

# Department of Family and Consumer Sciences

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## COPING DURING COVID-19: HOW UNCERTAINTY IS AFFECTING OUR MENTAL HEALTH

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Great uncertainty associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has led to complex feelings. Our rituals and routines have drastically shifted and many feel out of control with an overwhelming sense of loss. Understood best as grief, we are mourning loss in many ways—the loss of a loved one; distanced connections with friends and family; missed celebrations and vacations; or fear over the state of our finances, health and what the future holds. The intent of this fact sheet is to understand how loss associated with COVID-19 is impacting our mental health and to provide stress-boosting strategies to ease the day-to-day uncertainty.



### Defining Loss

While a major health concern, the COVID-19 crisis is very much psychological in nature. Collectively, we are experiencing multiple losses that amplify stress and mental health concerns.

*Primary loss:* Physical and psychological losses related to death or major life changes.

*Examples*

- Witnessing suffering and death to COVID-19.
- Loss of loved ones unrelated to COVID-19 without the ability to attend celebration-of-life services.
- Separations from those we love for an indeterminate amount of time.

*Secondary loss:* The loss of abilities and identities is often the consequence of primary loss.

*Examples*

- Layoffs, job loss or economic distress.
- Increased loneliness.
- Strained relationships and conflict.
- Cancelled events, such as graduations, family vacations or religious rituals.
- Loss of freedom.
- Lack of motivation or hopelessness.

## Dealing With Uncertainty: Ambiguous Loss

Living in a state of uncertainty is termed by grief researchers as **ambiguous loss**, a type of unclear and undefined loss. There are two types of ambiguous loss: *physical presence with emotional absence* (for example, a family member with dementia) and *physical absence with emotional presence* (for example, a missing person). What underscores ambiguous loss is the uncertainty and lack of closure, which causes unresolved grief.

### Physical Presence With Emotional Absence

This type of ambiguous loss occurs when something is physically present, but there is a lost emotional connection. For example, a family member in a coma due to COVID-19 is still physically with us, yet emotionally unavailable. Another example is an overworked parent, perhaps due to a strained work-from-home schedule. The parent is physically at home but not as emotionally engaged as before. In both cases, there is no closure or resolution to the situation.

### Physical Absence With Emotional Presence

This type of ambiguous loss occurs when something is no longer present in a physical form, yet there is still an emotional connection to it. Take stay-at-home orders and social distancing measures as an example in which we are physically isolated from extended family and friends and an end to strict safety precautions is unforeseen. Additionally, essential or furloughed employees are physically restricted from working, yet remain emotionally invested in their jobs, coworkers and work environments. In both examples, the uncertainty regarding when restrictions will be lifted is straining emotional connections, potentially leading to unease and distress.

## Stress Management Strategies

If you notice yourself or a loved one having a hard time, here are stress-reducing strategies for coping with the losses linked to COVID-19.

### Name it to tame it

The feelings you have — irritation, grief, loneliness or feeling overwhelmed are NORMAL. Validate those feelings and give yourself or others patience and understanding. As they say, name it to tame it!

*Strategy:* Check in with yourself to prevent “autopilot” reactions by increasing mindfulness to calm challenging moments. Use the following process:

*Recognize* the emotion in the moment by naming it: “There’s frustration.”

*Detect* how you feel physically as a result of this emotion. What is going on physically (breath awareness, muscle tension)? Is anything making you feel physically uncomfortable as a result of this emotion?

*Observe* the cause of this emotion with openness and without judgment. What specifically triggered this emotion?

*Relate* to others. How might your emotions impact others? Or how might others’ emotions affect you?

*Manage* emotions in the moment. For example, take five deep and long breaths, focusing only on the air entering and leaving your body, or listen to a quick mindfulness exercise available online or through free smartphone apps (e.g., Calm App).

### Perspective sharing

The act of simply talking through difficult feelings rather than bottling them up is a powerful

tool. Find someone you trust and feel comfortable with and share your experience and offer insight on challenging moments.

**Strategy:** Create a “COVID-19 Time Capsule” that records your experiences during this historical time. Include photos, special memories, newspaper clippings and a journal that captures your daily routine, challenges and triumphs. Write about what you have learned from this experience and what you look forward to in the future. Encourage your family and friends to make a similar capsule and share together.

### **Be socially distant but not emotionally distant**

Figure out ways to spend time with, laugh with, and have fun with one another.

**Strategy:** Host socially distant driveway hangouts. Invite your neighbors or friends to socialize while remaining 6 feet apart, wearing masks and allowing less than 10 people at a time. Also, connect virtually by hosting virtual watch parties or online gaming. For example, Netflix Party enables you to watch a movie together, yet from afar. Jackbox TV Games and Kahoot! offer group gaming opportunities to play virtually over share-screen applications (i.e., Zoom or Microsoft Teams).

### **Move from stigma to strength**

Talking about emotions can be uncomfortable or embarrassing. Judgment about emotions regarding self or others reinforces stigmas about mental health, often preventing people from seeking help. When we deny the existence of hard emotions, however, they come out in some shape, usually in the form of less healthy coping behaviors (e.g., angry outbursts, abuse of alcohol or drugs, overeating, etc.). Accept that emotions are part of who we are; just as bones make up our skeletal system, a brain helps us to learn, and lungs enable breathing.

**Strategy:** Use strengths-based thinking and gratitude over self-judgment and criticism. To practice this type of thinking, keep a *Gratitude Jar*. Jot down notes throughout the day of things that you are thankful for, such as ways people are helping one another, moments that make you feel joy, or traits of you or your family members you appreciate.

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