



Managing Anticipatory Grief in a Pandemic

A profound sadness has settled over our world. Whether it's the loss of visits with loved ones, the loss of steady work and income, the loss of our usual routines or the full-stop loss of a person in our life, grief is now a part of our daily landscape.

As the list of items stoking our fears and grief grows by the day, it helps to remember that while loss is universal, grief is personal. At a stressful time like this, we need to steer wide of judgment (of ourselves and others) and widen the space for compassion.

Coping strategies in the face of grief:

1. **Try techniques to quiet dark thoughts.** When you find your thoughts spiraling into a black hole of what-ifs, try replacing them with a mantra or phrase to help pull you back in the present moment. One particular timely phrase: "Don't go there 'til you get there:" reminds you that you are in the here and now, and there's no gain in trying to predict an event hours, days or months from now.
2. **Feel your emotions:** When we are rocked by a wave of grief, let go of negative thoughts and focus instead on the physical sensations. To do this, sit or lie comfortably and train your attention on where the emotion is showing up in your body. Are you feeling a stiffening in your shoulders? A quickening of your heartbeat? An unease in your gut? A pounding in your temples? Whatever the sensation, explore it with interest, not judgment. Say to yourself, "So this is what grief feels like." By focusing on the physical sensations, rather than thoughts, a strong wave of emotion often quits and passes within minutes.
3. **Practice self-compassion:** Offer yourself words of comfort. Give yourself a hug. Treat yourself, as Kristen Neff suggests in "Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself," with the same kindness, caring and compassion you would show to a good friend, or even a stranger. Also, remember that we are not alone in our pain. By remembering that grief is a part of the human experience, one that we all share, we allow our pain to connect us to our common humanity rather than isolate us.
4. **Allow yourself to cry:** During the first week of the current lockdown in Missouri, I went for a walk. As I took in the shining sun, the blue sky, the picture-perfect clouds, the budding trees, I suddenly felt a gut-punch of sorrow. "Our planet is so sick," I thought. With that acknowledgement, I began to weep. I didn't care if the people across the road or the people 10 feet in front of me noticed. I just let grief have its say. And you know what? After about five or 10 minutes, I felt better.
5. **Tap into gratitude:** Feelings of extreme pain can be attended by feelings of extreme gratitude. Appreciate other people's kindness. Appreciate what remains good in your life. Be thankful for

the ability and talent to make a huge difference in other people's lives. These days, people are trying so hard to lift one another up. Sharing a wave and a smile while out walking or accessing the myriad online efforts to comfort and reassure can help to soften your grief.