

There Is No Vaccine for Grief

But there are ways to prepare to face it.

By A.C. Shilton

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For months, I've felt like the emotional equivalent of a car with a cracked windshield. I'm still rolling through daily life, but one good knock is bound to shatter me. Although the number of coronavirus cases has been declining, the number of deaths has soared well above 500,000, and now we have the new variants to worry about. I know that if I have not yet lost a loved one, I'm one of the lucky ones — and no one's luck lasts forever.

I love being proactive — I'm all about having a go bag with extra batteries, duct tape and granola bars ready for any emergency. But *what, if anything, could I do to prepare myself for grief?*

Anticipatory grief is a well-documented phenomenon in grief counseling, said Dr. Katherine Shear, the founder and director for the Center for Complicated Grief at Columbia University. But usually researchers study anticipatory grief in environments like hospices, where loss is imminent. What many of us are experiencing right now is more nebulous. Dr. Shear cautioned that spiraling into anticipatory grief for a loss that may not even happen is likely to be unhelpful.

Of course, even if you do not lose a family member or friend in the pandemic, that does not mean you will not experience grief. At its core, grief is a reaction to a change that you didn't want or ask for, said David Kessler, a grief expert and author of many books on the subject, including his most recent, "Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief."

Even those who have not lost family members are experiencing some level of loss in the pandemic, he said, from the disappointment of missing in-person experiences and holiday celebrations to the losses of our jobs and even our homes.

"The problem with comparisons in grief is if you win, you lose," Mr. Kessler said, adding, "and the world is big enough for all our griefs."

Inoculating yourself against feelings of loss may prove harder than getting a routine vaccine. "Grief is as unique as a thumbprint. What works for one person may not work for another," said Deanna Upchurch, the director of clinical outreach services at the Providence-based hospice HopeHealth. Still, should the worst happen, knowing what tends to help others could help you gird yourself — even just a little bit. If doing something feels better to you than doing nothing, consider this your packing list for a grief go bag.

Practice Experiencing Your Emotions.

"In our culture, we tend to think painful emotions are bad," Dr. Shear said. "But that's really not true. It's true that they're painful, but we can learn from them," she said. Next time you feel something unpleasant, take a moment to sit with it and think about why you're feeling the way you're feeling.

Mr. Kessler suggests looking to the animal kingdom for inspiration on learning to live with uncomfortable emotions. After his 21-year-old son died suddenly in 2016, Mr. Kessler was watching a documentary on buffalos. The documentary noted that buffalos run straight into oncoming storms.

"Because they run into the storm, they minimize the time they are in the discomfort. We live in a society that minimizes grief. Unlike the buffalo, we try to stay a mile ahead of it, but it's just always there, chasing behind us," he said. Consider, instead, being willing to run into the rain.

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Shower the People You Love With Love.

Maureen Keeley, a professor of interpersonal communication at Texas State University, has been studying the final conversations between family members for nearly 20 years. In that time, one theme has emerged over and over again: “We need to tell those we love that we love them,” she said.

This advice sounds so simple. And yet, when I tested it out by calling my best college friend to tell her how grateful I was for her friendship, the gears gummed up. (Instead, I asked about her new cat.) To which, Dr. Keeley gave me this advice: “Grow up.” Telling someone how much they mean to you may feel a bit awkward. Go on and reveal the mushy bits of your soul. Most people enjoy hearing how much they matter, and saying it now saves you from having regrets later.

Nurture Your Network.

“We are not meant to be islands of grief,” Mr. Kessler said. Everyone grieves differently, and even within your grief there may be periods when you wish to be alone and periods when you really need a friend. When the latter happens, having a sturdy network to lean on is so important. “We need to know our loved one’s life mattered, our loved one’s death mattered. It brings us meaning to see our pain witnessed in someone else’s eyes,” he said. Now is the time to make time for friends.

Recognize Your Coping Style.

Some people need something to look forward to. Others find thinking about the future overwhelming, said Ms. Upchurch. If you’re currently planning what to serve at your post-vaccine dinner party, you’re likely in the first group. Knowing that can help you put things on your schedule that will bring you joy in a dark time. If, however, you’ve been getting through the past year of social distancing by not thinking too far into the future, you may be better served by just allowing yourself to stay in the moment, taking each day as it comes.

Find a Natural Space.

Even if you’re generally not the outdoorsy type, a tiny slice of nature can be helpful in navigating grief, said Sonya Jakubec, a professor in the school of nursing and midwifery at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Canada. Dr. Jakubec studies the impact of natural spaces and parks on patients and caregivers. As she reported in a chapter she wrote on grieving in nature for the book “Health in the Anthropocene: Living Well on a Finite Planet,” she took palliative care patients and caregivers out for a walk near where they worked.

“Many of them had never considered the idea of going for a 20-minute walk break,” she said. After the field trips outdoors, 93 percent said they agreed or strongly agreed that natural spaces provide emotional comfort. Dr. Jakubec has seen similar results with grief groups that meet outside. “Parks and nature feel like a container that is large enough to hold our grief,” she said.

Thanks to vaccines and hospitals having more tools to treat critical patients, it’s possible that the bump we’re all bracing for will never arrive.

Still, it’s worth fortifying yourself now, because grief is an innate part of what it means to live a full and rich life as a human.

“Generally, grief is a lifelong experience that changes over time,” said Ms. Upchurch. Still, humans can be surprisingly resilient. That resilience will help you weather whatever else the pandemic has in store — cracks and all.