Part 1: Recognizing covid-19 loss and grief

- Understanding the impact of loss
  - Identifying risk factors
  - Identifying protective factors

Part 2: An evidence-based framework for understanding covid-19 loss and grief

- Understanding grief
- Understanding adaptation and how it can be derailed
- Adapting to loss during the pandemic
Losses are ubiquitous in a world closed down by the virus

Economy shut down  
Jobs lost  
Schools closed  
Sports events, artistic performances, holiday celebrations cancelled

usual graduation celebrations cancelled

Loss of a loved one: the most painful and impactful of coronavirus losses

Coronavirus COVID-19 Global Cases by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University (JHU)
Grief is a common human experience, and we have an innate capacity to adapt

“Like tiny seeds with potent power to push through tough ground and become mighty trees, we hold innate reserves of unimaginable strength. We are resilient.”

—Catherine DeVrye, The Gift of Nature, 2018

Resilience is the norm, rather than the exception

Stolove et al., 2017
Factors that increase risk for complications after loss

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person-related</th>
<th>Relationship based</th>
<th>Circumstances of the death</th>
<th>Context of the death</th>
<th>Consequences of the death</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>history of depression, prior loss and trauma</td>
<td>quality of the relationship, closeness, identity-defining</td>
<td>age of the person who died, how they died</td>
<td>what else is going on in the bereaved person's life</td>
<td>loss of income, need to move, loss of social connections</td>
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Factors that reduce risk for complications after loss

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<td>hardiness, flexibility, coping repertoire, continued bonds</td>
<td>social connections; support; social cohesion</td>
<td>end of life planning, developmental timing</td>
<td>lower trauma burden</td>
<td>maintenance of income</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Flexibility in adjustment strategies that have a good person-context fit drive adaptation

Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of overcoming it.

-Helen Keller
Part 2: An evidence-based framework for understanding covid-19 loss and grief

✓ Understanding grief
✓ Understanding adaptation and how it can be derailed
✓ Adapting to loss during the pandemic
In a world of many kinds of loss, we are focusing today on loss of a loved one

Grief is the response to loss

- a natural, complex multi-faceted experience – the form love takes when someone we love dies
- permanent after we lose someone close
- unique to every person and there are important commonalities
- All grief is complicated and complicated grief is a diagnosable condition: **Prolonged Grief Disorder.**
Some reasons why all grief is complicated

- There are a lot of different thoughts, feelings and behaviors
- It changes – erratically at times
- It evolves over time but not in a smooth way and not in a defined time frame
- It's affected by other people and by things that are unexpected and uncontrollable
- There are a lot of mixed feelings and thoughts

A lot of mixed feelings and thoughts
For example…

- We want to hold onto grief and we want it to go away
- We have severe mental pain that seems like it can never go away
- We want to go on but we have little enthusiasm for life
- We need other people but it’s hard to feel connected
- We know the person died but we have trouble understanding it
- We crave connection to our loved one but think we need to avoid reminders of the loss
- We can’t stop thinking about the person who died but we feel like we’ve lost them forever
Acute Grief: Commonalities

- Strong emotions
- Intrusive thoughts
- Grief-related behaviors
- Physical symptoms

Grief is transformed as we adapt to the loss

- Physiology is re-regulated
- Thoughts and memories find a place in our life
- Grief is integrated

- Emotional intensity subsides, becomes more bittersweet
- Thoughts recede, more distant, but still accessible
- Behavior more connected to ongoing life

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**Bowlby: how we progress**

*Loss 1980*

- Recognition of changed circumstance; revision of representational models
- Redefinition of life goals

*A mourner who does not progress remains in a state of suspended growth in life in which they are held prisoner by a dilemma they cannot solve.*

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### Accept the reality

**Accept...**

- Permanence of loss and grief
- Changed circumstances
- Changed relationship with the deceased; revision of representational models

### Restore wellbeing

**Restore:**

- Sense of purpose and meaning; possibilities for joy and satisfaction; a promising future
- Feeling of competence
- Feeling of belonging and mattering
A grief map

Loss

Adapt to changes

Accept the reality

Restore wellbeing

When adaptation is derailed

Loss

Acute Grief

Integrated Grief

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Common kinds of derailers

- Protest and proximity seeking
- Guilt and anger, including survivor guilt
- Counterfactual thinking
- “Immune neglect” and “miswanting”
- Inability to balance avoidance of pain and confrontation

Risk factors enhance the likelihood that derailers can take over

Person-related
Relationship with the person who died
Circumstances of the death
Context of the death
Consequences of the death
Covid-19 deaths are likely to contain many risk factors, e.g.

Circumstances of the death
Sudden, unexpected, seemingly preventable, seemingly random
People are dying alone
Need for physical distancing: Loved ones are unable to visit

Context of the death
Physical distancing

Consequences of the death

How clinicians can help Covid-19 bereaved people

Active empathic listening, as always when supporting a bereaved person.
People may need to sideline their grief because of a need to take care of themselves or others and/or because of the unavailability of the physical presence of supportive friends and family.
They may worry that this means they are not grieving in the right way.
Clinicians can support them in finding their own balance between allowing their grief and taking care of their own life..
Screen and treat those with mental disorders, suicidal ideation and behaviors, and any worsening of medical conditions.
Clinicians can also help people after a COVID-19 loss in the following ways:

**Understand and accept grief:** it can help to understand that grief is natural after loss. It is a form of love; allow it to wax and wane naturally. Help people be alert to issues related to the COVID-19 death that are troubling to them.

**Manage emotional pain:** accepting emotions and naming them can be helpful; let them wax and wane naturally as much as possible. Encourage the experience of positive emotions - doing something pleasant each day – almost as a kind of ritual.

**See some possibility of a promising future:** taking some time to begin to think about what is important, meaningful, intrinsically interesting and what kind of activities are in line with this; helping them recognize and manage survivor guilt which may be especially pronounced after a COVID-19 death.

**Strengthen relationships with others:** encourage creative ways to stay connected with friends and family during period of social distancing; encourage the bereaved to find ways to honor the deceased person with loved ones or friends flexibly, even virtually; encourage increased social connection where feasible and desirable; allowing others in, sharing stories, accepting support and comfort, lower expectations for reciprocity for a time, sharing memories;

**Tell the story of the death:** share the story, help the person deal with troubling aspects, honoring a loved one’s death as a part of their life; helping people voice and come to terms with aspects of the COVID-19 death that are troubling or especially painful; validating these concerns and helping the person accept the reality; show respect for people who prefer not to share this story.
How clinicians can help

**Learn to live with reminders**: gradually find ways to return to the world of reminders rather than avoid them; discovering meaningful and comforting memories in reminders; show respect for individuals finding their own balance between confronting emotional pain and avoidance or distraction: people need to find their own balance of these; those who wish to share photos and memories of the loved one should be supported to do so.

**Feel a sense of connection to memories of the deceased**: encourage recognition of a changed relationship with the person who died; understand that memories are a living part of connection to the deceased.

Summary

Grief emerges naturally after an important loss
We adapt naturally to even the most difficult losses
Supportive companions are important
Covid-19 deaths have many elements that are likely to be especially challenging and clinicians can help