

That Discomfort You're Feeling Is Grief

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Executive Summary

During the global pandemic, a palpable sense of collective grief has emerged. Grief expert David Kessler says that grief is actually multiple feelings that we must manage. In an interview with HBR, he explains how the classic five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, acceptance) apply today, and the practical steps we can take to manage the anxiety. Those include balancing bad thoughts with good; focusing on the present; letting go of things you can't control; and stocking up on compassion. Kessler also talks about a sixth stage of grief: meaning. After acceptance, he says, we will find meaning in the hard-to-fathom events and we will be stronger for it.



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Some of the HBR edit staff met virtually the other day — a screen full of faces in a scene becoming more common everywhere. We talked about the content we're commissioning in this harrowing time of a pandemic and how we can help people. But we also talked about how we were feeling. One colleague mentioned that what she felt was grief. Heads nodded in all the panes.

If we can name it, perhaps we can manage it. We turned to David Kessler for ideas on how to do that. Kessler is the world's foremost expert on grief. He co-wrote with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss*. His new book adds another stage to the process, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*. Kessler also has worked for a decade in a three-hospital system in Los Angeles. He served on their biohazards team. His volunteer work includes being an LAPD Specialist Reserve for traumatic events as well as having served on the Red Cross's disaster services team. He is the founder of www.grief.com, which has over 5 million visits yearly from 167 countries.

Kessler shared his thoughts on why it's important to acknowledge the grief you may be feeling, how to manage it, and how he believes we will find meaning in it. The conversation is lightly edited for clarity.

HBR: People are feeling any number of things right now. Is it right to call some of what they're feeling grief?

Kessler: Yes, and we're feeling a number of different griefs. We feel the world has changed, and it has. We know this is temporary, but it doesn't feel that way, and we realize things will be different. Just as going to the airport is forever different from how it was before 9/11, things will change and this is the point at which they changed. The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us and we're grieving. Collectively. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air.

You said we're feeling more than one kind of grief?

Yes, we're also feeling anticipatory grief. Anticipatory grief is that feeling we get about what the future holds when we're uncertain. Usually it centers on death. We feel it when someone gets a dire diagnosis or when we have the normal thought that we'll lose a parent someday. Anticipatory grief is also more broadly imagined futures. There is a storm coming. There's something bad out there. With a virus, this kind of grief is so confusing for people. Our primitive mind knows something bad is happening, but you can't see it. This breaks our sense of safety. We're feeling that loss of safety. I don't think we've collectively lost our sense of general safety like this. Individually or as smaller groups, people have felt this. But all together, this is new. We are grieving on a micro and a macro level.

What can individuals do to manage all this grief?

Understanding the stages of grief is a start. But whenever I talk about the stages of grief, I

have to remind people that the stages aren't linear and may not happen in this order. It's not a map but it provides some scaffolding for this unknown world. There's denial, which we say a lot of early on: *This virus won't affect us.* There's anger: *You're making me stay home and taking away my activities.* There's bargaining: *Okay, if I social distance for two weeks everything will be better, right?* There's sadness: *I don't know when this will end.* And finally there's acceptance. *This is happening; I have to figure out how to proceed.*

Acceptance, as you might imagine, is where the power lies. We find control in acceptance. *I can wash my hands. I can keep a safe distance. I can learn how to work virtually.*

When we're feeling grief there's that physical pain. And the racing mind. Are there techniques to deal with that to make it less intense?

Let's go back to anticipatory grief. Unhealthy anticipatory grief is really anxiety, and that's the feeling you're talking about. Our mind begins to show us images. My parents getting sick. We see the worst scenarios. That's our minds being protective. Our goal is not to ignore those images or to try to make them go away — your mind won't let you do that and it can be painful to try and force it. The goal is to **find balance in the things you're thinking**. If you feel the worst image taking shape, make yourself think of the best image. We all get a little sick and the world continues. Not everyone I love dies. Maybe no one does because we're all taking the right steps. Neither scenario should be ignored but neither should dominate either.

Anticipatory grief is the mind going to the future and imagining the worst. To calm yourself, you want to **come into the present**. This will be familiar advice to anyone who has meditated or practiced mindfulness but people are always surprised at how prosaic this can be. You can name five things in the room. There's a computer, a chair, a picture of the dog, an old rug, and a coffee mug. It's that simple. Breathe. Realize that in the present moment, nothing you've anticipated has happened. In this moment, you're okay. You have food. You are not sick. Use your senses and think about what they feel. The desk is hard. The blanket is soft. I can feel the breath coming into my nose. This really will work to dampen some of that pain.

You can also think about how to **let go of what you can't control**. What your neighbor is doing is out of your control. What is in your control is staying six feet away from them and washing your hands. Focus on that.

Finally, it's a good time to **stock up on compassion**. Everyone will have different levels of fear and grief and it manifests in different ways. A coworker got very snippy with me the other day and I thought, *That's not like this person; that's how they're dealing with this. I'm seeing their fear and anxiety.* So be patient. Think about who someone usually is and not who they seem to be in this moment.

One particularly troubling aspect of this pandemic is the open-endedness of it.

This is a temporary state. It helps to say it. I worked for 10 years in the hospital system. I've been trained for situations like this. I've also studied the 1918 flu pandemic. The precautions we're taking are the right ones. History tells us that. This is survivable. We will survive. This is a time to overprotect but not overreact.

And, I believe we will find meaning in it. I've been honored that Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's family has given me permission to add a sixth stage to grief: Meaning. I had talked to Elisabeth quite a bit about what came after acceptance. I did not want to stop at acceptance when I experienced some personal grief. I wanted meaning in those darkest hours. And I do believe we find light in those times. Even now people are realizing they can connect through technology. They are not as remote as they thought. They are realizing they can use their phones for long conversations. They're appreciating walks. I believe we will continue to find meaning now and when this is over.

What do you say to someone who's read all this and is still feeling overwhelmed with grief?

Keep trying. There is something powerful about naming this as grief. It helps us feel what's inside of us. So many have told me in the past week, "I'm telling my coworkers I'm having a hard time," or "I cried last night." When you name it, you feel it and it moves through you. Emotions need motion. It's important we acknowledge what we go through. One unfortunate byproduct of the self-help movement is we're the first generation to have feelings about our feelings. We tell ourselves things like, *I feel sad, but I shouldn't feel that; other people have it worse.* We can — we should — stop at the first feeling. *I feel sad. Let me go for five minutes to feel sad.* Your work is to feel your sadness and fear and anger whether or not someone else is feeling something. Fighting it doesn't help because your body is producing the feeling. If we allow the feelings to happen, they'll happen in an orderly way, and it empowers us. Then we're not victims.

In an orderly way?

Yes. Sometimes we try not to feel what we're feeling because we have this image of a "gang of feelings." If I feel sad and let that in, it'll never go away. The gang of bad feelings will overrun me. The truth is a feeling that moves through us. We feel it and it goes and then we go to the next feeling. There's no gang out to get us. It's absurd to think we shouldn't feel grief right now. Let yourself feel the grief and keep going.