

The effects of loss, grief and bereavement

A very close friend of mine died the day after the national lockdown. Thankfully, I had visited him just before the lockdown and he was able to ask me to take his funeral. I promised that I would and the funeral took place on Monday 6th April.

It was an honour to be able to do this for him, his wife and his children. Unsurprisingly, it was a very emotional service but it was also a real tribute to him that his wife and children were able to share their memories of him, say farewell in a dignified way, and leave him in God's hands.

Of course, since the funeral, I have been reflecting on the nature of loss and how so many people are experiencing a real sense of grief at this time through the loss of loved one, loss of companionship with family and friends (especially with those in hospital), loss of work and loss of access to what was 'normal'.

Loss and grief seem to be one of the defining features of the COVID 19 lockdown especially as we have no real idea when this will come to an end. One of the most important aspects of grief is that it is acknowledged. So, here are some brief thoughts on what to expect and what to do at a times of loss.

There may be feelings of numbness and disbelief. It somehow does not seem possible.

There may be feelings of guilt for something you may have done, or not done, or even thought. There may be some anger about what happened/is happening. Anger with yourself, perhaps even anger with other people.

There may be some fear or anxiety about your own safety or the safety of those closest to you. It can be difficult to sleep and yet there is a feeling of overwhelming exhaustion

Of course there are feelings of loss and great sadness – as if there is a gaping hole deep inside you. Occasionally there is a sense that everything is back to normal but then suddenly you are reminded of what has happened.

These are perfectly normal and natural feelings.

They are feelings that will come and go.

They may come in waves or even catch you out at unexpected moments.

But they are perfectly normal and the important thing is not to be afraid of those feelings.

For those experiencing the death of a loved one, these feelings are going to be most acute.

They may or may not want to talk about the person who has died, and that's okay.

They may be quiet or emotional and that's okay too.

They will all be slightly preoccupied, but in time that will pass. Just be patient and a little gentle with each other.

For those who are experiencing a sense of loss in general, it is also important to recognise that you may well experience the same feeling and, again, that it perfectly normal.

Whatever the case, if you feel you need to talk, and talking is good, then find someone you trust to talk to. This may be a good friend or member of your family or, of course, you can talk to me or any other member of our Team.

So today the important thing to do is to acknowledge the sense of loss we have, whatever the cause and to acknowledge how strange everything is.

A great church leader who had lost a number of his friends once wrote to those who were mourning their loss;

'I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'

He also wrote, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him".

Where are those who have died? – I believe they are surrounded by God's love.

Will we see them again? Yes, we will. For us it may seem like a long time, but for them, it will just be like the blinking of an eye.

Will we ever recover from the effects of this virus? Yes, we will.

Finally, the World Health Organisation has published some advice on how to protect our mental health at this time of global crisis which I have summarised below.

1. Limit your exposure to the news and be careful what you read. *Listening to the headlines will give you the information you need but the more in depth, and often repeated, and more dramatic details of what is happening may increase a general sense of anxiety.*
2. Have breaks from social media and mute things that trigger anxiety. *Social media is essential to maintaining contact with family and friends but it can also be the means by which unsettling information is passed on. The use of social media can also be exhausting, especially for those who have not used it before.*
3. Keep connected with family and friends but agree times to be in contact and agree the amount of time you will 'chat'.
4. Wash you hands regularly **but not excessively**.
5. Avoid burnout - and you can avoid burnout in the following ways:
 - i. Acknowledge uncertainty as it comes to min (don't ignore it or try to suppress it).
 - ii. Pause and breathe. Take time out.
 - iii. If you have persistent and intrusive thought - pull back – and remind yourself that it is just the worry talking.
 - iv. Let go - let thoughts and feelings pass.
 - lvi. Explore the present moment. Focus on sights and sounds. See and listen.

Finally, I have many years of experience of working with adults and children who were suffering from anxiety and the WHO advice is very sound. However, one of the challenges that chronic anxiety brings is being able to let go and focus on the present and one of the best ways to do this is to actively engage in a relaxation exercise. As soon as I can, I will record the relaxation exercise that I have used and taught to others and will circulate it. It only take a few minutes to complete and it is very effective.