

PERSPECTIVES

COVID-19: Loss and grief without an expiration date**Publish date:** April 27, 2020By [Dara Abraham, DO](#)

We are all experiencing collective loss and grief because of COVID-19, but that doesn't mean that we are experiencing the same loss or grieving the same way.

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Losses can be unique to individuals, such as the death of a loved one or divorce from a spouse. They can also be more universal, such as the tragedy of Sept. 11, 2001. However, both of these types of losses are generally associated with a distinct event that has a known beginning and endpoint. What makes the losses related to the coronavirus so different is that there is not a known expiration date. This lack of certainty about when the losses caused by the pandemic will end makes it difficult to process and mourn appropriately.

The multitude of potential losses includes, of course, the death of thousands of people. Many of us have personally lost loved ones or know people who have had loss because of COVID-19-related illnesses. There have also been numerous illnesses caused by delayed medical care tied to fears of going to a hospital during the pandemic. Unfortunately, there is an anticipatory loss because of the invariable diseases that will be diagnosed because of the halt of routine and preventive medical care during this current restricted phase of social distancing. There has been a loss of how people can mourn the deceased, having to go without funerals, memorials, and shivas.

There are also losses that are not related to health. These more intangible losses may include the loss of employment and stable income; loss of our children's completion of their academic year; loss of socialization; loss of travel and visits to friends and family; loss of normal childbirth where a pregnant mother is accompanied by her partner; loss of visiting sick relatives and newborns; loss of dating, weddings, graduations, and milestone birthday celebrations; loss of visits to nursing homes

of your loved ones; loss of the needed services and support to help with your young child's disabilities; and loss of intimacy, connection and touch.

Such losses may seem inconsequential, compared with the death of an acquaintance or loved one. But we do not know the back story behind these other losses. For example, could a family member who is unable to meet the newest addition to the family have a terminal disease and his or her own expiration date? Could the lack of dating exacerbate a new divorcee's feeling of loneliness and despair?

When we know the details associated with the individual's loss due to COVID-19, we can understand and better empathize. Continued collective loss without an expiration date will lead to collective grief without an endpoint.

Stages of grief

The five distinct stages of grief experienced after a loss were initially developed by psychiatrist [Elisabeth Kübler-Ross](https://www.biography.com/scientist/elisabeth-kubler-ross) <<https://www.biography.com/scientist/elisabeth-kubler-ross>> , in her 1969 book “[On Death and Dying](https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781593976569) <<https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781593976569>> ” and again explored in her book “[On Grief and Grieving](https://www.simonandschuster.com/search/books/_/N-/Ntt-On+Grief+and+Grieving) <https://www.simonandschuster.com/search/books/_/N-/Ntt-On+Grief+and+Grieving> ” in 2005. The stages of grief are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.



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The grief process is unique to each individual and not necessarily a predictable process, with some moving through the stages at a slower pace while others can get stuck in one or more of the stages. This non-linear pattern of grief is evident in our grief response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some of us had experiences of denial back in early March, when initial thoughts crept up, such as “this can't be as bad as what the medical officials are proposing” and “how is this any different from

the flu?” Denial is used as a protective defense against feeling an abundance of emotions all at once, while allowing us time to adjust to the new situation.

Most of us have also had experiences with anger directed at our leaders for not adequately preparing us and intense rage at health care administrators for lack of proper protective gear for our first-line health care workers.

Bargaining tactics were noticeable with common thoughts such as “if we stay home and risk the demise of our economy, we will have the chance to protect our most vulnerable populations and therefore save lives.” Unfortunately, many of us have also experienced thoughts of despair and depression. Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness set in with many parents, who, overnight, were given dual roles as a parent and teacher. Many parents are attempting to simultaneously juggle a full-time workload.

Some of us already have begun to move to the last stage of grief, which is acceptance. Although most of us will experience all five of the stages of grief, we are not necessarily in the same stage at the same time. This can lead to contentious conversations among colleagues, friends, and family members. We might not necessarily be in the same mourning stage as our spouse, child, mother, father, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, cousins, or friend. The differences in how we mourn can result in your spouse remaining in the denial phase of grief and refusing to wear a mask to the grocery store. At the same time, you may have already entered the bargaining phase and are willing to forgo the niceties of grocery shopping to protect and promote the common good.

With loss inevitably comes change

This difference in these stages of loss can affect how we all return to a new sense of routine when we begin to reopen our communities.

Unfortunately, we will not have defined guidelines or cookbook steps and rules to abide by. The one thing we will have is our ability to accept each other’s differences, especially when it comes to grief.

Remember, we all will grieve in our way, and this isn’t a race to the finish line. What we do know is that none of us are coming out of this unscathed. This global loss will forever change us. Our new standard will take time for acclimation, but we will get there. With loss inevitably comes change, and this experience will allow us to redefine who we are and what we choose to prioritize and focus on post pandemic. There will be a post-pandemic period, whether it is 6 months, 1 year, or 2 years from now; we will eventually start to shake hands again, even hug and kiss hello. What we need to

make sure of is that we don't forget this time. Whatever meaning you find, and change for the better, will hopefully transcend to your post-pandemic life.

Dr. Abraham is a psychiatrist in private practice in Philadelphia. She has no disclosures.

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