

EDITORIAL: Grief in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring New Approaches from Diverse Perspectives

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Globally, 2020 is marked as a year of grief, with 1, 377,395 deaths as a result of the COVID-19 virus since the first reported case since December 2019 (WHO, November 2020). In light of this ongoing crisis, many individuals and communities face intersecting personal and systemic challenges preventing them from the right to access basic medical care, safe housing, sociopolitical participation, and economic prosperity. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only compromised the social determinants of health, but has halted access to mental health services in 93% of countries worldwide in spite of the increased demand for mental health and grief response services (WHO, October 2020).

As the virus continues to spread, and local and global regions begin to experience new waves of COVID-19, many states continue to prioritize reactionary measures in mitigating the immediate health and economic risks over their population's need to grieve. This is compounded with the implementation of initiatives to flatten the curve through travel restrictions, self-isolation protocol and social distancing regulations. These policies, although well intended, have removed one's rights to attend religious, spiritual, and healing places, pursue burial and communal mourning ceremonies, or seek solace from personal support networks. While an interruption to a sense of normalcy creates anxiety in the absence of social connection, and the fear of loss of control intensifies as an analogous survival reaction, the need for individual and collective grieving support becomes urgent. Grief is a normal reaction to the loss of life and right to commemorate within relational spaces of safety and security amidst the connection to family and community networks of those who have been lost. Although grief is an individual experience, under COVID-19, communities experience collective grief over the interruption to their

way of life, employment, education and leisure activities.

In times of public health emergencies, where uncertainty surrounding the pandemic confluences with overarching issues of gender, race, class, disability and sexual identities, individuals and collective communities' grief can further trigger underlying systemic and intergenerational trauma. These interlocking chains of unanticipated grief can have long-term physical, emotional and mental health consequences. It is therefore pivotal to invest in inclusive and equitable grief response strategies, that are receptive to both the short-term and long-term grief needs of diverse populations. An inclusive and equitable grief response acknowledges that the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately disenfranchised certain members of society, namely older adults, essential care workers, and racialized and marginalized populations.

While some institutions have been able to deploy virtual and tele-mental health services to accommodate grief needs, such services are not accessible by those in dire need. For example, in Ontario, Canada, long-term care facilities account for 80% of all COVID-19 related deaths, with residents of for-profit facilities being at much higher risk of contracting the virus or succumbing to death (Grant, 2020). Due to physical distancing restrictions, the majority of older adults died in isolation, leaving their family members with limited to no grief support in the immediate situation or aftermath.

In addition, the year 2020 notably saw unprecedented local and global social movements and upheaval in relation to contemporary neo-colonial exigencies of the perpetuation of racial injustice related to the continual socio-economic and political inequities that Black, Indigenous and other racialized populations experience. More than ever, North American societies, including Canada, along with other countries

worldwide have witnessed anti-Black and anti-Indigenous resistance movements; calling for racial justice and the decolonization and decriminalization of targeted racialized individuals and groups. Despite this, data from the United States and Canada continue to show higher fatalities among the Black population, followed by members of Indigenous and other racialized communities. As such, individual and collective responses to grief must ignite care and empathy for their narratives in an effort to re-claim their rights to grieve over the intersectional challenges related to COVID-19, while processing historical traumas that have been inflicted upon them.

The presenting Special Issue entitled, *Grief in the Wake of COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring New Approaches from Diverse Perspectives* constitutes a collection of papers from a multi-disciplinary team of academics, frontline practitioners, and organizations, as well as narratives from grieving individuals through personal reflections or expressive art.

The Scream of Silence is the title of a poem by Mahmood Nafisi. While in isolation under COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, Nafisi unleashed his feelings of grief over the loss of social contact, visits to art galleries, and the opportunity to take campus walks by tearing pieces of old newspapers, turning these small pieces into a tall statue with opposing expressions of grief, and turning nostalgic screams into scattered words. Without much anticipation, Nafisi molded words, colour and subliminal emotions into a piece of artwork in spite of his inability to attend his Computer 3D animation graduation ceremony at Sheridan College.

Globally, the education system has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving many children, youth and higher education students in a state of uncertainty. Fayeze Mahmud and Dana Bdier examined the relationship between social skills and

resilience as predictive factors for grief among Palestinian university students. Palestinian youth experience multiple stressors from living in a war zone; which affects aspects of self, family, education, leisure, employment and a broader structure. Findings reveal that social skills were negatively correlated with the experiences of grief and positively correlated with resilience; while resilience was negatively correlated with grief.

Heather Gordon, Rima Styra, and Natasha Bloomberg from the University Health Network (UHN), explore the overwhelming COVID-19 related stressors experienced by healthcare providers, who not only risk their lives to save others, but witness the loss and suffering of their patients. Relying on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a framework, Gordon and her team initiated the Staff Respite Units; an initiative providing healthcare workers with the opportunity to find a time and a place to engage in supportive activities, destress, and an opportunity to grieve over extremely demanding caregiving responsibilities.

Sep Pashang takes the discourse of grief beyond the health outcome-placing it at the center of the financial markets and economies that has been disrupted this year by the COVID-19 pandemic. By highlighting the correlations between financial loss and overall psychosocial well-being, Pashang relies on system thinking and the concept of mega-crises to further explore the relations of these factors and their compounding impacts on other interconnected crises, such as marginalization and racialization amid the pandemic. Finally, policy recommendations requiring multi-stakeholder collaboration are provided for local and regional implementation.

Rai Reece's personal reflection takes the reader to a deeply intimate and personal expression of living through an unprecedented moment in time amid the

COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing search for racial justice. It is within these intersectional conjunctions that Reece demonstrates how grief and resistance can propel one to find the strength to fight and advocate for a true emancipation of Black, Indigenous and all racialized people. Reece politicizes her grief after learning about her father's dementia, when being denied visitation rights due to social distancing regulations at his long-term care home, and when experiencing anticipatory grief in light of colonial and racial injustices.

The COVID-19 pandemic has specifically impacted residents of long-term care facilities. Salma Jaffer discusses the complex health conditions of older adults in Ontario's long-term care facilities that have placed them at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19. Specifically, Jaffer focuses on inadequate staffing and medical supplies, particularly within for-profit facilities. The impact of these living and working conditions are explored at the individual level as well as by family members, long-term care staff, and the community at large. The article further explores the role of social workers in providing psychosocial, emotional and grief support to marginalized populations.

By highlighting the programs at Woodingford Lodge, a non-profit municipal long-term care home in Oxford County, Ontario, Canada, Mark Dager uses Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to reflect on best practices implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the safety and security of residents, staff and visitors. Despite an increased mortality rate among older adults, Woodingford Lodge takes the pride in having zero positive cases of COVID-19. Dager further presents a sphere of support framework at three levels; Individual (residents), Social (family and friends), and the broader Community. One exemplifying service at Woodingford Lodge is the Family Transition Program; proven to enhance the

mental health and wellbeing of older adults and their families.

Margrit Eichler's personal reflection embraces the journey of time as a one-directional stream, while mourning the loss of subjective temporal continuity. The COVID-19 pandemic has ultimately disrupted the subjective time experience in which Eichler defines as an abyss, separating our COVID experiences from a pre-COVID reality. The question Eichler raises as a result of this dichotomy is whether other memories can also no longer be trusted. COVID-19 has disrupted the temporal continuity that has otherwise been an unquestioned part of life.

Nastaran Khajehnoori uses Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to shed light on the relationships between communication, grief, and lifestyle during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Iranian context. The COVID-19 pandemic, according to Khajehnoori, has disrupted the discourse of humanity alongside social science theories. For example, the concept of self-actualization, including psychological needs, safety and security, social needs, and self-esteem have been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic as individuals strive to survive and regain a sense of safety and security. Evidently, this pandemic has changed our way of life, norms, lifestyles and processes of grief forever.

Soheila Pashang and Masood Zangeneh explore the complexities of death during the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of global mobility; where families are faced with the task of overcoming loss without access to grief support, alongside the multifaceted challenges associated with repatriation of deceased loved ones. Bereaved family members are left with no option but to either delay burial, or mourn in isolation. Nonetheless, in times of adversity, a sense of resilience and collective agency ignites the adaptation toward new grieving methods.

In closing, the ultimate goal of this special issue is to highlight the gap in addressing grief support during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to initiate dialogue to enhance the mental and spiritual health and wellbeing of impacted populations. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world at a rate in which science, medicine and governing states find it challenging to quickly adapt. Collectively, the global community is mourning the loss of what was once considered a sense of normality, with little control over the reimagining of a new normal.

Reference

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