



# Grief in the Time of a Pandemic

## One Therapist’s Perspective

| By Ronne Rabinowitz, LCSW, ACSW-R, CASAC, CPC

The COVID-19 pandemic has complicated the experience of grief and will have long-lasting consequences. As of May 27, over 100,000 Americans have died from this virus in a period of less than five months. Sadly, there will be many more deaths in the future by the time this article is published. “Normal” grief is difficult enough for the bereaved, but as EA providers and clinicians we need to remind ourselves that grief and loss during a pandemic is more complicated: How do we help employees come to terms with death when the usual coping rituals of grief and loss are no longer available?

In my practice as a psychotherapist, hospice social worker, and EA consultant for almost 30 years, I have sat by patients’ bedsides as their families came to terms with the inevitable. *But grief and loss during this pandemic are like no other time we have ever experienced.*

### The Importance of End-of-Life Care

Working in this field for many years, I have witnessed how important it is for loved ones of the dying to find a deep sense of purpose in end-of-life care. The ability to experience this process holds profound meaning for the survivors. Family members say things such as, *“I was able to be there during the last moments, hold her hand, tell her I loved her and that I would be okay.”* But it is not possible, for example in a COVID-19 hospital room that is quarantined, to sit by your loved one’s bedside as she passes from this world into whatever lies ahead.

As EAP counselors, how do we help our clients make sense of these sudden deaths when we have trouble making sense of them ourselves? And how do we separate our own grief when some of us are experiencing the same losses in our own lives? These are grief and loss experiences that EAPs and corporate clients are going to struggle with as employees

return to a “new normal” in both the workplace and at home.

### The Experience of “Julie”

“Julie” was referred to me by one of the EAPs I work with. During her father’s final days, Julie told me, *“There’s just no closure. I feel so helpless.”* There was no funeral, no way to offer support to her mother down in Florida, no way to put a period on her father’s death.

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Julie’s feelings echo those of so many others who have lost loved ones during COVID-19. *Grief, together with feelings of helplessness and social distancing are drastically changing the therapeutic landscape.*

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, in *On Death and Dying* (1969), describes the five stages of emotions experienced by a terminally ill patient or people who have lost a loved one as:

- Denial;
- Anger;
- Bargaining;
- Depression; and
- Acceptance.

We know today that these stages are non-linear; that is, one can move back and forth from one stage to another and it may take months, even years, to finally reach acceptance. Those dealing with a death

from COVID-19 have particular challenges in resolving the initial stage of denial. (More on that in the next sections.)

### **Pandemic Adds Dimension to Mourning**

We must acknowledge that unexpected losses, *compounded by the loss of regular day-to-day life as we knew it*, adds another dimension to the mourning process. Many of the rituals that usually give us the opportunity to grieve together with a community have all but come to a complete halt. To help our clients, we need to acknowledge the loss of these events that guide us in how we process a death.

Pointing out this additional challenge in a therapeutic relationship such as EA counselor / client helps put words to some of the loss of closure our clients may be feeling. Encouraging them to stay connected to their spiritual and faith leaders for comfort is of utmost importance. Their assistance during this time cannot be underestimated.

With no face-to-face contact or physical involvement in the dying process, recognizing that a death has happened may be more difficult to internalize. *“I couldn’t be there to watch my father die or attend his funeral. It just doesn’t seem real,”* Julie\* shared so poignantly. *“How did he go from being healthy one minute to being gone the next? It’s so hard for me to feel anything else, when I can’t get past this.”*

This mysterious virus has wreaked havoc on otherwise normal lives. Scientists are still working to answer questions about who is most at risk of infection, why

some people with no known health history fall ill, and why some who have been careful about social distancing continue to get sick. We struggle with the “why?” “Why me? Why my family member? Why now? What is the meaning of all of this?”

*\*Names have been changed to protect anonymity.*

### **Debra and Lawrence**

Debra\* and her husband, Lawrence\*, were both healthy seniors living independently, enjoying life and feeling grateful for all they were still able to do. Out of nowhere, they were both struck ill with COVID-19 and admitted to the hospital on the same day. For one month, they lay side-by-side in the same room, struggling to survive, monitoring each other’s well-being, sharing an intimate, albeit unusual kind of isolation.

They depended on hospital staff as their only means of outside interaction and spoke with family only via FaceTime. While Debra’s condition slowly improved, Lawrence’s worsened. Debra dealt with her own fragile condition and watched her spouse of 30 years slowly lose his fight. No family was allowed in the quarantined room as she faced the death of her spouse and fought for her own health beside him.

She recalled the moment of his passing with one word — *unbelievable*. Now home and slowly recovering, she is trying to figure out who can safely attend the funeral and how to honor her spouse in the most meaningful way allowed by social distancing.

### **Finding Meaning; Sixth Stage of Grief**

David Kessler, author of *“Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief”* (2019) argues that it’s in *finding meaning* that can transform grief into a more peaceful and hopeful experience. He postulates that this additional stage to Kübler-Ross’s model is essential for those who can’t move out of the denial stage – for Debra and for many others like her.

COVID-19 has the potential to progress rapidly, leaving family members with many of the same feelings as those who might have died from a massive stroke, heart attack, or accident. With little time to prepare or emotionally adapt to this loss, survivors are often left with the

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shock and disbelief that lingers long after the person has passed.

Kessler writes, “Meaning comes through finding a way to sustain your love for the person after their death while you’re moving forward with your life. Loss is simply what happens to you in life. Meaning is what you make happen.”

It’s important that we continue to normalize what our clients are feeling and where they are in the grief process. (Of course, this is with the exception of intent to harm self or others). We must acknowledge that grief is highly individualized for each person.

## Loss of Mourning Rituals

As noted, the pandemic has added a dimension to the mourning process that normally does not exist. The loss of mourning rituals is in fact a secondary loss that creates a ripple effect off of the primary loss. As EAP counselors, we provide hope that in the future the bereaved will be able to receive hugs and in-person support to help them on their journey.

If we remind clients that our current world situation is, hopefully, only “for now” and can help them think in a future-oriented manner, they can imagine honoring their loved one. This gives them a goal to work towards that can help them through this difficult time.

We listen and we learn from our clients so that we may use their experiences to add to our knowledge of how to respond to something that is so universal, yet also unique.

## Other Forms of Grief and Loss

But even if we haven’t lost a loved one to COVID-19, it’s important to note that *all of us* have experienced grief and loss during this challenging time. The “loss” of the workplace environment as we knew it. The “loss” of weddings, graduations, and other family milestones that have been either cancelled or postponed. And so on.

As human beings, we are creatures of habit and social connectedness. We look forward to going to the summer cottage each July. The county or state fair every August. The wedding of our best friend’s daughter. Take events like these away, and it’s like a piece of ourselves has been ripped away, too.

Events like these, while perhaps not as significant as the loss of a human life, are equally important to consider as we address the stressors employees and

employers have been dealing with as they return to the workplace. Even casual interactions, such as in the lunchroom, or at a company picnic, may be gone forever – or at least for a long time. *There will be some sort of loss that will impact each and every one of the clients we serve*, and it’s important for EA professionals to keep that in mind in the coming months.

## Summary

As not only EA professionals but also as human beings, we struggle with many of the same feelings our clients experience, we are at risk of our own countertransference peeking in as well as the risk of experiencing compassion fatigue. **Editor’s note:** See compassion fatigue questionnaire on page 35.

I have never experienced a time in my life like this before, as I’m sure most people in the “helping fields” would agree. I have been challenged in ways I never could have imagined, dealing with my own melancholy, anxiety, and fear of what the future will hold.

Connecting with others and seeking support is the one thing we can *all do* to help ourselves so we can continue to help others. Find an online support group, connect with a colleague, schedule a game night, but also find ways to disconnect from work that can be all-too consuming.

Develop those healthy boundaries we’re always reminding our clients to have, and remember: if *we’re* not okay, our clients surely won’t be either. Take time to process your own feelings during this time of uncertainty. Grieve what you’ve lost, whether it’s a loved one, a job or just your life as you knew it.

Hold onto the hope that because we’re all facing this difficult time together, we will come out on the other end better and stronger, with new gifts and insights to share with those we help! ❖

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## References

- Kessler, D. (2019). *Finding meaning: The sixth stage of grief*. New York, NY: Scribner.
- Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. Macmillan Publishers.

3) Type “EAP and COVID 19” into the search bar to pull up COVID-19 related materials.

If you cannot find what you are looking for, or for additional information about the *International Digital Employee Assistance Archive*, contact Jodi Frey at [JFREY@ssw.umaryland.edu](mailto:JFREY@ssw.umaryland.edu) or Patricia Herlihy at [pherlihy@rockymountainresearch.us](mailto:pherlihy@rockymountainresearch.us)

**Pandemic = More Virtual Mental Health Care**

The coronavirus pandemic is causing unprecedented levels of stress and grief. As a result, companies providing virtual mental health care say they’re seeing a strong surge in interest —which means they’re scrambling to meet that demand by introducing new services, accelerating launch timelines, and hiring more staff on board.

According to *Stat Reports*, COVID-19 could prove to be a breakout for these businesses, which had been trying to address the shortage of in-person mental health care by offering virtual coaching, monitoring, and educational information long before the coronavirus outbreak. If the firms can bring in more users and corporate customers *now*, they might convince them to stick around after the pandemic is over. But that depends on whether the firms can handle the upsurge in demand.

The demand for mental health services has long been higher than the supply of available sit-down appointments. The coronavirus pandemic has only exacerbated this dynamic, by making in-person counseling nearly impossible, while also intensifying existing symptoms of depression and anxiety for some people and causing new symptoms for others.

Virtual mental health services could fill part of that gap, but the format also creates new challenges. People sheltering in place with family members or roommates for weeks on end, especially in a cramped living space, may lack a private space where they can do a video or audio chat with a therapist without being overheard. That may be fueling demand for smartphone apps that allow users to chat via text messaging and to access educational content.

Read more here <https://www.statnews.com/2020/04/13/remote-mental-health-livongo-omada/>

**EARF Releases ‘The History of EAP in the United States’**

The Employee Assistance Research Foundation (EARF) is pleased to announce the open access release of its latest research initiative: “*The History of EAP in the United States*,” written by principal investigator Dale Masi, PhD, CEAP, Professor Emeritus at the University of Maryland and former director of the MSW EAP specialization program.

The book addresses a critical deficiency in the EA knowledge base: the need for a definitive resource that accurately documents the history and evolution of EAP in the U.S. It can be downloaded for free at [http://www.eapassn.org/Portals/11/Docs/EAP%20History/The\\_History\\_of\\_EAPs\\_in\\_the\\_US.pdf](http://www.eapassn.org/Portals/11/Docs/EAP%20History/The_History_of_EAPs_in_the_US.pdf).

**BackBone Raising EA, EAPA Awareness**

The Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA) is excited to announce that it has engaged the services of BackBone, a public relations and marketing communications firm that has worked with some of the most dynamic and innovative EAPs in the field for over 15 years (they also specialize in healthcare and technology).

The overarching goal in working with BackBone is to raise the organizational profile of EAPA as the authoritative voice on Employee Assistance and workforce optimization across the Employee Assistance marketplace.

BackBone will also raise awareness among HR, Safety, Wellness, Benefits, and general business audiences of the central role EA plays in maintaining business continuity - a message that will have particular resonance as workplaces grapple with the effects of COVID-19 (a message that we believe will continue to have relevance well after the current crisis subsides). Read more here [https://www.eapassn.org/Portals/11/Docs/Communications/BackBoneLaunchAnnouncement\\_050820.pdf?ver=2020-05-08-093053-717](https://www.eapassn.org/Portals/11/Docs/Communications/BackBoneLaunchAnnouncement_050820.pdf?ver=2020-05-08-093053-717) ❖