

Now What?

Now we learn from the geese.

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AS WE EMERGE FROM THE PANDEMIC HERE IN THE UNITED STATES, WE'RE FEELING ANXIOUS. A recent survey from the American Psychological Association found that 49% of adults reported feeling uncomfortable about the prospect of life returning to normal.

That's because we're different now. That pesky word "normal" implies that we can get back to the way things were, that we can pick up right where we left off before the pandemic hit.

But nothing could be further from the truth. There's no going back to the old normal. There's only creating a new normal.

Whenever we're impacted by significant loss of any kind, we're changed by it. After someone we dearly love dies, for example, we're never quite the same. The hard work that is grief, in fact, is the very process of coming to terms with our new normal, which includes developing changed self-identities and revising our understanding of what gives our lives meaning and purpose.

As with any great loss, the COVID-19 experience, too, has changed us. Funeral home staffs, especially, have been affected in myriad challenging ways. You have been on the front line of so many losses. And so now you, too, are in a period of constructing a new normal. You are in a time in which you must ac-

knowledge everything that has happened, feel and express your many continuing feelings about it and work to reconstruct meaning in your vocations and lives.

Post-pandemic, all this hard work of grieving, mourning and finding a new normal requires human empathy and kindness. If there has ever been a time in which we needed to support and nurture one another, it is now.

In reflecting on the need to support each other during this period of reconstruction, we would well-served to look to the skies. Wild geese have much to teach us about community and lifting one another up. Let's observe the five natural instincts for support and companionship demonstrated by wild geese.

OBSERVATION #1

When the flock is on a journey, the flapping of the wings of each individual goose results in an up-lift for the bird that follows. By flying in a V formation, the entire flock achieves 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew alone.

IMPLICATION: As we are finding our new normal post-pandemic, we, too, are on a journey. Your fellow funeral home staff members are on a similar journey, and you can all be uplifted by journeying together. No, you need not travel alone, nor should you try.

OBSERVATION #2

Whenever a goose falls out of formation, it experiences the drag and resistance of trying to fly alone. It then realizes it needs to get back into formation to take advantage of the collective lifting power of the flock.

IMPLICATION: As geese benefit from staying in formation with those on the journey, we as humans are better off if we accept the lifting power of those who journey alongside. We are grace filled when we open ourselves to the support of fellow travelers.

OBSERVATION #3

If any one goose has a problem, two other geese will drop out of formation and follow the wayward goose to help support and protect it. They stay present to the goose that has special needs until it is able to continue the journey with them.

IMPLICATION: If we humans can learn from the wisdom of geese, we will always companion each other in difficult times. Receiving help from others strengthens the bonds of compassion and love that help us survive when we are devastated by loss and difficult change.

OBSERVATION #4

When the leading goose is tired or overwhelmed, it rotates back

into the formation and another goose flies at the point position.

IMPLICATION: No one person on a funeral home team can lead the way all the time. Especially during difficult times, it is wise for leaders to acknowledge when they are tired and need others to care for them and protect them from the headwinds.



OBSERVATION #5

While flying in formation, the geese honk to each other as a form of encouragement and mutual support.

IMPLICATION: Now is a time when we all need encouragement from those around us to remind us of our interconnectedness. We must allow ourselves to rely on each other. Otherwise, in our struggle to find a new normal post-pandemic, we will likely end up feeling alone and isolated.

WHERE TO TURN FOR HELP

“There is strength in numbers,” one saying goes. Another echoes, “United we stand, divided we fall.” As you work to grieve the many losses you have experienced in the past 18 months, it’s essential to let other people in. Both inside and outside your work community, I encourage you to make room for those you trust. Carefully chosen friends and family with whom you feel safe can often be at the center of your support system.

Seek out people who encourage you to be yourself and who acknowledge your many thoughts and feelings. Open your broken heart a little at a time to those people in your life who are compassionate and loving listeners. In an ideal world, this is your family and friends. If this is not true for you, my hope is that you will seek out other sources of support.

The darkness COVID may have brought into your life is a place from which you might be tempted to judge others, particularly their motivations. True, not all will be able to feel your profound losses the way you do, so don’t expect them to be able to. Except in cases in which there is evidence that you can’t trust someone’s intentions, try to be open to letting others be of support to you. Remember, you are doing the best you can from moment to moment, from day to day.

The hard work that is grief is the very process of coming to terms with a new normal.

You may also find comfort in talking to a minister or other spiritual leader. As you work to find your new normal, it may be natural for you to feel ambivalent about questions of faith and the meaning of life. A clergy member or spiritual mentor who responds without judgment and with empathy to all of your feelings can be a valuable resource.

A professional counselor may also be a helpful addition to your support system. In fact, a good counselor can be something friends, family members and colleagues can’t be right now – an objective listener. A counselor’s office can be a place of sanctuary, where you can give voice to those feelings you may be afraid to express elsewhere. As with everything else in this overwhelming time, counseling is an intensely personal choice. However, when you find the right counselor, you may well have found a safe haven in which to experience and explore the jumble of feelings impacting you.

Many also discover that sup-

port groups are one of the best helping resources. In a group, you can connect with others who have experienced similar thoughts and feelings. You will be allowed and gently encouraged to talk about your struggles as much as you would like. In these groups, each person can share their unique loss experiences in a safe and nonthreatening atmosphere.

While I’m sure you’re looking forward to face-to-face funeral service organization gatherings, in the meantime, perhaps you have access to a study group or association that allows you to stay in contact with colleagues online. Or maybe you could create an employee support group at your funeral home and bring in a trained facilitator. Such groups could be a lifeline during this time of transition.

As a grief counselor, I have been privileged to have thousands of people challenged by loss reach out to me for help. Among the lessons they have taught me is that sharing their grief with others is an integral part of the healing process. Perhaps it is helpful to remember that by definition, “mourning” means “the shared response to loss.”

Remember, help during this post-pandemic period will come in different forms for different people. The trick is to find the combination that works best for you and then make use of it.

Please don’t try to confront your pandemic grief and loss experience alone and solely inside yourself. You need and deserve companions – friends, relatives, colleagues, counselors and others who have experienced challenges during the pandemic – who will walk with you as you make the difficult journey to a new and meaningful normal. ☸

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