

Drowning in Coronavirus Grief and Loss?

Surviving the 8 types of pandemic sadness to feel strong again



It is difficult to describe the many losses attached to COVID-19.

Some lost loved ones. Some lost financial stability.

Some lost graduations and family traditions.

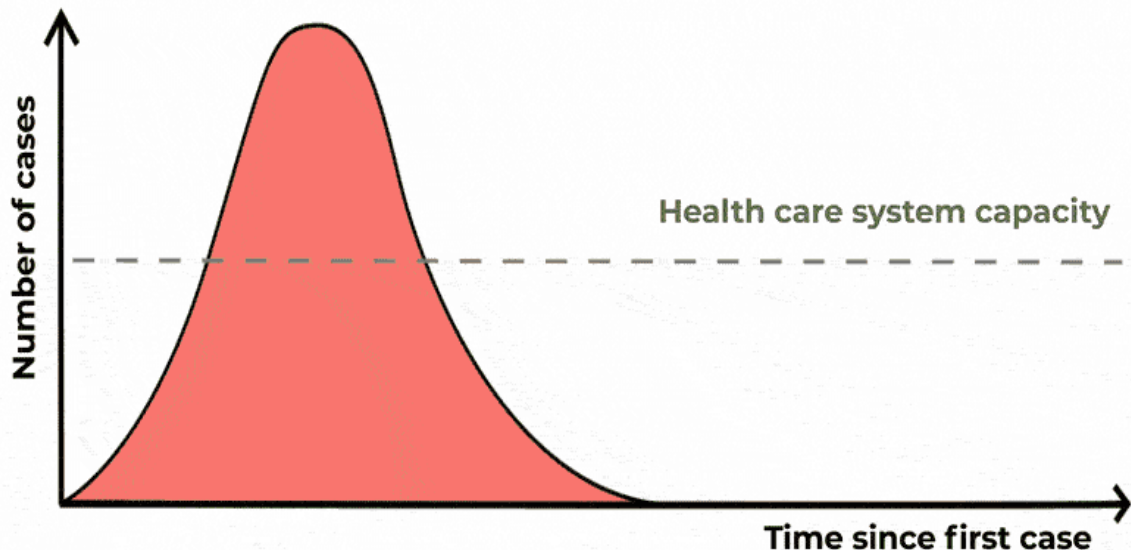
Some lost homes. Some lost jobs.

Some lost hope. All lost something.

If you feel like you are drowning in a sea of grief you are not alone. COVID-19 shattered the word *'normal'* on March 11, 2020 when the World Health Organization declared a pandemic. Consider the numbers to understand the pain most American's are feeling.

- Over 1.6 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, and almost 100,000 deaths, (*as of 05/24/2020*)
- The highest levels of unemployment since the Great Depression, with 36 million Americans filing for unemployment, (*14.7% national unemployment rate*)
- Millions have lost their sense of normality, with social distancing and self-isolating as employees and students have been working from home or attending online school since March

Flatten the curve



You have heard of flattening the curve of medical symptoms from coronavirus, which has been effective due to extended lock

downs. What you may not have heard is the surge of psychological symptoms which are building to dangerous levels. Everyone is facing traumatic stress from COVID-19 and for some the deep sadness and grief is overwhelming.

“We are in the middle of collective grief. We are all losing something now. There is a communal grief as we watch our work, health-care, education and economic systems — all of these systems we depend on — destabilize.” - Sherry Cormier, PhD

In a crisis stress builds up until it blows up, which forces a person to seek help or stuff it inside and pretend it will go away. If you have been feeling traumatized, you are not alone. A national poll released by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), reveals the complexity of COVID-19 emotions.

- 48% are anxious about the possibility of getting coronavirus/COVID-19
- 40% are anxious about becoming seriously ill or dying from coronavirus
- 62% are anxious about the possibility of family and loved ones getting coronavirus.
- 36% say coronavirus is having a serious impact on their mental health
- 59% feel coronavirus is having a serious impact on their day-to-day lives.
- 57% are concerned the coronavirus will have a serious negative impact on their finances
- 48% are worried about running out of food, medicine, and/or supplies
- 68% fear the coronavirus will have a long-lasting impact on the economy.

Grief intensifies from multiplied loss

Psychological stress from pandemic starts small, like waves at the beach, which is why most do not think about it until an out of control flood of emotions is threatening destroy everything good. Whatever grief you are facing, it is important to know the feelings triggered by traumatic stress do not just disappear, because this pandemic will go on for months creating wave after wave of catastrophic loss.

When life comes at you like a hurricane, small waves of stress become huge and cause you to feel like you are sinking. When daily life problems come one at a time most people have learned to handle it, but when problems are bunched together in clusters coming from a dozen different directions it can be terrifying. It can feel like you are emotionally drowning in a sea of sadness.



Sadness is not a sign of weakness – it is a sign of being human

Continual coronavirus pressure affects everybody just not in the same way. It is about feeling in control. People come out of lock down in one of two ways. Some will be rested or bored. Others will come out exhausted and depleted. If you have a good job, a good relationship, no student loan debt, and good income while working from home, the CDC.gov recommendations to shelter in place may have felt like an extended holiday. After binge watching Netflix for two months these people wonder why governmental leaders have not given the ‘*all-clear*’ to fully open-up theme parks, movie theaters and baseball.

However, if you lost your job and are trying to homeschool kids while caring for an aging parent, it may feel like you are on the battlefield every day. Losing money, losing a home or the fear of losing health while being isolated from friends can be devastating.

Traumatic loss from sudden and unexpected losses, (*like losing a job or testing positive for coronavirus*), affects our ability to function and make clear decisions. Mental ‘fog’ is not a sign of being weak – it is a sign of being human.



Consider the layers of traumatic loss created by this pandemic which can intensify pressure on you and your family.

8 Types of COVID-19 Loss

- 1) Loss of job or role from corporate downsizing or lay-off's
- 2) Financial insecurity or fears, feelings of failure over financial instability
- 3) Loss of self-control in body-care, addictive, or secret life issues, includes angry rage, impulse control issues or addictions like gambling and pornography
- 4) Loss of marriage, family, or other significant relationships
- 5) Loss of coworkers, classmates, teachers, or peers who will move away seeking employment, and perhaps never be in contact again
- 6) Lost dreams, hopes, plans, goals, and the desire for a comfortable retirement
- 7) Loss of motivation and drive from apathetic feelings of '*Who cares anymore*'
- 8) Death- to lose loved ones from coronavirus, cancer, heart disease, accidents, domestic violence, overdose, or suicide.

How many types of pandemic loss have you experienced?

Who could you talk to about managing those feelings of loss before they grow larger?

Every loss creates stress and pressure. When these losses build up, you can feel overloaded with no hope. Every American is facing the loss of something which is why it is important to manage these powerful emotions now, so they do not overwhelm you like a tsunami wave of sadness in the days and weeks ahead.

“This crisis isn’t just shaking our faith... it’s upending our understanding of the world around us. The losses include our sense of predictability, control, justice, and the belief that we can protect our children or elderly loved ones.” - Robert Neimeyer, PhD, director of the Portland Institute for Loss and Transition



Someone who understands traumatic stress, grief and recovery is Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook COO, after losing her husband Dave. Since his death in 2015 she has become an advocate for pushing through the pain with what she and psychologist Adam Grant describe as “*Option B*”. When a family member died last month from complications of coronavirus, she released a series of

COVID grief coping skills take our of her book about finding options through the grief process. <https://optionb.org/bookexcerpt>

Trauma shatters the sense of predictability and normalcy out of your life, but Sandberg discovered how to find the next best option by moving forward, one step at a time.

Action is healing. One of the things she learned to get through the toughest times was journaling. She describes the process of writing about circumstances outside of our control as a pathway to regain control of something.

- Writing about traumatic loss can decrease anxiety, anger, fear and worry.
- Releasing negative emotions on paper has been shown to boost immunity and increase mental resiliency in a person, giving them renewed energy to manage stress and grief.

Grief Journaling to Reduce Pressure

Psychologists agree journaling is a powerful way to reduce emotional pressure and is available to anyone (*small children can draw out their emotions, as*



their parents are writing down their answers).

Work through the following questions or verbally discuss with a trusted friend. Talking through grief and loss of COVID-19 is an important step in the healing process. This exercise may spark feelings of deep sadness, or tears and that's okay. Facing the loss is how to get through the loss. Some of these topics may be easy, others more challenging. The goal of facing and voicing or writing out what you lost will give you back some mental clarity and that is the pathway toward mental resiliency and strength.

- 1. What is your happiest vacation memory before the year 2020?*
- 2. What is most frustrating to you about the last six months?*
- 3. Describe what you miss most since the pandemic began.*
- 4. What possession or experience brings you joy?*
- 5. Who spoke words of encouragement or voiced how they believed in you when growing up? (teacher, coach, grand-parent, or parent?)*
- 6. What worries tend to keep you up at night these days?*
- 7. What hobbies do you want to learn or experience? (playing an instrument, camping, cooking, crafts, or painting)*
- 8. When do you feel the greatest sense of safety and comfort?*
- 9. Describe what can make you laugh.*
- 10. When do you feel the greatest sense of inner peace?*

Journaling is important to protect mental and physical health since the complicated grief from multiple losses associated with the coronavirus, or the economic recession can lead to a psychological condition called “*persistent complex bereavement disorder*”, by the American Psychiatric Association.

This condition is quite different from depression, even though some people mistakenly label it as such. Complicated grief is a condition resulting from a series of traumatic losses leaving a person feeling in shock and disbelief with persistent longing and deep sadness. Contrary to popular belief this condition does not get better with time, it gets worse.



COVID-19 has affected everyone psychologically, even though most have not been infected physically by the virus. Traumatic emotions can build up and increase the risk of substance abuse, sleep disorders, impaired immune functioning, and suicidal thinking according to the New England Journal of Medicine.

The risk to your health, and the health of those you love is quite real. Stuffed feelings of grief and loss do not stay bottled up forever. The pain comes out in aggressive, anxious, or impulsive behavior for some, and in others they are so affected it leads to a feeling of drowning in sadness with the desire to just give up.

It's okay to not be okay

When life destroys your sense of *'normal'* it takes away the feelings of being in control. Whatever you knew about life in your home, family, school, or community was shattered a few months ago, and for many that feeling of *'life as we know it'* will never return.

To manage the intense pressure, it is important to regain control of something. Beyond journaling, begin to rebuild daily rituals. Get up at the same time, make your bed, take a shower, exercise, eat a nutritious breakfast, put on clothes as if you were going to work or school. The goal is not to get back to how you used to live – it's to accept this is how you are living now.



The old way of doing things is gone and you can't bring it back. However, you can learn

to be in the moment and to manage today the best you can, which is all you ever actually have the power to do.

Breathe in faith. Breathe out fear.

This process is easier with the support of others, so to borrow wisdom from an old song you can learn to *“get by with a little help from my friends”* .



Learn to be grateful for the simplicity of family meals together without everyone staring at a screen or rushing out to go somewhere. Being together is comforting in a crisis. Speaking up about what you are experiencing is healing for you and for the people you are in relationship with, so create a daily ritual of talking, Facetiming, or texting out your feelings.

This experience helps you learn to flow with the emotions of grief and loss while helping those close to you share their emotions. You get stronger. They get stronger. Both of you are better for it. No one gets through a crisis alone.

E-Motion begins the Healing Process

Normal patterns during times of catastrophe allows your brain to return to a pre-crisis level of routine which is healing. On the days you feel overwhelmed by the sadness of loss it is important to do something healing.

Consider the word 'emotion' and take the 'e' away. Motion can improve mood, which is why a small action of physical self-care can rebuild a large degree of mental resilience.

Exercise, yoga, Pilates, biking, swimming, or walking are proven mood boosting activities to give you back a sense of inner strength.

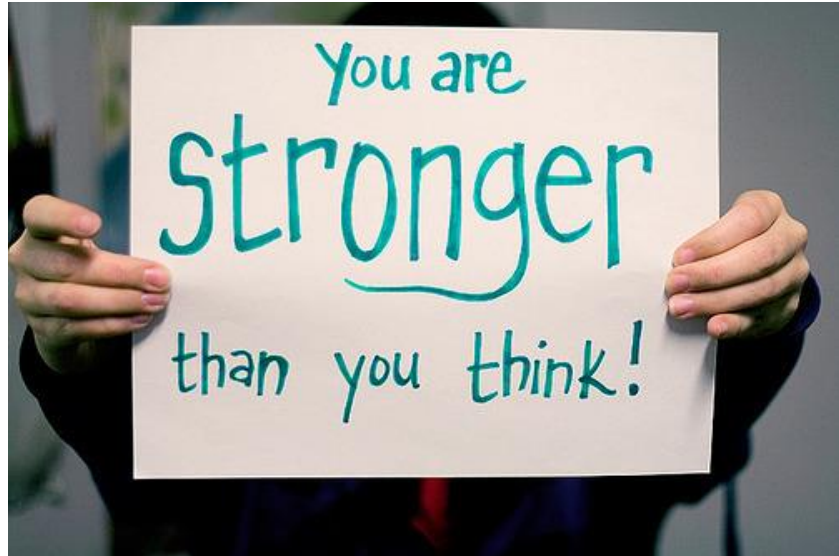
Facing your hurts and loss may seem like a small step, but it is the most important start to move through grief caused by the pandemic. Voicing the hurt and loss by openly talking about what is causing pressure is powerful.

If you feel like you cannot talk to anyone about your problems, you can still draw, write, or pray about them.



COVID-19 is bringing higher levels of stress than any crisis event in modern times.

You can't get through this alone, so learn to reach out to people who can help, like friends, family, counselors, clergy, doctors, counselors or hotlines, *(many US cities offer a direct connection to social service agencies*



like the United Way by calling 211, which help with daily life pressures after a traumatic life experience).

You might not be able to change your circumstances right now, but you can decide to take healing action before the pressure increases and negatively impacts your physical and mental health.

Finally, meditate on the words of grief researchers Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and John Kessler who wrote,

"The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal, and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again, but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same, nor would you want to."

COVID-19 will end

This pandemic will be over at some point in the future and you will look back on this time with deep regret or with greater resilience. Some people describe multiple losses as an ocean because you cannot stop the waves from crashing on the shore. While it is true the surf is continuous, it is also true you can learn to swim. COVID-19 will end.

The losses will begin to subside, and life will become what some are calling the new reality.

The choices you make to manage emotions will strengthen you through this crisis. Healthy choices to make the next right step in rebuilding after the loss will equip you with mental resilience for whatever the future holds.



This inner strength to choose your responses is how to gain strength and resilience. Choice is the one power you have when facing any loss because it allows you to flow with the emotions of major change and loss.

Swimming does not start with diving into the deep water. It starts with getting your feet wet and realizing you will not drown.

Managing major loss works the same way.

Take a breath and let yourself feel whatever the day is bringing.

In this complicated time learn to be simple.



Learn to rest. Learn to seek peace and share that peace with others. Remember everyone else is learning how to do the same.

Everyone is affected in some way – not everyone will be okay. As you become skilled in flowing with the feelings of grief and loss you will be able to notice others who may not be managing the stress very well. If you see them struggling gently share what you learned. You learned how to swim through the waves of loss, and with that strength you can now teach others.

Everyone lost something, but we do not have to lose each other and the sense of healing that grows best in community.

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