

Strategies for managing grief and COVID-19 related anxiety



When a person experiences a bereavement, the impacts can feel paralysing. Grieving people often feel that they have lost their sense of control as they attempt to adapt to a different life. Beliefs about the world being a safe and predictable place can be challenged, and grief may leave a bereaved person worrying excessively about the possibility of future losses, feeling fearful or thinking about the past.

For many, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has created a sense of uncertainty and confusion. In times like these, it may be difficult to escape from the constant discussion of the crisis. The news, social media and conversations seem to be preoccupied with the current situation. These conversations can bring up painful feelings for those who experience heightened anxiety or who have pre-existing mental health conditions. They can also bring up memories of past bereavements, past traumas or fears about our own health and wellbeing.

Common grief-related symptoms can include:

- » Feeling out of control. "My emotions are all over the place. One minute I am ok the next I am overwhelmed with fear."
- » Excessive worrying. Ruminating about the details of bereavement or what may happen in the future
- » A fear of dying or an inability to 'shut off'
- » Trouble concentrating
- » Palpitations
- » Dizziness or shortness of breath
- » Profuse sweating
- » Trouble sleeping
- » Changed appetite
- » Feeling panicky. "I feel like I am going crazy"

However, if symptoms such as these are impacting on your daily functioning or not reducing with time, it is important to seek assistance from a Health Care Professional.

What can help?

'Smile, breathe and go slowly' (Thich Nhat Hanh)

- » Being kind and compassionate to yourself and others during this time is very important. Take your time and go gently and slowly.
- » Go 'back to basics' - Grief and anxiety can make it challenging to take care of your daily needs. Doing things like eating nutritious foods, sleeping well and getting some fresh air each day can help.
- » Try not to keep your emotions bottled up. Spend time talking to family, friends or neighbours who may give you energy and support either online, via the telephone, social media or across a 2-metre distance fence!
- » Using mindfulness practices to encourage 'present moment awareness' can be helpful for some people. For example, meditation, noticing our breathing, mindful walking, colouring, or doing a 'body scan'.

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- » Are you feeling overwhelmed? Think about the **RAIN** acronym. Practised regularly it can be a way to notice feelings triggered by unhelpful thoughts and feelings.
- » **Recognise** - what is going on with your thoughts and emotions
- » **Allow** - the experience to be there, just as it is
- » **Investigate** - with kindness
- » **Natural awareness** - which comes from not over-identifying with the experience
- » Practice daily gratitude to help you remember other positive things that are there as well as grief and anxiety. Using a gratitude jar or journaling "what went well for me today?" are some examples of this.
- » Ask for help. An understanding doctor, counsellor, psychologist, faith/spiritual adviser, or a support organisation such as ARCVIC (The Anxiety Recovery Centre in Victoria) is a good starting point.
- » Call a helpline for support. Beyond Blue, Lifeline, ARCVIC are some examples of helplines that have trained staff to provide support.
- » It can help to take regular breaks from the news, social media, and also from your grief if it feels overwhelming.
- » Try to keep to a regular daily routine. Getting dressed, having breakfast and walking at the same time created each day are some good examples.
- » Try to relax and do enjoyable things. Activities such as watching a TV series, reading, arts and crafts, using essential oils or having a bath can help.
- » If friends or relatives are continually talking about the situation, or seem anxious about the pandemic, you could suggest talking about something else for a while. Try to keep in contact as isolation can make it difficult for some people to cope.

Download the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement's *MyGrief App* for immediate information and strategies about bereavement support and how to support someone who is grieving. The *MyGrief App* is available at <http://bit.ly/mygrief> for both the Apple and Android smartphone platforms.

Contact the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement on freecall 1800 642 066 to arrange for telephone and online specialist bereavement support.

For more information and advice, contact Beyond Blue Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service on 1800 512 348, ARCVIC on 1300 269 438, or Lifeline on 13 11 14.