
Coping with loss and grief

In the wake of the global pandemic, many are experiencing loss and grief. Whether it is grieving due to the loss of a loved one, due to the loss of your social and academic life on campus, or due to the loss of a sense of certainty about the future, our entire community has experienced loss in some way. This guide provides information and tips to support anyone who may be grieving and coping with loss right now.

What is grief? What is loss?

Grief is the response to experiences of loss and, in the ideal, serves a useful function in allowing people to heal and adapt to the changes brought on by loss. That said, the experience of grief is typically a painful one. It may feel all-encompassing or it may come in waves throughout the day or week.

The experience of *loss*, while perhaps most closely associated with death of a loved one, may accompany any significant change or transition, whether in a relationship, physical setting, job, or class year. Any time there is a transition around something we care about, we may experience loss in some way or another.

Grief is experienced in any number of ways. Just as loss is deeply personal and specific to each person, the way people move through loss and grief is also highly personal. Importantly, there is no prescribed amount of time that someone should grieve. Individual grief reactions can vary widely, not only from person to person, but also within the same person over time. It is not uncommon for individuals to fluctuate between feelings of sadness and moments of acceptance and happiness.

We cope with loss all the time, whether we are fully aware of it or not. You may well have more experience coping with loss than you realize. In addition, we are capable of simultaneously holding multiple complex emotions – we can experience grief, pain, and loss while, at the same time, holding meaning, purpose, and care for ourselves. It can be helpful to remind ourselves of the complexity we are capable of holding, especially in moments that challenge us to be our most resilient.

Coping with Loss

When it comes to effective coping, the plan you make and the intentions you set can often be even more impactful than what you actually do. Here are some suggestions for coping with loss, adversity, and transition:

1. Honor your reaction and accept your feelings; try to tolerate uncertainty; be patient with yourself.

- When life feels very difficult, individuals sometimes try to distance themselves from hurt, disappointment, and uncertainty.
- Understand that it is very hard to tolerate uncertainty and loss of control. You might recognize these common questions that many ask when they are feeling the most uncertainty, hurt, and disappointment:
 1. What does this say about *me*?
 2. What does this say about *the world around me*?
 3. What does this say about *my future*?
- Coping effectively starts with noticing this thought pattern and trying to actively challenge any premature conclusions.
- Accept the reaction you feel and affirm that you are upset because something upsetting has happened.

2. Commit to self-care for the health of it (even though it may not make you feel better right away).

When thinking about self-care, it is important to distinguish between self-care and soothing because they impact recovery differently. With *soothing*, the intention is to feel better and change mood. The quickest and most impactful methods to change mood (brain chemistry) are through food, drugs, pain/exercise, sex, or compelling entertainment. While there can be value in some forms of temporary distractions, these activities are difficult to moderate naturally and they tend to perpetuate a focus on the need to feel better in the moment, rather than striving for a state of recovery (guided by personal values).

Alternatively, *self-care* activities assist in holding difficult emotions while leading with values. It allows you to flourish even while experiencing and coping with difficult emotions. Some ways to practice self-care include:

1. Talking with someone you trust — sometimes converting emotional energy to *verbal expression and social support* can help you tolerate distress.
2. Converting emotional energy to any *physical expression*, including enjoyable movement, physical activity, athletics, progressive muscle relaxation, active breathing exercises, yoga, etc.
3. Converting emotional energy to some form of *creative expression*, such as writing, artwork, music, whether you are skilled at it or not.

4. Mindfulness exercises, meditation, prayer, guided imagery, etc. – *meditative and spiritual forms of expression* or reflection that are calming practices of emotional management, and that can foster acceptance of a current state and the temporary nature of challenging emotions.
5. Taking a *temporary break* from stress through distractions like TV, reading, connecting with friends, scrolling through social media, etc. while recognizing that there is a difference between suppressing an emotion and temporarily setting an emotion to one side while you take a break from it.
6. Asking “*What else is true?*” and reminding yourself that there is a broader reality to your current emotion, life, and world that is also true.
7. Expressing your objection to the difficulty or pain of your current reality and finding small ways to protest, rebel, or laugh at the absurdity of your situation with *appropriate inappropriateness* (like through internet memes) to help you cope, so long as you are mindful to not hurt yourself or others.

3. Do something that feels meaningful to you.

After honoring authentic reactions and devoting time to self-care, consider doing something each day that feels meaningful to you, as it can aid in your coping. It is important for coping with loss, hurt, and disappointment that we still engage with life in ways that correspond to our values. The practice of acting on something that matters to us can help keep us defined by our authenticity rather than our hurt.

4. Maintain reasonable expectations for yourself.

With all the changes, transitions, and loss, it is possible that some of your priorities have shifted. Aligning your current expectations of yourself with what is manageable and most important to you at this moment in time can be another helpful way to cope.

Coping is a skill like any other. As we all continue to practice it, we can become more confident in our abilities to cope with difficult emotions. These steps are not intended to act as a one-time fix, but rather as a process to continually practice in refining and building our coping skills.

Grieving ideally serves a purpose: it allows us to gradually accept what we have lost and adjust to a changed world. It is ideally a process that helps us resume participating in life to the fullest extent possible. However, sometimes for any number of reasons, grief does not abate over time, and life remains dominated by sorrow and a pervasive sense of loss. This is a state known as *complicated grief* or *persistent complex bereavement*. Speaking with a mental health professional can help. If you find yourself unable to adjust over an extended period of time, or if the pain of loss seems unbearable, please seek out professional resources. Below is a comprehensive list of resources available both at Columbia and beyond.

Resources at Columbia

Counseling and Psychological Services

Visit: <https://health.columbia.edu/cps>

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) supports the psychological and emotional wellbeing of the Columbia community through individual, couples, and group counseling, as well as through community partnerships, workshops, and outreach. At the moment, CPS is offering a variety of virtual support spaces, as well as virtual counseling appointments. You can learn more about the virtual support spaces by visiting this webpage: <https://health.columbia.edu/content/support-groups-spring-2020>

Alice! Health Promotion

Visit: <https://health.columbia.edu/alice>

Alice! Health Promotion works to create and sustain a healthy University community in which students can achieve their personal and academic goals. Alice! provides a number of individual direct services ranging from general health education to alcohol and substance use, to HIV counseling and identity work. Alice! also works collaboratively with campus partners to impact university systems, and to provide supportive spaces and workshops for students around pertinent topics. Last, Alice! maintains and operates the Go Ask Alice! health question and answer online resource where students can ask health-related questions and see more than 25 years of well-researched, accessible health answers. You can access Go Ask Alice! by visiting this webpage: <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/>

Office of the University Chaplain

Visit: <https://ouc.columbia.edu/>

The Office of the University Chaplain provides pastoral care and counseling for all Columbia affiliates, regardless of anyone's formalized religion. They work collaboratively to facilitate spaces that offer education and community around justice, faith, and spirituality. At the moment, the Office of the University Chaplain offers virtual appointments for pastoral care and counseling seven days a week, from 7am-7pm EST.

Columbia University Religious Life

Visit: <https://religiouslife.columbia.edu/>

Religious Life supports students in striving to nurture the spiritual and religious health of the Columbia community. They support the various faith communities, programs, and also regular sacred music. There are many virtual opportunities to engage in fellowship, conversation, and sacred music that are currently happening, and you can learn more by visiting this webpage: <https://religiouslife.columbia.edu/virtual-resources>

Resources in New York City and Beyond

NYC Well

Visit: <https://nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/en/>

NYC Well is available 24/7 for individuals to speak with a professional or peer counselor or confidential, non-judgmental emotional support, suicide prevention, crisis support, and help accessing mental health and substance abuse care.

Crisis Textline

Visit: <https://www.crisistextline.org/>

Crisis Textline is a 24/7 text message hotline where real people are trained to respond to and de-escalate situations that they are texted about through active listening and collaborative problem solving. To access this resource, text HOME to 741741.

Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Visit: <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat>

Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a 24/7 resource for free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals. Call 1-800-273-8355 or 1-800-799-4889 (TTY).

SAHMSA Disaster Distress Helpline

Visit: <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline>

SAHMSA Disaster Distress Helpline provides immediate crisis counseling for people who are experiencing emotional distress related to any natural or human-caused disaster, pandemic (including COVID-19) etc. This helpline is available 24/7/365. Call 1-800-985-5990 (English and español) or 1-800-846-8517 (TTY)

The Trevor Project – for students identifying as LGBTQ

Visit: <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help-now>

The Trevor Project provides crisis intervention for students age 25 and under identifying as LGBTQ, including support on a variety of issues affecting emotional well-being, whether or not concerns are directly related to identifying as LGBTQ. Their helpline is available 24/7. Call 1-866-488-7386.

PTSD Coach

Visit: <https://mobile.va.gov/app/ptsd-coach>

PTSD Coach is an app that provides support to people struggling with the aftereffects of trauma by educating users about trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It also provides tools to identify, track, and manage trauma symptoms.

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