

LOSSES, MOURNING AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN COVID-19 TIMES

PERDAS, LUTO E TRANSFORMAÇÕES EM TEMPOS DE COVID-19

PÉRDIDAS, LUTO Y TRANSFORMACIONES EN TIEMPOS DE COVID-19

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The ongoing intense transformations, resulting from the Coronavirus pandemic, have significantly changed the ways of being and staying in the world. Since March 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a pandemic state, the world has been experienced in a different way, as it is also modified for us. These changes impose significant losses, which require existential adjustments and are capable of causing important impacts on mourning processes.

The pandemic is an unforeseen event that requires reconfiguration in a dimension never imagined. The life context was largely changed, being demarcated by competing stressors that changed the routine, relations with the world and between people, as well as the horizon of the future. Social distancing, restriction of coming and going, new demands for personal hygiene and health care, impossibility of being close to friends and/or family without restrictions, constant threat of illness and death of oneself and those close work together with previous living conditions. This mixture of changes acts as stressors that have been chronic, favoring a spontaneously cautious functioning of people, of incessant alertness on a collective scale, reducing vital energy and the availability of social support resources.

The notion of continuity and predictability of life was altered, almost interrupted, before so many different experiences. There is a breakdown of the presumed world that causes the renunciation of one way of life and the construction of another. The presumed world refers to what is known and constructed based on the particular experiences, values and beliefs of each person. It encompasses the perceptions of the past, the future expectations, life projects, prejudices, being structuring for the understanding of the being-in-the-world⁽¹⁾. This affects what is known as normality and safety, as it is difficult to recognize, to make sense and to integrate. When changes are perceived as unpleasant, there is commonly resistance to transformation, which is the basis of mourning⁽²⁾.

Grief is a natural and dynamic process of adjustment before a significant loss. It is extremely important for the recognition and integration of life and one's changes resulting from the breaking of an important

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bond. These changes require greater adaptive movement when: they call on people to reformulate their understandings of the world; happen suddenly, without offering time for preparation; and have long-term repercussions⁽³⁾. That is, the greater the deconstruction of the presumed world, the greater the energy needed for adjustment to the modified world.

In the pandemic, the demand for change is still imprecise, even though it is already gigantic. Life change happens on a global scale, overlapping and multiplying losses. Thus, the experience of existing is very focused on losses, with few points of rest of pain and, consequently, collapse of the support network and internal resources. This framework of current life has adversely affected the adaptation of bereaved people during the pandemic, contributing to the prolongation of acute grief (moment of pain and intense suffering), making the experience different from other types of mourning in critical aspects⁽⁴⁾. Therefore, it is possible to speak of another pandemic that is developing in parallel to the COVID-19 outbreak: an intensified mourning pandemic⁽⁵⁾.

The pandemic context directly affects the circumstances of death and access to social support, which are important mediators of mourning. The way losses occur in the pandemic, especially in cases of death from COVID-19, and the distancing of the support network appear as circumstantial risk factors for a dysfunctional experience of grief. Suffering has been experienced in a solitary way, and family and friends are kept distanced from the care process, losing the possibility of being a witness to the path that is conjecture in the evolution of the disease and follow-up of treatment. Moreover, the death from COVID-19 is sudden, violent, stigmatizing and, therefore, potentially traumatic. Thus, the possibilities of constructing meaning for the loss and rescue of the dynamic movement of life are compromised.

The relationship between risk factors associated with pandemic conditions, functional losses and symptoms of dysfunctional grief is confirmed in an empirical study in which the main risk factors for dysfunctional grief in the pandemic are identified, organizing them into four categories⁽⁵⁾:

- a) circumstances of death, which contribute to the deep sense of emotional distance between patient and family, just at the critical moment of life for both;
- b) intensification of the sense of guilt of the survivor, favored by the absence in the care process and/or by believing that he/she failed to protect his/her loved one;
- c) ruptures of the support network for the bereaved person, as limiting and even preventing farewell rituals;
- d) painful and intrusive images of the suffering of the loved one who died, which is a cognitive response from the impersonal and traumatic impact of deaths from COVID-19 and other deaths in the pandemic.

These characteristics favor the crystallization of the mourning experience, restricting the oscillation between life responses. Adaptive grief work occurs through dynamic oscillation between loss-oriented coping (concentration in dealing with the processing of stressful aspects of the loss experience itself) and restoration-oriented coping (sources secondary to the loss itself that need to be treated), according to the Dual Mourning Process Model⁽⁴⁾. The concept of oscillation recognizes the impossibility of coping with all stressors linked to loss at the same time, thus offering a regulatory function for the mourning process. The stagnation of oscillation occurs due to stress overload, implying a more intense experience of grief or postponement of coping with stressors⁽⁴⁾.

In view of all this, the question remains: How to favor adaptive oscillation and rescue the flow of life, when there are still so many threats of new losses? There is no definitive answer⁽⁵⁾ to this, since the pandemic context is still latent and imprecise. The loss experience is a photo recorded in memory as a difficult record. The prolonged experience of the pandemic resembles a tense photo essay, full of painful records, but does not occupy the whole life story. It is necessary to return the pages of the album to find other stories, memories and contours that remind the organism of other possible movements

and other ways of being and staying in the world, to help counterbalance pain and absence, favoring transformation. However, it has not always been possible to do this in a solitary way, because the current moment captures all the attention.

The imbalance calls us to create, to continue transforming the world and being transformed into a relationship of otherness, recognizing human existence as body-in-the-world-with-the-other. Therefore, the most powerful way to transform this moment of wear is collectively, sewing with the possible lines the holes of the support network. Many constructions point to the capacity for collective resilience. Online farewell rituals, free and/or low-cost projects for psychological support to the bereaved, humanitarian campaigns to enable basic resources of existence (food, tampons, sweaters, etc.), careful information spaces about the mourning process (lives, webinar, conversation wheels) were and are some possibilities of support that have emerged in order to mitigate the suffering of the bereaved. Therefore, it is necessary to believe that “As long as there is/ Space for the after/ The trace of tomorrow/ We do around us”⁽⁶⁾, to build new memories and continue taking care of each other.

Contributions:

The author is responsible for the project conception, analysis and interpretation of data, writing of the paper, review and final approval of the version to be published, and for all aspects of the work in ensuring the accuracy and completeness of any part of the work.

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