

West County Psychological Associates

The WCPA Newsletter

1215 Fern Ridge Parkway, Suite 110 St. Louis, MO 63141

Website: www.wcpastl.com

Phone (314) 275-8599

Email: info@wcpastl.com

Fall, 2021

Good Grief!

Amy Neu, MSW, LCSW

Early in the summer, I sat down to write this article with a very different perspective. My outline was about the 6th stage of grief (“Finding Meaning”), and how we could individually and collectively process the grief that we experienced throughout the pandemic. I planned to write about the lessons we learned, how grief comes in waves, the virtues of patience and self-compassion, and how we could move forward and support each other as we re-enter public spaces. After all, these topics reflected the conversations I had with my clients throughout the summer.

In July, with vaccines widely available, businesses reopening, and a new school year approaching, it seemed that a fresh new chapter had begun. Then, WHAM! The Delta variant emerged. The discussions that I had been having with my clients about community re-engagement, feelings of relief after vaccination, hope for continued socialization and holiday plans came to a halt. Conversations reverted back to mask wearing, fears for safety, concerns for friends and relatives, and how to manage renewed anxieties. Now, many people are working to process through anxiety, fear, sadness, and anger “all over again.” We are denying, bargaining, and grasping for answers, normalcy, and acceptance.

As I sit and reflect on this tumultuous year, perhaps my initial plan for this article was optimistic. Yet I also see, as I re-read the brief story above, a clear illustration of how grief plays out in an undulating fashion. As people work through their grief (stemming from loss or significant life change), they experience ongoing shifts in their emotions and behaviors. For example, after meeting regularly with a therapist, a man begins to feel relief from the depression he experienced following his partner’s death. He begins to re-engage with friends, eat healthier, work more efficiently, and connect with people. He thinks that just maybe he is “getting over” his loss and feels relief. Then, WHAM! He hears a song that reminds him of his lost love, and he goes back to process through the anger and sadness once more. But this time, he has different ideas, tools, and experiences to help him move through these emotions more effectively. While he is certainly not immune to experiencing these emotions, he can manage them and continue to function on some level.

This is the way of grief, and it is hard. I see us now in a similar situation to the man who grieves the loss of his relationship. We were feeling hopeful again this past summer, ready to re-emerge and re-engage fully in the community. We planned to tie up a few loose ends and move forward to rebuild our lives this fall. Then, WHAM! Now we are back to yearning for an end to this familiar yet unwelcome suffering, sadness, anger, and loneliness.

We think how unfair it is to go through this again; we feel angry that we have done all we can do and we are again stuck; we look for someone to blame; we search for answers to explain why. How lovely it would be to fast forward through these uncomfortable feelings, thoughts and experiences and to press play once we get to the acceptance part. However, if we avoid these feelings, they end up causing continued pain for us and will just emerge in different ways (i.e. headaches, pain, depression, anxiety) when left unaddressed. If we did skip over this grief process, we would also not have the opportunity to learn and grow; the chance to find meaning.

I want to encourage you now to bring to mind what that you have endured, learned, and coped with throughout this pandemic. These experiences are now part of you. This fact alone means you are not back at square one, because you are not the same person you were in March, 2020. You have acquired critical insights about yourself: how you react to stress, how you function in difficult times, how you use your strengths, how you work through challenges, and what matters most to you. Upon reflection, you also know your past behavior in situations that you wish you could do over, the words that you wish you did or didn't say, and the different actions that you would take if you had another chance. These pieces of information are crucial to informing your well-being and to guiding you to create a meaningful life. Finding meaning is a process, not a final product.

While I cannot offer a quick fix for this situation, I would like to share ideas and information about grief and how you can work through it in your own way:

- **The stages of grief are not linear.** It is generally accepted by grief experts that there are six stages of grief: denial, bargaining, anger, depression, acceptance, and finding meaning. While these stages are guideposts for the grieving, they do not go in any particular order. We don't move through these stages one by one, conquer a stage, or overcome a stage. Rather, these stages bring language to grief and provide the grieving with feeling identification and validation.
- **There is no "correct" way to grieve.** Every relationship and situation is different; therefore, each grief is uniquely experienced. There is no right or wrong way to feel when you have lost someone or something special in your life, and there is no particular timeline for you to "finish" grieving. The only exception I want to point out is that thoughts of self-harm are unhealthy. If you are having thoughts of hurting yourself, please reach out immediately to a medical or mental health professional. Grieving is painful, and you deserve support.
- **Practice good self-care.** Your health is important, and you deserve good care. Basic self-care includes eating healthy meals, drinking enough water, quality sleep, and exercise. If any one of these pieces is absent from your daily routine, your physical and mental health will suffer over time. Furthermore, practicing good self-care allows you to think clearly, regulate your emotions, and complete tasks efficiently.
- **Seek connection.** Grief is isolating. It takes a great deal of energy to just live while grieving, which makes it difficult to reach out to others. However, connection is an antidote to grief and loneliness. While it may feel that you don't have the energy to contribute to another person right now, maintaining your healthy relationships is essential for meaningful living. A brief video chat or call today can make a difference in how you feel tomorrow. These little interactions do add up and contribute to more worthwhile relationships.
- **Acknowledge your progress.** Every night, call to mind three tasks you have completed. These can range from relatively small (i.e. I did the dishes!) to larger accomplishments, depending on the day. The important things are that you keep moving, recognize your ongoing efforts, and provide yourself with the opportunity for positive self-talk.

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and it is hard.*

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As we look to the fall, another season full of uncertainty, please know that the emotions we feel and grief we each experience are valid. We anticipated healthy communities and "normalcy" for the coming fall, and we now face the disappointment of this dream delayed. Yet, we are not back to the very beginning. Continue caring for yourselves and loved ones, and continue reaching out to friends, family, and colleagues for your health and theirs. We are here for you, your loved ones, and your workplaces. Please reach out to us if you want to connect and receive more information on how we can help.



Amy Neu, MSW, LCSW is the Assistant Director of Senior Services at West County Psychological Associates. She provides private therapy for adults, families, and seniors who are facing a variety of issues including depression, anxiety, grief, coping with medical issues, and end of life. Amy has significant experience counseling seniors, caregivers, and families within medical systems and during transitional periods from home to alternate levels of care. In addition to Amy's clinical practice, she provides on-site counseling and education to staff throughout the continuum of senior living communities. She is a Certified Dementia Care Specialist.

From the Director



**Mary Fitzgibbons,
Ph.D.**

In May of this year, at our regular weekly team meeting, the therapists from West County Psychological Associates were discussing the articles that were going to be written for our September newsletter. We were all in agreement that the theme for this newsletter was going to be “Getting Back to Normal.” I had planned to write about what normalcy was going to look like in our society. Certainly, our mask wearing days would probably be over. Families would be coming back from vacations having had little concern about the virus. At that time, most of us were talking about resuming a “normal” social life. Restaurants were getting very busy and people were even beginning to go back to the movie theater. In other words, life was going to be as we had known it. I am now writing this article in mid-August.

I haven’t heard the word normal mentioned in the last few weeks. There is now the concern over the new Delta variant, hospital statistics are where they were at the beginning of the year, and the number of people dying from the virus is increasing. St. Louis and St. Louis County have also revived their masks mandate in public. This is not normal. We are discussing new terms added to our medical vocabulary such as brain fog. This has been described as experiencing mental slowing down, fatigue, trouble thinking and having difficulties with problem-solving, organizing and completing daily activities. One study stated that brain fog can occur even to those who have not been diagnosed with Covid. For those who have experienced the virus, many are suffering from long haulers syndrome where they can continue to experience symptoms long after having had Covid, such as fatigue, aches and pains, headaches and problems sleeping. Supposedly, all of these symptoms are caused by or greatly exacerbated by stress.

In speaking with other therapists, many are identifying the same experiences that my clients are having. First of all, while much of a private practice consists of treating depression and anxiety, we are seeing incredibly greater numbers coming into therapy with these symptoms. The symptoms may last over a short period of time or extend over months. Many have already been to their medical doctor but the medication has not been able to fully alleviate the symptoms. Some see therapy as their last hope.

Some of these clients are very treatable and others struggle with ridding themselves of what seems to be a cluster of anxious behaviors. Sometimes the anxiety surrounding the anxiety is truly difficult to bear. In time, with most clients, the symptoms start to abate. The client is following a regimen of activities that will be helpful. We address behaviors such as being on a schedule, creating a routine, healthy eating, meditation and deep breathing. Or the client is addressing those emotions that have come to the surface that have needed to be addressed. This is often the case. Emotions that should have been acknowledged and dealt with in our past are now presenting themselves in the form of depression or anxiety. In order to alleviate the symptoms, they must be dealt with. This is the case with many clients. With a commitment to doing their therapeutic work, they will get better.

We are living in a very unpredictable world. We don’t know what the next few months hold for us. Personally, I like planning my life so that, as closely as I am able, I know what lies ahead for me. That, to me, is normal. What we’re experiencing now is not normal.

There are those few whose struggle is longer and harder. Their therapeutic journey seems atypical. These cases don’t seem “normal.” They seem to present with a number of different behaviors. I spoke to a highly experienced therapist that I know and asked him if he is seeing the kinds of clients that we have not typically been seeing in the past. He said that he was. What he said reminded me of what therapy is really all about. He tells them that while this may seem to be a difficult struggle, he is there with them. They are not alone. Of course, he’s right. Is that not what we do for all clients in therapy? We stay with them on this journey. Even if they lose hope, we don’t. We will be with them until they can function without our help. These cases may not seem typical but our response is. While it certainly demands skills, it’s also very much about having hope when others don’t. It’s knowing that within yourself; we’ll get through this. This is what I know to be “normal.”

~ *Mary*

Re-Bootng:
Re-establishing Balance with Technology
Tony Tramelli, M.A., L.P.C.



Our relationships with technology have been challenging for everyone during the pandemic, but this has been especially true for parents. With students learning full time from home or in a “hybrid schedule,” already over-stretched parents had to manage even more of their children’s time while also trying to get their own work done. For many families, this resulted in an increase in the amount of time children were spending in front of screens.

Most age groups have seen an increase from 10 to 30 percent of screen time during the pandemic compared to their previous habits. Obviously, some of this time was necessary and even healthy; we were learning online, working, engaging with friends and family, and celebrating holidays. In so many ways there are reasons to be grateful that we had the technological tools to stay as engaged as we did throughout the pandemic. However, the end result for many families has been an overdependence on that technology.

Before the pandemic, a shift in our society’s feelings about technology seemed to be emerging. Many families shared their intentions to change the way technology was being used in their homes. Research around the psychological damage of social media was becoming mainstream; parents were learning the effects of screens on neurological development during early childhood. As a result, screen time was being more strictly limited. Prior to the pandemic, more parents were putting off giving their children their own phones until they were older. They were more closely monitoring social media, setting limits on when and where phones were allowed, and attempting to limit their own use of technology.

But for many of us, the COVID-19 pandemic threw a wrench in these attempts. For those of us who see this in our own families, it’s important that we take a moment to allow for some self-compassion. We have never experienced anything close to what we went through the past year and a half. Most of us were simply trying to survive the day, and the fact that we relied on technology to entertain our kids and cope with our anxiety is completely understandable.

As we consider attempting to adjust back to pre-pandemic rules and boundaries around screen time, it may be most beneficial to move slowly. If we attempt to go “cold turkey”; we will likely have mass rebellion on our hands. If there are no limits currently, try implementing just one. For example, no screens during mealtimes. Once one limit is established and is consistent, attempt to implement another one, slowly progressing back to “normal.”

It’s important to talk with our kids about why these rules are going back into effect. For older kids and teenagers, allow them to have a say in what they think is appropriate. Adolescents will respond better if they feel they have some agency in these decisions. For younger children, provide concrete examples of things they can do besides being on their screens: playing with friends, doing an art project, biking outside, etc.

It is also important to remember that not all screen time is created equal. Think of screen time like calories: there are healthy sources of calories and unhealthy sources. Mindlessly scrolling through Tik-Tok or Instagram Reels would be akin to eating an entire carton of ice cream. However, sitting down with your family for a movie night or facetimeing with friends are healthy screen time opportunities. We can encourage children and teenagers to choose healthier options when it comes to their screen time, and we can also put limits on the different types.

Don’t forget, we as parents are the most significant models of behavior for our children. Kids look to their parents to understand what is appropriate, so if we have our phones out at the dinner table, then of course they assume it is reasonable for them to be on their devices as well. If we interrupt a conversation by checking a text message, then we are teaching them to do the same. And there is more to it than just modeling behavior; when we are all constantly distracted by our own devices and communications, we are missing opportunities to engage with one another and connect on an intimate level.

As we all attempt to move back to our own definition of normal, it is essential that we do so with patience and empathy. Our children and teenager’s devices are more than just tablets and phones. They are lifelines to their friends, they are the foundations for their social world, they are their source of entertainment and connectedness. They also happen to be incredibly addictive. Remembering this as we attempt to reestablish balance can be incredibly helpful. We cannot just say to our kids, “put your phone away” and expect them to willingly put it down. We must be having regular and ongoing conversations about technology within our families, we must be intentional and consistent with our rules, and we must model appropriate behavior with our own devices.

Social Distancing turned Social Anxiety

Jacqueline Siempelkamp, MS, NCC, LPC



The world has changed quite drastically since March 2020, to say the least. We've all been impacted by this pandemic, especially on a social level. Some people have stayed very socially connected and have jumped at the chance to see friends and family in person again. Others have remained quite hesitant and have avoided socializing with peers at all during times that have felt unsafe.

Many of us are somewhere in the middle of those two extremes. We are left feeling a little socially anxious after periods of quarantine and social distancing. When considering social situations, we are feeling stressed and are wondering how we used to know what to say to people. Instead of working through the discomfort and nervousness of a new social situation, some of us are wondering if it's even worth it and are choosing to stay home instead.

With COVID cases rising again and guidelines changing, it can be difficult to know the "right" thing to do and how to go about being social with others. If all this sounds familiar to you, some helpful suggestions might include:

- **Evaluate the situation:** Social gatherings, big and small, are going to come up. This might be grabbing coffee with a friend or getting together with that side of the family you haven't seen in a while. No matter what size the situation, if feelings of nervousness or hesitation come up it's important to tune into those emotions and consider what might be contributing.
- **Use grounding techniques:** Anxiety may bubble up even if you want to spend time socializing with others. There are ways to ground yourself in order to calm those nerves. Try tapping your thumb with each finger for a few seconds; make note of your five senses and pick out one thing you observe for each. There are many ways to get back control of your body and resume having a good time.
- **Challenge negative thoughts:** If you are coping with significant social anxiety, social situations are likely to bring up intrusive thoughts that don't make you feel very good. If you start to feel like all eyes are on you, or you're afraid to say something because of what someone else might think, challenge those negative thoughts with something else. Ask yourself, what will realistically happen if you share that idea with others? What's the worst that could happen and how likely is that outcome? Are people really looking at and judging you, or is it possible that you simply feel nervous? Focus on interacting with people who make you feel good and remind yourself that you can get through this.
- **Engage in positive self-talk:** Build yourself up and bring out those feelings of confidence and reassurance. Internally, give yourself messages like, "I can get through this," "I can contribute to this conversation," "I enjoy spending time with these friends," "I like going to school," and so on. Remind yourself of what is true—if you can speak positive words to yourself, it can be the fuel and encouragement you need to work through anxious feelings.
- **Reinvent what it means to be social:** Use this time to reflect on what about pre-pandemic life brought joy and which parts you would like to do without. Be mindful to engage in activities that are fulfilling both with others and individually. Give yourself permission to have changed throughout this experience, as most people have. Additionally, be honest with yourself if you notice you're avoiding situations that may not have bothered you before.
- **Seek help:** Counseling services have surged throughout the pandemic, and understandably so. If you are feeling off, disengaged, and notice increased feelings of anxiety or dread, it could be time to seek professional help. Talking with a therapist can help provide insight as to what could be going on behind these behaviors and emotions. Therapy is a safe space to identify concerns, process feelings, and learn coping strategies that can truly help you deal with any of life's stressors. Engaging in therapy is commonplace these days and using this tool can help remind you that you're not alone and can help ease anxiety surrounding social situations.

As a society, our social batteries have changed over the last year and a half. We used to have packed schedules and would make every social gathering fit into our lives. The thought of what we used to do sometimes seems overwhelming now; many of us have noticed a decreased tolerance for socialization. Relationships have changed and the way we've spent time together has shifted as well. Moving forward, we'll all need to check in with ourselves and decide how to define our new social normal.

Back To School

Acknowledging and Understanding School Stress

Katelyn Schaefer, MSW, LCSW



“Back to School”... three words that typically hold some level of both excitement and worry for children and parents alike. Parents are excited for some return to “normalcy,” while also feeling worried about all the new hurdles the school year and its schedule could hold for their family. Children, on the other hand, are usually excited to see friends but also aware that going back to school might mean more stress or anxiety in their life. It’s safe to say that school stress is a very real thing for both children and their parents or adult caregivers.

As adults, we may be able to acknowledge these difficult or negative emotions on our own, but for some children, guidance may be needed in starting this conversation and self-reflection. As the adult, we are responsible to provide a safe emotional space for our children to discuss how they are feeling about going back to school. A safe emotional space is created by using active listening and non-critical conversation. It is not our job to “fix” their feelings but rather to be present with our child as they acknowledge the feelings that exist. Practice sitting in the uncomfortableness of these feelings together. Acknowledge the feelings then move forward to processing.

When we think about processing our back-to-school emotions, specifically the negative ones, we can benefit from writing them down. Younger children who do not yet write may choose to draw pictures about their concerns. After writing down or drawing our worries or concerns we can prioritize them. Which worries hold the most weight for us or are causing the largest amount of stress? This allows us to tackle the “big worries” first. Many times, children’s worries are around the unknown or based off past school experiences. With some problem-solving skills, together, we can support our children in answering questions or figuring out who they can go to if they need more clarification.

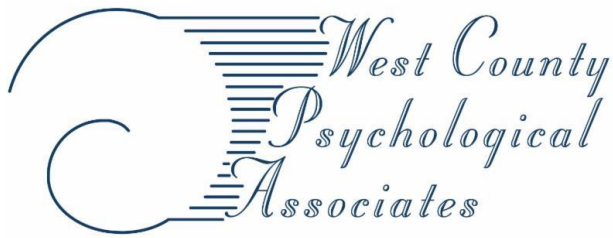
Some questions may not have easy answers. If that is the case, it’s important to consider what strategies could be used to reduce anxiety when there is a lingering “unknown.” Many times, when there are too many unknowns for children, they begin to show signs of needing more control through undesired behaviors. Answering questions and providing a space to figure out as many stressors as possible can reduce some of that back-to-school anxiety as well as a potential increased need for control.

It’s important for parents and caregivers to remember that children’s brains are still learning how to navigate difficult or confusing transitions. They need frequent guidance and support in learning how to handle difficult emotions and situations in a healthy way. School can be looked at as a child’s full-time job; they are there 7-8 hours a day Monday through Friday. They have expectations they are expected to meet and are evaluated daily on their performance and increase in skill. They may encounter peer struggles and have difficult or confusing interactions with their teachers. For most adults, the demands of their job is at times stressful, so it’s only natural that children would feel this way too about their “job.” Considering this perspective allows adults to have ongoing empathy for a child and their return to school. It helps parents and teachers understand how children may be viewing school and the stress related to it.

With this said, it is also important that parents and educators are taking appropriate measures to handle their own back to school stress. Acknowledge the emotion and allow yourself space to process it with a friend, spouse, family member, or therapist. Then begin to problem solve to the best of your ability. Recognize what you DO have control of and what may take some time to figure out. For example, one thing parents do have control of is how and when they discuss their own back to school stress. It’s important to be mindful of the way adults talk about school in front of children, as it can set the tone for a child’s opinion of school, too.

Besides ensuring our own stress is discussed in private, another thing adults have control over is helping our child maintain a healthy school-life balance. In today’s world, children usually are involved in multiple extracurricular activities that take place in the evenings or on weekends. There is a point at which these activities, on top of nightly homework, become “too much” or mentally unhealthy. It is important as the adult that we help our child set healthy school-life boundaries. There should be multiple opportunities for spontaneity and, most importantly, quality family time and time for rest throughout your child’s week. Communicate with your child about how it might look to maintain a healthy school-life balance this year.

By acknowledging and processing back to school feelings, we are allowing ourselves and our children the opportunity to understand both the thoughts and the feelings that are currently present. When we can better understand our thoughts and feelings, we are more in tune with what supports or strategies we may need to utilize to get us through the situation at hand. While the idea of going back to school likely brings up mixed emotions for all of us, by working together, the upcoming school year can be approached with courage, optimism, and hope for all the good things this year could bring.



School Anxiety, Avoidance, & Refusal

*Helping the Student Who Would Rather
Do Just About Anything Than Go to School*

~ A Webinar for School Professionals ~
Friday, September 17th, 2021 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Registration deadline: Wednesday, September 15
4.5 CEUs available for licensed MO and IL Social Workers and Counselors

Many students are bounding back into schools this year, eager to see their friends and hoping for a “return to normal” with class activities, field trips, the arts, and sports. Other students aren’t exactly “bounding in,” per se, but they come. They understand that school is, simply, *what you do*.

Then there are those students who are reluctant or refusing to come to school. Some are truly anxious about school in general, worried about health and safety, or uncomfortable leaving home. Others were socially anxious or introverted to start, and learning from home during the pandemic has been very comfortable for them. Still others just want to be left alone to sleep or play video games all day instead of coming to school. This year, more than ever, schools must have effective strategies to respond to these school-avoidant students.

Topics Covered Include:

- The Anxiety Formula
- How Avoidance Worsens School Anxiety
- Stress and Anxiety in the Age of Covid-19
- Common Characteristics of Students with School Anxiety
- The Four Types of School Avoiders
- Intervening with the Four Types of School Avoiders
- Strategies for Test and Academic Anxiety
- Strategies for Separation and Social Anxiety
- Dealing with Difficult Parents
- Case Examples and Discussion

Presenter: Amy V. Maus, MSW, LCSW specializes in school consultation, providing professional development, parent presentations, seminar programs, principals’ groups, Care Teams, and on-site case consultation to dozens of area schools each year. Along with colleagues, she is co-author of *The Care Team Approach: A Problem-Solving Process for Effective School Change*.



Who Should Attend: School Counselors, Social Workers, Nurses, Teachers, Administrators, Special Educators and Learning Consultants

Cost: \$105 per attendee CEU certificate provided, must attend full program.

Date and time: Friday, September 17th, 2021 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Location: Online via the Zoom format. Participants will be sent the Zoom link and handout after registration.

Register Now! Online registration is available at: <https://conta.cc/3AWNzfa>

Questions or concerns? Call WCPA at (314) 275-8599 or feel free to visit our website: www.wcpastl.com.

NOTE: This presentation is also available for schools/districts at your site.
Call Amy Maus at the WCPA office to schedule.

