

32. DEPRESSION AND GRIEF DURING TIMES OF CRISES



Pain is not Gods big mistake.

#NCSAMENTALHEALTHDEVOTIONS

DEPRESSION AND GRIEF DURING TIMES OF CRISES

Isaiah 53:3-5: "He was despised and rejected; a Man of sorrows and acquainted with the deepest of grief; we turned our backs on Him and looked the other way; He was despised and we did not care, yet it was our weaknesses that He carried. It was our sorrows that weighed Him down. We thought His troubles were punishment from God, a punishment for our sins; but He was pierced for our rebellion and crushed for our sins, He was beaten so we could be whole, He was whipped so that we could be healed."

One of the most comforting thoughts I have during the COVID-19 lockdown, is that Christ understands the trials and tribulations, the losses and the stresses we go through. The Bible declares that He was a man of sorrows and He was acquainted with much grief. As a matter of fact, the NLT says: "... with the deepest of grief."

Let's look at the losses we have faced and how we can successfully navigate through them in order to cope during the COVID-19 lockdown. A large number of people have done self-diagnosis during this time. I've heard people saying they are feeling very depressed because of this pandemic the world is facing. This is a self-diagnosis. The reason why people say they are depressed, is because they are experiencing intense feelings of sadness and a kind of lowering of emotions and well-being. But depression is not necessarily what you may be struggling with right now.

**CHRIST UNDERSTANDS THE TRIALS
AND TRIBULATIONS, THE LOSSES AND
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You are probably facing grief because of some or other loss. Grief is what manifests when you are going through loss. Because depression and grief symptoms and how they manifest are so similar, you may think that you are struggling with depression when, as a matter of fact, you are simply going through a period of loss in your life.

I want to spend time talking about grief and how to successfully navigate through the process of grief towards healing. **What exactly is grief?** Grief is the pain you feel during significant loss. Grief is a natural response to significant loss. Many of us try to run away from grief because it is associated with negative emotions and with a very low part of our lives. We tend to feel weak when we go through grief. We tend to feel that life is not making sense anymore and it is all our fault.

The grieving process involves a period where we feel what is happening is not a reality. We go into a time of saying that it cannot be; we do not accept this. It is a period of **disbelief** and shock, a period where life is out of focus. Another aspect that characterises loss and grief, are the **changes** that take place. You might have noticed that many changes have taken place in your life with the COVID-19 pandemic, changes that have thrown your whole life out of array. You might feel that you cannot control the situation anymore. You want to control the things that are changing around you, but you cannot because the changes are out of **your** control. Part of what we go through is **pain**. This loss and the changes and the lack of control cause a lot of pain inside us. Part of working through grief successfully is for us to recognise what type of grief or what type of loss we are dealing with.

**GRIEF & LOSS IS CHARACTERISED
BY FEELING OUT OF CONTROL AND
STRUGGLING WITH THE CHANGES
THAT TAKE PLACE.**

Significant loss doesn't necessarily only mean death. When we think of grief and the pain associated with grieving, we think of death, but there are many losses we face that can activate the process of grieving inside us.

At the moment, some of you are busy dealing with what we call **compound grief**. It means that you are going through more than one loss at the same time. I think for many people this is the reality they are facing. Some have lost their jobs, some have lost their social connections and others have lost their social economic status. They experience loss of income, loss of security, loss of certainty, loss of purpose, loss of spending time with family, friends and colleagues. They feel very helpless and experience so many losses that many are probably going through compound grief.

Going through one loss is difficult, but going through compound loss makes it so much more difficult. If you are struggling and if it is very hard for you to cope right now, it is probably because you are struggling with the loss of something very significant in your life and not because you are necessarily depressed.

What other types of losses could you be facing? There is death or illness or your body could be giving in and you are not as healthy as you used to be. You might even be struggling with broken relationships, e.g. your marriage, friendships or in your dating life. Families could break up and members are not happy with one another anymore. Property losses are also something that you could be facing right now; or work loss or even a loss of self-esteem, feeling that you don't have a purpose in life anymore. Some people are losing their safety if they are locked up in homes where it is not safe to be.

**COMPOUND GRIEF MEANS THAT YOU
ARE GOING THROUGH MORE THAN ONE
LOSS AT THE SAME TIME.**

Some have also lost other things like belongings and pets. Even though possessions may seem insignificant to the Christian, the loss still causes grief. What you need to do in order to successfully navigate the losses, is to identify which losses you are dealing with. I recommend taking a pen and paper and writing down the possible losses mentioned above, ticking the ones that you are dealing with now, so that you can work through them and move towards healing. You are not going to heal immediately, but facing the grief is the beginning of the healing process.

Part of recognising what's going on with you, is also to establish what affects your grieving process. There are different things that can cause you to either grieve harder or grieve longer. Your **temperament** – whether you are an extrovert or an introvert – will cause you to grieve differently. It is important to understand this in the family context so that you don't blame each other for the things that are going wrong. Introverts may isolate and are going to internalise a lot of things and deal with it in their own time and in their own way, where extroverts are probably going to prefer to be around people and want hugs and kisses and re-assurance.

The **circumstances** surrounding the loss will also influence the process. Were you fighting with somebody when they became ill or was there a break up? Were you in a financial difficult situation already when you lost your job? These are all going to affect how you are going to move through the loss and how you are going to grieve. The **type of loss** is also going to affect how you grieve. A death versus maybe property loss is not going to be dealt with in the same way. Your faith plays a very big role during the time of loss.

THE INTENSITY OF GRIEF WILL BE
AFFECTED BY YOUR
TEMPERAMENT, THE CIRCUMSTANCES
SURROUNDING THE LOSS AS WELL AS
THE TYPE OF LOSS.

Are you in a good place with God or are you not in a good place with God? Can you go to Him with your loss and seek His support and help during the time of anxiety and fear?

Was the loss **expected** or unexpected? Some of you perhaps were already on the brink of certain losses and you knew what was coming, but COVID-19 was much unexpected. There are things that happened which you didn't plan for, things you didn't expect and that is going to affect how you move through the loss and the grief.

One of the things you also need to recognise is how these losses are affecting you **internally**. This is extremely important. How is it affecting you *emotionally*? How is it affecting you *cognitively* (your thoughts)? How is it affecting your *physical* body? What about your *spiritual* well-being? How is it affecting your *behaviour*?

1. Emotionally you might be feeling some of the following: sadness, shock and denial, depression, vulnerability. Maybe you are experiencing anxiety for the first time in your life, worrying about the future. You may feel very overwhelmed because of all the changes that are taking place. When some people go through loss, they feel apathy, they don't feel anything. They look, they do and they just walk around as if it is not affecting them. This doesn't mean that they are not going through a hard time. It is just a different way in which some people respond to loss and grief emotionally.

2. Cognitively some of you might be struggling with concentration, because COVID-19 is the only thing that is on your mind or all the losses associated with COVID-19 are all you can think of now. Motivation might be very low.

**HOW YOU GRIEF WILL ALSO BE
AFFECTED BY YOUR RELATIONSHIP
WITH GOD AND WHETHER OR NOT
THE LOSS WAS EXPECTED.**

You have things to do, maybe you still have to work, you still have to plan for the future, you have to budget, you have to move into this new reality of life, but your motivation is low, so you rather sleep, or you rather eat or keep yourself busy with watching Netflix series. Your motivation to do something productive or healthy is very low. You may have difficulty in learning, or feeling indecisive not being able to make certain decisions. You may be struggling with dreams or nightmares or even having thoughts of suicide. If you are struggling with thoughts of suicide or self-harm, please reach out for help. Please don't go through it alone, speak to somebody you trust. Call *Lifeline*, call *SADAG* or any free counselling service that is available. Please do not go through it alone.

3. *Physically* your body is also affected during grieving. You need to recognise exactly how your body is being affected. Are you crying or struggling with nausea or maybe numbness? Maybe you have tension headaches, or you are feeling the tension in your upper or your lower back? Maybe you experience an increased heart rate because of anxiety, so you constantly feel your heart beating as if it is beating in your throat. All of these are effects of grief and loss.

4. Spiritually you may also experience hopelessness, anger, doubt and confusion with many questions towards God. Why did He allow this? A lot of people can experience spiritual withdrawal during times of crisis, loss and grief. On the other hand, some people have experienced an increase in their spirituality. So it's not necessarily all negative, sometimes when you go through a crisis, you call upon the name of God more and you spend more time in the things of God.

5. Then there is your behaviour. You may be experiencing behavioural changes during this time period of loss and grief and crisis.

**GRIEF IS MORE THAN JUST PAIN IT
AFFECTS YOUR EMOTIONS, YOUR
THOUGHTS, YOUR BODY, YOUR
SPIRITUALITY & YOUR BEHAVIOUR.**

Behavioural changes could involve things like being less tolerant towards others, less tolerant towards your family, less tolerant towards your boss, less tolerant towards the country with its rules of lockdown and social isolation. And then comes reckless behaviour where you do things that are out of the norm, things that are not safe or good for you overall because you simply don't care. You have an attitude of, "Whatever, I'm already in a situation I cannot control, so I might as well do whatever I want." Some people isolate, others become more social. Some people over-eat, others just don't have an appetite and they under-eat or they refuse to eat.

Emotional, cognitive, spiritual and physical effects are all associated with **pain**. You tend to be very uncomfortable with what is happening, then you start changing your behaviour simply because you are trying to cope. These behavioural changes are called coping mechanisms. At this stage it is important to identify whether your behaviour is changing for the better or for the worse.

Are you trying to numb the pain you are experiencing or are you trying to work through it by facing the pain. When people go through pain, they try to run from it. Pain is not something that any person wants. When pain comes into your reality due to loss, you try to avoid it. You may think things like, "This is not right; I don't know what God was thinking when He allowed this into my life; this is a mistake, it shouldn't be in my life." Pain on the other hand, is not always a bad thing. Pain is actually very beneficial to the body. Let me explain. If you get a kidney stone and you have to go to the hospital, the doctors put you on a drip.

**THE MENTAL, EMOTIONAL,
PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL AFFECTS
ARE PAINFUL AND IN ORDER TO
COPE MOST PEOPLE CHANGE
THEIR BEHAVIOUR IN A GOOD OR
BAD WAY.**

If ever you had a kidney stone, you will know that it is very painful and the only thing you want is for the doctors to give you some morphine or something extremely strong in order to make the pain go away. But the doctors won't do that. What they will do instead, is giving you something light, like a Panado, just to put you at ease. They won't give you anything strong to take away the pain. The reason for that is because they understand the human biology. They understand that God put pain receptors in your body in order to tell the body that something is wrong and it needs to be fixed. So when you have a kidney stone, the doctors will not numb the pain, otherwise the body will not naturally recognise the problem and get rid of the kidney stones. The doctors will let you suffer until the kidney stone passes.

The process of grief is exactly the same. You often think you only go through physical trauma during loss, but you also go through emotional trauma where you literally have emotional and cognitive scars that need to be fixed and healed. The only way to fix that is for your body to go through the natural process of the pain of grief. You try to short-circuit the process by avoiding to think about the things that make you sad and you don't want to talk about the things that make you angry. You run away from the physical, emotional, spiritual and cognitive pain. Through your behaviour, you try to numb the pain.

What you really should be doing is to allow the natural process of pain and grief to heal your emotions and to fix what needs to be fixed. Something has gone wrong when you lost what was important to you. Emotionally you are broken and a healing process needs to start taking place. The pain is there to help the body to start healing naturally.

**DAIN IS NOT GOD'S 'BIG MISTAKE',
PAIN IS USUALLY AN INDICATOR
THAT SOMETHING HAS GONE WRONG
THAT NEEDS TO BE FIXED.**

Part of working through the pain and successfully navigating through the process of grief, involves the recognition of what needs to take place during the time of grief. You need to ask questions in order to work through the uncertain and confused feelings you experience. Questions such as, "Why is this happening? How was this happening? Who is responsible? Where do I go from here?" Face all the confusing feelings you experience. Face them and work through them. If you have regrets or feelings of guilt during this time, work through them. Do this by writing or by talking to somebody or by going to God in prayer. You know He is your best counsellor. Earthly counsellors can only listen for so long, but God is available 24/7. Go to Him with your questions. Go to Him with your regrets, with your fears, with your anxiety and with the physical changes that are taking place.

You may also be struggling with the people around you during periods of loss. People may make specific comments, they may try to force their behaviour, attitudes and beliefs on you. Each person thinks about grief and loss in a different way. Some people may be saying to you: "It is God's hand, He is punishing you because of your sins." Or they may say things such as: "God is in control and He allowed this for a reason." You may not feel comfortable with the things people are saying or doing, or their attitudes towards the way you are grieving or how you should grief, but you need to face that instead of running away from it. You need to realise that it is another discomfort you are feeling, it is another element of pain you must move through, rather than trying to move around it. It is the path of pain that is going to lead you to healing, not by running away from the pain, but rather working through it.

**WHEN FACING LOSS THERE ARE
ALWAYS MANY UNANSWERED
QUESTIONS. ASK THESE QUESTIONS
EVEN OF THERE ARE NO ANSWERS.**

Saying this doesn't mean you need to have an attitude of let the pain in, let's just go through this and get it over and done with. You can't face everything at once. You need to work through this slowly but surely. That is why the grieving process is going to take time for many of you.

You also need to **re-orientate**. Many times when you go through loss and changes and loss of control which are associated with grieving, you want things to go back to the way they were. The truth is, because you have no control over these losses, things are going to change whether you want it or not. You need to accept that reality and as you work through the pain, you need to start moving towards a **new reality**, not right now, but you need to re-orientate yourself some or other time. And then, while you re-orientate you can call upon people, upon God, upon those who are your support system. Reach out to your support system when things are changing. Don't be stubborn or feel too proud to reach out to people. You need to start moving to what is fast becoming your new reality, whether you want it or not. Take control of that reality and start making those changes for yourself so that you can start working on a new routine.

Some of you may have lost your purpose and identity during this time, which may be a good thing. There may be some things you need to **re-evaluate** and to change. You need to start planning on how your new reality is going to look like.

How can you start working towards this **new reality** so that it can be a successful reality? Form a **new identity**. Set new goals for yourself. You may not be able to do that immediately, but eventually you will be able to move towards your new routine, your new reality by God's grace.

**CHANGE IS INEVITABLE DURING LOSS
AND EVENTUALLY YOU WILL HAVE TO
START RE-ORIENTATING YOURSELF
TOWARDS A NEW REALITY.**

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a psychologist, wrote in one of her books that there are different stages which we have to move through in order to get to acceptance and healing and to the new reality. According to her there are five stages and they are characterised by denial, anger, bargaining, sadness and acceptance.

Whenever we face loss and pain and loss of control in a crisis, there is going to be a time when we will be in **denial**.

We are going to struggle to **accept** it and we are going to try and run away from things. We are going to try and avoid the pain and whatever is associated with the crisis. There is also a period when we are going to be **angry**. Angry at the people around us, angry at those who caused the loss, or whom we may think caused the loss. We will be angry at God, and be angry at the people around us because they do not understand what we are experiencing. Another stage is **bargaining**. We will try to fix things and we may bargain with God so that the crisis can go away. We may even promise to give Him our life and be a missionary in some far country.

Then there is the period when we are going to experience intense **sadness**. But eventually there is the acceptance and moving through the pain towards healing and a new reality.

These five stages of working through grief don't take place at a specific time or at a specific pace or in a specific order. It is literally like spaghetti in a pot. It is jumbled up. One moment you say you accept the situation, it is fine, this is the new reality, and the next moment you can be crying and shouting and the next moment you feel very depressed and just wanting to sleep all the time. And then, eventually, you may say you don't accept it, you refuse to accept it. Then you can go into bargaining and then you can become angry again and then go back to bargaining.

ELISABETH KÜBLER-ROSS EXPLAINS
THERE ARE 5 STAGES IN LOSS.
DENIAL, BARGAINING, SADNESS,
ANGER AND ACCEPTANCE.

You really jumble them up and mix them up and things are quite out of your control. Please take courage during this mixed-up, jumbled-up time where nothing makes sense, where there are so many things you have to work through. It is a normal process. It is the body, in a much messed up way, working through the pain. Those scars that have been left because of the losses you've experienced, are trying to heal itself and that is going to take some time. Sometimes you will have to open up the rooms and look at them again and re-evaluate them and talk about them in order for you to heal. Don't run away from them.

Go to God, speak to Him about it, and work through this confusing time with Him. Recognise what it is doing to you, recognise what losses you have experienced. Recognise how it is affecting you emotionally. Recognise how you behave in order to cope. Get new and better coping mechanisms. Recognise what stage of loss you are in and why. Are you angry right now? Sometimes you are angry and you don't know why. Remember it is only a stage in the grieving process. Go to God, talk through it, write about it, or look at photos while remembering the situation.

Working through grief on the way to true healing doesn't mean you let go of the past. It simply means you move to a new reality and remember the past in a different way. Your past is your past, your old reality. It is going to hurt looking back at how life used to be and how life is now, but you remember with tears and you remember with happiness and you look forward to a new reality where you will be happy again.

RECOGNISE WHAT LOSS IS DOING TO YOU, IDENTIFY WHAT LOSSES YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED. HOW IT IS AFFECTING YOU? ASK IF YOUR COPING MECHANISMS ARE HELPING OR HARMFUL? ALSO IDENTIFY WHAT STAGE OF LOSS YOU ARE IN AND WHY.

God has promised that the troubles and the trials of this life will not last forever. I am reminded of the verse in Revelation where Jesus says that He wipes away our tears. In heaven there will be no more death, no more crying, no more pain, because the former things have passed away. There will be no more sickness, no more grieving. I look forward to that day.

But for now, while we are facing crises and while we are facing times of loss, may we lean on God. May we understand that the pain is going to help us to heal naturally from inside. May we trust the body's processes which God has set up in order for us to navigate through feelings of sadness and periods of loss and grief.

**GOD HAS PROMISED THAT THE
TROUBLES AND THE TRIALS OF
THIS LIFE WILL NOT LAST
FOREVER.**

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