

Facing Grief, Fear and Anxiety by Choosing Hope

BY ROB MORRIS

When the world we're familiar with tips to one side and becomes uncertain, negative emotions are sure to follow. For a community still grieving the tragic loss of 4 Moore High School students in automobile accidents (1 in December, 3 in February), it may become navigate the unfamiliar landscape we now find ourselves in due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Marla Mercer-Cole knows this landscape well. She is a licensed professional counselor with undergraduate and graduate degrees in psychology, along with being a Certified Bereavement Facilitator. Even more impressive, she is one of Oklahoma's two Fellows in Thanatology: Death, Dying, and Bereavement.

Mercer-Cole understands all too well that amid our current reality, it can become easy for some to give in to fear and anxiety. She says the most important place to start is to understand the difference between the two.

"It's important to make a distinction between fear and anxiety," said Mercer-Cole. "The best way to explain it is that we experience fear over something real while anxiety is all about the 'what-if's.'"

"It's those 'what-if's' that so many people struggle with, sending us down rabbit trails to unhealthy emotional and mental places. Explained concerning COVID-19, Mercer-Cole says that the reality is that any of us could possibly contract the virus, and fear is a legitimate response to that reality. Beyond that, the unknowns are where anxiety kicks in.

"The reality is that if I get COVID-19, I get it," said Mercer-Cole. "We can be proactive and do everything we know to do to stay healthy. It's when we start overthinking all of the unknowns about what would happen if we get it that it turns unhealthy."

The antidote to fear and anxiety is to be proactive, says Mercer-Cole. Among the things, we can do in this are all of the now-familiar recommendations of social distancing, self-isolation, washing our hands, and cleaning shared surfaces. But it's also smart to look at ways to reach out beyond our own personal circle and connect with those around us in a safe way.

"We can check in on neighbors or older friends who are sheltering at home," said Mercer-Cole. "We can drop things they might need on a front doorstep."

Staying connected with others is a critical activity right now. While it can be somewhat challenging due to the calls for social distancing and quarantine, Mercer-Cole says we live in an age of technology where it's possible to have that personal connection no matter what our living situation might be. Using chat apps like Google Hangout, Facetime, Zoom, and Facebook Messenger allows us to have a visual connection that can make all the difference in combating fear and anxiety.

"Sometimes, I just need to lay eyeballs on people and see how they're doing," said Mercer-Cole. "You can tell so much about how someone is doing by seeing their expressions and their body language, whether their shoulders are hunched and tense."

Social media and the internet are great ways to stay connected, with a couple of

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provisions. "Facebook is a favorite for me," said Mercer-Cole, "But one of the things I see more and more of is people asking others to leave politics out of the discussion."

Mercer-Cole also cautions against endless surfing on the internet, especially spending too much time on sources that generate anxiety. She recommends getting your information from trusted sites instead of giving in to the waves of insanity that seem to be washing over everyone online right now.

Limit how often you check on things," said Mercer-Cole. "Don't spend too much time with the news. Instead, check the CDC and World Health Organization websites for updates. And if you need to, just sign off and step away from it all for a while."

Then there's the genuine problem of grief. The COVID-19 pandemic is following closely on the heels of a very tragic loss for the Moore High School and Moore Public Schools community. In addition to that, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an early end to the school year and a loss of many activities that are important to students and their families.

"These students have experienced physical death, and that is extraordinarily difficult for anyone," said Mercer-Cole. "But now they've also seen some of the most important traditions of their senior year taken away as well. Both of these things are losses. In truth, all change is loss."

Mercer-Cole encourages those experiencing any loss to give themselves permission to accept the loss as a valid emotion.

"It's o.k. to feel the way you're feeling," said Mercer-Cole. "Grief is the normal human response to these things, and it makes sense that you would feel this way. When these kinds of things happen to us, it opens up this whole Pandora's Box and the idea that the world is not safe. If it could happen to my friends, then it could happen to me."

Mercer-Cole says a healthy way to deal with grief is to name it and then find a way to express it.

"Tears are obviously the number one way people relate to grief," said Mercer-Cole. "They serve a function and are stress relievers. Writing is also a proven therapeutic technique. Just find something

that works for you and let your grief out."

One more important thought from Mercer-Cole on facing grief: we never truly get over loss. It becomes a part of who we are.

This is a long and hard road," said Mercer-Cole. "Grief isn't the kind of process where one day it's just over. There's nothing wrong with you if you fall apart for a moment six months from now. The memories will pop up from time to time. We're all knocked off balance. Just take the time to acknowledge the feelings are valid and acknowledge what you've lost. Then find a healthy way to express those feelings."

Finally, Mercer-Cole urges people to simply, "Choose Hope."

"Try and find three things every day that you can be thankful for," said Mercer-Cole. "It can be something as simple as freshly-mown grass or a full moon or some colorful flowers. Studies show that gratitude and thankfulness actually change our brain chemistry and help us to survive these difficult times."