

COVID-19 and Grief

By Nancy Arko, MD

Dr. Claire Zilber wrote an insightful piece last month on the anger—and often rage—she was noticing as a result of the pandemic. It is striking to see the range of reactions to the overwhelming stress we are under!

Never before has the entire world stopped as it has amidst the pandemic. Even if we have not lost a loved one or friend to the virus, or been on the front lines of healthcare work, we sense unprecedented alterations in our way of life.

Anger and rage are often the result of feeling overwhelmed, and caught up in circumstances beyond our control. The way we travel, socialize, celebrate, and gather have been altered and we don't know when they will return to the way they were, if ever. In a startling way, we are between two worlds and sense that things may never be the same. With changes like these, it is understandable to carry a sense of loss, even despair, and feel, deep down, so much sadness.

Consider how the [Life Change Index Scale](#) has increased significantly for almost everyone this year. The Life Change Index was composed over 50 years ago, when society was considerably less complex. A current Index might include pressures such as displacement by a natural disaster, extended periods of heat, poor air quality, or tainted water, prolonged periods of isolation, missing an important celebration, prohibitions on travel and occupational obsolescence. Adding to our increased anxieties, we are less able to comfort each other in the traditional ways involving physical closeness. Some, especially the elderly and infirm, feel trapped in isolation. We look to such a scale to determine level of stress and increasing likelihood of resulting illness and we expect future repercussions for the deterioration in health and wellbeing of our patients and most individuals in the larger society.

The model of grief and loss may be helpful in comprehending the current state of affairs, as we remember that grief is behind anger, heartbreak behind fear, and disconnection at the root of community mistrust. As psychiatrists we know how psychological defense mechanisms, used to protect us from truths we are not yet ready to accept, can make things quite confusing. Currently these defense mechanisms come into play for the individual and the collective as groups contend with shared losses. Distortion of the truth can appeal to the unconscious denial of things that should be obvious, like facts and science. Mistrust of the facts shield us from the implications of cataclysmic change. And conjuring up of conspiracy theories “works” to deflect the seriousness of the problem, which comes into play as large groups of people refuse to grapple with the reality of climate change as well as the virus. Projection of blame onto the other is apparent in our political situation and shields us from accepting complicity.

Through working with ill and dying patients, we understand that the process of acceptance and working-through takes time. The spiritual significance of the pandemic is profound on an individual and collective level. It is an opportunity for inner work, deep contemplation, and taking stock on an individual and collective level. Although we must physically distance, social isolation is not healthy for us or those who depend upon us. Instead, it is healing to share thoughts and feelings regarding issues arising in our world. As we cultivate compassion and

empathy for ourselves, we will benefit each other and the world. This is essential to arrive at that place of acceptance and hope we long for. As with any great transformation, insight and growth are on the far side of pain. This may be especially true for America, as she comes to terms with her tragic and unexpected failings, products of arrogance and pride. Humility and tolerance are the gifts she can receive once she has gone through her terrible trials.

It may be helpful to have a place for CPS members to voice their views, laments, and creative ways of working with these topics. Who understands these issues as intimately as we do? Sharing in such a forum can keep us from feeling isolated, and promote our own healthy transformation and that of our world.

Thank you for the opportunity to express my views.
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***If you are interested in a CPS forum, please let us know by emailing
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