



The Discomfort That You Are Feeling Is Grief Emotional Intelligence from Harvard Business Review (HBR)

David Kessler, the world's foremost expert on grief, recently shared his thoughts with Harvard Business Review on why it's important to acknowledge the grief you may be feeling during this pandemic, how to manage it, and how he believes we will find meaning in it. This interview is lightly edited for clarity.

HBR: People are feeling any number of things right now. Is it right to call some of what they're feeling grief?

Kessler: Yes, and we're feeling a number of different griefs. We feel the world has changed, and it has. We know this is temporary, but it doesn't feel that way, and we realize things will be different in the future. Just as going to the airport is forever different from how it was before 9/11. Things will change and this is the point at which they changed: the loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us, and we're grieving. Collectively. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air.

HBR: You said we're feeling more than one kind of grief?

Yes, we're also feeling anticipatory grief. Anticipatory grief is this feeling we get about what the future holds when we're uncertain. Usually it centers on death. We feel it when someone gets a dire diagnosis or when we have the normal thought that we'll lose a parent someday. Anticipatory grief is also more broadly imagined futures. There is a storm coming. There's something bad out there. With a virus, this kind of grief is confusing for people. Our primitive mind knows something bad is happening, but you can't see it. This breaks our sense of safety, and we're feeling that loss of safety. I don't think we've collectively lost our sense of general safety like this.

HBR: What can individuals do to manage all this grief?

Understanding the stages of grief is a start. But whenever I talk about the stages of grief, I have to remind people that the stages of grief are not linear and may not happen in this order. It's not a map, but it provides some scaffolding for this unknown world. There's denial, which we said a lot of early on: "this virus won't affect us." There's anger: "You're making me stay home and taking away my activities." There's bargaining: "Okay, if I social distance for two weeks, everything will be better, right?" There's sadness: "I don't know when this will end." And finally there's acceptance: "This is happening; I have to figure out how to proceed." Acceptance, as you might imagine, is where the power lies. We find control in acceptance. "I can wash my hands; I can wear a mask; I can keep a safe distance; I can learn to work virtually."

HBR: When we're feeling grief, there is often a racing mind. Are there techniques to deal with that to make it less intense?

Let's go back to anticipatory grief. Unhealthy anticipatory grief is really anxiety, and that's the feeling you're talking about. Our mind begins to show us images. We see the worst scenarios. That's our mind being protective. Our goal is not to ignore those images or try to make them go away --- your mind won't let you do that, and it can be painful to try and force it. The goal is to find balance in the things you're thinking. If you feel the worst image taking shape, make yourself think of the best image. We all get a little sick and the world continues. Not everyone I love dies. Maybe no one does because we're taking all the right steps. Neither scenario should be ignored but neither should dominate either.

Anticipatory grief is the mind going to the future and imagining the worst. To calm yourself, you want to come into the present. This will be familiar advice to anyone who has meditated or practiced mindfulness. Realize that in the present moment, nothing you've anticipated has happened. In this moment, you're OK. You have food. You are not sick. Practice deep breathing to energize your body and calm your mind.

You can also think about how to let go of what you can't control. What your neighbor is doing is out of your control. What is in your control is staying six feet away, washing your hands and wearing a mask. Focus on that.

Finally, it's a good time to stock up on compassion. Everyone will have different levels of fear and grief, and it manifests in different ways. A coworker got very snippy with me the other day and I thought, "That's not like this person; that's how they're dealing with this. I'm seeing their fear and anxiety."

HBR: One particularly troubling aspect of this pandemic is the open-endedness of it.

This is a temporary state. It helps to say it. I worked 10 years in a hospital system. I've been trained for situations like this. I've also studied the 1918 flu pandemic. The precautions we're taking are the right ones; history tells us that. This is survivable. We will survive. This is a time to over protect but not overreact. And, I believe we will find meaning in it. People are realizing they can connect through technology, and they are not as remote as they thought. I believe we will continue to find meaning now and when this is over.

HBR: What do you say to someone who has read all this and still feeling overwhelmed with grief?

Keep trying. There is something very powerful about naming this as grief. It's absurd to think we shouldn't feel grief right now; let yourself feel the grief and keep moving forward.