

# PANDEMIC GRIEF IS REAL. But how do we live with the loss?

## Lack Of Timely Medical Aid And Unexpected Loss Of Loved Ones Have Made Recovery Harder For Bereaved Families

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In the past year, the coronavirus outbreak has given rise to another pandemic — that of grief. The virus has resulted in some form of loss — tangible or intangible — for everyone.

While there is the mourning over death, there is also a collective loss of normalcy and anxiety about the future, which counsellors say can trigger reactions associated with loss and grief.

“Whenever an attachment — to a person, position, or possession — is severed, we grieve,” says Aarti C Rajaratnam, a consultant psychologist based in Salem. “Loss is a part of being human. And grief is not a linear process, it goes back and forth throughout your life.”

Rajaratnam lost her father several years ago, but a few weeks back, when she was ill with Covid-19, memories of him came flooding back. “I live on my own and had to go through my illness alone. I missed my father more than ever in those days. In a way, I was re-experiencing the grief I felt years ago,” she says and stresses on supporting oneself emotionally by taking care of physical health. “Self care is essential through the grief process,” she says.

Psychologists say a major loss, such as the death of a loved one is often referred to as a “primary loss”, while the other losses that result are “secondary losses” (loss of income because of the death) or “symbolic losses” (loss of a sense of identity). When the losses happen simultaneously, they can prolong grief and delay a person’s ability to heal.

In a study published in the Journal of Affective Disorder in January, researchers suggest that higher grief levels occur among people bereaved due to Covid-19, as compared to those bereaved due to natural loss. They also predict that pandemic-related increases in pathological grief will become a worldwide public health concern. According to the study, Covid-19-related death characteristics, such as intensive care admission and unexpected death,

and circumstances like social isolation will precipitate a worldwide increase of prolonged grief and persistent complex bereavement disorders.

The experience of guilt — particularly that of having survived the illness and infection, or not being able to provide timely care/medical attention — is also a factor to be noted in Covid-19 context, says clinical psychologist Paulomi M Sudhir, who works with NIMHANS. “For some, the grief is more traumatic because of not being there with a loved one at the time of their death,” she says.

There are several emotions that are common outcomes of grief, says psychologist Saras Bhaskar, such as sadness, anger, anxiety, or loneliness, which can manifest as mood changes, restlessness, inability to concentrate, irritability, and sleep problems. “For those who have lost loved ones to Covid, the grief is leading to anxiety because of the uncertainty, and loss of control,” she says.

“If death is expected, though the grief is just as severe, it is prolonged and anticipated. The grief we see today resulting from the death of a loved one due to Covid-19 is unexpected,” says psychiatrist Dr N Rangarajan. “The pandemic has created a feeling of helplessness. There is a fear that you or a loved one may fall ill, not get the medical help needed, or oxygen to breathe, and as a result not survive. Earlier, at least there was sufficient comfort in the fact that medical help was available. But today that safety net is shaky. The grief is cocooned in unrest, anger and despair.”

Bereavement rituals helped in the process of grief, says Dr Rangarajan. “But today, there may be no ceremonies to say final goodbyes. People need a social support group in times of grief. One way we can help those grieving is to let them talk it out,” he says. “Especially children. They have already been taken away from peer groups, which has impaired their coping style. So, be more attentive and sensitive to children and don’t belittle their grief, or run away from comforting them.”

In her grief counselling, Bhaskar often uses acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). “It is almost like the Buddhist philosophy of birth, death and the inevitability of suffering. For those in grief, often the present is entangled with the past and worry about the future, which can distort thinking. One needs to first be aware and accept the loss,” she says.

Rajaratnam says that one needs to be aware of and acknowledge the pain as well as accept that grief can trigger many different and unexpected emotions. You cannot fix grief, says Rajaratnam. "You can only learn to build a life in spite of it."

Illustration: Shinod Akk



## WAYS TO DEAL WITH THE SITUATION

➤ With children, it is important for parents or caregivers to engage with them over their grief to promote healthy coping

➤ Connecting with people who knew the person who died. Having family and friends sharing stories, memories and pictures of the person over email, phone calls or social media can help

➤ The five stages of grief, as defined by psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler Ross, are denial, anger, bargaining, sadness and acceptance. Her colleague David Kessler documented a sixth stage, which is finding meaning. Learn to remember those who have died with more love than pain and move forward in



a way that honours them

➤ Take part in an activity that may have been significant to you and the loved one who died, such as planting a tree. Some people express grief and find comfort through art, gardening, writing, talking to friends or family, cooking, music, gardening or other creative practices

➤ Seek out grief counseling or mental health services and support groups, especially if health is impaired, there is a feeling of despair, substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, or signs of self-harm

➤ Limit news of Covid. Try an engaging diversion like exercise or helping others