

Missing Life Before Covid-19? You're Not Alone

Allowing for grief without toxic positivity and comparative suffering.

Posted Apr 13, 2020



Like George Bailey, many yearn to go back to the ordinary with a greater appreciation for the predictability we've lost. Source: Johannes Roth/Unsplash

In the 1946 film, [It's a Wonderful Life](#), family man George Bailey is struggling, and feels there is no way out of his problems. After finding out he owes large sums of money, George contemplates ending his life. With the help of his guardian angel Clarence, he's given a chance to see what the world would be like if he had never been born. George discovers that without him, things are even grimmer. The community is crumbling to the oppressive Mr. Potter, and his family is in shambles. As Clarence returns George to his life, he ends with renewed [gratitude](#), thankful for the chance to start again with a new perspective.

With the struggles that accompany the current [Coronavirus](#) pandemic, many of us find ourselves longing for the normal lives we took for granted. Yes, we had problems in the past, but now we are faced with new and uncertain challenges we wish we could trade back. Like George Bailey, we yearn to go back to the ordinary with a greater appreciation for the day-to-day predictability we've lost.

Unfortunately, we have no guardian angel to reverse the economic, social, and psychological destruction of Covid-19. Life may never go back to the way it was. As [grief](#) expert David Kessler [said](#),

We are all dealing with the collective loss of the world we knew. ...I don't know how this is going to change, but it will. We're going to find meaning; we're going to come out the other side of this...but this world that we've all been accustomed to is now gone.

We are each facing innumerable losses whether it's missing our child's preschool graduation, losing our place of worship, struggling to pay rent, or saying goodbye to a loved one.

Stop the Toxic Positivity. It's Okay to Not be Okay.

Let's allow ourselves to feel those losses, whether big or small. Many messages being shared on social media such as, "Positive vibes only!" are uninviting to a full range of human emotions. Telling someone to simply have happy thoughts, get over it, or look on the bright side can be dismissive of the genuine pain others are feeling. Though many are meant to be uplifting and encouraging, they often have the opposite effect. This type of positivity is toxic.

Stifling negative emotions doesn't make them go away. In fact, suppressing them often gives them more power over us. Those who bottle up emotions have an [increased risk](#) of cancer, premature death, and a [host](#) of other problems. Simply [labeling emotions](#), such as sadness, [anger](#), and [fear](#) makes them less intense. More helpful [responses](#) to those in distress would be, "Things can really be tough, I'm here for you," or "Sometimes we experience bad things. How can I support you?"

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

There Is No Winner in Comparative Suffering

One barrier to allowing ourselves to grieve over our current losses is that [shame](#) often takes over. I for one have found myself grieving lost access to the gym. I could walk the track and listen to audiobooks while getting a much-needed break from my small children. When I begin missing the old days, I often feel terrible at my own ingratitude, knowing others are experiencing more distressing problems such as losing a business, life partner, or dream wedding ceremony. This comparative suffering is never helpful and can lead us to dismiss our own experiences. Vulnerability researcher Brené Brown articulated this nicely when she [said](#),

What's crazy about comparison when it's triggered by fear and scarcity is that even our pain and our hurt are not immune to being assessed and ranked. So without thinking, we start to rank our suffering and use it to deny or give ourselves permission to feel...But this is not how emotion or affect works. Emotions do not go away because we send them a message that these feelings are inappropriate and do not score high enough on the suffering board. ... Not only do our feelings double down and grow, they invite shame...It's really dangerous. The entire myth of comparison suffering is the belief that [empathy](#) is finite...False. When we practice empathy with ourselves and others, we create more empathy. Love, y'all, is the last thing we need to ration in this world.

Let's be conscious that we do not minimize the pain of others, such as our children, who may be experiencing some of the largest losses they have ever experienced. For example, your son missing a soccer game may sound trivial compared to the losses of others, but it can still feel devastating to him.



Your son missing a soccer game may sound trivial compared to the losses of others, but it can still feel devastating to him. Source: Kelly Sikkema/Unsplash

Grieve in Your Own Way

Once we've recognized toxic positivity for the parasite that it is and have allowed ourselves to feel grief and loss, we can express it in our own way. Kessler [writes](#), "Each person's grief is as unique as their fingerprint. But what everyone has in common is that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed." He notes that this doesn't mean having someone reframe it or point out a silver lining but being fully present in the enormity of their loss. Just as we can allow ourselves to feel negative emotions, we can withhold judgment on how others manifest their grief and loss.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

Grief Can Aid in Finding Meaning

While grief is never an emotion we actively seek to experience, it may propel us to find more meaning in our lives. Kessler, with the help of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, developed the well-known [stages of grief](#) including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. After Kessler lost his young adult son, he decided to add a sixth stage, finding meaning.





This pandemic is likely long-lasting, with some permanent societal scars. The only way to pull through it is together. Source: Nick Karvounis/Unsplash

In his book, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*, Kessler writes, “Your loss is not a test, a lesson, something to handle, a gift, or a blessing. Loss is simply what happens to you in life. Meaning is what you make happen.” Meaning is not a stage to rush to in order to bypass pain. “If you can’t feel it, you can’t heal it,” Kessler [said](#). However, we can be grateful for the experiences we were able to have such as being with loved ones before social distancing, without being grateful for the pandemic. We can cherish any new opportunities that have come from our new circumstances, while still missing a past life that will never be again.

In the wake of the current pandemic, our collective loss requires collective healing. Like George Bailey, we see ourselves confronting a world we don’t recognize. Yet, his real heroism was not returning to his former life, but in recognizing the value of what he had. Let’s hold space for each other’s grief. Stop toxic positivity. Stop comparison. Let’s fill the need gaps we see around us as we seek help to fulfill our own needs. This pandemic is likely long-lasting, with some permanent societal scars. The only way to pull through this is together.