

## **COVID and Grieving- DO YOU HAVE HIDDEN GRIEF ON SMALL LOSSES?**

Even the loss of small things, from canceled trips to postponed parties, can cause us to grieve the future we expected. But there is light on the other side. Here are heartfelt ways to boost joy and resilience:

All year you've been looking forward to celebrating your son's graduation...until it was canceled. There's no doubt life has shifted in unprecedented ways. The uncertainty we are all feeling is more than destabilizing – its causing us to MOURN. And while we recognize the need to grieve profound loss, its harder to understand the overwhelming emotions surrounding other setbacks, such as lost income, missed family reunions and canceled celebrations.

Grief has a spectrum, but all personal losses are important. “Just like when we eat and release what the body doesn't need, we also have to digest our losses as a way to decide what pain to let go of,” says trauma specialist Arielle Schwartz, Ph.D. But if we believe grief is only warranted for life and death matters, we might dismiss or undervalue those feelings.

That's where HIDDEN grief comes in – if we don't recognize such SMALL LOSSES as “worthy” of our attention, we avoid processing that pain... and those bottled up feelings may leak into our life in unexpected ways, often disguised as insomnia, anger or constant anxiety.

To move on from this “secret stress” we must recognize our trapped feelings and allow them to flow through us. “Grief is a doorway that opens us up to a more peaceful heart.” Read on to learn how to process this emotion so you can embrace joy, even in times of struggle.

**CONFUSED?** - Journal this Way. You learn that an event you were looking forward to has been canceled and you burst into tears, unsure why this news has set you off. Ambiguous loss is a grief that you can't quite define. The brain's emotion centers are overwhelmed, leaving us feeling sad, uncertain and powerless. **Bring more clarity to your feelings with emotionally expressive writing**, which engages the logic center of your brain. This form of grief journaling is one of the best ways to corral elusive emotions after loss. Simply focus on jotting down your feelings without censoring yourself. “Transforming ambiguous feelings into concrete words allows us to escape the emotional quicksand,” assures neurologist Lisa M. Schulman, M.D., author of *Before and After Loss*. It works by gradually desensitizing you to the emotional charge associated with trauma. “Be patient with this process- evenif your writing seems non-essential at first, it's helping you become aware of your feelings.”

**OVERWHELMED?** -try Collective Compassion. As you're bombarded with bad news from around the globe, your thoughts begin to spiral and your anxiety skyrockets. This collective grief- the sense that so many of us are suffering at the same time – can trigger a spike in the

stress hormone cortisol and increase our heart rate. **To help release the overwhelming emotions caused by this shared grief, try a visual meditation**, where you imagine dividing our worries into management chunks. Simply step back from the enormity of it all, make a list of those worries and choose a single worry to attend to at a time. By allowing yourself to grieve specific things over time, you can relax knowing you are not trying to tackle it all at once. “Pace yourself and remember, if we can process collective grief, we begin to feel collective compassion,” says Schwartz.

**ANXIOUS?** –try a mindful snack. Looking at your calendar, you wonder if you’ll ever feel safe enough to vacation like you used to. ***Anticipatory grief*** – where you start mourning ahead of a loss . (see more on Anticipatory grief in the workshop materials posted under Resources: Elder Care and Caring for Our Aging Parents on Visitations website.) While it can help your brain prepare, it can back fire if it creates heightened anxiety for a loss that never occurs. Think of it like watching a horror movie where the monster never jumps out- our brain and our body constantly in a tense “high-alert” mode for no reason. **One way to cue calm and feel more in control when facing uncertainty is by grounding yourself in the present.** Think about what you are doing right now, where you are, the smells, the sounds, your breathing, ONLY. Don’t think about what you will be doing later in the day. Then, you can be mindful later when you prepare Sunday dinner for your family, set the table and sit down at the table with each other. You may want to talk about the highs and the lows of the day. “Chewing food is a deceptively simple and effective calming activity for the body,” says Schwartz. That’s because when our jaws moves, there’s both compression and loosening in the inner ear, which controls our sense of where our body begins and ends in space. As a result, the simple act of noshing on a healthy, crunchy snack, like popcorn, apples or celery, helps us feel safe and balanced, physically and emotionally. Who knew??

**LONELY?** - Create a mini-memorial. Everyone is so busy trying to adapt to this “new normal” you feel ashamed wishing people were checking in with you about your own personal challenges. ***Disenfranchised grief*** occurs when our sadness isn’t acknowledged, compounding our sense of loss, because we start to believe we’re the only ones feeling this way. “We don’t often recognize that grief is a social emotion,” says Schwartz. “It’s meant to be a shared experience.” In fact, Harvard research finds that communal rituals help us heal faster after loss. **“Emotional healing is enhanced by being witnessed.” To feel more connected with others, try memorializing your grief – even for small things- in a way that can be shared with others.** Plant a tree with family members, converse on social media about how you are feeling or sketch a picture of your grief and share it, call a friend on the phone, light a candle at the same time each day, pray together, set up zoom rosaries or scripture readings or find a zoom group already doing that. Experts find that as soon as we validate and legitimize our own

experiences, this gives permission for others to do the same. “Rituals are hardwired in our brain and are guaranteed to move one from bereavement to betterment.”