



The Covid-19 Pandemic and Grief

Greetings, and welcome – My name is Daniel Baker, Executive Director of the Helping Hands Institute.

Founded in 1989, our philosophy at Helping Hands Institute is to help people help each other, and given the impact the Covid-19 Pandemic is having in every country, and every person around the world, the significance of helping people to help each other couldn't be more relevant than it is today.

In 1998 author Patsy Clairmont wrote a humorous book entitled "*Normal Is Just a Setting on Your Dryer*" and these days that seems just about right, because by now almost everyone we share this world with is clearly aware of the global event the impacting human life on the planet, an event so disruptive to the "normal" we have come to know and live, like never experienced before.

When the Coronavirus hit, our personal definitions of "normal" flew out the window leaving confusion, chaos, and disarray in its wake, and because of its departure, the concept of normal seems far more important now than just a setting on the dryer, and for many in the world, not a very amusing one at all.

If you are like me, and at times overwhelmed by the changes the Covid-19 Pandemic has made to the "normal" lives we've been accustomed too, take some comfort in also knowing, that you are not alone. People all over the world are experiencing an array of feelings as we try to anticipate and prepare ourselves for whatever our "new normal" will mean.

When I think about what was normal and what will be normal, I can't help but feel a mass of conflicting feelings when I think about that is going to mean for me, my family, my community and I like many others are grieving.

So how can what I am experiencing be grief you might ask? While most people would associate the word "grief" with death, and death only, there are countless other life events that can produce feelings of grief, and the COVID-19 pandemic is now most certainly one of them.

If we look at a more comprehensive understanding of grief and our human reaction to loss of any kind, we would find that we can experience a range of conflicting feelings caused by the end of or change in a familiar pattern of behavior, and this Covid-19 pandemic has most certainly changed our familiar patterns of behaviour.

Grief is the normal and natural emotional reaction to loss of any kind, and when we grieve, we grieve the loss of unmet hopes, dreams and expectations.

Perhaps another way to look at it is "it's like reaching out for something that is familiar, only to find that when we need it one more time, it's no longer there". This can amass a number of conflicting emotions and feelings in us.

It can be incredibly scary when everything we are familiar with changes. Like the changes which affects our independence, autonomy and our way of living. The uncertainty of our future, fear for our safety and the dramatic changes we see unfolding around us daily. The most simple to the most complex habits and routines have changed, like the tens of millions of people around the world under quarantine or sheltering in place.

Even if you don't know someone who has died from COVID-19 its power is touching many lives in many different ways.

Perhaps you're worried about the well-being of your parents, children and your own health and safety, and if you yourself are older or have health problems, and are following safe/social distancing practices, you are probably staying indoors, which means increased isolation from family and friends so as not to expose them or yourself.

The events you planned and anticipated, like vacations, weddings, graduations, celebrations, church services, and even simple social gatherings are now cancelled as we all adhere to Safe Distance Practices, which again for many means “increased isolation”.

Our daily lives have shut down and even some of the most important of the social rituals we attend in our communities are now inaccessible, like attending the funeral for a loved one, attending Easter service, or volunteering for a local neighborhood program.

Many of us aren't used to spending so much time at home or away from our normal day-to-day activities. It's a huge change; and one we still don't know how long will last.

You may be expected to learn how to work from home, master a new technology, are worried about the future of your job, how to take care of your kids and how you're going to pay your bills. For many parents they have become home schoolteachers to their children, who are just as confused, bewildered, and yes, as afraid and uncertain as you are with this “new normal”.

Maybe the uncertainty of a future yet to be determined, along with the pressures it brings is causing trouble in your relationships with family, friends, neighbors or even complete strangers as we try to find our way through this safely. Perhaps you are worried about our first responders or the ability of our healthcare system to manage in the days and weeks to come, and how they will weather this pandemic.

Perhaps you have you lost faith with your government, employers, service providers and even your spiritual convictions as we look for help and answers to get us through this safely?

Maybe you're worried about family or a friend in other parts of the country or world as the news updates of this virus inundates us constantly. The steady reports of death and despair, the shortages of personal protective equipment, conflicting values, principles and beliefs to your own can at times overwhelm us and our senses.

Perhaps it's some of these, all of these, or more than I could possibly list from the countless things we accept as our normal in our lives.

One thing is for certain though, whatever normal was it has been turned upside down, and inside out, and leaves many of us, feeling a mass of conflicting feelings as we venture into this new and uncertain future.

People all over the world are grieving the loss of their normal, and that makes what we are feeling *the only thing that is normal*.

These changes and fears for many can cause a great sense of emotional isolation. So not only are we more isolated physically, but emotionally as well.

Society has taught us to “*put on a happy face*” which means that many of us think we shouldn't talk about negative or painful feelings. So if you're grieving the loss of your routine, and the physical isolation caused by COVID-19 stay at home measures, I want you to know that your feelings are *normal and natural*.

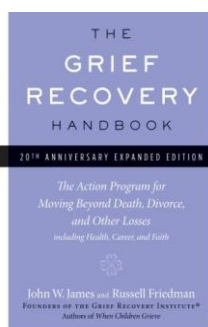
Because sheltering in place and quarantines make it impossible to provide the typical emotional supports to people, efforts are being made in the community to organize and mobilize resources in the days and weeks to help you manage the emotional disruption to your life.

In the meantime, here are some helpful things you can do during this time of overwhelming grief and isolation?

First things first - there is nothing wrong with feeling how you feel about all of this. Grief can be lonely and isolating on its own. Even though the whole world is experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic and others may be having similar experiences, you are very much unique in how it impacts you. How you feel is never the same as someone else and that makes your feelings normal.

Secondly - because grief, our reaction to loss, is so misunderstood in our society it has the potential to create physical and emotional isolation. The idea that we need to grieve alone is a myth, one which causes more loss and ultimately more harm. Of course the remedy to emotional and physical isolation is participation. So how do we engage in emotional and physical participation when we are quarantined or sheltering in place?

1. Start by practicing shifting what you believe about communicating your sad and painful thoughts and feelings. Know that you should talk about them as you would happy or positive thoughts. In the wise words of Mr. Fred Rogers, *anything human is mentionable, and anything mentionable is manageable*. We need to talk about what has and is happening and our feelings and so we can learn how to manage it all. A good book to help you with that is *The Grief Recovery Handbook* by John James and Russell Friedman.



2. Next, find ways to *engage with other people*. Here are some possible suggestions.
 - *Video Chat*. Choose your favorite video chat service and start an online meeting based on common interests like a book club, spiritual program or a trivia night.
 - *Hop on the phone*. We've gotten so used to email and texting that many of us have stopped making phone calls. This is a good time to change that. Hearing a familiar voice can provide a tremendous amount of comfort. You also get a deeper level of connection than over text and email because you are hearing the inflection and tone of someone's voice.
 - *Check-in with friends and family members*. Set a time of day to talk with your loved ones.
3. **Get active**
 - *Involve yourself in an activity*. Try cleaning, organizing, exercising, cooking, doing crafts with your kids, teaching your dog a new trick, home improvements, gardening, working, going in the yard for fresh air or reading a book. Get active!
 - *Practice living in the moment*. When you find yourself going out of the moment remember that you can always get back in the present. First acknowledge your thoughts and feelings (so you're not avoiding them) then try to focus on what's happening right in front of you. This works best if you allow yourself to have your feelings as they arise in the first place. It's much harder to be in the moment if you try to ignore or push your feelings away.

4. *Avoid the Distraction Activities*

- *Avoid* activities that distract you from sad or painful feelings. They work, and they work very well, but they are short lived and only SHORT TERM. Eventually they will stop working. Here are just a few!
 - Excessive Drinking, Sleeping, Eating, Exercise, Internet activity, Shopping (here me here, I said EXCESSIVE)
 - Distraction Sex
 - Drugs
 - Gambling
 - Workaholism
 - Isolating (even while in isolation)
 - Keeping Busy just as a means of distraction
- *Don't intellectualize.* Grief is emotional, not logical or intellectual. Following CDC and government regulations for sheltering in place and social distancing is what we all should do for our own safety and the welfare of our families, coworkers and community, but that doesn't mean it's easy. There's no need to explain away your feelings with intellectual truths. In fact, doing that could make you feel more isolated because you think you have no one to talk to.

So as I stated earlier, efforts are being made to put resources together that may be of benefit to you or someone you know. In the meantime if this topic has generated any thoughts or questions, which I'm sure it has, write them down, and we'll try to answer those as soon as possible.

Until then, stay safe, and we'll help each other get through this together.

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