

PERSPECTIVE

How ‘Anticipatory Grief’ May Show Up During the COVID-19 Outbreak

Written by Sam Dylan Finch on March 31, 2020

Most, if not all of us, have a lingering sense that more loss is still to come.



While many of us might think of “grief” as being a response to losing someone we love, [grief](#) is actually a much more complex phenomenon.

Grappling with any kind of loss can involve a grief process, even if that loss isn’t exactly tangible.

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And most, if not all of us, have a lingering sense that more loss is still to come. That sense of fearful anticipation is called “anticipatory grief,” and it can be a doozy.

A mourning process can occur even when we sense that a loss is going to happen, but we don’t know exactly what it is yet. We know the world around us will never be the same — but what exactly we’ve lost and will lose is still largely unknown to us.

This can be difficult to come to terms with.

If you’re wondering if you might be experiencing this kind of grief, here are some signs to look for, as well as some coping skills you can tap into at this time:

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1. You’re on edge — and it’s not always clear exactly why

Maybe you’re feeling a sense of dread, as though something bad is just around the corner, but it’s unclear what it might be. (This is often described as “waiting for the other shoe to drop.”)

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This can also manifest as persistent anxiety and overwhelm, like “freezing up” when faced with decision making or planning, or procrastinating more often to avoid complex tasks.

If you’re anticipating danger or doom, it makes sense that staying emotionally regulated would be more challenging right now.

2. You feel angry at things you can’t control

Finding yourself easily and persistently frustrated is a very common manifestation of grief.

For example, working from home might have *previously* felt like a luxury, but maybe now it feels more like a punishment. Not getting your preferred brand of boxed macaroni and cheese might not have felt like a big deal before, but suddenly you’re irate at your local store for not having ample stock.

If small obstacles suddenly feel intolerable, you’re not alone. These obstacles often serve as unconscious reminders that things aren’t the same — triggering grief and a sense of loss, even when we aren’t aware of it.

If you find yourself getting riled up more often, be gentle with yourself. This is a completely normal reaction during a time of collective trauma.

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3. You're resigned to the worst case scenario

One of the ways that people often cope with anticipatory grief is to try to mentally and emotionally “prepare” for the worst case scenario.

If we pretend that it's inevitable, we can trick ourselves into thinking it won't feel so shocking or painful when it does come to that.

However, this is a bit of a trap. [Ruminating](#) about morbid scenarios, feeling hopeless as things unfold, or anxiously spinning out about everything that could go wrong won't *actually* keep you safe — instead, it will just keep you emotionally activated.

In fact, [chronic stress can impact your immune system](#) in negative ways, which is why it's so important to practice self-care during this time.

Preparedness is important, but if you find yourself fixated on the most apocalyptic and disastrous possibilities, you may be doing more harm than good. Balance is key.

4. You find yourself withdrawing or avoidant of others

When we feel overwhelmed, fearful, and triggered, it makes a lot of sense

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Instead, we need to stay connected to others — and we can do that by keeping firm boundaries about what kinds of support we can offer.

Some examples of boundaries you could set right now:

- I've been having a really hard time with this COVID-19 stuff. Can we keep the conversation light today?
- I don't think I can talk about this right now. Is there something we can do to distract ourselves right now?
- I'm struggling at the moment and not able to support you in that way right now. I'm happy to (play a game/send a care package/check in by text later on) instead if that would be helpful.
- I don't have a lot of capacity to support you right now, but I'll email you some links later on that I think could be useful if you'd like that.

Remember, there's nothing wrong with setting whatever [boundaries](#) you need to take care of yourself!

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5. You're completely exhausted

A lot of what we're talking about with anticipatory grief is really just our body's trauma response: namely, being in "fight, flight, or freeze" mode.

When we feel threatened, our bodies react by flooding us with stress hormones and amping us up, just in case we need to react quickly to a threat.

One of the side effects of this, though, is that we end up feeling worn down. Being so activated on a daily basis can really tire us out, making exhaustion a pretty universal grief experience.

This is particularly difficult at a time when so many people are talking about how productive they've been while self-isolating. It can feel pretty lousy to hear about others starting new hobbies or projects while we can barely [get out of bed](#).

However, you're far from alone in your pandemic-induced exhaustion. And if all you can do right now is keep yourself safe? That's more than good enough.

If you're feeling anticipatory grief, what can you do to cope?

If you're not sure how to navigate this form of grief, there are a few things you can do:

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Bring it back to basics. It's especially important to stay fed, hydrated, and rested at this time. If you're struggling with this, I list some tips on basic self-care in [this article](#) and some useful apps to download [here](#).

Connect with others, even when you don't want to. It can be tempting to shut everyone out when you're overwhelmed and activated. Please resist the urge! Human connection is a critical part of our well-being, especially now. And if your loved ones are driving you up a wall? There's also [an app to connect with people](#) at this time.

Prioritize rest and relaxation. Yes, it sounds absurd to tell people to relax during a pandemic. However, when our anxiety is so activated, it's critical to try to deescalate our bodies and brains. [This article](#) has a pretty exhaustive list of resources if your anxiety is heightened at this time.

Express yourself. Creative outlets are especially helpful right now. Try journaling, dancing, collaging — whatever helps you to process what's happening for you emotionally! I've also got some journal prompts and self-care exercises in this [grief zine](#) if you're interested.

Talk to a professional. Online therapy is a blessing right now. If you can access it, therapists are a vital resource for moving through grief and anxiety at this time. I've included some therapy resources [here](#), and I've also shared some of my best teletherapy tips in [this article](#).

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In fact, you're far from it. So many of us are experiencing a grief process around this time of rapid change and collective fearfulness.

You are worthy of support, and the struggles you're having are completely understandable, especially given everything that's shifting around us.

Be gentle with yourself — and if you need more support, don't hesitate to reach out. We may be self-isolating and even lonely in the weeks to come, but none of us have to be alone right now.

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