

**LOSS AND GRIEF IN REAL
TIME: THE AFRICAN
AMERICAN EXPERIENCE
WITH COVID-19**

M. Katherine Shear, M.D.
Director, Center for Complicated Grief
Columbia University School of Social Work

Nicole Alston, MSW
Associate for the Center for Complicated Grief
Columbia University School of Social Work

Rev. Dr. Johnnie Green
Senior Pastor
Mt. Neboh Baptist Church

The Center for
Complicated Grief

Grief is universal... but how we understand it is not

But...grief does not proceed in stages

The term “stages” means “parts of an activity”
Used by the stage proponents it also implies a predictable sequence: “After bargaining our attention moves squarely into the present.”
Kubler-Ross and Kessler

Cautioning Health-Care Professionals: Bereaved Persons Are Misguided Through the Stages of Grief

Margaret Stroebe^{1,2}, Henk Schut¹,
and Kathrin Boerner³

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Attachment theory

The desire to form close relationships is part of our biology

These people are rewarding to be with; we don't want to be separated

They help us feel safe and confident (safe haven and secure base)

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Relationships as Regulators

Secure attachment has widespread effects on body and mind

Some Examples:

Psychological processes

- ✓ Emotion and attention regulation
- ✓ Tolerance of ambiguity
- ✓ Empathy and compassion
- ✓ Suppression of unwanted thoughts
- ✓ Extinction recall
- ✓ Decision making

Sense of self

- ✓ Implicit and explicit
- ✓ Self-compassion
- ✓ Self concept complexity
- ✓ Self concept clarity

Physiological processes

- ✓ Sleep quality
- ✓ Eating behaviors
- ✓ Autonomic function
- ✓ Cortisol, oxytocin response to stress
- ✓ Pain intensity (physical and social)
- ✓ Emotional and physical warmth
- ✓ Cardiovascular reactivity
- ✓ Gene expression
- ✓ Immune function
- ✓ Neuroendocrine function
- ✓ Inflammatory response

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What happens when a loved one dies?

Loss of attachment relationship

Activates attachment:

Separation distress: anxiety, loss of sense of safety, loss of confidence and competence, anxiety, guilt

Proximity seeking: yearning, searching, preoccupation

Grief

Yearning, searching, preoccupation with the person who died

Anxiety, loss of sense of safety, loss of confidence and competence, anxiety, guilt

Physiological and psychological regulation is disrupted

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In other words...

Grief is the form love takes when someone
we love dies

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Grief is the natural response to loss

- ✓ natural response to loss – the form love takes when someone we love dies
- ✓ permanent after we lose someone close but evolves
- ✓ naturally contains mixed feelings and confused thoughts
- ✓ universal, with recognizable features
- ✓ unique to every person and every loss

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Mixed feelings and confused thoughts; for example...

- ✓ We want to hold onto grief and we want it to be over
- ✓ In a way, we welcome the mental pain yet we also want it to go away
- ✓ We want to go on with our life but have little enthusiasm or understanding of how to do so
- ✓ We need other people but have trouble feeling connected to them
- ✓ We know the person died but can't understand how they can be gone
- ✓ We crave connection to our loved one but want to avoid reminders of the loss
- ✓ We can't stop thinking about the person who died but feel like we've lost them forever

All of this is natural and very common

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Grief does not unfold in a predictable way

- ✓ complex variable mix of thoughts, feelings, behaviors, physical changes
- ✓ varies erratically and unpredictably in the short run
- ✓ evolves over a variable period of time
- ✓ affected by things unexpected and uncontrollable

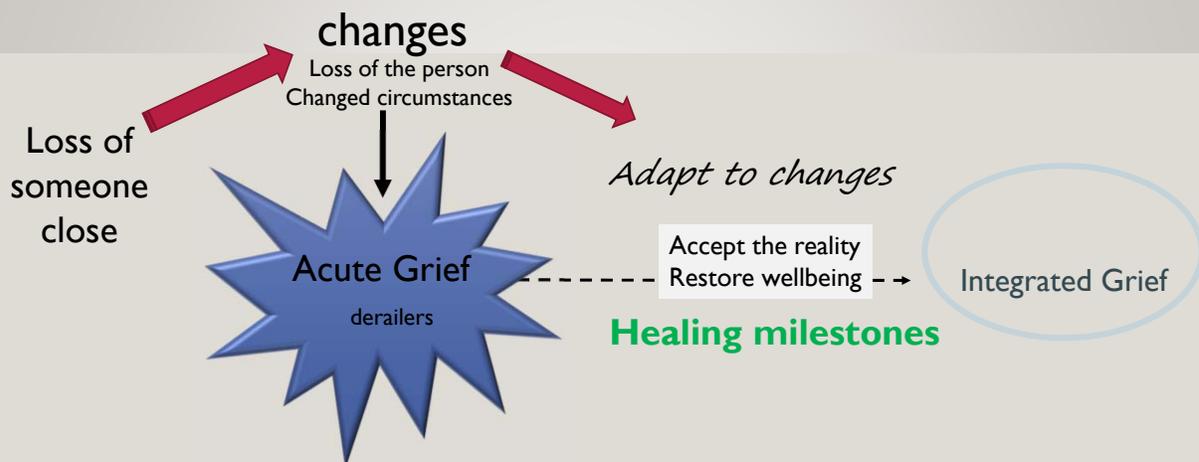
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However, there are recognizable Healing Milestones

- H**onor your loved one and yourself, reconnect with your own interests and values
- E**ase your emotional pain, allow emotions in your life, both painful and pleasant
- A**cept grief and let it find a place in your life
- L**earn to live with reminders of your loss
- I**ntegrate memories of your loved one into your life; let them help you learn and grow
- N**arrate stories of the death so that you can understand and accept the reality of your loss
- G**ather friends and loved ones and let them into your life; let them support you

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A grief map



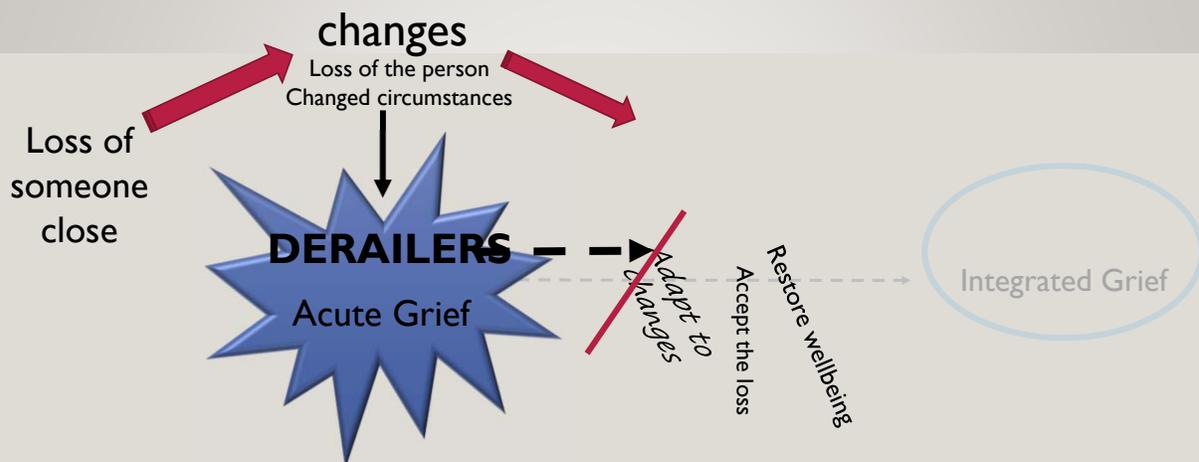
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Sometimes the progress of healing is derailed

- D**oubt that you did enough for the person who died; caregiver self-blame
- E**mbracing the idea that intense grief is the only way to honor the person who died
- R**epeatedly imagining scenarios, “if only” thinking
- A**nger and bitterness you can’t resolve or let go of
- I**nsistent belief that this death was unfair or wrong or shouldn’t have happened
- L**ack of faith in the possibility of adapting to the loss and having a promising future
- E**xcessive avoidance of reminders of the loss
- R**ejecting support from others, unable to let others help, feeling hurt and alone
- S**urvivor guilt that is stopping you from experiencing joy and satisfaction

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Derailers can block the healing pathway



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Risk factors: increase likelihood that derailers will gain a foothold

Person-related

history of depression, prior loss/trauma, difficult relationship with early caregivers

Relationship based

who died, closeness, identity-defining; secure relationship in the context of general insecurity

Circumstances of the death

age of the person who died, how they died

Context of the death

what else is going on in the bereaved person's life

Consequences of the death

loss of income, need to move, loss of social connections, change in lifestyle

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Covid-19 deaths are likely to contain many risk factors, for example

Circumstances of the death

Sudden, unexpected death, seemingly preventable, seemingly random; people dying alone; loved ones restricted family visiting

Context of the death

Physical distancing affecting; funerals, burial, rituals, support of the grievors; unemployment worries; feelings of unsafety; financial insecurity

Consequences of the death

Being alone; feeling more unsafe; having others to care for, financial worries

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