

Opinion

Opinion: Coping with grief and loss during COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has turned all of our lives upside down. Even if you're fortunate enough to be healthy, this time period is not without its mental and emotional challenges. As a licensed mental health counselor at Retreat Behavioral Health, which is located in New Haven, not only do I see these challenges when treating patients, but I've dealt with my own personal struggles with grief.

The past two months have been a roller coaster with major highs — having a baby — and major lows — my grandmother and pet dog passing away within weeks of each other. While having a baby is certainly a reason to celebrate, that doesn't mean I haven't felt moments of intense sadness. Although, my grandmother did not die of COVID-19, the pandemic has certainly affected the way my family and I could mourn. Normally, we would sit shiva, a Jewish tradition where family members and close friends gather to grieve their loved one for a week. Given the need for social distancing, that was just not possible during the pandemic. Additionally, we could not attend a funeral. When you cannot observe these significant rituals, it can make it more challenging to go through the natural grieving process, which can sometimes lead to delayed onset grief.

It's also possible to experience grief for reasons other than the death of a loved one. Perhaps you're a college student that won't get to celebrate your graduation with a ceremony or you're grieving the loss of a relationship. Even the loss of freedom you might be feeling as a result of the pandemic can make it tough to cope. The important

thing to remember during this Mental Health Awareness Month is that grief can turn into mental illness if left untreated.

Fortunately, there are things you can do to help alleviate the pain. Here are a few professional recommendations:

Stay connected: While experts use the term “social distancing,” what we really want to convey is physical distancing. This means that even if you can’t see your loved ones in-person, you can still connect with them. Whether you prefer video chats or talking on the phone, it can feel very cathartic to talk about the pain you’re experiencing with a friend or family member.

Honor your loved one: If you are mourning the death of a loved one, it can also be therapeutic to honor them with certain rituals. If they had a favorite meal, try making it. Did they love a certain book or movie? Read it or watch it. Even looking at pictures of them or wearing their favorite color can help you feel connected to their memory.

Practice self-compassion: It’s important to acknowledge that this is a tough time for everyone, but especially for anyone grieving. Don’t be so hard on yourself. Accept that it may take a while but you will get through this.

Remain physically active: Exercise increases your endorphins, which are known as our happy chemicals. They also reduce stress. Having a mood-booster like this can keep your body and mind healthy.

Reach out to a mental health professional: There is no shame in asking for help. A therapist can help you work through your feelings and develop healthy coping

mechanisms. Now that many are offering telemedicine, it's easier than ever to get an appointment.

I hope that people realize just how normal it is to be grieving right now and that there's no reason to feel ashamed. With this in mind, Retreat Behavioral Health will host a grief webinar focusing on the mental and emotional challenges facing our children right now. Parents can join me for this important discussion on Thursday, June 4, at 1 p.m. For more information, visit <https://register.gotowebinar.com/register/6916124258554239501>

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