Siva:
Welcome to the fourth episode of our MMI podcast series: Mental Health during Crises and Pandemics.

I am Siva again. You might recall me from Episode 1 which was about anxiety and loneliness. And, I really hope all of you are doing well. Today, I'll be co-hosting the show with my fellow colleague, Ghaythree. Hi, Ghaythree.

Ghaythree:
Hello, Siva and all our fellow listeners.
Siva:
Today’s episode is called “Relief from Grief”. We will be speaking about a heavier and far more sensitive topic than before, which is grief and bereavement of the loss we’ve experienced in this COVID-19 pandemic. We’ve invited Dr Edmund Ng, a renowned grief specialist to talk to us about this topic and explain to us about how to cope with our losses in this difficult period of time.

Welcome, Dr Edmund. It’s a pleasure to have you here.

Dr Edmund Ng:
Thank you, I’m pleased to be with you.

Ghaythree:
Great to have you too, Dr. We are aware that you have several qualifications and you play many crucial roles in our community. Would you like to tell us a bit about yourself?

Dr Edmund Ng:
Well, basically, I’m a grief therapist and a psychotherapist. I’m in private practice as well as in community service reaching out to grieving people for the last 15 years.

Alright, that’s great. Thank you for sharing, Dr.

Dr Edmund Ng:
You’re welcome.

Siva:
Grief is a topic, which I believe is neither simple nor superficial. We’d definitely need a deeper understanding about grief itself before moving on to the grief associated with the current COVID-19 situation. Dr, could you just tell us: What is grief? How does grief come about?

Dr Edmund Ng:
Grief is all the painful consequences following a loss, comes about because in our relationship, we have attachments, whether to people or to things and if that attachment is severed, then we feel the pain of loss. So, grief is the resulting mental and emotional and even behavioural or anguish that follows that experience of loss.

Siva:
That explanation of grief that you just gave, it actually paints a different picture, which is different from what I’ve always had in my mind and most people would have in mind. Because everytime I think about grief, my immediate next thought would be… it’s a loss of a person or a living being dear to me. But, actually, it’s the loss of anything that you could be attached to.

Dr Edmund Ng:
Yes, yes.
Siva:
Does that mean that there are actually different types of losses?

Dr Edmund Ng:
Yes, there are basically three broad categories of loss. One is the tangible loss. If we have lost a family member, well that is one of the most common tangible losses. If we lost our source of income or our wealth or our house that burnt down or we lost a part of the body, these are all tangible losses. And then, there’s another broad category we call intangible losses. Now, these very obvious losses that can accompany tangible losses. So, if you’re in a relationship with somebody and, uh, for example, a husband and wife and there is a divorce, then there is this loss of relationship. Or a mother losing a child, not only losing the child is a tangible loss, but you know, she also loses the role of a mother, so that role -- loss of role is also called an intangible loss. Loss of security and you know, loss of hopes and dreams, all these are intangible losses. Then, of course as a person grows, there is what we call the developmental losses, a child, you know, growing up feels there’s a loss of those happy days, being taken care of as a child or as he’s growing up, he goes to study somewhere, then he leaves behind all the security and all the comforts of home. That is part of what we call developmental losses. So, these are at least the three broad categories of losses.

Siva:
Hmm… So, just to reiterate what you said, there are tangible losses, intangible losses and developmental losses.

Dr Edmund Ng:
Yes.

Siva:
Okay. Well, come to think about it, if you look at the current COVID-19 crisis, you can actually witness so many reasons to grieve. And I recall reading recently that people experience different types of grief, sometimes even without losing anything. Or, it can even occur in a group, rather than in an individual or on the societal level in this COVID-19 crisis. And, these types of grief even are given different terms. So, Dr, could you just walk us through these different forms of grief that we commonly see in this current pandemic?

Dr Edmund Ng:
Um, I’d like to start with what we anticipate of an impending loss. So, a person who is infected and then, you know, there is the possibility of the condition deteriorating towards death. Then, there is an anticipation of the worst that can happen, so we call that anticipatory grief because the loss of life, the loss of relationships and even for normal circumstances, that will be some form of grief resulting from whatever losses, from the losses that we can mention, just earlier. So, there is this normal grief and complicated grief. Grief is something natural and we’re wired to grief and there is this loss of attachment. So, it is healthy to grieve over something we miss or somebody who is close to us and that is normal. But, when grief is not properly addressed though grieving is undertaken in a healthy and complete manner, then what is normal grief can turn complicated. In other words, it becomes a [inaudible] and there are complications arising from it. So, when such a thing happens, there is no progression towards recovery, it gets more intense and more severe.
So, that is what we call complicated grief. And on top of that, some grief, because of social disapproval, some grief -- some losses are not socially sanctioned. Like the person who has recovered from the coronavirus infection, when people come to know of it, they may still distance themselves from that person because that person may be without symptoms and still suspected as a carrier. So, that results in a loss that is disenfranchised. In other words, people disapprove (of) you to have the right to grieve. So, that grief is what we call disenfranchised grief. And you mentioned collective grieving, whenever there is a community loss or like a disaster that rampaged through a community or like in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic that rampages through the country or even across the entire world. Then, there is a collective form of grieving in the sense that everybody felt the loss and they are -- they are sort of in the same boat, of course to different intensities. So, these are some different categories of grief you can -- that we can talk about.

Ghaythree:
Alright, so now knowing that now that there are so many types and reasons of grief and losses, I think that it is definitely not right to compare the severity or the magnitude of the impact between them. Right, Dr?

Dr Edmund Ng:
Certainly, certainly. In the first place, grieving is always done in the context of different people, different cultures. The way that -- for example, the Islam religion sees the proper way of mourning or grieving would be very different -- from different religions and different races. So, the expression of grief is very much sanctioned or influenced by the religious and cultural factors affecting it. And then, of course, different age groups will grieve in different ways, for example, adults grieve differently in the sense it is a constant kind of timing, whereas for younger people, especially children, they grieve intermittently, you know, so they're out there, they're playing and they are happy and then, they come back and feel the absence of their parent for example, then they would go into that grieving mode. So, between ages, there are different approaches and expressions of grief. And even between men and women, men grieve very instrumentally in the sense that, you know, he is trying to find solutions to help him in his grief, whereas women, they are more emotive and they just reflect on things, you know, they think over and then they get into the emotions. So, between men and women, there are also differences.

Ghaythree:
Alright. Dr, so I understand that in essence, the experience of grief is not standardized among different people, right?

Dr Edmund Ng:
Yeah, therefore it is important that we do not compare whatever progress or lack of progress and start to be judgmental against one another, especially amongst family members, because there are different styles, patterns and expressions of grief.

Siva:
Hmm...okay, Dr. So, we've spent quite a long time speaking about grief so far, but I believe that real life stories might allow the audience to relate more to what you've said and the
actual grief scenario of COVID-19. Perhaps you could share with us about your experience or someone else's experience of grief?

Dr Edmund Ng:
We do know of people whose loved ones have died and first of all, the infection of it is quite unexpected -- how can it be happening to me or how can it be happening to our family members, so that initial reaction is usually quite traumatic. And as the condition deteriorates and therefore the anticipatory grief comes in and you're waiting in the house for calls because you cannot visit the patient because of the movement restrictions, [inaudible] about it. So, death can be quite shocking and therefore, it is a lot, we don't even have the chance to say goodbye. In some countries, they don't even allow funerals, so even that, maybe funerals at a distance and without the physical presence of other people, maybe apart from immediate family members. So, the bereaved family is deprived of the community support that is -- you know, that is common under normal conditions. Therefore, the loss can be quite unreal, like a [laughs], like a dream. So, this is a common scenario in many, many countries.

Ghaythree
So, Dr, as you said, the loss of something, like suddenly, it's -- I perceive it as the worst form of loss actually and I feel like it gives you no time to actually compensate for the loss because of the shock.

Dr Edmund Ng:
Yeah, yeah. Our body naturally builds up defense to protect us from being overwhelmed, so in the initial stage, you have no time to process all these things that are happening around you and therefore, there will be a lot of denial in the beginning part.

Ghaythree
But, is it possible for us to grieve without being aware of it? Without being presented with symptoms?

Dr Edmund Ng:
Of course. When you are in a state of shock and disorientation, you can still function very well, when you have to make the arrangements and all that kind(kinds) of things, so when you ask the person are you coping okay, of course in the initial period, because the reality of the loss has not fully sunk in yet, they will tell you “I'm okay, I'm okay”. But, over time, in the one or two weeks that follow, then the reality starts to sink in, then they'll start to feel the symptoms of the grief following the loss. So, yes, initially one may be grieving but not really feeling the grief because the symptoms are not there because of the denial.

Siva:
Okay, so in med school, there are these 5 stages of grief that we were supposed to memorize and commit to memory. If I recall them correctly, they were denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. And recently I just read, some time ago, they added a 6th one to the list, this was done by David Kessler, which is meaning. But, as you mentioned earlier, you did say that the experience and intensity of grief varies from person to person. So, what are your thoughts about staging the process of grief? Does everyone go through all 6 stages?
Dr Edmund Ng:
Well, it was Elizabeth Kubler Ross who studied the dying stages of her patients and then she came up with the stages and she tried to apply them to the bereaved family members of those who lost their loved ones about these stages. But, this was a very old model study that was done in perhaps 40, 50 years ago and increasingly, there are more criticisms rather than approval with this kind of model. You can add in a lot of other stages beyond the sixth stage, but what is more recognized these days are that phases do not accurately depict the model of grieving, because grief is generally very chaotic and also it is not linear. It is like a yoyo or like a roller coaster, it goes up and down and you go forward and you go backward. And that’s why modern models of grief theories tend to favour an oscillation of what you are pining over the loss versus your adjustments to come to some kind of balance. So, it swings left and right, up and down and you know, it is generally very messy. The grieving model we are looking at these days are more towards that than just that linear process of phases.

Siva:
Okay. It's quite interesting that a lot of people are talking about these 5 or 6 stages of grief. But, actually it has evolved to a more modern -- more complicated stages of grief. So, from what you’re saying, if we really can't identify the stages of grief, then it is really not possible for us to determine how long one will take to adapt and to recover from grief. So, just to follow up on that, is it still possible to determine how long the normal grieving process takes?

Dr Edmund Ng:
Well, the common consensus is that there is no ending point for grieving or the grieving process. As a rule of thumb, few of us in the field would expect that, you know, with normal loss and normal grief would be more than over by 2 years. And, of course, the standards are satire. The DSM or the Diagnostics Statistics of Manual that the psychiatrists use, they even set a time frame from two years to bring down to 6 months, where they are saying that what is normal grief can be considered as complicated grief requiring professional attention when you find that you are not progressing well enough within 6 months. So, there is no general pattern but roughly we’re talking about this time frame within 6 months and 2 years to be something that is normal and we find that a lot of research tells us that grieving people with proper support, you know whether professional or you know, formal support makes a lot of difference towards the shortening of the period of one coming to terms of the loss.

Siva:
Okay, I see. So, could you just tell us in brief how does grief and grieving affect us?

Dr Edmund Ng:
Oh, [laughs], it affects us in all manners and unless someone has really experienced a tangible loss, it would be very difficult to identify what is in theory and what is being experienced. So, when one is grieving, especially when the loss is sudden, it is felt in every faculty of our being, emotionally, mentally, behaviourally, you know and physically. Everything looks just colourless and blank, there’s no future, there’s nothing to look forward to, no meaning, no purpose. So, the intensity, of course, varies with a lot of factors, especially with regards to the coping capacity of the person, the type of loss and the circumstances of loss too. So, they experience very differently, but some even say it is as
painful as a childbirth, only that one is very physical, while the other is affecting every aspect of our being.

Ghaythree:
Mmm... so grief is very individualized in its presentation and it does affect every aspect of our being, like Dr said.

Dr Edmund Ng:
Yes, yes.

Ghaythree:
So, Dr, moving on, -- what is bereavement and how does it differ from grief?

Dr Edmund Ng:
Bereavement is the event of the loss, whereas grief is the expression of the consequences of the loss. So, one is an event and one is the expression of the suffering due to the loss.

Ghaythree:
Alright, so grief occurs because of bereavement?

Dr Edmund Ng:
And other types of losses, of course. Not just bereavement, but also other types of losses.

Ghaythree:
And just like Dr said just now, we’ve heard that funerals have become different in this movement restriction period. And, usually funerals are for us to mourn the ones who have left us. But then, now we have to abide by the new Health Ministry guidelines - bodies will not be handed over to families, 10 minutes for mourning and limited numbers of mourners. So, Dr this would of course affect the normal grieving process right, but how would they say they affect, could you elaborate on that?

Dr Edmund Ng:
When you don’t have the funeral rights, of course bereaved family members will think they have not done what is proper or what is enough for the afterlife and therefore there can be a lot of guilt that adds to the pain of the loss all these things can affect the subsequently grieving process. They may act as obstacles and roadblocks in grieving. We also need to remember that funerals and services of funerals they serve a very important function because not only symbolically it gives us the opportunity to say goodbye but more importantly it makes real the loss has happened and traditionally the bereaved family members will have access to the community support and the comfort that is being offered by the physical presence of relatives and friends.

Ghaythree:
Yeap yeap.

Dr Edmund Ng:
So, during this COVID-19 crisis, things are being deprived for and therefore it can bring about a lot of consequences that we don’t know yet because studies are not really being
carried out. What are the poor implications and to what extent that will add to the complications and grief that ensues.

Ghaythree:
Alright. Okay, thank you, Dr. So far, we’ve had a general overview of grief and losses as well as bereavement to some extent. Grief can affect us, any of us, and present differently depending on our age groups and certain other factors impacting our lives as a whole and it is indeed vital to be understanding and supportive of each other when we’re going through difficult times as such especially towards our loved ones, our family and friends.

Dr Edmund Ng:
Yes.

Siva:
So, this marks the end of the first section of this podcast. So, in conjunction with this episode about grief, let us just spare a few moments of silence to honour those who have left us.

[moment of silence]

Thank you everyone for joining in on that. Welcome back to the second part. We’ve talked so much about the basis of grief previously, so I hope it really helps with the coping process since understanding is after all, half the process of managing. Now, we’ll move on to discussing about the actual ways of coping with grief.

Ghaythree
Yes, and currently the number of deaths in Malaysia it’s pretty concerning as it’s approaching a 100. Although it’s relatively smaller than the death toll in other countries like the US and um European countries like France and Italy, it still is saddening.

Siva:
Yeap, you’re right. Regardless of what the values are in the statistics, whether it’s a 100 or a 1000 or 20,000 these numbers should never be compared because every life is valuable and every death causes a great loss and sorrow, devastation to all the people surrounding and connected to the person who has passed away like their family, their friends, their colleagues, students. So, Dr in context of that, could you just give us some specialized advice on how to cope with the grief experience caused by the death?

Dr Edmund Ng:
First of all, all sorts of losses needs to be processed because you know, usually it involves a big chain and our brain not able to comprehend fully what has taken place. Especially with the losses in COVID-19 which can be sudden and deprived of the proper funeral rights and so on without the chance of saying goodbye and no anticipation of the loss can be said and not said and all these things can be very traumatic.

Siva:
Yeah right.
Dr Edmund Ng:
And therefore, family members even between husband and wife especially in one’s space for grieving so either individually or collectively this loss has to be processed to bring the reality of the loss of what we’ve experienced so that we can comprehend and come to terms with what has taken place.

Ghaythree:
Alright.

Dr Edmund Ng:
So, with that processing we can, by talking with one another, we can reflect and think of the life of someone, the person who has departed and because in the processing, we also vent our emotions, allowing our emotions to be ventilated. Without that, issues will surface, issues that needs resolution because unless issues are resolved, we will add up roadblocks that will make a person stuck and suffer for years to go. Therefore, issues has to be talked over and resolved. People may be feeling very guilty of what they’ve done or not done. People may also have fears of what is the fate and therefore such fears can overwhelm them, over and above the grief that they’re already experiencing and then the loss in the sense of life and the meaning of life and all these things has to be rediscovered so that one will be able to move on in a more wholesome and healthy way.

Siva:
My heart really goes out to those to have lost someone in this covid-19 crisis. Essentially, what you’re saying is that we need to come together and speak about our emotions, accept the feelings and then talk about what are the issues that we can resolve so we can have less burden on our hearts and minds. So, now moving on, just now previously, you said that grief affects every aspect of our being. So, physical symptoms like chest pain, palpitations and racing thoughts are inevitable and may be recurrent. Could you suggest some techniques to reduce these physical symptoms?

Dr Edmund Ng:
Well, these physical symptoms arise because we are very down in our emotions and maybe we are feeling the stress, trauma of the loss. We are disoriented, fatigued and so on. Of course things like when blood pressure is too high, we might need medications or we are not eating, we are not sleeping sometimes, they need to have proper medical attention, alright. So it is important for one to realize that grief is a natural process and therefore, one must learn to relax in that season of loss. The more we fight over those symptoms, or what we experience, the more tenser we become and the worst will be our physical symptoms. Therefore, one has to accept that we have to go through this type of journey as a natural process and we need to pamper ourselves in order to survive this experience of grief and the latest study has shown that people can die from a broken heart and therefore we must not try to push ourselves too much during the same time of work and same kind of performance but to realize that this is a very exceptional period that we owe it to ourselves, give ourselves the space to grief.
Ghaythree:
Alright, that's very shocking Dr, that people can die of a broken heart but first it would be helpful when we're grieving right but how do we support those who are facing grief during this time of social distancing?

Dr Edmund Ng:
First of all, it is not necessary that everybody can understand us, not everybody can be empathetic towards what we're going through and therefore the grieving person has to be selective even if it's close relatives who want to have things their way, it's best that you move on. So there might be a season of time where a grieving person may avoid help. What is important is that we identify people who are supportive of us, who can comfort us, who know us, who understand what we're going through and give us that space to grieve. That kind of support is very important.

Ghaythree:
Mm. okay.

Dr Edmund Ng:
We can talk it over with them, discussing with them the issues that are involved.

Ghaythree:
Alright. Finally, before we end this, Dr, what would be your takeaway messages for all our listeners?

Dr Edmund Ng:
First of all, encourage bereaved family members who lost their loved ones through this COVID-19 that it is important for them to grief as a family, support one another, watch out for one another and even family members who are away from confines of the house, they still need to be contacted through social media so that we talk it over to make real what has happened and also resolve the issues that one is having. I want to say something to people in the frontline, the medical staff.

Siva:
Sure.

Dr Edmund Ng:
First of all, if a patient is critical, they might not have a chance for the family to say goodbye then, I think it is not too difficult to connect them through handphone, Skype and through whatever platforms there is, facetime and so on, then they can have the time to say what they want to the family, the dying person to the family members and the family members to the dying person. At least, you know, there is a time for farewell and anticipation of the worst. So, I think it can be done if we know the implications and the impact that it has on the family. The other point is that informing the bereaved family is important because it is possible that we can be very insensitive to have someone who has no relation who would not know about this family, just to call and inform that so and so has passed. I think it is fair and best for a doctor or nurse who knows the family members, to use this person to make the call because there is already a relationship. He or she knows who is the key person in the family to speak to and I think it's not just to pass the message but also to be there to
Siva: Okay, point taken, Dr. so you have given us really wise and feasible ideas that bereaved families and frontliners can use in approaching grief. Finally, almost reaching the end of our episode, I'll just summarize. In short, we have spoken about how to manage grief, particularly, in death, how to manage the associated physical symptoms, ways to support those grieving around us despite physical distance, how bereaved family members should support each other and how medical staff should approach grief with their patients.

Ghaythree: Yes. thank you, Dr and thank you, Siva. That was a very informational session. Hope our listeners have a better idea on grief and work towards relieving themselves from grief. Bye!

Thank you, bye bye.

Siva: Bye, everyone.

Ghaythree: Thank you everyone for listening. Feel free to drop questions or feedback on our facebook page, Malaysian Medics International. Also, do follow us on Spotify and iTunes so you don't miss out on our podcast episodes. Till next time, stay tuned (for our next episode).