



MISSING HOW THINGS USED TO BE



There are a lot of things you might be missing right now. You probably know what big things you're missing, like summer activities with friends, sports games, and school dances. But chances are you're missing some small things too—things you may have taken for granted, like sitting next to your friend on the bus every day or getting to show off your new outfit. Almost every part of life has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and we're all living in a completely new world than we were a year ago. As you shift to a "new normal," it's common to miss how things were before. Part of that sadness and discomfort you're feeling is actually grief.

You may have only heard of grief in terms of death, but it's a lot more than that. Grief is the emotions we feel related to loss, even if that loss is something like your typical schedule or your sense of safety and control. Grief is a complex emotion. Many people recognize five distinct stages of grief. You may not go through all of them, and you may experience them in different orders, but these are common responses to loss.

STAGES OF GRIEF¹

DENIAL is when you refuse to accept that a loss is factual. Related to COVID-19, this might look like:

- o Acting as though it's the same as the flu and therefore unnecessary to worry about
- o Thinking that you don't need to care about it because you're young

ANGER is the emotion you may feel when you want control over your fears. Rather than dealing with the problem, you might blame others and refuse to follow safety guidelines. Related to COVID-19, this might look like:

- o Not caring about shelter-in-place restrictions and seeing friends anyway
- o Blaming others for not quarantining and being the reason this is still an issue

BARGAINING is when you acknowledge reality but still try to maintain control. Related to COVID-19, this might look like:

- o Acting as though if people look healthy, they are fine to be around
- o Telling yourself that this will all be over by Halloween

DESPAIR occurs when the seriousness of the situation sets in. You may feel hopeless—like things will never get better. Related to COVID-19, this might look like:

- o Thinking that this is forever, and you'll never be able to hang out with your friends normally again
- o Worrying that many of your loved ones will die before this ends

ACCEPTANCE is when you finally admit that the situation is what it is—it's not great, but it's not complete doom either. Related to COVID-19, this might look like:

- o Knowing that while you can't control the pandemic, you can do your part by washing your hands, wearing a mask and keeping 6 feet of distance between yourself and anyone who doesn't live in your home
- o Acknowledging that even though you're stuck at home, there are still things you can do from a distance, like keeping up your schoolwork and connecting with friends virtually

COPING WITH CHANGE

Most people don't like change. People are creatures of habit, and we like to stick to our normal day-to-day life. Sometimes change feels threatening – we don't know if everything will work out and we worry about all the new challenges we might face. It's normal to feel uneasy as we leave our old normal behind. If you're struggling, here are some ways to help yourself adjust:

FEEL YOUR FEELINGS

Grief is natural. Everyone deals with it in their life, and most people are dealing with it right now in some way. Letting yourself feel however you feel – whether that's angry, sad, or worried – is the first step to feeling better. You will probably move in-between these different emotions, and even have moments of acceptance or happiness. It's okay to let yourself be sad, and it's okay to let yourself be distracted and have fun. All of it is part of the healing process.

PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness helps you tune into your emotions – these techniques can be really helpful in situations where your routines are disrupted or you're feeling overwhelmed. You might feel so many different things that you don't even know how to start dealing with them. Try laying down, closing your eyes, and focusing on your breathing, or go for a mindful walk (pay close attention to the sounds, smells, and sights). You can also listen to a guided meditation to feel more connected to yourself.

KEEP UP NORMAL HABITS WHEN POSSIBLE

Routines help people know what to expect throughout the day or the week—that's why change is often so uncomfortable. Figure out what you can do to keep some things the way they were before. If you're used to sitting with a certain group of friends at lunch, maybe you can do a group video call once a week and have lunch together. And even though you might not need to wake up as early as when you were physically going to school, going to bed and waking up on a schedule will help you get more restful sleep and have more energy during the day.

THINK AHEAD

Some events that you were really looking forward to have probably been cancelled over the last few months, and that's not easy. It can be especially hard when it wasn't your decision – like if your parents or school cancelled the event. Even though it's for everyone's safety, feeling like you have no say in what happens is frustrating. Stay positive by looking to the future. Brainstorm some fun virtual events (like an online game night) for the next few weeks and make a list of other things you want to do once it's safer.

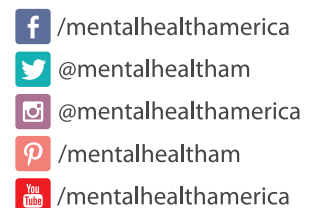
STAY CONNECTED

Even though you can't see your friends in person, it's important to make time to talk to people and keep your support network strong. Plan a virtual game night with friends, or just send your best friend funny memes more often. It's not the same as hanging out, but just a quick conversation can help you feel less alone and more able to take on the changes that you're facing.

If you still feel overwhelmed and unable to cope, you may be experiencing the first signs of a mental health condition, like depression or anxiety.

Take the youth screen at MHAScreening.org to see if you may be at risk. Once you get the results, MHA will provide you with more information and help you to figure out next steps.

SOURCES
¹Axelrod, J. (2020, July 8). *The 5 stages of grief & loss*. PsychCentral.
<https://psychcentral.com/lib/the-5-stages-of-loss-and-grief/>



www.mentalhealthamerica.net