



Life and Loss During the Pandemic: Hope and Resilience

Marc A. Markell Ph.D. CT
Professor Emeritus- St. Cloud State University
Instructor- Worsham College of Mortuary Science
Instructor-University of St. Thomas

mamarkell@stcloudstate.edu email
Marcmarkell.com website

COVID



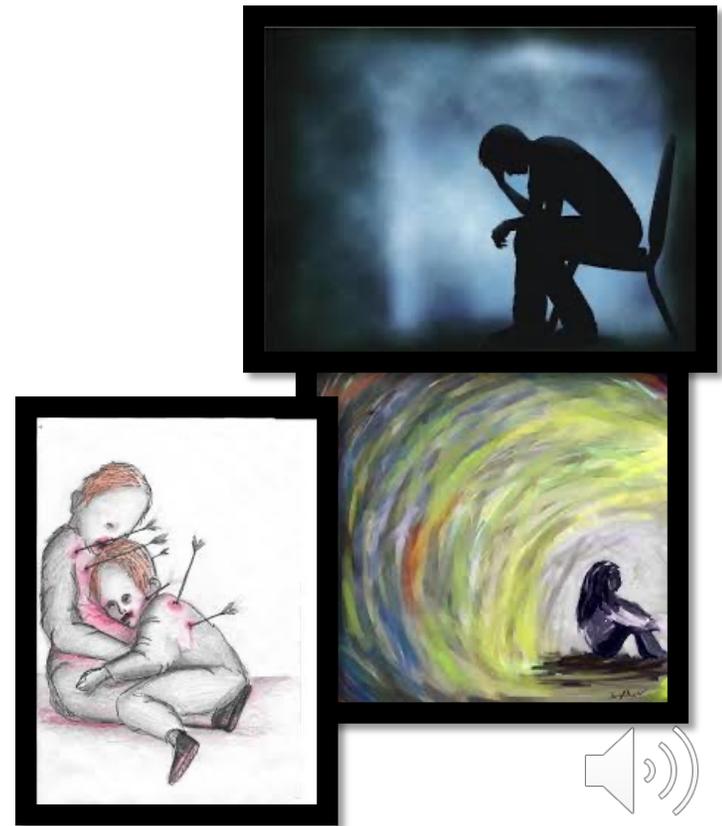
Grief and Loss During the Time of Covid

The pandemic has left many people experiencing grief and ambiguous loss. People who have had a friend or family member die due to COVID, suicide or other health condition may be struggling. This presentation will help participants learn more about how the pandemic has impacted grief and how to be helpful and supportive to yourself and others.



Outline

- Introduction
- Grief from COVID deaths
- Suicide or other issues dealing with COVID
- Covid and grief from ambiguous loss
- What to do?



Grief from COVID deaths

- October 2021 poll that about 13% Americans had a member of their family die of covid; another 20% have lost a close friend.
- Approximately **9 close relatives are bereaved** for each person who dies from COVID
- Potential bereaved population from Covid deaths is about **65 million**

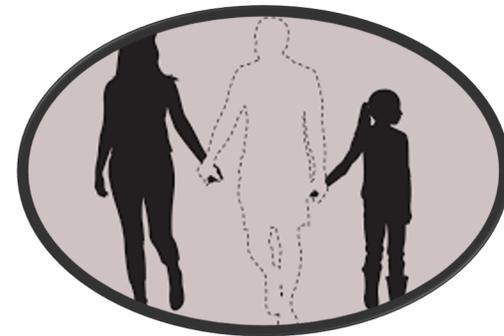


https://greenlining.org/press/opinion-columns/2020/racial-inequality-and-covid-19/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw4eaJBhDMARIsANhrQAAAn9-xAUbtvpXk17URYm2IVnih8-Og6vIlZP0mWIZqGL8vHfEvYQZMaAofMEALw_wcB

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/10/13/third-americans-say-close-friends-or-family-have-died-covid-19/>



- African American Communities are experiencing higher COVID-19 mortality rates:
 - 2.9 times higher than the rate for Asian Americans
 - 2.7 times higher than the rate for White Americans
 - 2.5 times higher than the rate for Latino/a/x Americans
- People who are African American already had a low life expectancy rate- with COVID it's even lower



- Grief because of covid death is more likely to be chronic or prolonged - The pain of loss intensifies – or feelings of numbness don't go away – **at least 6 months to 1 year after the loss.**
- Characteristics of prolonged/chronic grief:
 - Preoccupation with the loss.
 - Intense longing for a lost or former life.
 - Increased irritability/agitation/bitterness/rage
 - Difficulty acknowledging the loss has occurred



- Avoiding situations that are reminders of the loss.
- Depression – especially hopeless thoughts and feelings.
- Apathy – aka ‘giving up because I just don’t care’ – sets in.
- Believing life no longer has meaning or purpose.
- Relationship strain
 - Problems with intimacy or withdrawing from friends and social activities.
- Experiencing distress
 - Intrusive thoughts related to the loss.



Suicide

- A majority of data-based studies report **no significant increase or a modest reduction** in total suicide rates during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic
- Slight increase with females and slight decrease with males
- Some journal titles are misleading
- **“COVID-19 threatens decade-long suicide initiatives in Japan”** noted a 3 percent increase in monthly suicide numbers in Japan in 2020 as compared to 2019. Mortality statistics are generally reported as **the average of the preceding five years- not the previous year**. 2020 in comparison to the average of the prior five years has a monthly reduction of 5%.
- Check how the data is collected and analyzed

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8110323/>



Suicide

Several reasons why suicide ideation and possible attempts increased, but suicides did not:

- people tend to rally around each other during times of crisis. The pandemic is certainly a crisis.
- people tend to be more open about their feelings during difficult times and are more likely to use mental health services.



<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8110323/>



Covid and grief from ambiguous loss

- What changed very quickly at the start of the pandemic?
 - Schools, businesses, restaurants, places of worship closed
 - Wearing masks and social distancing expected
 - Hand sanitizer used
 - Run on toilet paper, hand sanitizer
 - People worked from home
 - Waiting for vaccine and treatment
 - No friends over
 - Few holiday gatherings in person
 - Events cancelled
 - Sports cancelled
 - Travel limited
 - School by zoom or other ways





Compounding grief

- Delayed funeral or memorial service for people who died during surge in COVID
- Murder of George Floyd
- Uprising
- A contentious election
- Storms
- Heat
- Drought
- Sickness
- Death
- Job loss
- Will it ever go away?
- 32% had lost friendships over COVID-19 disagreements
- <https://thehill.com/changing-america/well-being/prevention-cures/566675-new-polls-show-large-number-of-americans-have>



Added Stress

- Fighting about vaccines and masks
- Mis/disinformation
- Breakthrough infections
- Delta variant
- Omicron variants
- Will it ever end...
- Mental health becoming more challenging
- Dealing with others who have strong emotions, have depression, or anxiety
- The unknown





Things That May Bring Hope

- Vaccine/treatment
- People will come together
- Seeing how hard some work to care for people who are sick
- Reminding yourself that how it is today isn't forever
- Look ahead to post-pandemic times
- Control what you can
- Turn to faith and spirituality
- Combat your negative thoughts
- Make time for fun

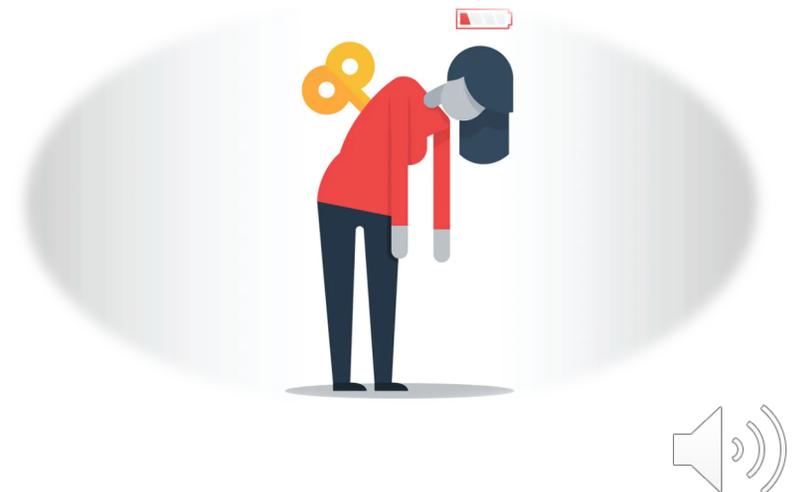
• <https://mhanational.org/maintaining-hope-face-uncertainty>



Surge Capacity

- Collection of adaptive systems-mental and physical-that humans draw on for short term survival in acutely stressful situations, such as a natural disaster
- It is typically Temporary
- The Pandemic is continuous
- Surge capacity depleted and we need to be renewed

From: Surge capacity and its role in making us feel overwhelmed



What to do to cope/be renewed?

- Don't participate in Toxic Positivity (gaslighting)
 - Accept that some things are very difficult; pretending everything is fine doesn't help
(example: "Because of the pandemic, we have needed to reduce our staff. I would not ask you to take on more work if I didn't know you will perform excellently doing twice the workload. It won't be bad at all.")
- Say no
- Acknowledge the medical advances being made to prevent and treat the virus
- There is no getting back to "normal" – things have changed
- Acknowledge when you are overwhelmed and ask for help
- Validate your experience



What to do to cope/be renewed?

- Embrace today-don't wait to live
- Accept life is different right now
- Expect less from yourself
- Recognize you are grieving – the entire world is grieving huge losses
- Give yourself and others a lot of kindness and forgiveness
- Look for activities old and new that fulfill you
- Maintain and strengthen important relationships
- Create routine
- Take a break



What to do to be renewed?

- Do Self-care
 - Exercise
 - Practice Gratefulness
 - Use Opposite of emotion
 - Use Radical acceptance
 - Affirm yourself for who you are
 - Affirm others for who they are
 - Find joy in small things
 - Hope
 - Hope is not stagnant
 - Hope changes as situations change
 - Hope also appears to be **linked to higher levels of life satisfaction** in people. Researchers even found that **higher levels of hope were linked to a lower risk of death for people** with chronic illnesses.



<https://www.nuffieldhealth.com/article/how-to-find-hope-during-the-pandemic#:~:text=Research%20shows%20that%20people%20who,a%20lower%20risk%20of%20mortality.>



Final thought

Life is challenging for everyone, even those who seem to have everything together- maybe especially those who seem to have everything together.

If, each time we see another person, we could keep in mind the unique challenges everyone experiences, I think we could be kinder, gentler and treat everyone as the precious individuals they are.

