



Issue 9, August 2020

COVID 19 and the complex pressures on our mental health

This month's issue summarises literature on:

- Understanding responses to COVID as grief (Kirsten Weir)
- Styles of coping given your 'surge capacity' (Tara Haelle)
- How life in the time of COVID impacts mental health (David Forbes)

"We need to recognize that we're grieving multiple losses while managing the ongoing impact of trauma and uncertainty. The malaise so many of us feel, a sort of disinterested boredom, is common in research on burnout. But other emotions accompany it: disappointment, anger, grief, sadness, exhaustion, stress, fear, anxiety — and no one can function at full capacity with all that going on."
Tara Haelle (below)

'Grief and COVID-19: Mourning our bygone lives', Kirsten Weir, The American Psychological Association

<https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2020/04/grief-covid-19>

Grief is a key emotion in people's responses to COVID-19: "The pandemic has led to a series of losses, from our sense of safety to our social connections to our financial security". Grief is for small things and big, for concrete things and abstractions, both individual and collective. Even people who have not lost anything concrete (illness, death, employment) suffer grief:

- Many of the losses we are experiencing now are so-called 'ambiguous losses'. Things like safety, freedoms and connections.
- Attachment is not just to others – it is to places, projects, possessions, professions and protections. "This pandemic forces us to confront the frailty of such attachments, whether it's to our local bookstore or the routines that sustain us through our days.
- Grief is felt "as we watch our work, health-care, education and economic systems — all of these systems we depend on — destabilize".
- COVID "is upending our understanding of the world around us... losses include our sense of predictability, control, justice, and the belief that we can protect our children or elderly loved ones."

Ambiguous losses

- The lack of clarity about what we have lost can make it hard to understand why we feel as we do and why it is hard to move forward.
- Grief is not just for what is missing, but for the way that losses affect our senses of self.

Moving on

Naming and claiming grief to move forward:



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- People often have a vague sense of anxiety or wordless suffering. Naming grief “helps people to wrap language around it”
 - “Grief is really about turning inward and recalibrating and thinking: ‘This is not the way the world is anymore, and I need to adapt,’” he says. “It’s okay to feel grief over what we’re losing. When we do that, it allows us to let grief do its job, so that we can move on.”

For more on grief and COVID, see: Berinato, S 2020 *That Discomfort You’re Feeling Is Grief*, Harvard Business Review, Emotional Intelligence Series, March 23, 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>

This article continues the theme of grief in the pandemic through an interview with David Kessler. Kessler co-wrote with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross [On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss](#).

Your ‘Surge Capacity’ Is Depleted — It’s Why You Feel Awful, Tara Haelle, Elemental <https://elemental.medium.com/your-surge-capacity-is-depleted-it-s-why-you-feel-awful-de285d542f4c>

Surge capacity is a collection of adaptive systems — mental and physical — that humans draw on for short-term survival in acutely stressful situations, such as natural disasters. When it’s depleted, it has to be renewed.

But what happens when you struggle to renew it because the emergency phase has now become chronic?

“I couldn’t get any work done. I’d grown sick of Zoom meetups. It was exhausting and impossible to think with the kids around all day. I felt trapped in a home that felt as much a prison as a haven. I tried to conjure the motivation to check email, outline a story, or review interview notes, but I couldn’t focus. I couldn’t make myself do anything — work, housework, exercise, play with the kids — for that whole week.

And the next...

And the next...”

While the phrase “adjusting to the new normal” has been repeated endlessly since March, it’s easier said than done. How do you adjust to an ever-changing situation where the “new normal” is indefinite uncertainty? The destruction is, for most people, invisible and ongoing. So many systems aren’t working as they normally do right now, which means radical shifts in work, school, and home life that almost none of us have experience with.



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Styles of coping

People can use their surge capacity for acute periods, but when dire circumstances drag on “you have to adopt a different style of coping.” The author talked to experts and recommends the following as ‘styles of coping’:

Recognise we need to change our ‘solution-oriented’ mindset - We are dealing with ‘ambiguous losses’ (see above writing about grief). This mindset is good and valuable but “a very destructive way of thinking when you’re faced with a problem that has no solution, at least for a while.”

Accept that life is different now - Accepting that it’s a hard time and be okay with this as a tough day is important and doesn’t mean giving up. “It means not resisting or fighting reality so that you can..step into a more spacious mental space that allows you to do things that are constructive”.

Expect less from yourself – Most of us have heard for most of our lives to expect more from ourselves in some way or another. Now we must give ourselves permission to do the opposite. “We have to expect less of ourselves, and we have to replenish more. I think we’re in a period of a lot of self discovery: Where do I get my energy? What kind of down time do I need? That’s all shifted right now, and it may take some reflection and self discovery to find out what rhythms of life do I need right now?”

Recognize the different aspects of grief – Plenty of people are in *denial*: denying the virus is real, or that the numbers of cases or deaths are as high as reported, or that masks really help reduce disease transmission.

Anger is evident everywhere: anger at those in denial, anger at ‘Karens’ in Bunnings, anger at those not physically distancing or wearing masks.

The *bargaining* is mostly with scientists we hope will develop a vaccine quickly.

Sometimes *acceptance* means “saying we’re going to have a good time in spite of this”. It can also mean accepting that we cannot change the situation right now.

Experiment with “both-and” thinking – “You have to face reality.” But how we frame that reality mentally can help us cope with it”. ‘Both-and’ is an alternative to binary thinking that means embracing a bit of the irrational and many people find it helpful in dealing with ambiguous loss. In COVID this thinking might be, “This is terrible and many people are dying, and this is also a time for our families to come closer together”. On a more personal level, it means accepting both “I’m highly competent, and right now I’m flowing with the tide day-to-day”

Look for activities, new and old, that continue to fulfill you - “Lots of coping advice has focused on “self care” but one of the frustrating ironies of the pandemic is that so many of our self-care



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activities have also been taken away (pedicures, coffee with friends, exercise classes, swimming in the local pool). We have to get creative with self-care when we're least motivated to get creative".

Focus on maintaining and strengthening important relationships – “The biggest protective factors for facing adversity and building resilience are social support and remaining connected to people... That includes helping others, even when we're feeling depleted ourselves. Helping others could include checking in on family friends or buying groceries for an elderly neighbour”.

Begin slowly building your resilience bank account – “ gradually building into your life regular practices that promote resilience and provide a fallback when life gets tough..Start really small and work your way up. If you do a little bit every day, it starts to add up and you get momentum, and even if you miss a day, then start again. We have to be gentle with ourselves and keep on, begin again.

Areas to specifically focus on are sleep, nutrition, exercise, meditation, self-compassion, gratitude, connection, and saying no.”

‘What is COVID 19 doing to our mental health’, Professor David Forbes, Uni. of Melbourne
<https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/what-is-covid-19-doing-to-our-mental-health>

The need to isolate to reduce the risk of infection conflicts with the need for “social support and social connectedness”, which are the “strongest predictors of resilience and recovery”.

A [review of studies](#) investigating the psychological impacts of quarantine that has just been published in The Lancet, found that symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, confusion and anger were common.

He recommends establishing and staying in some sort of routine, staying in social contact with others, reframing the situation (as an opportunity to use time effectively) and focusing on what you can control, like good hygiene, washing your hands properly, and teaching your children to do the same.