



Loss and Grief During the COVID-19 Pandemic

A Resource for Post-Secondary Institutions

The COVID-19 pandemic is forcing many of us to change the way we go about our daily lives. With those changes, some of us are experiencing a wave of losses: economic, social, physical and emotional. For some, these losses may build up and lead to feelings of grief. Why is it important to accept and allow these feelings? Acknowledging the grief that we are going through allows us to take the steps necessary to heal.

It may come as a surprise to realize that grief can be a reaction to events other than death. Such emotional reactions may include shock, numbness, denial, anger, fear, anxiety, panic, and guilt as individuals learn to live with loss, then move into acceptance and meaning making. Even authors such as Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler, who have described ***grief as occurring in stages***, point out that grief is not linear. It is normal to experience a variety of emotions, and grief is often described as being like a roller coaster. Another analogy that is very relatable is what Dr. Alan Wolfelt phrases “the wilderness of grief”, a journey that is very unpredictable and difficult to navigate.

Grief and COVID-19

In linking our feelings of loss to grief, it is helpful to first have an understanding of the various types of grief.

Ambiguous grief refers to a loss that occurs without the opportunity to say good-bye, engage in traditional rituals and obtain closure, making unresolved feelings commonplace. The rapidness of change during the pandemic has caused many to be left with a real sense of unease. The losses we are experiencing are not typically acknowledged as loss by our friends and families – losing our confidence in the future, losing our security that we will graduate by a specific date, losing our feelings of control over our own lives – all of these are losses that we may grieve but we have no rituals or even language to acknowledge them as such.

Latent (hidden) grief is often associated with caregivers of individuals with dementia. It attributes caregiver burden to the hidden grief that comes with the many losses associated with dementia. The thought is that addressing the hidden feelings of grief can diminish the burden.

Similarly, losses both big and small can build up and lead to overwhelming feelings of loss, sadness, powerlessness, anxiety and depression.

Anticipatory grief refers to our feelings of grief even before a loss occurs. For example, we may be worried about a very ill family member and already feel that we are grieving them. Or we may be anticipating even more loss of income and financial insecurity.

Even though our worst fears may not come to pass, anticipating them can lead to legitimate feelings of grief.

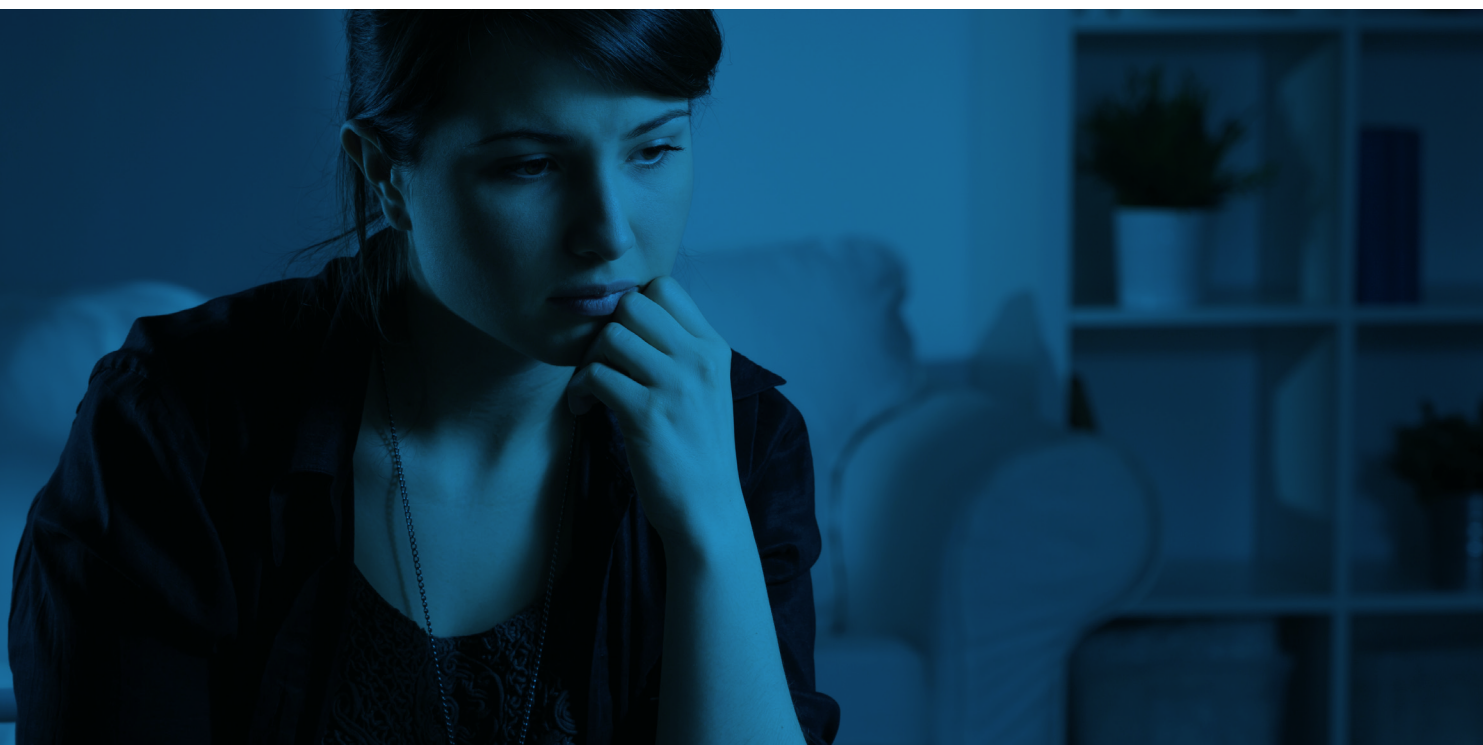
Post-Secondary Students and Grief

Post-secondary students and those expecting to enter college or university in the fall, may experience feelings of grief associated with loss just like everyone else. COVID-19 has brought dramatic changes to their lives including many losses, such as:

- **Academic stability:** While post-secondary institutions have done a tremendous job of transitioning to an online environment and offering support, many students are still left feeling a lack of control over their current and future education.
- **Housing:** Students have had to leave campus quickly and may have moved into unstable housing. For many, there is the added concern of having to pay rent for apartments that they are not currently living in.
- **Economic security:** Summer jobs, internships and careers may have been put on hold.
- **Food security:** Campus life provided stable access to food. Students feeling the financial burden of this pandemic may be going hungry.
- **Friends:** As students left campus suddenly, they may feel lonely, disconnected and isolated from their friends and classmates.
- **Ceremony/tradition (e.g. graduation, proms):** The cancellation of traditions and ceremonies that mark the hard work that has gone into their studies can leave a sense of being cheated of important milestones. This can lead to great disappointment for students.
- **Stability/safety:** For some, campus was a place of safety and stability from an unsafe home environment.
- **Sense of personal freedom:** Since physical distancing measures are now a necessity, they may leave individuals feeling like a prisoner in their own home.
- **Future dreams:** Graduating students may feel like life has been put on hold.
- **Death of family member or friend to COVID-19.**

It is not surprising that post-secondary students may be going through denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

The question is how do we help them?



Ways to Cope

- ▶ **Name it.** In naming our feelings as grief, we can begin to understand the underlying emotions it brings and address them. Emotions are not right or wrong. However, we need to recognize that we will experience such feelings as denial, anger, frustration and sadness, and that we need to feel the depths of our pain in order to work through our grief. Responses to loss and how people experience and express grief vary greatly by individual. It is also important to remember that grief is a process, not an event or a race. With support and the willingness to do the difficult work, students can get through it.
 - ▶ **Validate it.** It is key to recognize all feelings and acknowledge them as important without judgement. Suppressing our feelings or feeling guilty for having them does not allow us to take steps to resolve them. Encourage students to give themselves and those around them permission to grieve all losses, big and small. Even as we shift to a virtual environment, campus staff can validate the feelings of loss students are experiencing.
 - ▶ **Mourn.** To assist in further understanding the difficult journey of grief, Dr. William Worden developed **The Four Tasks of Mourning**. Again, these are not linear, and everyone's journey is very unique. While the tasks were created around mourning the death of an individual, they can also be applied to other loss. They include:
 - *To accept the reality of the loss*
 - *Experience and process the pain of grief*
 - *Adjust to the world without the deceased or with the loss*
 - *Find a way to maintain a connection to the deceased/loss, while embarking on your own life.*
 - ▶ **Celebrate the good.** While COVID-19 has brought great uncertainty and loss, we can also “find meaning” in the good it may have brought into our lives: closer ties, time for reflection, realization of what is important to us and what our priorities are.
- Spending time writing in a journal and acknowledging the things they are grateful for can be a simple yet valuable exercise for students.
- ▶ **Routine:** At a time when life feels particularly chaotic, setting a routine is important and ensures students have a mixture of social, physical and educational activities in their day. Routine doesn't mean rigidity, but it can offer a sense of control.
 - ▶ **Self-care.** Time constraints still exist for many of us – virtual work, study and even socializing can result in a hectic schedule for students. Ensuring that there is still time for self-care (however that may look) is key. Taking a walk, exercising and meditating are all ways we can be kind to ourselves. A sample meditation is available [here](#).
 - ▶ **Avoid comparing.** It is easy to compare ourselves to individuals who are coping differently with the current situation. Especially when we are already feeling low, comparing can drain us of our limited energy and can lead to resentment towards others and towards ourselves. **Instead, have students focus on their own strengths and coping strategies. Listing their strengths and issues they have overcome is an effective way of highlighting and celebrating their own ability to cope.**
 - ▶ **Lean on friends/family.** Encouraging students to socialize virtually is important. Free applications like Zoom and FaceTime provide a platform for human connection.
 - ▶ **Seek support.** Now more than ever, it is important to reach out and seek the support of professionals. Many campuses are still running their mental health programs and numerous COVID-19 supports have been established by the government. For more information, the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health has collated resources across the province and Canada. Visit us [here](#).

References

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