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## **The Stages of Grief in Quarantine**

I definitely hit the Anger stage of grief in the middle of week-4 of our stay-at-home order. As anyone knows who has experienced grief and loss, the stages are not sequential. We used to like to think you could progress in a neat pattern from one to the other, finally culminating in a sigh of “Acceptance.” Actually, I’ve heard it suggested that acceptance may be too tall of an order and that the best we can hope for is Understanding. We may never get to full acceptance in many grief and loss scenarios. Will we ever fully accept the way the coronavirus has upended our world? But let’s get back to the anger stage as I’m nowhere near acceptance OR understanding.

Today, I hate my toaster oven. Let’s be clear: I love my toaster oven. I’m not sure how I could survive without a toaster oven. Anyone who knows me knows I love things crispy and toasted. Don’t give me a pale, lukewarm English muffin; it has to be golden – darker around the edges. Even a little burnt is okay. And I’ve got a stockpile of bread supplies to choose from in my refrigerator: Trader Joe’s cinnamon roll bread; the above-mentioned English muffins, seedless Rye and Pita. I’m well-stocked for this quarantine. Yes, there’s spinach and broccoli too, but this is not the time I’m going to curtail my carb addiction. Actually, no time is that time for me; but especially not now. The thing is my toaster oven is very loud when it announces your toast is done. And today, this causes me to feel furious as I lift out the lovely slices onto a waiting plate. This is not a normal reaction, but it’s normal under these circumstances.

I’m having fantasies of escape, which fits right in with the Bargaining and Denial stages. This morning I was plotting how I’d put on a mask and gloves and go to the post office and CVS. I wouldn’t confess this to my adult daughters or son. Earlier this week, in a half-awake, half-dream state I imagined pancakes and scrapple from Eastern Market Lunch (I know, I know, one of the worst foods in the entire world; but my mother used to fry scrapple, so you can understand my longing). I could just sneak over there and no one would know, right? Once fully awake, I recognized my fantasies as hallmarks of Bargaining and Denial; the hopeless wish to dupe reality, to find a way out of a reality that seems unbearable.

I believe in every family, every friend group, work group and neighborhood, there are the coronavirus gatekeepers. These are the people who were early adopters of quarantine. In my family, it’s my eldest daughter. She hasn’t left her house since early March and no one is allowed in or out except her immediate family – my son-in-law and two grandsons. She recently allowed her sister, who lives twenty minutes away, to visit on the deck, touching no one and not being allowed into the house for any reason. She has a history of asthma and one of my

grandsons has asthma, so this all makes sense; except there are moments when it feels dictatorial and irrational. If I even allude to doing something, or refer to something someone else has done that skirts the edges of safety, her reaction is swift and unyielding. She's that parental figure telling you your strict curfew is for your own good, and there's no room for negotiation.

Some of my anger – and bargaining, springs from how highly I value self-sufficiency. There've been moments when I feel like (and in my own head, sound like) my early twenties client who has a tendency to whine. Trust me: she won't mind if she reads this – we have an open dialogue about where the whining comes from and why it's so difficult to openly express feelings, needs and opinions. I think she'll actually appreciate knowing that I whine too. I hear myself whining about not being able to do all the things I normally do, go the places I want to go (granted, most of them are closed now). Yes, people are helpful and more than willing to bring me groceries, but I want to go get them myself, as I've always done! During the first week of the shut-down, this young woman was the voice of the resistor, the person who didn't want to believe any of it and didn't want to adjust her behavior. Of course, she has since come around to living life sequestered at home, like the rest of us. But sometimes, we still want to protest, to deny the unbelievable, surreal world we now inhabit.

I'm sure we're all familiar by now with the Depression that comes with isolation. The lack of motivation; worries about the future, poor self- image because we're not exercising, being productive, or receiving stimulation from any of the external resources we've come to rely on. The work we do as therapists is in one way easier than other kinds of work that can be done virtually because we receive the engagement of our clients; we don't have to be entirely self-motivated. But it's still hard, for all of us; especially those who have lost jobs, whose incomes are now slashed; those who toil on the front lines in hospitals, those who still stock our supermarkets and pharmacies.

Recognizing the stages of grief can help: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance – or Understanding, and recognizing that the stages don't progress in any neat order. We will all cycle through repeatedly, finding ourselves suddenly angry at an inanimate object – or worse, a loved one; suddenly gripped with sadness because we haven't seen our friends, the inside of a gym or yoga studio or anyone else for that matter, except on Zoom. It has recently been suggested that we add a sixth stage of grief: Meaning-making. I'm sure the process of trying to make meaning of this pandemic will consume many hours and many great minds. Meanwhile, let's be kind to one another and to ourselves, and to all the people (and even objects!) that are helping us get through this.

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