

Understanding grief in the coronavirus pandemic

M. Katherine Shear M.D.
Columbia School of Social Work
Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons

The Center for Complicated Grief

"grief is a form of love"

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

Losses are ubiquitous in a world closed down by the virus



usual graduation celebrations cancelled

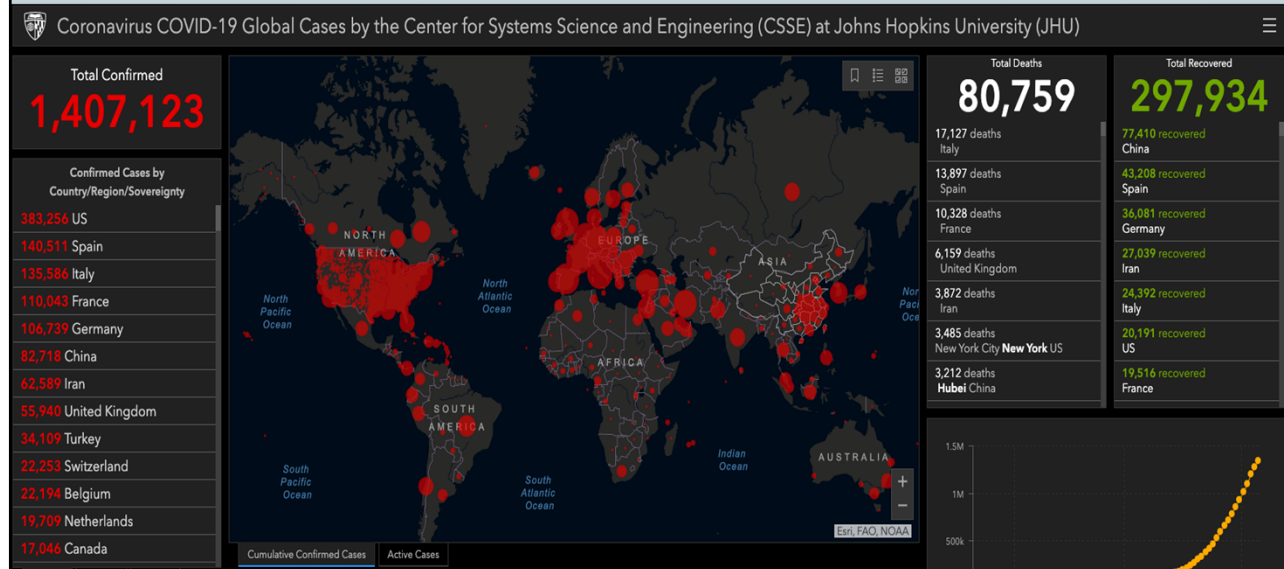
Economy shut down
Jobs lost

Schools closed

Sports events, artistic performances, holiday celebrations cancelled

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

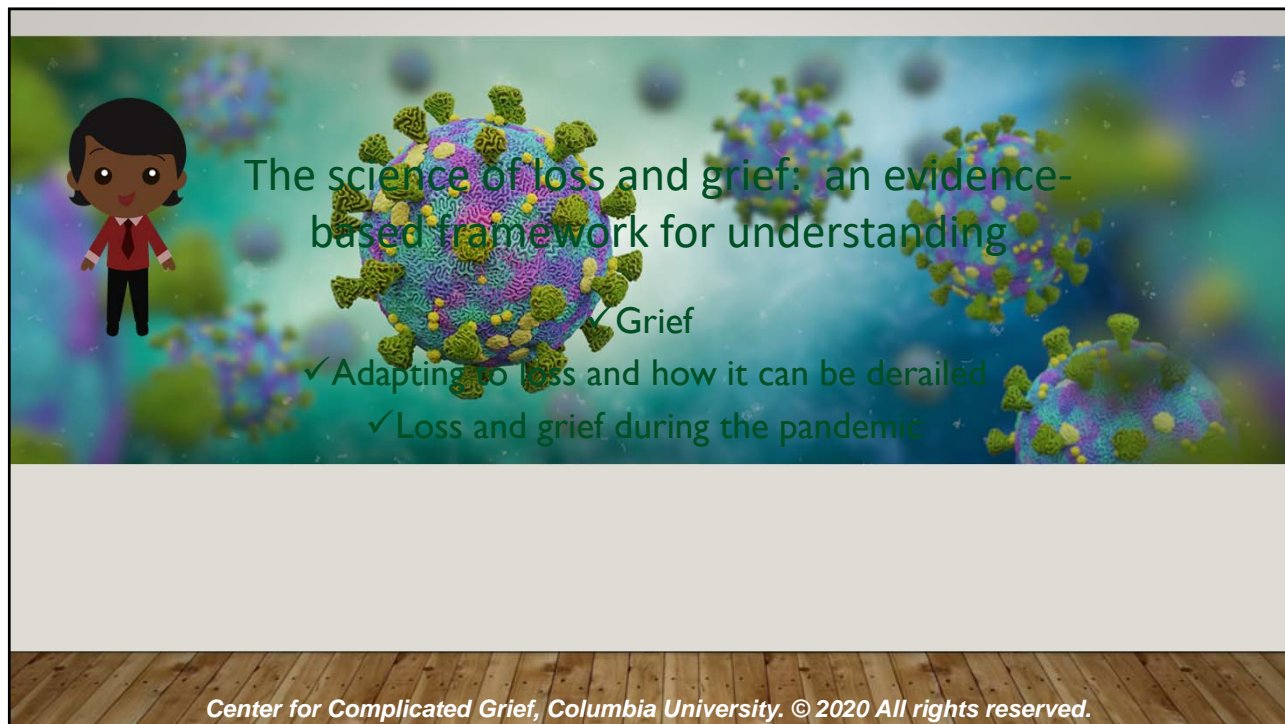
Loss of a loved one: the most painful and impactful of coronavirus losses



In a world of many kinds of loss, we are focusing today on loss of a loved one



Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

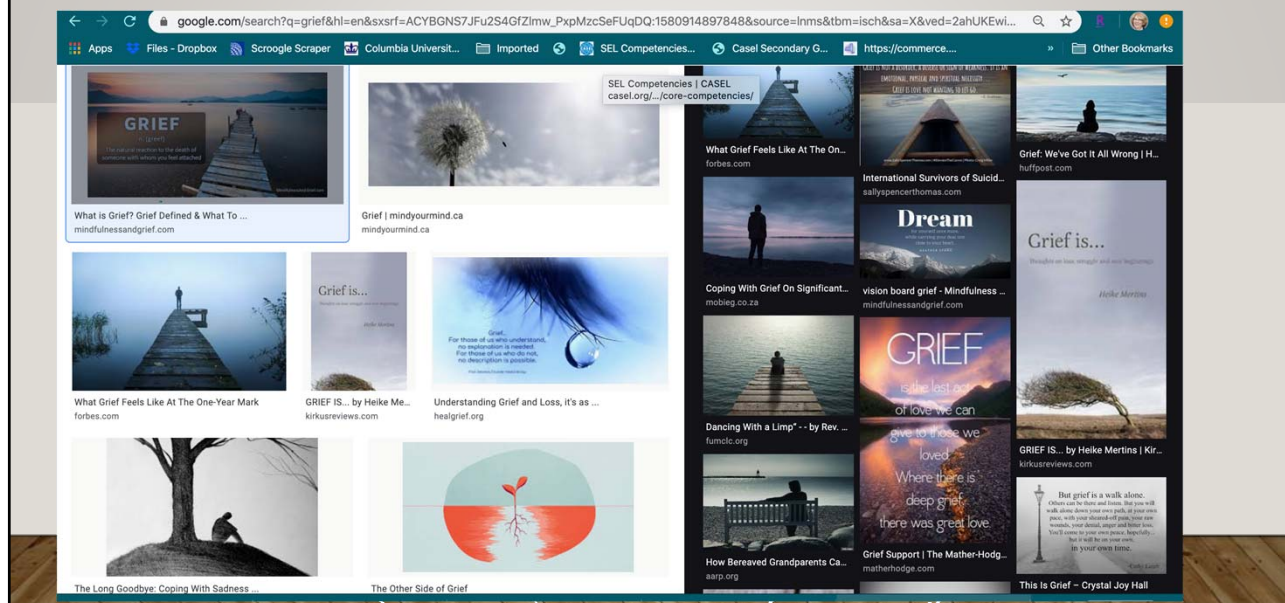


The science of loss and grief: an evidence-based framework for understanding

- ✓ Grief
- ✓ Adapting to loss and how it can be derailed
- ✓ Loss and grief during the pandemic

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

Grief is universal... but how we understand it is not



google.com/search?q=grief&hl=en&sxsrf=ACYBGNS7JFu2S4GfZlmw_PxpMzcSeFUqDQ:1580914897848&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi...

What is Grief? Grief Defined & What To ...
mindfulnessandgrief.com

Grief | mindyourmind.ca
mindyourmind.ca

What Grief Feels Like At The One-Year Mark
forbes.com

GRIEF IS... by Heike Mertins
kirkusreviews.com

Understanding Grief and Loss, it's as ...
healright.org

The Long Goodbye: Coping With Sadness ...

The Other Side of Grief

What Grief Feels Like At The On...
forbes.com

SEL Competencies | CASEL
casel.org/.../core-competencies/

International Survivors of Suicide...
sallyspencerthomaz.com

Dream

Grief is...

Coping With Grief On Significant...
moblog.co.za

vision board grief - Mindfulness ...
mindfulnessandgrief.com

GRIEF

Where there is deep grief, there was great love

Grief Support | The Mather-Hodge...
matherhodge.com

This is Grief - Crystal Joy Hall



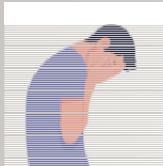
Grief is the full-bodied response to loss



Photo by Nancy Turret LCSW

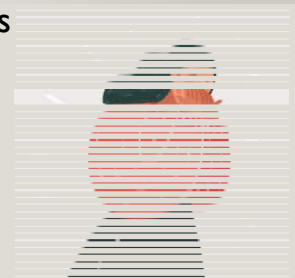
- ✓ It's not just an emotion and loss can trigger emotions that are not grief
- ✓ It's a natural, complex multi-faceted experience – the form love takes when someone we love dies – it's core is yearning and longing
- ✓ It's permanent after we lose someone close; it changes and evolves over time
- ✓ It's unique to every person and there are important commonalities

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.



Some reasons why all grief is complicated

- ✓ It contains a lot of different thoughts, feelings and behaviors
- ✓ It changes – erratically at times
- ✓ It evolves over time but not in a smooth way and not in a defined time frame; grief does NOT unfold in stages
- ✓ It's affected by other people and by things that are unexpected and uncontrollable
- ✓ There are a lot of mixed feelings and thoughts



Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

A lot of mixed feelings and thoughts For example...

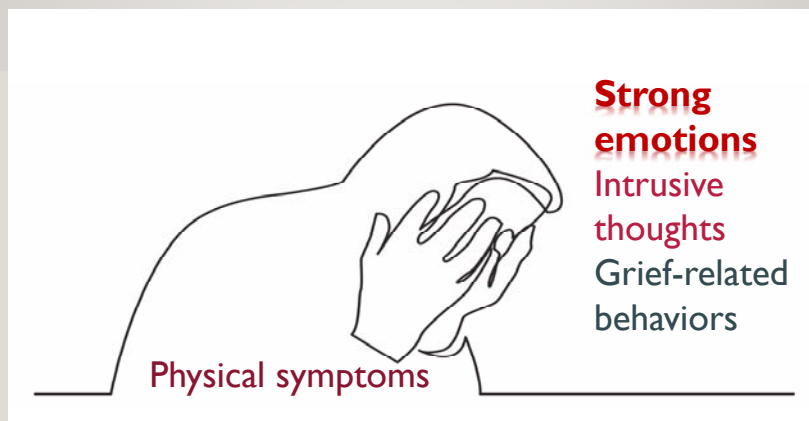
- ✓ We want to hold onto grief and we want it to go away
- ✓ We have severe mental pain that seems like it can never go away
- ✓ We want to go on but we have little enthusiasm for life
- ✓ We need other people but it's hard to feel connected
- ✓ We know the person died but we have trouble understanding it
- ✓ We crave connection to our loved one but want to avoid reminders of the loss
- ✓ We can't stop thinking about the person who died but feel like we've lost them forever



All of this is natural and very common

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

Acute Grief: Commonalities



Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

Grief is transformed as we adapt to the loss

Physiology is re-regulated

Thoughts and memories find a place in our life

Grief is integrated

Emotional intensity subsides,
becomes more bittersweet

Thoughts recede, more
distant, but still accessible

Behavior more connected to
ongoing life

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

John Bowlby: how we progress

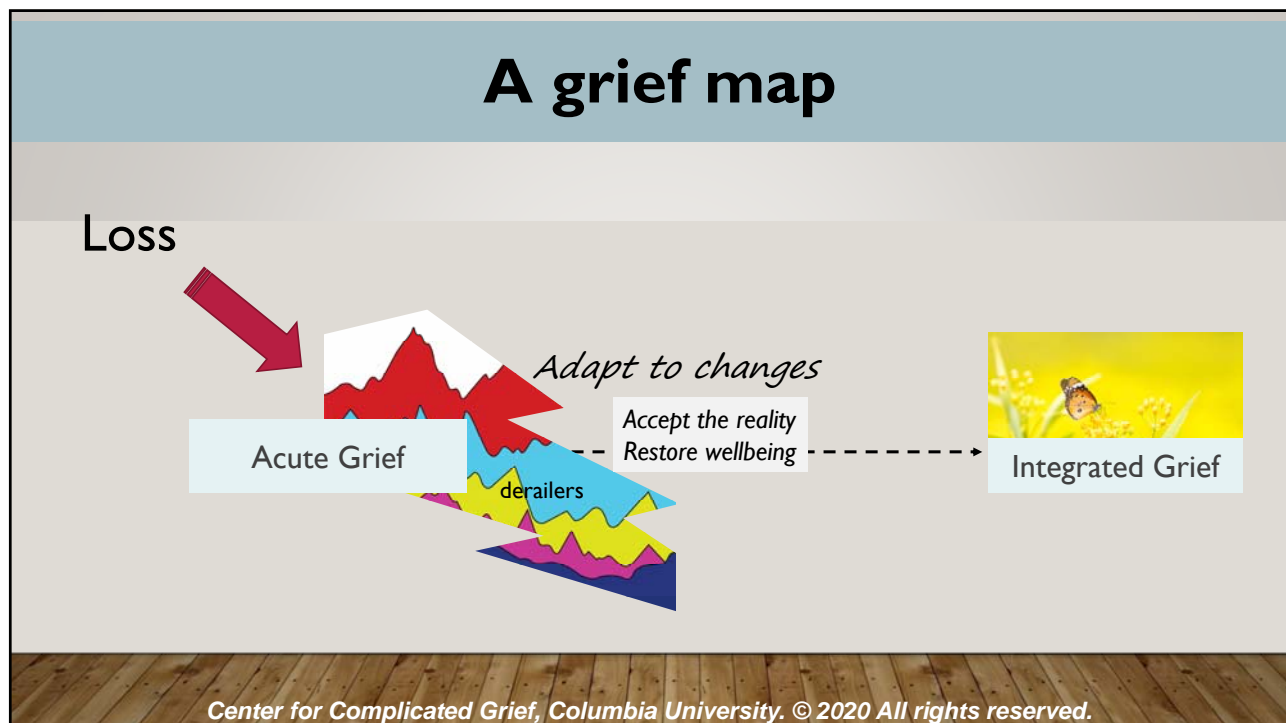
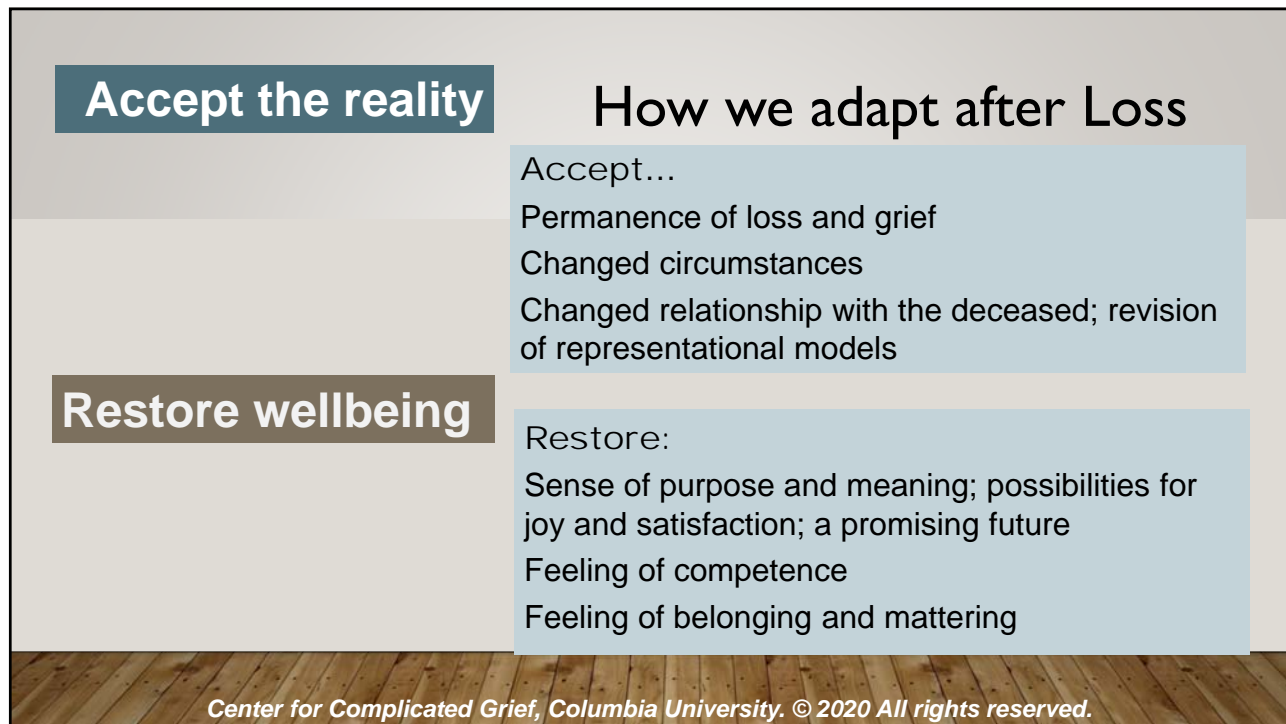
Loss 1980

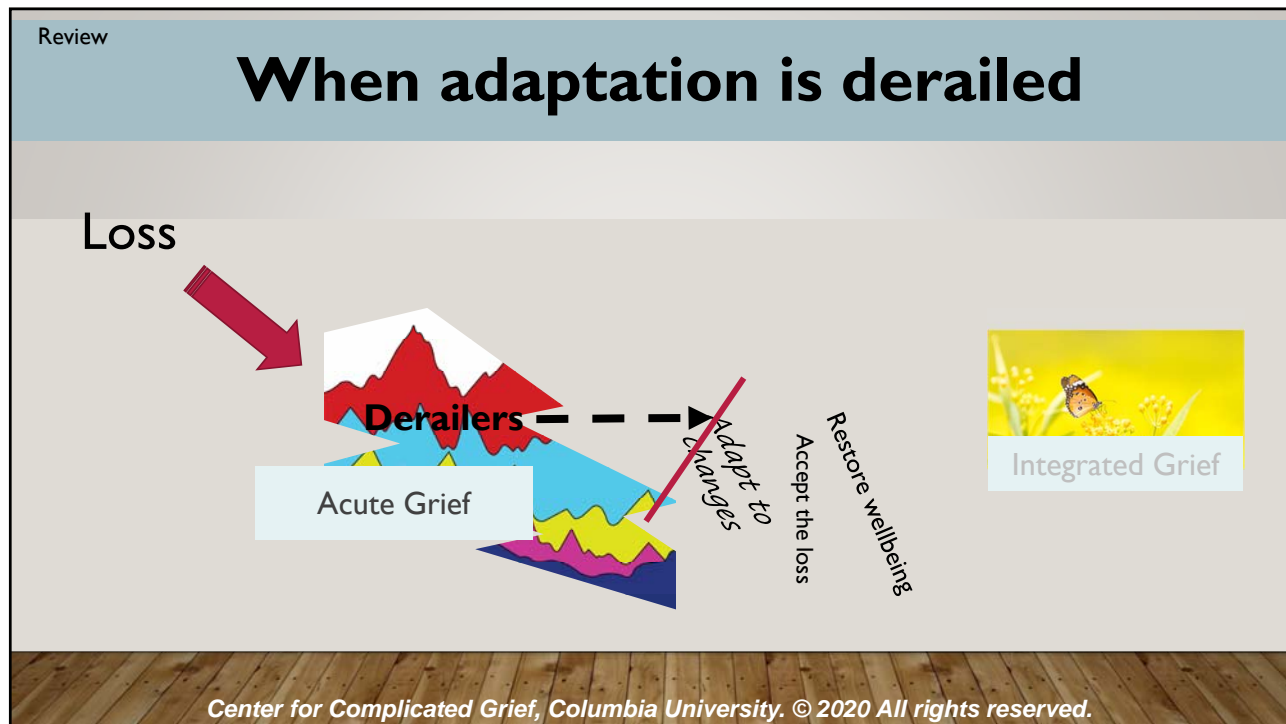
Recognition of changed circumstance; revision of
representational models

Redefinition of life goals

*A mourner who does not progress remains in a state of suspended growth in
life in which they are held prisoner by a dilemma they cannot solve.*

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.





Common kinds of derailers

- ✓ Protest and proximity seeking
- ✓ Guilt and anger, including survivor guilt
- ✓ Counterfactual thinking
- ✓ “Immune neglect” and “miswanting”
- ✓ Inability to balance avoidance of pain and confrontation

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

Resilience: reduced risk that derailers will gain a foothold



Person-related

hardiness, flexibility, coping repertoire, continued bonds



Relationship-related

Self-sufficiency; tendency toward detached style



Circumstances of the death

end of life planning, developmental timing



Context of the death

lower trauma burden, social connections, support, social cohesion



Consequences of the death

maintenance of income

Slide modified from Christy Denkla

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

Examples of factors that increase risk for derailing adaptation



Person-related

history of depression, prior loss/trauma, difficult relationship with early caregivers



Relationship based

who died, closeness, identity-defining; secure relationship in the context of general insecurity



Circumstances of the death

age of the person who died, how they died



Context of the death

what else is going on in the bereaved person's life



Consequences of the death

loss of income, need to move, loss of social connections

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

Covid-19 deaths are likely to contain many risk factors, for example

Circumstances of the death

Sudden, unexpected death, seemingly preventable, seemingly random
people dying alone; loved ones unable to visit

Context of the death

Physical distancing affecting; funerals, burial, rituals, support of the griever;
unemployment worries; feelings of unsafety; financial insecurity

Consequences of the death

Being alone; feeling more unsafe; having others to care for, financial worries

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

Things that can help Understand and accept grief

- ✓ Remember that grief is natural after loss; it's a form of love; accept it; don't judge it; observe it – monitor it; get to know it: watch it, name it
- ✓ Observe your thoughts and feelings; expect to have a lot of different kinds of thoughts and feelings
- ✓ Thinking about protesting or revising the outcome are natural, don't judge this but recognize it as futile and gently set it aside
- ✓ Feeling anxiety, guilt, anger, shame, is also natural; don't judge this either but consider what you can do to resolve these feelings and then let them go
- ✓ Allow grief to recede at times; this is also natural and very important; we all need respite from the pain; build this into your life

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

Things that can help Manage emotional pain



- ✓ Accept your emotions and name them; don't judge yourself for having them
- ✓ Allow yourself to experience and savor positive emotions
- ✓ Do something pleasant each day – make it a kind of ritual.
- ✓ Let yourself start to think about what's important, meaningful or interesting to you
- ✓ Recognize and manage survivor guilt; it might be especially pronounced after a COVID-19 death

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

Things that can help Monitor emotional pain

Monitor your emotions. Notice when emotional pain is at its highest and when its at its lowest. Take 5 minutes at the end of the day to record this

Day/ Date	HIGHEST Emotional pain	What was happening at the time?	LOWEST Emotional pain	What was happening at the time?	Overall Level for the day
Mon					
Tues					
Wed					

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

Things that can help **Attend to your relationships**



- ✓ Find creative ways to stay connected with friends and family during even with physical distancing
- ✓ Find ways to honor a deceased person with loved ones or friends
- ✓ Nurture social connections where feasible and desirable;
- ✓ Allow others in, share stories, accept their support and comfort
- ✓ Lower expectations for reciprocity; it's not possible for a person during acute grief

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

Things that can help **Don't be afraid to tell the story of the death**



- ✓ Share the story if you are up to it, even if its painful
- ✓ Talk about the troubling aspects with a trusted companion
- ✓ Remember that the death is just one part of loved one's life; accept it as a part of their life but not all of it
- ✓ Voice and deal with aspects of a COVID-19 death that cannot be changed even though they are naturally especially painful
- ✓ Understand that it's also natural to prefer not to share this story; you can postpone grieving or do it in tiny parts - piecemeal

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

Things that can help

Understand that you can live in a world of reminders and feel a sense of connection to your memories



- ✓ Understand you can gradually find ways to return to a world of reminders
- ✓ In time you can discover meaningful and comforting memories in reminders
- ✓ Respect your ability to find your own balance between confronting painful situations and avoiding them
- ✓ Look at photos and think about memories of a loved one if you wish
- ✓ Try to accept a changed relationship with the person who died; understand that memories are a living connection to the deceased

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

Summary



- ☐ Grief emerges naturally after an important loss
- ☐ We adapt naturally to even the most difficult losses
- ☐ It's important not to be judgmental and to seek and savor positive feelings when dealing with a loss
- ☐ Supportive companions are important but it can be hard to manage relationships
- ☐ Covid-19 deaths have many elements that are likely to be especially challenging; we all need to accept what we cannot change and find what we can change

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

Grief is a common human experience, and we have an innate capacity to adapt



"Like tiny seeds with potent power to push through tough ground and become mighty trees, we hold innate reserves of unimaginable strength. We are resilient."

—Catherine DeVrye, *The Gift of Nature*, 2018

Slide from
Christy Denkla Ph.D.

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of overcoming it.

-Helen Keller

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.

Resources

Center for Complicated Grief

<https://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu/for-the-public/complicated-grief-public/overview/>

Human Flourishing Program

<https://mailchi.mp/05ee7322aa2b/positive-epidemiology-2638953>

International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies

<https://istss.org/public-resources/covid-19-resources>

Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Gp47v-KtK5JuexPnUrzNu33pgRbpVLF2?usp=sharing>

Katherine Shear, MD

ks2394@columbia.edu

Christy Denckla, PhD

cdenckla@hsph.harvard.edu



@Cdenckla
@CenterforC
G

Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia University. © 2020 All rights reserved.