

Grief and Loss in the face of the COVID-19 Pandemic

As the number of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) cases rise across Australia, many individuals are reckoning with significant losses. This includes experiences of illness and death of loved ones, colleagues, and clients; exposure to constant reminders about illness and death amongst fellow Australians and people overseas; job and financial losses; and the loss of social freedoms which Australians have always enjoyed. It is important to understand our grief responses and learn strategies to manage our feelings and reactions during this time. This article provides some important information, strategies and resources which can be used to in the face of these events.

What is Grief?

Grief is a natural response to the loss of something meaningful. It is a process, rather than a single emotion and the experience of grief evolves and changes as a person adapts to the loss.

There is no “right way” to grieve, and no way of predicting how long the grieving period will or should last. Whilst grief is a normal response; for some, feelings of loss are debilitating and don't improve even after time passes. This is known as complicated grief. The grief is chronic and has a significant impact on the affected person.

Understanding Common Reactions to Loss

It is normal to experience a range of physical, emotional, psychological and physiological reactions to grief. It is common to sleep too little or too much, to forget things or experiencing fatigue, nausea, headaches and intense emotions. Given the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals and society at large may feel unprepared for coping with the associated losses.

Some signs that a person may be struggling to work through their grieving process and may be experiencing complicated grief include:

- Intense sorrow and pain at the thought of the individual or situation
- Focus on little else but the situation
- Extreme focus on or avoidance of reminders of the losses
- Extreme levels of fear for the future
- Problems accepting the circumstances
- Numbness or detachment
- Bitterness about the losses
- Feeling that life holds no meaning or purpose anymore
- Irritability or agitation
- Lack of trust in others
- Inability to enjoy life or think back on positive experiences

Caraniche at Work

Level 1, 260 Hoddle Street, Abbotsford VIC 3067

T 1800 099 444 F (03) 9417 0181

work@caraniche.com.au

work.caraniche.com.au

Experiences of grief can feel overwhelming, but the painful feelings generally diminish with time. If they remain intense, it is important to seek professional support. However, there are things that can help in managing these symptoms and support coping.

Looking after yourself after a loss

Allow yourself to grieve

Know that grief takes time. You may be surprised by how you are feeling and how these feelings change over time. It is important to stop and acknowledge difficult feelings and emotions. Be open about how you are feeling and understand that grieving does not have to be done alone. Share your feelings with people you trust such as friends, family and colleagues, who might understand how you are feeling. Even during these times where coming together physically is not an option, make efforts to connect via phone, FaceTime, video, or even write a letter.

Don't ignore your feelings and do your best not to compare yourself to others or feel guilty about how you are feeling. In times where everyone is affected in some way, it can be easy to experience thinking patterns that diminish the seriousness of your loss experiences (e.g., It could be worse; I shouldn't feel this way because I am better off than others). Give yourself permission to experience grief in your own way.

In the case of death, honour the person and create positive memories

Honour the life of the person who has died. While the rituals we normally use to honour our losses, such as funeral services, may be limited due to isolation and lockdown restrictions, it may be helpful to find your own, meaningful way to honour the loss. Collect photos or keepsakes, write a journal, plant a tree or share stories and rituals with others. These can all help to create meaning after loss.

Self-care

Looking after yourself is important and should be a priority when responding to grief. Some strategies for self-care include:

- Look after your physical health. Grieving can be exhausting so it is important to eat a healthy diet, exercise and sleep
- Try relaxation, breathing or meditation techniques to manage strong emotions
- Make sure you still have a routine and structure to your days, even if this looks different to your usual way of living
- Get plenty of rest, even if you can't sleep
- Eat regularly and try to choose healthy food, if possible. If your usual choices are not available, get creative and remember this will not be forever
- Plan small rewarding activities and try to enjoy them as much as possible
- Give yourself time out – remember you are allowed to enjoy your life

Caraniche at Work

Level 1, 260 Hoddle Street, Abbotsford VIC 3067

T 1800 099 444 F (03) 9417 0181

work@caraniche.com.au

work.caraniche.com.au

- Be mindful of any drug or alcohol use. Substances can numb feelings in the short term but will make it harder to heal

Stay connected

Social support is vital in helping people move forward with the grief, rather than getting stuck in it. Due to the COVID19 pandemic, many of us will be isolated from important support networks, as well as the normal activities that would generally bring us in contact with others. It is important to find ways to stay connected to others during this time, in the ways that you can. This might include regular check ins with others via phone, video calls, and social media, joining an online support group or accepting offers of help. You might make a commitment to contact one person each day and talk.

Surviving significant days/dates

When we are going through a tough time, significant dates (e.g., birthdays, anniversaries or holidays) can trigger intense feelings of grief. It may help to mark these occasions with a simple ceremony like lighting a candle, playing music or gathering with family – in this case virtually may be a good option. These are things that can continue to support the grieving process, after the pandemic passes.

How can you support others?

Don't let your fears of reaching out to others stop you from being there for them. Offer your support, so your friends and loved ones know it is available when they need it. Remember that everyone's grief is unique. By responding with empathy, listening and validating their experiences, you can be a supportive option for others to turn to. Some ways to support those around you experiencing grief include:

- Ask them how they are feeling
- Take time to listen with compassion and understanding
- Acknowledge how they are feeling and their loss
- Talk about everyday life as well
- Ask them what supports they have and what they need
- Avoid statements intended to comfort them, but that minimise their grief (e.g., "At least" statements)
- Encourage them to seek professional support if their grief does not appear to be easing over time

Need support?

It is important to remember you are not alone. Medicare rebated mental health support for individuals, families and communities is available. Recently, the Australian Federal Government announced funding of a new Medicare service for people in home isolation or quarantine, as a

Caraniche at Work

Level 1, 260 Hoddle Street, Abbotsford VIC 3067
T 1800 099 444 F (03) 9417 0181
work@caraniche.com.au
work.caraniche.com.au

result of COVID19, to receive bulk-billed telehealth consultations and services. Telehealth attendance can include either videoconferencing or phone attendance.

Help is also available through:

- Your GP and community health centre, if needed.
- Caraniche at Work as your employee wellbeing provider (1800 099 444). We are currently offering appointments via phone or video and have a drop in service available at both Sunshine and Footscray Hospitals.
- A mental health care specialist such as a Psychiatrist, Psychologist, Counsellor or Social Worker. This can often be Medicare funded (as described above).
- GriefLine (1300 845 745)
- Lifeline (13 11 14), Beyond Blue (1300 224 636) or MensLine (1300 78 99 78)
- The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (ACGB) (03 9265 2100 or www.grief.org.au)

Online Psychological Resources

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

- [Grief and Bereavement and COVID-19 – Resources for Practitioners and the public](#)

Health Direct

- [Coping with Grief](#)

Beyond Blue

- [Grief and Loss](#)
- [Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service](#)

APA – American Psychological Association

- [Grief and COVID-19: Mourning our bygone lives](#)
- [Video – Grief and COVID-19: Mourning What We're Missing](#)

Psychology Today

- [Grief in the Midst of Covid-19](#)

University of California, San Francisco

- [Emotional Well-Being and Coping During COVID-19](#)

Caraniche at Work

Level 1, 260 Hoddle Street, Abbotsford VIC 3067

T 1800 099 444 F (03) 9417 0181

work@caraniche.com.au

work.caraniche.com.au