

Grief and loss associated with COVID

The last 16 months have been gruelling, and with no end in sight, for many Victorians it is becoming difficult to remain positive. When lockdown began last year, it felt manageable. A lot of us thinking, "It's OK, if we all do the right thing we'll get on top of this virus and our lives can go back to normal". Many of us even enjoyed the slower pace of life, taking up some new hobbies like baking sourdough and making clay jewellery, and some made the most of time at home by doing some long overdue home improvements.

However, as time has passed, and it has become apparent that getting on top of this virus is not as simple as locking the state down for a week or two; the incremental losses are growing bigger by the day. Things that once felt stable, such as healthcare, our economy, and education, have been hit in a way that we never could have imagined.

Now, in lockdown 5.0, the losses continue to grow daily. With funerals cancelled, weddings postponed (for a 2nd, 3rd, 4th time), people celebrating their birthday in lockdown for a second year in a row, school camps and formals cancelled (yet again), and critically ill and dying loved ones lying alone in hospital beds. Many of the losses we are feeling are hard to put into words. People are doing their best to stay positive, but it is becoming harder and harder as time goes on.

Just one of these losses is enough to knock us around, but 16 months of continuous loss can break even the strongest person. This sense of loss and the grief associated, which we often can't quite put our finger on, is known as ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss refers to feeling a sense of grief and loss without being able to explain what the loss is associated with. It is more confusing because we usually associate grief and loss with death, therefore, we tell ourselves this couldn't possibly be what we are feeling.

So, how do we get through this cumulative ambiguous loss?

1. It is important to acknowledge that it is normal to be feeling this way under the circumstances. Don't be hard on yourself if you're feeling the impact. Give yourself permission to grieve.
2. Be aware that grief comes in waves. Don't be hard on yourself if you were OK one day and hit a wall the next.
3. Prioritise self-care:
 - **Exercise** – make the time to move every day. This does not need to be strenuous exercise, it could be a leisurely stroll around the block. As long as you get your blood pumping it is good for you.
 - **Do something fun every day** – find time to do things you enjoy. Order a nice meal from a local restaurant, have a virtual movie date with friends, play a board game with the family, read that book you've been meaning to read but haven't found the time, etc. What is it that brings you joy? Life will always find a way to make you busy, take control back and prioritise you and your happiness (especially in lockdown).
 - **Practice Mindfulness** – look up mindfulness apps available to download or watch and listen to mindfulness clips on YouTube. There are lots of different styles and options to suit almost anyone. Mindfulness helps you to see and make sense of your emotions, thoughts, and feelings, and helps you to unwind and become better

equipped with managing strong emotions. Mindfulness can also help you to prioritise what you put your energy in to.

- **Adopt good work/life boundaries** – do not let work consume your personal life. Boundaries are important, especially when we are working from home. You might decide that you don't check work emails outside of work hours, or that you don't discuss work between 8pm-8am. Set boundaries for yourself, and those around you, so that you can switch off from work and decompress.
- **Connect with others** – remaining connected is hugely important to mental health. Find people who lift you up. Make the time to have that virtual coffee catch up or to make that phone call. Life can often be busy, so sometimes you have to create the space and make the time to keep connected with people.
- **Get support if needed** - As a small business owner, you're probably used to always handling problems on your own. But you don't have to. And when it comes to your mental wellbeing, you really shouldn't. Because your mental health is crucial to the health of your business. Mental Health Clinician, Jade, can provide free, confidential, one-on-one mental health and wellbeing support to employers, staff members and their families, to help to improve wellbeing, develop strategies to cope and access emotional support as you need it.

If you would like to reach out to discuss the mental health needs of yourself or a member, how to have a conversation or to make a referral, contact Jade, mental health & well-being consultant on: Email jade@commerceballarat.com.au P: 03 5333 3233

Alternatively, you can call the Partners in Wellbeing helpline, the team are available 9am – 10pm weekdays and 9am – 5pm weekends

Call 1300 375 330 or visit www.partnersinwellbeing.org.au