



## UNDERSTANDING GRIEF IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

When we think about grief and loss, we tend to think about death; the pain of bereavement, losing someone we know well. However, as a healthcare professional you may well have experienced these feelings in different contexts. Given the unique challenges we are all facing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it may be worth considering the ways in which we may be experiencing feelings of grief and loss, perhaps without being consciously aware of it. Some of these will be true for the wider population, while others might be especially pertinent to those that the media like to describe as being “on the frontline”.

I’ll start by briefly describing the effects of grief and loss – bear with me! I know you know this, it’s likely you’ve experienced these feelings and or/have a theoretical understanding of bereavement – but what I’d like you to take a moment to consider is whether you’re experiencing any of them now, without being able to attribute them to one specific event.

### Symptoms of grief and loss

Without thinking of these in terms of grief, just check in with yourself and think about whether you’ve experienced any of the following recently (or have been for a while):

- Emotional symptoms including despair, sadness, guilt, anger, anxiety, emptiness, loneliness.
- Cognitive symptoms including hopelessness, difficulty concentrating, self-reproach
- Physical symptoms including changes in sleep, changes in appetite, loss of energy, unexplained aches and pains
- Behavioural symptoms including tearfulness, restlessness, agitation, increased alcohol/medication/drug consumption

Perhaps you have read the list and are surprised that you are experiencing many of these symptoms, but haven’t thought of yourself as “grieving”. Or perhaps you have already identified yourself as experiencing a grief response to the current situation, but can’t put your finger on the reasons why. It could be useful to explore what might cause these feelings.

### Reasons for grieving

- *Death of a family member/friend*; this seems really obvious, but it seemed important to acknowledge that medical professionals are not immune to losses in their personal lives, and may have to carry on doing a difficult job despite experiencing the massive emotional toll of loss. Like any bereavement, we need to be aware that this does not only mean the pain of losing a loved one, but may also incorporate mixed feelings dependant on the relationship with that person or the means in which they died. It is worth being aware that if you need to “ignore” your feelings in order to meet the extraordinary demands of the present situation, which is understandable, your grief may resurface at a later date, in which case it would be wise to seek support.
- *Death of a colleague*; again, this may seem obvious, but it may surprise you if you are grieving the loss of someone you didn’t know well, or perhaps didn’t even like. However, this kind of loss raises lots of other considerations, such as a loss of feeling safe in the professional environment (see below). And while it’s recognised that medical professionals are “supposed” to be able to put their emotions aside and carry on with the job, you are a human being; it is likely that you will feel sad about a life cut short, and feel empathy for the deceased’s family and friends. The loss of a colleague who has died or had to take sick leave may also mean that your department loses valuable skills and experience, possibly even a



reassuring presence. The absence of a team member may therefore trigger feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty as well as grief.

- *Death of your patient(s)*; this can understandably trigger a grief reaction for many reasons. You are a human being, and I'm sure no amount of medical training or experience protects you from the sadness of seeing another human being die. On top of that, you entered a profession focused on healing the sick and injured, and not being able to do that might make you feel like a failure, or negatively affect your confidence. In this unprecedented situation where so many people have become seriously ill so quickly, your ability to provide treatment may be affected by a lack of resources, which may trigger feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and anger.
- *Loss of previously held assumptions and beliefs*; your role as a medical professional no doubt had its challenges even before the pandemic. In order to cope with these, you will, whether consciously or not, have formed beliefs that meant you could get on with your job without worrying about anything else. At the risk of over-simplifying, these may include such beliefs as "I am safe at work", "I have all/most of the resources I need to do my job", "I can help all/most of my patients" or "my job does not put my family at risk of illness". The events of recent weeks/months may have caused the loss of these beliefs, resulting in grief symptoms which you were unaware of, or found difficult to attribute to a specific event

#### **What might help**

- *Understanding what you're feeling and why*; I hope this article has helped with that! It's completely normal and understandable to grieve for a time when life felt under control, when you felt you and your family were safe, and when you weren't facing death on the scale that you are now.
- *Access some grief resources*; if you've identified that you are experiencing feelings of grief and loss, follow the links on this website for useful information.
- *Talk to your colleagues*; it's likely that they're feeling similar thoughts and emotions and it might help you and them to know you're not alone in this. You'll all have good and bad days/hours so try to support each other in the darkest times.
- *Be honest when it gets too much*; we've all heard "it's ok to not be ok" but that might not be the culture you're used to. These are extraordinary times and the usual approach may no longer be appropriate or helpful. It may be that if you reach out for support you can carry on working or get back to work more quickly than if you keep trying to "push through".

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