

You may not have thought of it in these terms, but what you have been feeling is **grief**.

Sometimes being able to name something can enable us to manage it. It is important to be able to acknowledge the grief you are feeling at this time.

Clients are sharing with us that they are realising at the moment that the world has changed. And it really has. Yes, we are hoping that it is temporary, but for now it doesn't feel that way and we are realising that things will be different for a while. There is a loss of what we consider as normal, there is the fear of the economic toll and a loss of connection which is hitting us all and we are **grieving as a whole**. We are grieving collectively, and we are not used to the feeling of collective grief around us.

**Anticipatory grief** is a feeling we get when we are uncertain about what the future holds, or we are certain of what it does hold, and it is upsetting for us. It can be likened to an imagined future, one in which we feel that a storm is coming towards us and that something bad is heading towards us.

With a virus, this kind of grief is so confusing for us as our mind knows something bad is happening, but you can't see it. This breaks our sense of safety and we are all feeling that in immense amounts at the moment, that loss of safety. Individually or in smaller groups you may have experienced this kind of grief before, particularly in relation to death, however losing our sense of general safety like we have at this time is all new and we are grieving on a micro and macro level.

To manage this grief **understanding the stages of grief** is a good start. However, the stages of grief are not linear and don't happen in a particular order or you can cycle back to previous stages unexpectedly. The stages don't provide a map but can provide a bit of a structure on what to expect or to normalise what you are feeling in this unknown world.

Denial - We say this early on in the process. 'This virus won't affect me'

Anger - 'You're making me stay home and taking away my activities'

Bargaining - 'Okay, if I social distance for 2 weeks everything will be better right?'

Sadness - 'I don't know when this will end'

*and finally...*

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 keep a safe distance. I can learn how to work virtually.*

**Unhealthy anticipatory grief is really anxiety** and that is the discomfort and the feeling that you are talking about and experiencing. Our mind begins to show us images and we see worst case scenarios. This is our mind looking out for us and being protective. Our goal is not to ignore these images or try to make them go away as these thoughts will naturally come in for us and our mind won't let us do this and can become painful to try and force it.

**Our goal is to find balance** in the things that you are thinking and if you feel the worst image taking shape, make yourself think of the best image. Do not catastrophise. We all sometimes get sick and the world continues. Not everyone I love dies. Maybe nobody does because we are all taking the right steps. Neither scenario should be dismissed or ignored but neither should dominate either.

When we are experiencing anticipatory grief, we are moving our mind to the future and imagining the worst. In order to calm this, we want to bring our mind into the present and become mindful. Focus on what is happening around us.

You can name five things in the room that are in front of you be it a picture, a chair, a table, a rug, a coffee mug. It is as simple as being present and breathing and realising that right now nothing you have anticipated has happened. In this moment you are okay. Use your senses and think about what they feel. The chair is hard, the rug is soft, I can feel breath coming into my nose. This really works to lessen the pain that you are feeling.

You can also think about how to **let go of what you can't control**. You don't have any control over what your neighbours are doing but you can control how far you stay away from them. You can control if you wash your hands or not or use sanitizer. You can control if you are self-isolating and staying inside as much as possible. **Focus on that.**

Now is when we need to be showing empathy and compassion to everyone. People will be experiencing different levels of fear and grief and it comes out in different ways for different people. If someone unexpectedly snaps at you instead of getting upset think something like 'that isn't how this person normally reacts, that must be how they are dealing with this'. We are seeing their fear and anxiety and now is a time to be patient and remember how that person usually is and not how they are reacting in this moment.

**The open-endedness and unknown of the pandemic is particularly difficult and troubling.** Saying out loud that this is a temporary state helps. Things won't always be this way. We are all taking precautions at this time and we have survived pandemics before. History tells us that we will survive, and this is a time to overprotect but not overreact.

**We can find meaning.** We all want to find meaning especially when we are experiencing those dark times. We want to find light in those times. We can keep up our connections with technology. We aren't as remote as we think, and we can still have phone conversations for a long time. People are appreciating the walks if they get to take one. We as a human race will continue to find meaning now and when this is over.

**It's okay to reach out for help.** It's okay to still feel overwhelmed despite knowing all of this. Just keep going. It is powerful to name what you are feeling as grief and it helps us feel what is inside. Verbalise what you are feeling. It's okay to tell coworkers that you are having a hard time. It's okay to tell your loved one that you cried last night. When you put a name to things it allows you to move through it. Emotions need motion and it is important that we acknowledge what we are going through and verbalise it to others.

Don't tell yourself that you shouldn't feel sad. You can feel sad and you should feel sad. Its okay. The trick is to feel your sadness and fear and anger when it arises whether or not someone else is feeling that way. Its your feelings. Fighting it doesn't help because your body is producing the feeling and if we allow it to happen it can do so in an orderly way and it can empower us. Then we are not victims.

**Keep trying.** There is something powerful about naming this as grief. It helps us feel what's inside of us. So many have told me in the past week, "I'm telling my coworkers I'm having a hard time," or "I cried last night." When you name it, you feel it and it moves through you. Emotions need motion. It's important we acknowledge what we go through.

One unfortunate byproduct of the self-help movement is we're the first generation to have feelings about our feelings. We tell ourselves things like, *I feel sad, but I shouldn't feel that; other people have it worse.* We can — we should — stop at the first feeling. *I feel sad. Let me go for five minutes to feel sad.*

Your work is to feel your sadness and fear and anger whether or not someone else is feeling something. Fighting it doesn't help because your body is producing the feeling. If we allow the feelings to happen, they'll happen in an orderly way, and it empowers us. Then we're not victims.