

GRIEF WHITE PAPER SERIES

I. HEALING MILESTONES: WHAT TO EXPECT FROM GRIEF WITH COVID-19 ADDENDUM

We grieve naturally and we adapt naturally after we experience a difficult loss. However, this process is neither simple nor predictable and people struggle to know what to expect. Grief is a complex, multifaceted process that has no rules. You may ask yourself whether you are “doing it right.” You may be wondering whether your grief is going the way it should. You may want to know what to expect and when it will be over. Grief doesn’t occur in stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. However, there are milestones you can encourage and derailers you can watch out for. This White Paper introduces two acronyms, HEALING and DERAILERS, that can serve as a helpful grief guide.

H.E.A.L.I.N.G. Milestones

Honor your loved one and yourself; discover your own interests and values.

Ease emotional pain; Open yourself to emotions – both painful and pleasant ones; trust that you can deal with emotional pain; it doesn’t control you.

Accept grief and let it find a place in your life.

Learn to live with reminders of your loss.

Integrate memories of your loved one; let them enrich your life, and help you learn and grow.

Narrate stories of the death for yourself; share them with others.

Gather others around you; connect with your community, let people in and let them support you.

You reach for these milestones in your own way, moving back and forth among them, in no particular order. In doing so, a healing process unfolds naturally. As this happens, grief quiets and recedes into the background. However, sometimes HEALING can be derailed. It’s useful to be aware of possible derailers.

DERAILERS

This section describes common derailers. It's important to be aware that all of these occur naturally in the aftermath of a loss. When you notice them, be sure to practice self-compassion. Then just take a few minutes to consider how you might gently and respectfully resolve them or set them aside. You do this in the service of inner peace, to honor your ongoing relationship with the person who died, and to free the HEALING process. To find and deal with derailers, consider that all of us must learn to accept what we cannot change and decide how to best channel our energies towards ways we can learn and grow and towards acting where we might make a difference.

Doubt that you did enough for the person who died.

Embracing ideas about grief that make you want to change it or control it.

Repeatedly imagining scenarios where the death didn't happen or happened differently, "if only" thinking.

Anger and bitterness you can't resolve or let go of.

Insistent belief that this death was unfair or wrong or shouldn't have happened.

Lack of faith in the possibility of adapting to the loss and having a promising future.

Excessive avoidance of reminders of the loss.

Rejecting support from others, unable to let others help, feeling hurt and alone.

Survivor guilt that is stopping you from experiencing joy and satisfaction.

Healing Milestones and Derailers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The many hardships and threats associated with the coronavirus increase the likelihood that bereavement will be even more challenging than usual. The ongoing pandemic might impact both HEALING and DERAILERS. Below we outline some of the pandemic related changes that might be affecting your grieving process.

- Physical distancing restrictions: This changed the experience of dying. You might not have been able to visit your loved one in a hospital or visiting might have been strictly limited. Your loved one might have died alone and this might become a focus of anger or guilt or you might get caught up in thinking “if only” this didn’t happen. Additionally, physical distancing prevents many religious rituals and community support gatherings, including holding of services in a place of worship, at a funeral home or at the gravesite as well as the presence of friends and neighbors to provide support and comfort to grieving families.
- Sheltering in place: Restrictions on travel and just moving about freely in the world might affect your ability to go places and do things to honor the person who died and to rediscover your own interests and values.
- Sudden unexpected death from Covid-19 might make it more difficult to narrate stories of the death, to comprehend and accept the reality of the death. You may find it easy to imagine scenarios in which the death didn’t happen or you may become caught up in the idea that the death was wrong or unfair. You might feel bitter or angry in a way that you can’t resolve or let go of.
- High level of contagiousness of the virus: The rapid and difficult to control spread of the virus can engender fear of contamination and this can make it more difficult to think about what you can do to have some respite from grief, to start to rebuild your life.
- Seemingly random nature of the course of the Covid-19 illness: The death of a loved one under these circumstances can engender increased feelings of survivor guilt and make it more difficult to set these feelings aside.
- Widespread unemployment and temporary lay-offs: You may be facing the loss of a job or cut in hours, working remotely and balancing responsibilities at work and home. You may be experiencing financial insecurity or struggling to keep your household functioning.

- Interruptions in child or eldercare: You might be in a position of needing to take on new caregiving responsibilities that are associated with new anxieties or presenting thorny problems to solve. You may be feeling overwhelmed with these responsibilities and this can provide little opportunity to grieve.

In summary, the death of a loved one during the COVID-19 pandemic is laden with risk factors for developing prolonged grief disorder (PGD). Risk factors can make DERAILERS more difficult to resolve or set aside and HEALING milestones more difficult to achieve. It can be helpful to be aware of what you are facing, to be sure to practice self-compassion and to make some efforts to gently set aside what you cannot change so that your body and mind can heal from the intense pain of the loss.

Seeking Help

You might reach out to us or to a mental health professional if you feel like you need help at any point in time. We recommend doing so if it's been at least six months and you're feeling "stuck" like you can't move forward in your own life and still stay connected to your deceased loved one - if you still have frequent strong feelings of yearning or longing for your loved one and/or thoughts and memories of them are so persistent and intense that it stops you from being able to live your life in a meaningful way. PGD usually does not resolve on its own but is responsive to treatment.

Complicated Grief Therapy (CGT) is a short-term therapy that identifies what's stalling or halting adaptation and helps reinvigorate this process. It's effectiveness has been demonstrated in multiple studies including three randomized clinical trials funded by the National Institute of Mental Health. Scores of therapists and their clients are using this treatment around the world and finding it very helpful. Our Center's website maintains a directory of therapists who have trained in this approach; or if you find someone you are comfortable working with, you can have them contact us and we will help them get trained.

The Center for Complicated Grief at Columbia University is dedicated to the research, training, collaboration, and compassion that can improve the lives of people suffering from complicated grief.

Contact us: info@complicatedgrief.columbia.edu or 212-851-2107