

Grand Rounds Handout on COVID Pandemic and Grief – Nadim Lalani FRCPC UCalgary Department of Emergency Medicine Wellness Hub

Introduction:

A few weeks ago, the realisation hit me that this is a pandemic of unseen proportions and the scale and breath of the fall out yet to come is unfathomable and unending. I became anxious. Like many, I was hoping for the best, but inwardly and sometimes outwardly and fearing the worst. Catastrophizing of yet-to-come scenarios, I began the spiral descent into my bird brain – my amygdala was on overdrive. I was telling people to self-isolate, wondering why we haven't shut everything down already. I was experiencing swings of powerful emotions – I became an insomniac. I was angry. I was afraid. I was searching for a sense of control. Then it dawned on me that I've been here before. These feelings were familiar – I had felt them before. It took a conversation with a close friend to put a name on that feeling – and that name was grief.

Like many of you – I was so looking forward to 2020. All our plans and hopes have been either dashed or paused indefinitely. We've lost our freedom, our plans, our habits and routines. Our basic and necessary connections with others have been jilted. We've collectively lost our safety blanket. It's been ripped away from us on a micro and macro level. We now rightly fear for our families, our friends, ourselves and our futures. There seems no immediate end in sight.

This is a global mess of epic proportions – never seen in our time. The world will irrevocably be changed. We shouldn't be surprised that we've been thrown for a loop!! So yes! You are allowed to grieve. I give you permission to grieve. We *should* grieve. We *need* to grieve because the way forward actually begins with grief. In order to bring our best selves to our lives - in this moment, in the here-and-now, the very first thing we need to do is grieve.

What does grief look like?^[Mirram Webster]

grief (n.)

early 13c., "hardship, suffering, pain, bodily affliction," from Old French *grief* "wrong, grievance, injustice, misfortune, calamity" (13c.), from *grever* "afflict, burden, oppress," from Latin *gravare* "make heavy; cause grief," from *gravis* "weighty" (from PIE root ***gwere-** (1) "heavy"). Meaning "mental pain, sorrow" is from c. 1300.

Firstly, grief is the experience of *emotions* in relation to events. This suggests an *extrapersonal* and *intrapersonal* component. It's usually broken down in to five stages (a sixth being recently added – "meaning")^[Kubler-Ross & Kessler 2005]

In the last three weeks:

I went through ¹**denial** ("this can't be happening")

I went through ²anger (“I can’t believe people’s behaviour!”)

I went through profound ³sadness (ugly crying in the middle of the night)

I was ⁴bargaining by searching twitter to try and get some sense of control. This knowledge (and the last grand rounds on COVID) – has been an important way for me to achieve some brackets around COVID.

It’s okay to feel these things. I give you all permission to do so. We’re all superhuman - nobody can do the stuff that we do. But we are human, and humans *feel* stuff. It’s a necessary part of our neurobiology.

It is through the processing these emotions - we can begin to work towards ⁵Acceptance

Other important things to note

1. We’re all wired in highly individualised ways.
2. We’re all probably at different stages of the grief process.
3. We also express it in different ways. Not all of us are comfortable openly sharing “I’m afraid” some of us use anger or humor as a language of fear – and that’s okay
4. We just need to give each other (and ourselves) a break.
5. It’s also okay to bounce around – this isn’t a linear process. You can be accepting one moment and then back to sad – that’s just the way it is ... it’s kind of like an INR on coumadin - it’s going to bounce around a bit before steady-state

How to process grief

Grief is not only the experiencing of emotions – in order to do it properly it takes a bit of work – what I call ‘grief-work’. What does working towards acceptance look like? The marines have a saying:

“The only way out ... is *through*”

Hacking acute anticipatory grief: ^[Beranito 2020]

Most of us are spending a lot of time and energy dealing with “anticipatory grief” – feeling this overwhelming anxiety about the tsunami that’s coming. The fear that we will run out of PPE. The fear that we’ll get sick. Derailing anticipatory grief [aka anxiety or catastrophizing] requires **breathing and bringing yourself into the present**. This requires taking a bunch of deep breaths and coming into the present. You can hijack anxiety by focussing on your breathing, your body and some things around you

Emergency Emotional Regulation: The STOP Mindful Technique: ^[Goldstein 2013]

In our medical workaday world, we are often bombarded with tasks and information that can at times overwhelm us. One useful method that I use is called the STOP mindful technique:

S = Stop

Stop what you are doing: Press the pause button on your thoughts and actions.

T = Take a breath

Take a few deep breaths to center yourself and bring yourself fully into the present moment.

O = Observe

Observe what is going on with your:

Body -

What physical sensations are you aware of (touch, sight, hearing, taste, smell)?

Emotions -

What are you feeling right now?

Mind -

What assumptions are you making about your feelings? What is the story you're telling yourself about why you are having them?

P = Proceed

Proceed in a manner that best suits you. This way you are making a conscious, intentional choice to either proceed with whatever you were doing or changing things up and doing something else first in that moment.

Naming, reframing and negotiating

1. You can **process emotions by naming them.** ("I am feeling angry")
2. Find balance for what you're thinking by **reframing things and not just focusing on the negative.** For example: "I feel afraid for my life" but "for every young person that's in the ICU – there's a 65 year old that just had a cold" "the stats are in my favour", "I am healthy", "they're not going to expect us to treat people without PPE"
3. You can then also **negotiate with yourself:**
"what are the things I can actually control? ... Hand washing. Wearing my PPE. Taking things really slowly. My mindset, staying fit and rested"

Listing off your fears:^[Fisher 2016]

It may be useful to actually list off your fears. Write them out and discuss these with someone you trust, a counsellor from the PSF a peer support member. When you list fears and discuss them openly – they lose their power over you.

Daily Gratitude:^[Young undated]

You can also derail a runaway amygdala through the daily expression of gratitude. Engaging the prefrontal cortex derails anxiety and increases dopamine serotonin and oxytocin. Commit to starting the day with gratitude.

Moving from subacute grief to chronic acceptance.^[Brach 2003]

I read a book called radical acceptance by Tara Brach – a PhD psychologist and Buddhist. It gave me a mind-blowing insight about grief-work. We often arrest the process of feeling powerful emotions because they seem overwhelming. But, here's the thing. Grief is like ripping off a Band-Aid. The more you try and limit or block it – the worse it is. You actually process emotions like grief by finding the time to be alone with these emotions, inviting them in and experiencing them as a compassionate observer. (Brach likens this to being at a campfire and welcoming a stranger to share your fire and a cup of cocoa). If you sit with your grief, welcome it in and provide a sounding board for your grieving-self ... a funny thing happens ... it actually extinguishes quicker. When we take a moment to hold a space for our grief - we can also give ourselves insights. We can 'diagnose' why we feel the way we feel and come to some inner resolution about it.

Moving towards Posttraumatic Growth:^[Tedeschi & Calhoun 1996]

Like it or not we are all on an existential quest. We're not there yet, but when this is over there will be an opportunity for existential and spiritual growth. Important aspects of post-traumatic growth are:

1. You need to be open, frank and in particular open about your emotions.
2. Assemble a team of close friends to vent and support each other.
3. This is ideally suited to professional coaching. The PFSP. Trained peers.
4. Talk towards achieving new wisdom and meaning through the process of this experience.
5. Become someone new – a better, different version of the person you are now.

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