



By Reabetsoe Buys
Counselling Psychologist
www.shrinkmama.co.za

GRIEF AND LOSS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Many people, the world over, are experiencing grief and loss during the current global health pandemic. With millions having contracted the virus and millions more who have lost their lives, the past year has been an

overwhelming time characterised by fear and anxiety. In South Africa, almost 1.5 million people have tested positive for Covid-19 and over 50 000 people have lost their lives to the disease in the past year.

Besides the grief and loss of

life, many people are also grieving for things the pandemic has taken away from them. People have lost their jobs and sources of income, their support systems due to the need to isolate from one another, and people have lost their “normal” lifestyles, where we were

you of your loved one (e.g. plant a tree in their memory and watch it grow; keep an item they loved; have their photo with a candle up in a part of the house where you can sit when you remember them)

- **Monitor** symptoms and wellbeing
 - Check in with yourself and others – How do you feel? What’s on your mind? How are you physically doing?
 - Reach out to others if you feel sad, lonely or overwhelmed; Keep in touch with those who you know have been going through a hard time
 - Contact professional services if you feel you’re not coping or if you’re worried about someone
 - Seek spiritual support if this has been a pillar of strength for you in other circumstances

GRIEVING FROM OTHER LOSSES AND CHANGES

We have also lost many different aspects of our lives – no matter how big or small. It is important that we also:

- Acknowledge these feelings of grief and loss to ourselves and work through them. You can do this by speaking about it, getting creative, getting physical (boxing/dancing), writing it out or listening to music.
- Create new routines and rituals which will help you move on from what you have lost. Do things as a family, create a daily routine which involves self-care activities and give yourself time to rest and recuperate from stressors.

Many people feel an enormous amount of guilt for grieving over

things that seem “less important” than the loss of a person.

However, remember that grief is a natural and universal response to the loss of anything we deem important to us, no matter what it is. If you need to process the loss of something, then allow that to take place in whatever way feels comfortable to you.

HELPING ADOLESCENTS AND CHILDREN DEAL WITH GRIEF

Similar to adults, children and adolescents also grieve for things they have lost. When the lockdown commenced they suddenly stopped going to school, were restricted from seeing their friends and loved ones and were confronted with this invisible threat.

Because children don’t have the emotional maturity and logical understanding of events the way adults do, may struggle with accepting change and loss in the way we do. Some children may appear okay and carry on the way they always have, while others may show changes in their behaviour, struggle to sleep alone or appear sad. We can help children deal with grief by:

- Asking them questions to get a sense of what they think and feel about what has happened and about any losses they may have experienced
- Allow them to process their grief in ways they feel comfortable – some children prefer to talk; while others prefer drawing, acting it out or getting active
- Explaining circumstances to them in an appropriate way for their age and developmental stage
- Teach and practice breathing and relaxation exercises together which can help with sleep and dealing with overwhelming emotions
- Maintain routine and structure where possible, while

establishing and maintaining new but safe boundaries

- Get them involved in household routines such as choosing an activity or making a choice between two dinner options

With adolescents, they tend to show symptoms similar to both children and adults. They may experience problems sleeping, prefer to isolate themselves or appear irritated and frustrated. Many prefer to play games or be on their phones than engage in usual activities. As parents and caregivers it’s important to engage with adolescents to assess where they’re at, encourage healthy coping mechanisms and work towards the stage of acceptance.

Encourage adolescents to:

- Learn about Covid-19 and all its implications
- Keep in touch and socialise with friends on virtual platforms
- Come up with new daily routines and schedules for themselves, where they allocate time for school work, socialising, exercising, spending time with the rest of the family etc
- Focus on rest and relaxation by using stress management techniques
- Talk to someone they trust about their feelings

While there does seem to be some light at the end of the tunnel in the fight against Covid-19, many people, families and communities have been left reeling from the devastation of profound loss. The best way to overcome the impact of this is to implement coping strategies and mechanisms which work for our needs. **MHM**

References available upon request