Losses are ubiquitous in a world closed down by the virus

- Economy shut down
- Jobs lost
- Schools closed
- Sports events, artistic performances, holiday celebrations cancelled
- usual graduation celebrations cancelled
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
Grief is universal… but how we understand it is not
Grief is the full-bodied response to loss

☑ 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

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
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

Acute Grief: Commonalities

Physical symptoms

Strong emotions
Intrusive thoughts
Grief-related behaviors
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

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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.*
Accept the reality

How we adapt after Loss

Accept...
- Permanence of loss and grief
- Changed circumstances
- Changed relationship with the deceased; revision of representational models

Restore wellbeing

Restore:
- Sense of purpose and meaning; possibilities for joy and satisfaction; a promising future
- Feeling of competence
- Feeling of belonging and mattering

A grief map

Loss

Adapt to changes

Acute Grief

Accept the reality

Restore wellbeing

Integrated Grief

derailers
When adaptation is derailed

Loss

- Derailers
- Acute Grief
- Adapt to changes
- Accept the loss
- Restore wellbeing

Integrated Grief

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
### Resilience: reduced risk that derailers will gain a foothold

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person-related</td>
<td>- Hardiness, flexibility, coping repertoire, continued bonds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship-related</td>
<td>- Self-sufficiency; tendency toward detached style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circumstances of the death</td>
<td>- End of life planning, developmental timing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context of the death</td>
<td>- Lower trauma burden, social connections, support, social cohesion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequences of the death</td>
<td>- Maintenance of income</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Slide modified from Christy Denkla

### Examples of factors that increase risk for derailing adaptation

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Factors</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person-related</td>
<td>- History of depression, prior loss/trauma, difficult relationship with early caregivers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship-based</td>
<td>- Who died, closeness, identity-defining; secure relationship in the context of general insecurity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circumstances of the death</td>
<td>- Age of the person who died, how they died</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context of the death</td>
<td>- What else is going on in the bereaved person’s life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequences of the death</td>
<td>- Loss of income, need to move, loss of social connections</td>
</tr>
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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 grievers; unemployment worries; feelings of unsafety; financial insecurity

**Consequences of the death**
Being alone; feeling more unsafe; having others to care for; financial worries

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**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
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

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day/ Date</th>
<th>HIGHEST Emotional pain</th>
<th>What was happening at the time?</th>
<th>LOWEST Emotional pain</th>
<th>What was happening at the time?</th>
<th>Overall Level for the day</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mon</td>
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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

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
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

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
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

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

-Helen Keller
## Resources

| Center for Complicated Grief | Katherine Shear, MD  
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<td><a href="https://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu/for-the-public/complicated-grief-public/overview/">https://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu/for-the-public/complicated-grief-public/overview/</a></td>
<td><a href="mailto:ks2394@columbia.edu">ks2394@columbia.edu</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Human Flourishing Program | Christy Denckla, PhD  
| [https://mailchi.mp/05ee7322a2b/positive-epidemiology-2638953](https://mailchi.mp/05ee7322a2b/positive-epidemiology-2638953) | cdenckla@hsph.harvard.edu |
| International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies |  
| [https://istss.org/public-resources/covid-19-resources](https://istss.org/public-resources/covid-19-resources) |  
| Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health |  
| [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Gp47v-KtK5JuxPnUrzNu33pgRbpVLF2?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Gp47v-KtK5JuxPnUrzNu33pgRbpVLF2?usp=sharing) |  
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| @CenterforCG |  

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