



The Other Pandemic

Caring for yourself
and others as we all grieve
during this global health crisis.

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.



*The coronavirus
is not only
causing a health
pandemic, it's giving
rise to a pandemic
of grief. As I write
this in mid-March,
we as a global
community are
suffering so many
losses that I hardly
know where
to begin.*

Death and grief go hand in hand, of course. Thousands have already died of COVID-19 worldwide. Many more will die. These are terrible losses for the loved ones of these precious individuals, and they will need our support and empathy in the months to come.

Yet what strikes me at this very moment is that this aggressive new virus is threatening every single person on earth with loss of every kind. Name something you care about or that gives your life meaning. In all likelihood, this attachment is now negatively affected or threatened in some way by the coronavirus.

Social distancing has forced us to be apart from friends and family for weeks, possibly months. Personal events have been postponed or called off, so we are unable to gather for life's most meaningful celebrations and rituals – from baptisms and birthdays to weddings, anniversaries and funerals. Public activities and experiences that brought us together have been canceled. Workplaces are shuttering or employees are working from home. Restaurants, museums and theaters are closed. Sporting events have been shut

down. Town squares stand empty.

Thanks to technology, we are able to stay in constant contact with each other remotely, something that wasn't possible during past prolonged international crises, such as the 1918 flu pandemic. But at the same time, we are learning the limitations of digital love and care.

As humans, we naturally grieve whenever our attachments are threatened, harmed or severed. Grief is everything we think and feel inside us when this happens. We experience shock and disbelief. We worry, which is a form of fear. We become sad and possibly lonely. We get angry. We feel guilty or regretful. The sum total of all these and any other thoughts and feelings we are experiencing as a result of the coronavirus pandemic is our grief.

Our pandemic grief will change from day to day and week to week. This virus is fast. As it sweeps across continents and we collectively take action to "flatten the curve," new rules and limitations pop up every day. Restrictions mount and grow increasingly severe. As the noose tightens, our grief will change. And as with the virus itself, it will likely get worse before it gets better.

There are a couple of important things to understand about your pandemic grief. First, it is normal and natural. It is simply a part of your love and attachment. Second, grief responds to awareness, attention and expression. You will feel better if you mourn. Mourning is simply being aware of your grief, giving it the attention it needs and deserves, and expressing it outside of yourself.

We've all heard a lot about how to take care of ourselves physi-

cally in fighting this virus, but I have seen too little about emotional, social and spiritual health. During this time of great grief, mourning is the key to these pillars of self-care.

When we are feeling the emotional pain of this coronavirus grief, we can tune into it and allow it to teach us what we are really worried, sad or angry about. And then we can express it. We can talk to others about it – in our household, on the phone or online. We can write about it in a journal. We can listen to music or watch movies that help us access, understand and share our feelings. Mourning our grief in these ways helps soften it and gives us the emergency emotional release and sustenance we need to survive.

Socially, we can't congregate in person right now, but we can continue to make efforts to reach out to the people we care about. Video calls are probably the best substitute for face-to-face conversations. Voice calls come second. After that, email, texts and social media work, too. And don't forget the power of a handwritten letter!

The point is to stay connected as much as possible and be open and honest in those communications about whatever you're feeling or struggling with at the moment. Your candor will encourage others to be honest as well, creating the opportunity for mutual support and kindness.

When it comes to spiritual health, now is an especially resonant time to work on caring for your soul. One redeeming factor of enforced isolation is that it creates the opportunity for spiritual contemplation and practice. In times of loss, we almost always wonder why things happen as they do. We naturally question the meaning of life in general and the meaning of our own life in particular. We turn our attention

to our deepest beliefs and values. We talk to God or wonder about God or get angry at God.

If you've been struggling with beliefs, values, meaning and life goals during the pandemic, you are experiencing the spiritual aspect of grief, and the best way to care for your spirit right now is to be intentional about giving it time and attention. I recommend spending at least 15 minutes each day on spiritual practices. Whatever helps you get in touch with your divine spark – do that. For some, that may be meditation or prayer. For others, it can be reading a spiritual text, speaking affirmations, attending a religious or spiritual service online, doing yoga, writing in a journal or spending time walking outdoors observing nature.

Simply being aware of your emotional, social and spiritual health every day and being deliberate about self-care in those areas will help you and others today, as well as in the weeks to come.

There is no doubt this is a challenging moment to be alive, but it is also a moment in which our collective resources have never been greater and more capable. So, let's be open, honest and kind to ourselves and to each other.



Suggestions for Special Circumstances

Loneliness

The longer we are isolated in our homes, the lonelier we are likely to become. Humans are social

creatures built for touch and body language and conversation. With the rise of technology and its modern-day substitution for personal contact, we were already suffering from a loneliness epidemic. And now the coronavirus social distancing efforts are making it (and will continue to make it) worse. My best suggestion is to reach out proactively to others in all the ways you can right now, as often as you can, for their benefit and yours. If you or someone you know is at particular risk for loneliness right now, ask for assis-

tance. Find friends, family members and neighbors willing to create a support team. Most people are happy to help but need suggestions for what they can do.

Isolated Seniors

On a related note, many seniors are particularly isolated right now. As you know, older people are at much higher risk for serious illness and death from the coronavirus and are having to self-isolate most strictly. If you are an isolated senior reading this, the loneliness self-care tips

I offered above apply to you. If you would like to help an isolated senior, brainstorm with others about ways in which you can still provide safe comfort and support. For example, deliveries of food, books and personal notes might help. Touching base by phone once or twice a day could make a world of difference. Be creative and practical in your efforts, and most of all, offer frequent and consistent contact.

Another special circumstance that applies here concerns seniors being cared for in long-



Talking to Children About the Pandemic

Kids are not immune to the stress are all feeling.

As our daily lives are transformed by COVID-19, we all must be aware of the need for good mental health care. It's a stressful time. Families are confined to their homes. School is canceled. Many businesses are closed. Workers are laid off en masse, causing financial distress. And then there is the illness itself. Will we or someone we love become critically ill or even die? We're all naturally worried about "what ifs" and "what nexts."

But we must remember that the youngest among us are not immune to all this stress. They sense it in the adults around them and see it on social media and other information sources. Their own day-to-day routines have been completely disrupted.

When it comes to painful, complex realities, it can be difficult to know how much we should share with children; many people have an instinct to protect kids. But as someone who has worked with and advocated for grieving children for many decades, I've learned that what they really need is honesty combined with steadfast care. Here are a few foundational dos and don'ts.

Follow the Child's Lead

Pay attention to what the child seems curious or worried about. These concerns in younger children may manifest through play rather than directly. You don't need to volunteer a lot of information. Instead, invite them to ask questions and try saying just a little at a time. Children are often satisfied with short answers and small "doses" of information. When they want to know more, they'll let you know, especially if you're someone who is always straight with them.

Talk Openly and Honestly About What's Happening

It's important to be honest with children about difficult circumstances. In fact, I often say that children can cope with what they know but not with what they don't know. Be factual. Talk to them about social distancing and why it's necessary to keep people safe. Explain to them that it's elderly people and those with other diseases who are most at risk of getting really sick.

If finances are an issue, it's good to talk to children about that, too. If someone in your family has been affected by the virus, keep the child updated. And if your family finances are being stressed, as they are for so many right now, try not to overburden your children with this chal-



term care facilities that have instituted no-visitors policies during the pandemic. Such policies are absolutely necessary right now, but they are also separating loved ones. I have already heard of a number of cases in which an elderly resident is actively dying,

but their family is not allowed to be by their side as they die. This is a great heartbreak indeed, and I can offer no equal substitute for physical proximity at this pivotal moment in a family's life. But I would encourage families to do whatever they can to convey their love. For example, it's possible to write a letter to the person who is dying and ask a care attendant to read it aloud. Making a video recording of yourself, as if you were talking directly to the dying person, is another idea. Asking that special music

be played and special memorabilia or flowers be placed in the room is a third idea.

Far-Flung Families

Many family members are separated from one another at the moment. Some live far apart and wish they could be closer together at this time of need and grief. But travel may not be possible, and for elderly or at-risk family members, physical proximity may be inadvisable anyway. Again, I would suggest being in touch as much as possible,

lenge. It's okay to let them know about the need to curtail unnecessary spending, for example, but also keep in mind that financial issues are grown-up issues. We must take care not to make children over-worry about this or feel responsible.

Use Appropriate Language

Use simple, concrete, developmentally appropriate language when you talk to children about the pandemic. It's okay to use the words "coronavirus" and "pandemic" because the children have been hearing those terms, but you must go a step further and explain it to them in ways they will understand.

Share Your Feelings

As I said, we are all naturally worried about and disoriented over the pandemic. Circumstances change rapidly, and the future is unknown. Children who spend time with you will pick up on your anxiety, so it's essential to tell them what you're worried about. If you don't, they are likely to imagine even worse scenarios or think that they are somehow to blame or at risk. It's also important that you practice good self-care to manage any severe anxiety you may be having. If your anxiety levels are too high, theirs will be, too.

Understand Magical Thinking

Young children are susceptible to what's called "magical thinking." They may believe that their thoughts and behaviors can cause bad things to happen. If they didn't want to talk to Grandma the last time they saw her, for example, and she gets sick, they may secretly believe they caused or contributed to her sickness. So be attuned to

any feelings of guilt or shame the children in your care may be hiding and explain clearly to them that none of this is their fault.

Be Patient, Kind, Reassuring

What children need most of all is reassurance that they are being cared for and that their family and others they care about are safe.

Routines help children feel safe, so if their daily routine has been turned upside-down, it's important to create a new one. Even if you're stuck at home, you can still have breakfast together at a certain time and follow a daily schedule. Keeping evening rituals consistent is also essential.

And while all this is going on, try extra hard to be patient and kind. I know it's extremely challenging to manage children patiently when school and activities are not there to share the "it takes a village" burden, but keep in mind that your children will likely have strong memories of this strange interlude in their lives, as will you. You don't need to be perfect. You just need to be caring, consistent and honest.

It's also important to emphasize to children that lots and lots of grown-up doctors, scientists and government workers across the world are working to solve the problem. It is our responsibility, not children's. Tell them we are working hard on treatments and vaccines, as well as ways to help families that need help. Tell them we will get through this.

It's my hope that you'll take advantage of any extra time you have during the quarantine to use for cuddles, hugs and play. Physical closeness and care go a long way in helping children feel safe and loved.

as often as possible, in any way you can. If you are feeling concern or love for someone who is far away, call them and tell them so. Send them a text. Write them an email. Send a heartfelt greeting card with a personal letter. Your grief over a possible threat to their well-being, yours or both is tugging at you, so give it voice. They will feel loved and supported, and you will feel relieved and loved as well.

Canceled Events

In many ways, special events are the moments in which we most profoundly feel the love we share with our closest others, along with the meaning of life itself. We dream of and plan for such significant expected events as graduations, marriages, retirements and family vacations. And when unexpected significant events arise, such as serious injuries, deaths and funerals, we drop everything to be there.

But we are living in a moment in time in which most such events are canceled in an effort to protect the health of the greater community and the most vulnerable among us. Naturally, we are bereft over the loss of these rare opportunities to gather with loved ones and immerse ourselves in that which is most meaningful in our lives.

Whenever possible, I would advocate for such events being postponed rather than canceled. If the graduation or retirement date comes and goes, maybe the celebration can still be held later on. If a public funeral can't take place shortly after the death, perhaps a memorial service can be scheduled some weeks or months from now. Untimely gatherings are not ideal, of course, but they are much better than no gathering at all. Virtual events may also be a good idea. Baby showers and christen-

ings broadcast live online might be an option, for example.

But most of all, what I hope you will do when an upcoming event must be canceled is pay attention to your feelings about the cancellation and then communicate those feelings to the people who form the centerpiece of the event. If a wedding is canceled, for instance, write heartfelt notes to the bride and groom and any other family members to whom you are close, telling them why you were looking forward to the event, what it means to you and what your hopes and dreams are for the couple in the months to come. I think they will find great comfort and meaning in your words.

Serious Illness and Death

If it hasn't for you already, the moment will likely come during this pandemic when someone you care about – maybe not someone in your closest circle but a friend or neighbor – becomes seriously ill and perhaps even dies. I am certainly not trying to borrow trouble, but I also understand that, numerically, you and I may both find ourselves in this unfortunate circumstance at some point in the coming year. Such is the nature of the virus. And to complicate matters, it may happen at a time when we are still quarantined to our own homes and public ceremonies are still forbidden.

Virtually all of us are grieving this possibility right now. If you have read this whole article, you know that I am an advocate for being open and honest about our inner grief. If in the coming days your grief includes this worry, please talk about it with other people on the phone, online and on social media. And if such a reality comes to pass for you, I hope you will remember that your grief is normal and neces-



sary, and it needs and deserves expression.

Here in the American interior West, it feels strange to be rolling onto the ramp of a viral pandemic. We know the route we are heading down, but we don't know exactly how bad it's going to be or how our communities – or us personally – will be affected along the way. Because of the uncertainty, our grief is in part anticipatory at this point. While we already grieve very real closures, cancellations and limitations, we are also, normally and naturally, anticipating unknown griefs to come. They also are part of our love.

I hope we will emerge from this double-edged pandemic a more conscious, cohesive and caring world community. May it shape and transform us into better versions of ourselves. ☰

Alan Wolfelt, noted author, educator and grief counselor, is director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado. He also serves on the faculty of the University of Colorado Medical School's Department of Family Medicine. Wolfelt has written many bestselling books on coping with grief, including Grief One Day at a Time and Healing a Child's Grieving Heart. For more information, visit centerforloss.com.