



Cultivating Resilience In Loss and Grief

By Suzanne Retzinger

The COVID-19 quarantine is compelling us to face a new kind of loss. We have lost all sense of normalcy in our lives. It is a difficult and confusing time for everyone.

Many of us feel helpless, and with the uncertainty, emotions can be intense. We've all lost a sense of safety. Many of our events have been canceled: school, church services, sports, graduation, weddings. The sense of loss from not having loved ones around us is especially hard for those giving birth, now happening in isolation, rather than in the presence of family and friends. Some are suffering the death of a loved one due to this pandemic, as well as other causes, which makes grieving all the more difficult. There is so much to grieve at this time.

One way of experiencing COVID-19's impact on our way of living is treating it as though it's the death of someone who matters. It can be a reminder of times when you've been sick. But we aren't sick, nor have we dealt with a recent death, but the feelings are the same. Life feels surreal in not knowing what to expect or how to live in this changed reality. Being with grief and death in our work at HSB has informed us about ways to be with loss on a larger scale.

You may sense feelings coming up inside. It could be fear, anger, guilt, shame, anxiety, regret, loneliness, helplessness, yearning, and more. These feelings can happen one at a time or all together in utter confusion. We might cycle through different feelings over and over. These are NORMAL reactions to loss. We are all grieving the loss of our world as we know it. And grief can be powerful.

We are being told to socially distance ourselves from others, which can create further isolation and loss. In grief from death we encourage people to reach out to others, which is a form of healing in itself. Though we need to physically distance ourselves, social, emotional and spiritual connections are vital.

This moment in history is an opportunity to develop greater resilience; it is an opportunity for growth, deeper connection and intimacy, forgiveness and gratitude. There are many possibilities. But first it's important to recognize that this is a major loss, and it's important how we address it.

It's alright to give ourselves permission to recognize the stories you tell ourselves during the pandemic. These stories color the way we live through this difficult time. They color how we respond, support each other or not, and whether we will come out more whole in the end. For example, a story behind panic might be, "I won't have what I need, I'll starve," or "I'll never survive this," so we buy huge quantities of supplies, creating problems for other people.

Our experience of COVID-19 can either be an opportunity for growth, or a recipe for further disaster. How do we remain calm during these times? One way is to check in with yourself by asking:

- What are my thoughts? They might be, "This will never end," or "How can I help?," or, "This is an opportunity to use creative problem-solving skills."
- What are my feelings? This could be fear or anger, sadness, or utter confusion.
- "What is happening in my body?" "Am I in survival mode of fight or flight or freeze?"
- Can we tolerate the state we're in with the abruptness of the changed world?
- Can we tolerate the feelings that arise in this novel experience?
- Can we grow the window of tolerance for our own experiences and for those of others?

Can we allow ourselves to be in this vulnerable place? How do we support ourselves each other during these challenging times? Consider these methods for helping yourself and others:

- Sit down, stay calm. Both calm and panic can have a ripple effect. One calm presence in the room may be all anyone needs in a crisis.
- Set down the terrifying stories about the future you may be telling yourself. Most of us are not fortune tellers. Don't pass on rumors. Be in the here and now. Check in with yourself, what are your thoughts, feelings and body sensations?
- Practice self-kindness. Be especially kind to yourself and others at this time, rather than ignoring the pain that's here for all of us. Put aside judgment for yourself and for others.
- Know that we are all going through this together. Normalize what you and those around you are feeling. These are challenging times. Know your feelings are normal. Try not to over-identify with the feelings you do have. Take a balanced approach to your difficult emotions so that feelings are neither bottled-up nor exaggerated. You don't have to act on them.
- Be mindful of and acknowledge any feelings that do arise. Name them. If it's confusion, name that.
- We can be physically distant, and still be socially, emotionally, and spiritually connected. Reach out to someone over the phone, Skype, FaceTime, Zoom, or by writing a letter or card.
- Ground yourself and come to your senses: feel your feet on the floor, pressing softly, really feel the sensations. Breathe through your nose and out your mouth, notice five different colors you see, four things you can touch, three things you hear, two things you can smell, one taste you have in your mouth now.
- It's not easy to bear witness to mass suffering. We might feel uneasy, and we might even collude in creating more harm, whether it's anxiety, panic, judgment or some other form. Loss stimulates our own fears because we're empathic creatures. Recognize this.
- If we're going to support each other in this time of mass loss and grief without getting lost in it, we need to get to know the terrain of our own feelings and thoughts and not act impulsively. Ask "If I can't tolerate grief and loss in myself – will I be able to tolerate it in others?"
- In the beginning when loss is fresh, it can be most confusing; emotions pour in too fast to differentiate. We need to sit quietly, shelter in place (in grief we call this "cocooning") and listen to ourselves and those who matter to us. Be real, share honestly.
- Get to know these states in yourself – sadness, fear, helplessness, and so on. Don't try and take away someone's suffering, just listen. Support others where they are. Pay attention. Show up and be present (even virtually). The more we're aware of our inner terrain, the more present we are able to be. Nonjudgmental presence may be all that's needed for the time being. We need to recognize the pain on a level of conscious awareness in order to heal.

As we heal from this, let curiosity grow. Learn to trust the process of grief. It slows us down and allows us to see things in a new way.

Remember, we are all in this pandemic together, which is showing us our true interdependence and the importance of our human connections. When this is over and done, let's not forget the lessons we learn from this era. What we need now is love and compassion. Let's embrace one another and our shared experience as we move forward through the days, weeks and months ahead. (1213 words)

Suzanne Retzinger, Ph.D., MA, MFT, has been a bereavement counselor and education specialist with Hospice of Santa Barbara since 2002.