

That Discomfort You're Feeling Is Grief

David Kessler, one of the world's foremost experts on grief, shared his thoughts on why it's important to acknowledge the grief you may be feeling, how to manage it, and how he believes we will find meaning in it. **If we can name it, perhaps we can manage it.** *The conversation is lightly edited for clarity.*

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People are feeling any number of things right now. Is it right to call some of what they're feeling grief?

Yes, and we're feeling a number of different griefs. We feel the world has changed, and it has. We know this is temporary, but it doesn't feel that way, and we realize things will be different.

The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us and we're grieving. Collectively. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air.

You said we're feeling more than one kind of grief?

Yes, we're also feeling anticipatory grief, that feeling we get about what the future holds when we're uncertain. Usually it centers on death. We feel it when someone gets a dire diagnosis or when we have the normal thought that we'll lose a parent someday. Anticipatory grief is also more broadly imagined futures. With a virus, this kind of grief is so confusing for people. Our primitive mind knows something bad is happening, but you can't see it. This breaks our sense of safety. We're feeling that loss of safety.

What can individuals do to manage all this grief?

Understanding the stages of grief is a start. I have to remind people that the stages aren't linear and may not happen in a particular order. There's denial, which we say a lot of early on: *'This virus won't affect us'*. There's anger: *'You're making me stay home and taking away my activities'*. There's bargaining: *'Okay, if I social distance for two weeks everything will be better, right?'* There's sadness: *'I don't know when this will end'*. And finally there's 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.

When we're feeling grief there's that physical pain. And the racing mind. Are there techniques to deal with that to make it less intense?

Unhealthy anticipatory grief is really anxiety; that's the feeling you're talking about. Our mind begins to show us images. We see the worst scenarios. That's our minds being protective. Our goal is not to ignore those images or make them go away.

The goal is to find balance in the things you're thinking. To calm yourself, you want to come into the present. You can name five things in the room. Realize that in the present moment, nothing you've anticipated has happened. Use your senses and think about what they feel. You can also think about how to let go of what you can't control. Finally, it's a good time to stock up on compassion. Everyone will have different levels of fear and grief and it manifests in different ways.

A coworker got snippy with me the other day and I thought, That's not like this person; that's how they're dealing with this. I'm seeing their fear and anxiety.

So be patient. Think about who someone usually is and not who they seem to be in this moment. One particularly troubling aspect of this pandemic is the open-endedness of it. This is a temporary state. It helps to say it. The precautions we're taking are the right ones. History tells us that. This is survivable. We will survive. This is a time to overprotect but not overreact.

What do you say to someone who's read all this and is still feeling overwhelmed with grief?

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. If we allow the feelings to happen, they'll happen in an orderly way, and it empowers us. Let yourself feel the grief and keep going.

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