

## Everyday Losses

By Eunie Alsaker

Teletherapy is not my favorite thing. Yet everyone I have connected with seems so grateful, and, after two or three meetings, it is starting to feel a little closer to “normal.” I work with college students, and I see two major themes. Each person talks about loss: the loss of their graduation ceremony, summer internships, in-person classes, physical time with friends, the independence they had at school that they may have lost living back at home, financial stability after job loss, and anything they previously thought of as normal. They also speak of resilience. Without exception, these young adults are finding ways to balance their individual loss with a broader perspective of the scope and consequences of COVID-19.

I recently participated in an Association for Death Education and Counseling webinar, *Grieving the Loss of Living Our Lives*, by Dr. Darcy Harris from King’s College in London, Ontario. Harris, an expert in non-death losses, provides a helpful framework for viewing this historical time as well as practical suggestions for use with clients. Both have guided my work through the pandemic.

She begins by reminding us of our assumptive world which offers predictability to our daily lives. We get up and go to work in the morning. Our children are schooled away from home. When we go to the grocery store, the shelves are full. A sneeze is a sign of spring allergies. I regularly see my family or friends. The experts are ready to cover us in an emergency. I know my role, and I know what my day-in and day-out life looks like. There is no

reason to assume this will shift dramatically.

Yet here we are in this state of disequilibrium. Life no longer matches our assumptions, and this leads to feelings of vulnerability. Who is safe? Who is immune from huge changes? Harris’ framework describes our response to challenging times in terms of three systems—threat, drive, and soothing. With the pandemic, we can no longer assume normalcy around the very central areas of our lives—health, finances, safety, and relationships. And thus, the central nervous system of most people is activated to some extent right now. Threat feels real when we are flooded with images and news reports, when there is no specific end-date in sight, when everyone is at risk and the danger is not only in some far-off place, when we are cut off from our typical support and distractions, and when we are powerless over the situation. It is a recipe for anxiety.

Under these circumstances, Harris explains, our drive system compels us to take action. We go into survival mode and try to calm those fears and fill those gaps in our lives. We turn to our support system, yet we can’t be with them in person. We try to “stock-up,” yet grocery shelves are empty. We rely on our jobs for financial stability, yet we have been furloughed. The dark side of times of threat, tribalism, may even kick in as people focus on survival. We try to exert control and protect ourselves.

The balance to these two systems is the soothing system. This is where we can rest and feel safe and comforted. Here we access our values and connect with others. This is where resilience grows and how we are able to take a step back and tap into the larger picture. And this is where we focus our

work with our clients. We help them consider what this looks like for them. Harris has many concrete suggestions.

Separate what we can control from what we can’t. Laser in on the controllables. I can limit my media intake. I can follow the state guidelines. I can talk to my mom every day. I can choose gratitude.

Do some type of body work each day. Identify where anxiety is felt and find ways to calm your central nervous system. Breath practice and muscle relaxation is key. We need to find a way to get a message to our brain that we are safe at this moment. This could be through meditation, prayer, yoga, or simple breath work. It can be through the soothing touch of pets. We release anxious energy through exercise, yard work, and a full belly laugh.

*Explore creative outlets.* Can I paint or draw? Take a photo on each daily walk? Create a new recipe from what’s in my pantry? Sing and dance?

*Choose words carefully.* Am I socially isolated or physically isolated? Am I sentenced to home or staying home for the safety of those I love?

*Notice what hasn’t changed.* Loss points to what we’ve lost, what we still have, and what we hope for. What do I still have? And are there any positive outcomes that I hope for?

*Focus on what resilience looks like.* What are my strengths and how am I using them? How have I moved through difficult times in the past? How do I hold my grief now? What might a practice of gratitude look like during the pandemic?

*Seek balance.* Acknowledge the losses. Mourn them. Speak of them. And engage in problem solving. How do I move through this in an effective and

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meaningful way? (The dual process of loss is a helpful model for this.)

*Finally, practice compassionate self-care.*

What does being kind to myself look like? How can I be patient with my lack of motivation? How can I remember that I simply won't be as productive as usual? How does giving myself some grace shift the quality of my day?

May we all find ways to foster self-compassion and soothing practices for ourselves and our clients as we move through this uncharted territory. May you all be well.

## Reference

Harris, D. L. (2020, April 21). Grieving the Loss of Living our Lives [Live webinar]. Association of Death Education and Counseling.