

Loss and Self-Care for Health Care Professionals during COVID-19

COVID-19 is a fast moving and unexpected pandemic and is likely to have ongoing and unexpected losses associated with it. The losses that Australians face may be many, the loss of the old familiar routines, the loss of security and of employment, the loss of a wedding, or even the loss of life of family, friends or work colleagues. Consequently, grieving and mourning may significantly change as people are facing these new and continual losses. Many people's lives will not return to 'normal' any time soon, if at all. It is important to grieve for what was.

People may be experiencing many aspects of loss normally thought to be only associated with loss through death. Remember that wide ranging feelings about loss and grief are to be expected and can unexpectedly change. Some people might not be feeling or experiencing much at all, other people might experience these feelings very acutely over a prolonged period of time. [1,2] All of the following feelings are normal responses to a significant loss situation:

- Disbelief that this disruption is happening on a worldwide scale. *It's not about me, I won't be affected, I'm safe – only other people who have been overseas are getting the disease*
- A questioning of all the disruption such as *Why is everything being shut down – how dare they stop me from going to work; going to the pub with my mates; going to the beach when I want to? Why are they still allowed to be at work and my income has stopped?*
- Thinking of the worst such as *This will never end; I won't survive economically; I'll be evicted because I can't pay my rent; I've got diabetes and compromised lung function – I'm one of those in the category that won't be prioritised for medical help if I get it.*
- Unrealistic thinking such as *If I stay inside and do the right thing, I won't have to worry about getting it*
- Fatalistic thinking such as *It is what it is. I need to work out how to make the best of this situation.*
- A search for meaning such as, *What is the bigger meaning of this worldwide slowing down/shut down? What does this mean for me? How can I make something positive out of this situation?*

Self-Care

The effects of individual or collective grief and loss will be interrupted, and potentially felt for some time to come. Health professionals need to think of both their own and their patient's wellbeing at this time. Below are some suggestions for managing this discomfort and perhaps suggest to others:

- Challenge our own worries/catastrophic thinking – Ask yourself is it really true that I will never work again or that I will definitely die because I have a compromised immune system?
- Identify what inner resources or resilience you have shown in other difficult situations. We have all managed very tough circumstances in the past – what did we do then and how can we utilise the same resources in this crisis? We are all more resilient than we think.
- Take a break from the news – only check a reputable information site (ABC News; State/Commonwealth Health; Government website) once a day to look for updates – do not compulsively watch/read about the situation and disengage from social media sites and news feeds.
- Identify what you are grateful for at this time and refocus your thinking away from the negativity – if you really look at your life there are lots of things to be grateful for at this time – don't overlook the little things like having a garden to step out into, or being welcomed home by a happy pet
- Try to do some grounding exercises, meditation, mindfulness every day. This will give your mind a rest from the compulsive ruminating and worrying
- Identify what you can control at this time – again don't overlook the little things like managing your own social distancing and hand washing to ensure you are as safe as possible
- Counteract isolation and loneliness – reach out to others by email, phone or skype, chat to the neighbours over the fence – use this as an opportunity to catch up with those you may have lost contact with.
- Laugh and share laughter – a great way to brighten your own mood and feel better – go on the internet and look at all the inspirational and in some cases very funny movies people have shared.

- See what you can give to someone else – are you able to help or contact a lonely or isolated person in your community. Can you do shopping or share those spare groceries or toilet rolls with someone who is less able to manage at this time.

It is important for health professionals to proactively care for themselves, assist others in their care and seek further support if needed. Below are some further resources to support you which you are able to share with your patients. Remember we are all in this together, and together we can come out the other side.

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References

[1] Kessler, D. (2019). *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Step of Grief*. London: Penguin Random House.

[2] The link between the stages of grief and the Covid information was from an interview of Kessler from: Berinato, S. (March 23, 2020). That discomfort you are feeling is grief. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>

Support

BeyondBlue

- [Looking after your mental health during the coronavirus outbreak](#)

BACP – British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

- [Coronavirus anxiety: how to cope if you're feeling anxious about the outbreak](#)

CDC – Centers for Disease Control & Prevention

- [Mental Health and Coping During COVID-19](#)

The University of Melbourne – Counselling & Psychological Services:

- [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): managing stress and anxiety](#)

APS – Australian Psychological Society

- [Tips for coping with coronavirus anxiety](#)

Psychology Today

- [How COVID-19 May Impact Mental Health](#)
- [COVID-19 Fears: How to Calm a Child's Anxiety](#)

APA – American Psychological Association

- [Psychologist leads innovative approach to tackle psychological toll of COVID-19](#)
- [Speaking of Psychology: Coronavirus Anxiety](#)