's one kind of ambiguous loss.

I think of dementia or Alzheimer’s, as well as other conditions like brain injuries or people who are in a coma – there are a lot of ways in which that loss is ambiguous because they're still alive, but they're not themselves. And oftentimes, you can't really communicate; or if you can, they may forget the next moment, and it's very, very hard and challenging for those who love an individual experiencing this. There’s a lot of support specifically for people going through this kind of loss. Support groups can be helpful because you can talk together and feel like you are with others who understand the ambiguity of the loss.

Can people mourn privately, meaning it is not visible to anyone? Not everyone feels comfortable mourning publicly

You definitely can mourn privately. It is the movement of the feelings that is important. You want to prevent the feelings from getting stuck, and make sure that you are actually feeling them and expressing them somehow. And all of that could be done privately.

Most people who work in the grief world say we're not meant to grieve alone, because support can be really helpful. During the time of grief and for a lot of cultures, grief is definitely not a private thing, but even then we all express it differently.

How can I cope and navigate the grief cycle when I randomly move around and the cycle each day?

I understand that it's so hard to cope with grief sometimes and navigate this terrain because your feelings can be all over the place. That's where I think support can be helpful because you can get some specific tools that give you ideas about what to do during this roller coaster ride that you're on. Sometimes even knowing that the up and down cycle of feelings is a part of the process can be helpful to you. I know when I show my clients the diagram of what we want grief to look like and what it actually looks like, people say, "oh my gosh, yes, that's me every day". the more I think you acknowledge the loss and you get the support to help you be with the feelings it tends to shift over time.

How do you show up and be there for someone else who is grieving?

The things that I've shared with you today can be shared with someone who's grieving.

I also think that the most important thing you can do is listen, is to just be present and say things like *"I'm here for you. I know I can't fix this. I can't make your grief go away, but I am here."*

When supporting someone who is grieving, it is not the time to share your own experiences of grief or to try to fix it. Sharing your story can come later. Don't judge or try to minimize what they're experiencing. Try reflecting back what they say to you as you listen with presence.

I often find that sharing poetry, if people are open to it, can be helpful. There's a lot of grief poetry and sharing that with someone who's grieving can be powerful because poets seem to be able to put things in words that we can't quite do in other ways.

How do you support someone who shows signs – they're grieving, but aren't open to the idea that they're grieving – especially if you're quarantined with them?

I think that you just wait for them to be ready. And you could share that you went to a grief webinar and give some of the information you've learned from the webinar. But I think that you just want to be with them and listen. Be gentle with them and follow their lead.

It can be helpful to simply ask them about what's going on – *"Do you think this might be grief? You know, you've had a lot of loss or are experiencing a big loss."*

Sometimes it takes a long time before people are ready to experience and express their grief.

Can you share a little more about metabolized grief?

I'm referring to grief that hasn't been expressed. I say unmetabolized as in it hasn't been moved through the body and out. It's often stuck and sometimes it can manifest as a physical symptom. For example, you might wonder why you are getting headaches every day or experiencing body soreness in the morning, or other physical or emotional symptoms.

Unmetabolized grief can also be related to past trauma or loss that comes up when experiencing a recent loss. There is then an opportunity to grieve and metabolize the past loss.

Are there any helpful or useful strategies or just some considerations for any educators or folks on the webinar today that might work with schools about things we need to start thinking about now as schools reopen, in order to be prepared to support our grieving students

There are a lot of school districts doing this already. It's important to really think about how you will make sure that the social, emotional needs of the students are met. So, whether that be through thinking about the programs that you already have in place to do that or bringing in more social emotional curriculum and tools to support grieving students and helping them with the transition back to school.

I think some of the same things that I mentioned with regards to helping students in the presentation would be helpful for schools, allowing space in the beginning to talk about the loss and to have a space to be able to encourage questions and to welcome their feelings. Art with Heart offers excellent resources for working with students.

I think every school needs to have a protocol for supporting grieving students and helping them access support in the community if needed.

What suggestions do you have for people who are struggling with nurturing themselves when they are now responsible for taking on more caregiving responsibilities, for example, kids are in school increase work responsibilities working at home homeschooling etc.

With all that is happening, sometimes it has to be small steps toward self-nurturing That's the first place I go with people is to think small instead of a big self-care plan. In the beginning, maybe it would be like *"Okay, I'm just going to step outside for a moment and look at the birds, because that's what I love to do."* Or, *"I'm going to bring the kids outside with me and each find a different flower and we're going to describe our flower."* So, there's lots of ways you can involve everyone in it too.

But it's important to express what you need, and it can also be important to have alone time. That could mean trying to get up a half hour earlier to write in a journal, or to have some quiet time to meditate, or getting five minutes of mindfulness while the kids are napping, etc.

Think small rather than thinking you can't do it at all.

What are some indicators suggesting we've given students sufficient time for processing grief before moving to problem solving? Something adults tend to jump too far too quickly.

Great question! The reality is that it's hard to know, especially if you have a group of children or even if you have multiple children in your family or classroom because they'll each respond differently. I think it's more of a sense of allowing some space in the beginning and then knowing it's likely going to pop up at various points. Some children are going to need more time than others.

And, be mindful that once you've decided to move on with problem solving or the lesson, there may be students who act out, get irritable, start to cry, etc. It's important to first think about checking in to see if these reactions are due to the collective loss or grief before jumping to any conclusions. Ask if they are hungry, or angry, or tired, or lonely – all of the things that can create emotional outbursts.

I think that's a tricky one to assign a time to because what we will probably find ourselves doing is going back and forth, it's not going to be contained in a single time frame, but just your awareness of it is going to go a long way, because you will notice when a child needs more support and be able to address it.

There's a question about grief and trauma and how they show up differently. And is there a difference in manifestation or healing.

There are some similarities between grief and trauma. If there's a loss it could also be a traumatic loss. For example, if there was a death by suicide or murder or a sudden accident, those are traumatic deaths and that will impact grief.

Healing Trauma is a separate and longer conversation; but, how it impacts grief is that we tend to have an experience of prolonged grief after a traumatic loss. This happens because when there is a traumatic loss, in the beginning stages –there is usually numbness and shock – and this can last much longer than with other losses, and that can extend the grief journey. It can be harder to acknowledge the reality of the loss. It can and usually does intensify the experience.

How is grieving for a departed pet different or similar to grieving for the loss of a human loved one?

That's really important to bring up because if we think that our culture doesn't do very well at holding space for the loss of the death of humans, we *really* don't do well when it comes to pets. Some people don't take this important loss seriously at all. You might hear someone say, "*it was just a dog/bird/cat*". "You could get another one"

I think sometimes the loss of a pet can be more intense than a human loved one, because of the unconditional love that they give to us and how much time we might spend with them or how much we might lean into them for emotional support. So, it can be quite painful and devastating. I think that a person can experience all of the things we've been talking about

during the webinar after the death of a pet. But, what they're sometimes missing is the understanding from people.

Right now during COVID-19, there are many people supporting patients and/or families remotely who will be using the information from this webinar. There are also many people that are not able to be with, see, or talk to their loved ones. Any special suggestions to help these people?

Yes, this is so hard. We're not meant to grieve alone. It's really hard to think about people dying alone. That has been one of the things that has hurt my heart quite a bit during this time, to imagine people dying alone and to imagine their loved ones, not being able to get to them. I feel like that's where we want to just really be doing a lot of listening to the pain and being with the pain of that, without trying to change it without trying to fix it.

Then there may be some creative things you can do. I've had some clients do some very creative things using FaceTime and technology to get as close as they could to someone who has been dying or to have ceremonies after a death so loved ones could be together.

And even there has not been a death, the loss of connection to loved ones is real and challenging. Many people are experiencing great loneliness. We want to do our best to connect with those we love on a regular basis.

Can "authentic" grief come from a place of guilt &/or regret rather than from a place of love and caring? Or from ambivalent feelings of love and guilt/ anger?

Relationships are complicated and that can complicate the grieving process. Guilt, ambivalence and regret can be a part of that journey. If we experienced a relationship with the one who has died that has unfinished conversations, or was traumatic or the person was absent from our lives in any way, those issues will show up in the grief. A good counselor can help you sort this out so you can get to a place of resolution that feels authentic for you.

What are some things to say to someone instead of "I know how you feel"?

It is important to remember that we never know how another person feels. We can start by asking "How do you feel?" or better yet, just saying, "I am here for you if you would like to talk."

At times it may be appropriate to tell how we feel about the loss, but usually we want to focus on the person who is sharing their experience and give them the space to have their feelings.

How do we grieve collectively if the grief is ambiguous and not easy to express?

Again, grief is an individual experience, but we can mourn collectively when we come to together to share our pain and our stories. The protests are a great example of collective grief

and collective pain, even if the resolution of the loss is uncertain and ambiguous, the reasons for the grief are many and varied. You will also notice that the feelings that are felt and experienced run the full range from profound sadness to intense rage. We can create spaces for people to grieve online or in-person, if many people are feeling the uncertainty and unknown nature of the situation, it can be helpful to see that you are not alone.

What about a child experiencing grief associated with their parents' divorce? Can that also come and go, as the child grows into adulthood —and stay with them all their lives?

Yes, definitely. Many times a child has an initial response to divorce based on their age and development. Feelings about the divorce may rise up again for healing at various times in life triggered by many things, like relationships and other losses. The grief will come and go, and will live in them. It usually becomes easier to live with or at least is integrated into the person's life in a way that it does not control their life on a daily basis. It can get triggered again when big events like graduations and weddings take place.