

Equipping the Saints!

Navigating COVID-19 Anxiety

The Wisdom of Grief

Many of us are navigating a maze of feelings during the COVID-19 pandemic that are even less discernible than ever. In one moment, we feel despair, disconnected, disoriented, and in the next, we feel hope, love, and deep solidarity for our global community coming together to take care of each other. It is essential, and in

fact very spiritual, to come to face and embrace this complicated pile of emotions, all of which stem from grief. Jesus modeled the wisdom of grief, and expressed it many times throughout the Bible. Questioning is a very real part of grief, we see it in Jesus, when on the cross, he cries out, "Father, why have you forsaken me?" Crying too, is part of the natural experience of grief. You may recall Jesus weeping over the loss of his friend, Lazarus (John 11:35). Our grief requires attention and care, and it helps us when we name what we are feeling. Loss and grief does not just refer to experiences we've had with people we love dying. We also grieve the loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection; anticipatory loss--the feeling that we get about what the future holds when we're uncertain. We know there is a storm coming, there is something bad out there. Our minds know something bad is happening, but we can't see it. This breaks our sense of safety. We're feeling that loss of safety as a collective in a way that we haven't before. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air, or being in tune with the emotions of others so broadly.

We live in a society which individualizes the issues we face day-to-day. Our mental, financial, familial, and unique lived experiences are typically ours and ours only to carry. We don't typically connect our day-to-day struggles with universal struggles. This is rooted in our culture, the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality is not just one that refers to economic growth and class mobility, but it also seeps into the way we understand our mental and spiritual wellness too. We are often encouraged not to cry, especially men and boys; we are told that if we suck it up, man up, and keep moving forward that our problems and emotions will go away if we can just keep pushing forward. Parents get hit hard with the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps mentality," too. Parents are expected to have all the answers, to know how to respond to their children as their children respond to a chaotic world, and to be a locus of self-possession and stability for their families-- even as they have their own feelings of loss and grief to manage.

This is not only harmful to us as individuals, because it leaves us to feel isolated and that our burden to carry belongs only to us; it is also harmful in that in cutting off our real feelings, in response to real threats and losses, we disconnect ourselves from others and from the healing capacity of our global community.

But because of this collective framework for understanding the state of our world, we also bear the weight of grief for all those suffering in our global human body. We are more intimately attuned to the suffering of all those impacted by COVID-19. So I encourage you, however uncomfortable it may feel, to embrace this grief. This grief stems from a deep solidarity to our suffering world. It is a deeply spiritual practice to engage with it, to allow ourselves to feel it, and to not push it away.

But, as you know, these feelings are heavy to carry, and frankly uncomfortable, so what do we do with all of these feelings?

Contextualize it. Help these feelings find their place. What does your experience of grief communicate to you about your connectedness to other people?

In what ways do these feelings of grief towards the pandemic bring up other experiences of grief? What does it tell you about your relationship with grief and loss of a sense of safety in your body?

Allow it. What does grief look like? Do you have really low energy? Do you find yourself less engaged with your loved ones? Do you find that it is especially hard to work right now?

To allow these outcomes of grief might disrupt your flow, but to deny them, or to fight against them, will ultimately keep you at war with yourself. Feelings are meant to be felt, and when they have nowhere else to go, they can materialize long-term and keep you from feeling peace and respite as they fail to find a way to integrate into your life.

Recognize the effects of grief in your life. Grief can cause changes in brain chemicals like dopamine and serotonin. Grief affects our limbic system, which is the system of nerves and networks in the brain, as well as the pre-frontal cortex. This can throw off how we regulate our emotions, our concentration levels, our ability to multi-task and our memory function. Grief can also influence hormonal changes, which affect eating and sleep patterns, and can cause anxiety and restlessness.

Maybe you've been experiencing some of the following:

- ♦ Difficulty concentrating
- ♦ Irritability
- ♦ Sadness
- ♦ Numbness
- ♦ Anger
- ♦ Anxiety
- ♦ Disorientation because of the rapid change in life circumstances
- ♦ Extreme exhaustion

- ♦ Headaches
- ♦ Getting sick
- ♦ Not being able to eat or sleep normally

Grief interrupts our normal brain functioning, and our brain is in charge of sending signals to the rest of our body. Recognize the effects of grief in your own life, and give yourself the gentleness and care that you deserve. You don't need to go to war with yourself. In fact, the opposite is true. Give yourself grace and patience, and keep doing the best you can to give yourself what you need.

Connect with others about it. Following is an exercise to help you begin to talk about challenging and uncomfortable feelings in your families. Maybe you'd like to use it to structure your family conversations around what this pandemic is bringing up and out for us emotionally.

Acceptable Feelings Activity

Write down on notecards a variety of possible feelings and emotions, like fear, anxiety, joy, grief, enjoyment, happiness, love, relief, amusement, pride, excitement, peace, satisfaction, compassion, loneliness, heartbreak, disappointment, hopelessness, lostness, misery, confusion, cheated, anger.

Instruct the family to put the cards into two categories: which feelings are acceptable and which are not acceptable to express. Talk about why each of the feelings cards are in each category.

Emphasize that some feelings may be uncomfortable, but all are a normal and healthy part of being a person and that we all experience them.

Invite the family to talk about when these different emotions come up, and which ones are they experiencing most lately.

When we bottle up difficult emotions, we reinforce that difficult emotions are not acceptable, and that difficult emotions are the antithesis of healing. This is not true! Facing and embracing difficult emotions actually help us build our emotional resiliency. When we are grounded in ourselves, allow our natural human emotions to flow through us, we have the power to move and speak in ways that resonate with our truest and most connected selves.

The best thing we can do for ourselves and for our families is to not deny ourselves of the real emotions that we are experiencing. When we connect the truth of the struggles of our lives to something bigger, a phenomenon, or social structures, or health pandemics, we see the truth of how our lives are intimately structured to respond to the same global issues.

This can be powerful in many ways, in that it helps us shift our perspectives to that of the global human body, lift the weight of responsibility off of individuals to that of the

collective (which we see ourselves as part of,) and connect us with a deep solidarity in which we know we are part of something bigger.

“Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.” (Psalm 30:5).
And when that morning comes, “death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore” (Revelation 21:4).

Here for you, in this time and always,

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Thank you, Rachel for this contribution in support of youth and families in our synod!