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Coping with a COVID Christmas

By Dr Bill Webster

2020 will go down as the year the world pressed the “*pause*” button. It certainly has not been a great time for the vast majority of people. Very few will be sorry to see the old year out and the new and hopefully better coming in.

This pandemic has meant the loss of so many things we care about and that give our lives meaning. Not able to visit with, or even say goodbye to friends and family in hospital or long term care facilities because of quarantine. When loved ones have died, funerals have had to be enforced by strict regulations and restrictions, leaving people to lament, “This is not what I wanted for my relative.”

For some, the crisis has meant the loss of their job, their financial security, the loss of freedoms, and right down to the loss of opportunities to go places and do things.

But you know all this, because we have been living it for months!

COVID-Grief

One of the key themes of this pandemic experience has been our feelings of loss. It is important to understand that we are grieving more than simply those who died. We are lamenting life as we knew it, feeling our world has changed, and coming to terms with this unwelcome new reality.

We should remind ourselves that grief is a normal response to any unwelcome event, and we have certainly experienced quite a number of these during this last year. We must recognise that grief is not a sign of weakness, nor a failure to cope or be strong. Rather it is a protest against something we don't like, we didn't want, and worst of all, something we can't change. The raw emotions of grief may eventually fade, but the scars can linger for a long time in our hearts and minds.

But in this COVID-Grief, as one person put it: “No one truly understands how different the grieving process is at the moment.” Some of life’s most meaningful celebrations and rituals have been limited or even cancelled. Whether we are talking funerals, weddings, birthday or anniversary celebrations, there is a typical sequence of events that most people go through which includes planning, preparation, and participation.

For example, when someone dies, there’s the whirlwind of organizing a funeral or celebration of the person’s life. There’s the time spent with friends and family, the deliveries of food and the sharing of memories, with laughter and tears. More than anything, many of our rituals are centered round being together in community, and anyone who has gone through a loss during the coronavirus pandemic knows that those rituals are not an option right now.

The Effects:

Although physical distancing is an effective way to slow virus spread, it is also having significant impacts on people's mental health and emotional wellbeing. This can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation, with heightened feelings of anxiety and depression amongst all ages, especially older adults.

Admittedly, social distancing affects people differently. Certainly for everyone, the loss of face-to-face social interaction has been challenging. For some, finding virtual ways to communicate with people has meant a minimal effect on their social well-being. But for others, the regulations have meant a loss of income, a loss of structure and routine as they struggle to balance working from home with childcare. These emotional and physical losses can lead to mental health issues, such as a loss of self-worth, loss of motivation and a loss of meaning in daily life.

The Fallout:

As a result, some people seem to insist on continuing normal levels of social activity, which, as most of us realize is dangerous in terms of virus spread.

But, admittedly, it is understandable to some extent. Let's face it, we're all sick of this. Enough already! So the temptation is to say, "To heck with it, I'm going to do what I want to do, and hang the consequences."

Let me be completely transparent. Given a choice this Christmas, I would like be with my whole family, and especially my grandchildren. I miss my extended family. I'm sure you can identify.

So the thinking can become, "I'm tempted to hop a plane, a train, a bus or get in my car and go visit them for Christmas, or have them travel here. After all, it's been a long time since I saw them, and I'm tired of these restrictions. Life is too short to miss having a jolly Christmas with those I love. So I'm going regardless!"

I get it! It's understandable! But personally I am NOT going to do that, as attractive as the idea may be. And here's why! I have chosen short term pain for long term gain. I refuse to take unnecessary risks, because the wish of having a better Christmas in coming years is worth it. I want to do everything possible to make sure that NEXT Christmas, in a hopefully vaccine-assisted COVID free world, we can all get together again safely.

Because more than anything, I want to *be here* next Christmas, and frankly I don't think unadvisedly travelling or getting together is worth jeopardizing that future. It will become, as one of my friends puts it, "a pleasure deferred".

I'll be HOME for Christmas.

The old familiar song takes on a whole new meaning *this* Christmas. Most of us will be **HOME** for Christmas

But, I'm darned if that pesky virus is going to spoil my Christmas. Enough of all the gloom and doom, let's do something about it. "Different" doesn't necessarily have to be a bad thing.

So here's how it's going to be: I'll be home for Christmas, and so will my entire family. Now admittedly, I will be in MY home, and my son, my family and my grandchildren will be in THEIR homes. I will be watching my family on Zoom ... and when I need a nap, I'll just hit the mute button.

So, here are a few suggestions ... but come up with your own:

1. Spread joy not germs!
2. Focus on what you **CAN** do, rather than on what you **CAN'T**. Enjoy this season in a different way. Get outside. Take walks. Organize a scavenger hunt for kids of all ages to find the stocking-stuffers, with the "clues" in the stockings. Turning a familiar activity into something fun will ease any disappointment.
3. Do the Zoom thing. Connect with friends and family utilizing technology. It has become almost normal to virtually gather with far-away family members and friends. Before the pandemic, if someone couldn't make a holiday gathering, we simply missed them. Now, we can all meet on Zoom just to talk ... or sing Christmas carols or songs together; to share what you're grateful for; to light the candles, or open gifts. It's *almost* as good as being there.

4. Get Creative and organize some crazy things:

- Try some “Look what you missed” gifts ... open ridiculous gifts that no-one would have wanted that everyone will get a good laugh over.
- Encourage everyone to wear reindeer antlers, Christmas pyjamas, or have an “Ugly Santa Sweater” contest.
- Have the kids make and decorate their Christmas cookies or cupcakes to show off in the video feed. In one store, I saw a “kit” to make gingerbread people which could be decorated in an “ugly sweater” pattern. Have fun.
- Organize a quiz for adults, kids and families. There are many online resources to give you questions to build a truly comprehensive quiz experience.
- Have each person in your family unit organize a “family activity” for those holiday times.

In short, virtual holiday parties or get-togethers make *new kinds* of lasting memories and help you maintain strong connections with friends and loved ones you can't see due to physical or social distance. Admittedly it's difficult to replicate the joy of being with friends and family personally, and while technology makes it easier to stay in touch, nothing beats giving someone a hug.

When you do *anything* positive, it boosts your mental health and helps you feel better about yourself and your situation.

5. But many do not have family or others to share with even virtually, and they find that loneliness, isolation and feelings of abandonment have been the worst part of this whole situation. Especially at Christmas!

So, find ways to make a difference:

- Stay connected to those you love, but cannot be with physically. Reaching out to someone every day by phone or video chat will help decrease feelings of loneliness, and you will feel better by making a difference for others.
- Help look after vulnerable individuals by picking up medications or dropping off groceries and essentials at their doorstep.
- Sending someone a gift during a difficult time can be a meaningful expression of kindness. A gift card that will enable the person to watch movies, or subscribing to a book club or playlist can be practical.
- Perhaps arrange for a meal to be delivered by a local business, restaurant or food delivery service that is following virus safety protocols.

Even these small, unexpected surprises and gestures can go a long way.

6. How can you look after “YOU” this Christmas season? Do things you want to do that will be meaningful. If you are grieving a personal loss, or even if the stress and strain of it all is bringing you down, we all have to cultivate some self-compassion:

- Acknowledge that this entire pandemic has forced us into a state of collective grief over multiple of losses, including the loss of social connections, routines and more. It's a lot to handle, so go easy on yourself.
- Seek out sources of comfort—either expressly having to do with your grief, like starting a daily journal, or joining an online support group; or completely unrelated, like finding a favourite book or movie.
- Accept the love and support others are offering.
- Most importantly, whatever you are going through, remember that you are not alone.

As Ebenezer Scrooge discovered, Christmas past often seems better than Christmas present. So however you decide to celebrate, remember that it's OK to feel ticked off about this season not being the same as Christmas' past. Life this year may be disappointing and it's *hard*.

But if we can look at holiday-related changes as an opportunity to get creative, you and your family will enjoy more time making memories and less time feeling like this year is incomplete due to pandemic restrictions. And who knows? Maybe you'll discover new ways of celebrating that will become a family tradition post-virus.

But also remember this. It had not been a great year for Mary and Joseph that very first Christmas. An unexpected pregnancy, the teenage mother far from home, away from her mother's loving support and care, no comfortable hospital care for the birth of her child, no warm fluffy towels or hot water. No room at the inn, just a stinky cattle shed after a long weary journey to a strange and foreboding place.

Oh I know the Christmas cards and carols paint a much prettier picture of the nativity scene, but to the Holy Family, *their* world that first Christmas must have seemed like a very unfriendly, uncomfortable and unpleasant place.

But the first words the angels spoke that first Christmas night were ones that should encourage us all this season. "Fear not. I bring you good tidings".

There are better days to come, and this pandemic too will pass.

Perhaps this can teach us, especially **THIS** Christmas, that life **CAN** be significant even when it doesn't work out exactly as we expect; that something good can come out of any situation if we work to make it happen; that life will have meaning again, even though we may not be able to see that right now.

Dr Bill Webster has a comprehensive grief support resource of videos and articles at www.griefjourney.com including a programme on "Coping with Christmas".