



Dear Parents of the Class of 2020,

This is not the way it was supposed to be. From the time we first imagined becoming parents, we started to dream about what our child's life would look like. Inevitably, this fantasy included them walking across a stage dressed in a cap and gown and receiving a diploma.

Somewhere around 5 years old we sent them off to school where these visions become less of a fantasy and more a "goal to achieve." The years went by quickly and we found ourselves in the fall of 2019, their senior year. Graduation day, the day we've thought about since they started kindergarten, would soon be arriving...until suddenly...those plans were shattered.

I write this today from the perspective of a licensed clinical social worker, therapist and the parent of a child in the class of 2020. I have counseled hundreds of people through grief and loss. I always hesitate to call myself an expert because I believe each client is the expert of his/her own life. However, I am experienced in grief and loss counseling.

What I do not have experience in is how to counsel a world full of people dealing with the aftermath of loss caused by a sudden and unexpected pandemic. Life as we know it has changed for the time being, indefinitely and possibly forever. We are collectively experiencing trauma, grief and loss.

One of the losses that has been the hardest for me to grieve in this crisis is that of watching my son lose the end of his senior year of high school, the potential times with his friends, the potential memories made, the school events, his senior track season, the honor nights, prom, senior skip day, the senior pranks, and potentially a graduation ceremony. These are the things that one looks forward to for years, and suddenly they are not possibilities. Not only are these things not possibilities, but it is now not possible to gather for support with friends, peers and adult mentors, as these students may have done in the past. It's a unique crisis that our children are facing; one that we never dealt with ourselves.

What we are experiencing is grief.

When I first started having feelings around the COVID-19 crisis and the change in school year plans, I could not identify what I was feeling. I knew something bad was happening and I knew there was major change coming, sure to bring many losses. I felt empathetic yet somewhat detached from those fighting for their lives, losing their lives and those on the front lines fighting the disease.

At best I could say I was numb. What was that feeling? It wasn't normal for me to feel so detached. I felt guilty for not feeling more devastated. After taking a couple of days to process I had an "Aha moment." I was grieving, and I was in the process of denial.

At first I didn't understand this as grief because nothing had happened yet. Spring break had just basically been extended for a couple of weeks. But as the days passed and the cases of the COVID-19 virus grew, businesses closed and it seemed inevitable that the school buildings would be closed too. Classes would be moved online and the graduation ceremony, as well as many other monumental "senior" events might not happen.

Anticipatory grief is the type of grief one has when they are grieving for an expected loss that hasn't happened yet. Sometimes it is hard to recognize anticipatory grief because it looks like other things: sadness, depression, anger, agitation or even numbness. We struggle to understand why we would grieve something that we have not yet lost. But what we are grieving is the expectation of loss and the potential of what might have been. I expect many of us are feeling this way. We are grieving the way things were supposed to be, the way things should have been, the way they were going to be up until six weeks ago.

Our kids are grieving too.

It almost goes without saying that our seniors are grieving too. Some of them are aware of it, others are not. Some loved the idea of an extended summer break until they realized that distance learning and quarantine aren't really much fun. Many of them are angry and feel cheated. Those reactions are a normal part of the process and must also be experienced with grief. Some of them are too busy trying to figure out the adjustments to doing all their work online, especially if they have AP classes that they are taking for college credit. Right now they are still in school, just not physically.

Just like we are all grieving a little differently, so are our students. Everyone grieves differently. The work of grief is that we do it, but there isn't a right way to do it. There are no shortcuts - we can only go through it. It's okay if we are not in the same place as our kids in this grief process. It is okay if you are not in the same place as other parents in the process. And it's okay if our kids are grieving differently than their classmates in the process.

What is not okay is to think that one person's pain is greater or more important than another's pain. We all have pain and struggle and we all must recognize and honor that. We should not minimize our pain or the pain of others. We simply do not know another's experience.

What can we do when we feel so helpless?

One of the greatest challenges for us as parents is helping our child with their pain, particularly when we are also hurting. Many of us are used to fixing or making things better for our child, sometimes too much so. This loss is simply something we cannot fix. We might be tempted to

try a lot of things that we think might help our child feel better. However, it's important to consider our motivation in these attempts; are we doing these things to help ourselves feel better or our "senior" feel better?

The best way to help someone when they are hurting is to be present and to ask them what they need. Make sure your child knows you are available if they'd like to process their feelings. You don't need to offer advice or wisdom, but just be there. If your child does not want to talk, don't force them, but make sure they know the offer is always available. Check in with them occasionally.

It is also okay to tell your child how you are feeling; tell them that you are hurting and disappointed as well. Tell them that you know everyone feels things differently and that you don't have it all figured out. You do not have to always be brave for your child; your child needs to see your vulnerability. You have the opportunity right now to teach your child that becoming an adult doesn't magically give us all the answers. There are things in this world that are confusing, scary and sad; it takes courage to recognize and admit that.

We do a terrible injustice to our children when we teach them to always "be strong and never show emotion." When the hard things of life occur, and they will, our kids won't be prepared to cope with them. How will they handle feeling something very powerful when they were taught that it's weak to feel emotions (sadness, grief, disappointment, etc)? This often leads to lifelong struggles with depression, anger management, relationship dysfunction and addictions, just to name a few. This is an opportunity to teach and model healthy coping skills for your child.

What is the point of it all?

The traditional stages of grief (denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and acceptance) aren't separate tasks to be accomplished. They are processes that often repeat more than once throughout the grief journey. We may jump around in no specific order from one stage to the next.

Ultimately, the final task of grief is to make meaning of the loss. To make meaning of something means to give it reason or purpose. Something that has meaning is something that makes sense.

Right now, my assumption would be that most of us are not in the place where the loss of our child's senior year events makes sense yet. Some of us may be starting to reconcile with the facts of the situation. The traditional senior year activities are not going to be a reality for our children. Some of us may still be in denial, while others may be angry. We could be anywhere along the grief spectrum.

Eventually, we will be challenged with the task of making meaning of this grief. Just as each of our grief processes looks different, the meaning of our grief will look different to each of us. The

beauty is that we get to decide what that meaning is, and that meaning is something that cannot be taken from us.

This time is a unique opportunity to build and practice resilience for ourselves and our children by using it as a chance to grow. We can begin to discuss what meaning can be made of this loss and how it can be used for the betterment of their lives moving forward.

When my son was born nearly 18 years ago, the world had already changed drastically from 9/11. I would be lying to say I didn't already have fears and questions in my mind about the kind of world he was entering. I am sure many of the parents of the Class of 2020 felt the same. Now we sit with many similar questions. We still dared to dream after 9/11, and many of those dreams still came true and many still will.

We will still dare to dream after that anticipated graduation date comes and goes. The class of 2020 has an opportunity that no other class has ever had; they get to walk out of the rubble of COVID-19, socially distant, but united, to become the leaders that we need to create a better world.

Sincerely,

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