



Supporting student wellbeing during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Penny Hargreaves, Head of PSHE

As the Covid-19 spread through Europe, the chances of us getting to the official end of term seemed increasingly slight. There was a lot of uncertainty and fear and when students turned to staff for reassurance and answers, it was difficult to give them what they wanted. We did not have the answers, we did not know what was going to happen, but we did not want to alarm them. What none of us really comprehended at the time was that what was happening in the wider world was going to have a profound effect on all of us.

When the school made the decision to close early there was an initial sense of excitement and relief. The students were jubilant at the idea of an extra week of holiday, they compared it to 'Snow Days' – extra, unscheduled days of holiday. Our initial focus was on student academic learning – making sure that students

would still receive the high standard of education whilst we were away from the school campus. The news came that formal examinations would not be sat, for the vast majority of our hard working and academically driven students, this was devastating.

The UK moved into full lockdown and it became increasingly clear that any kind of public or group gathering would not be able to go ahead. Students began to realise that future plans such as parties, holidays, and festivals would also be cancelled and that they would miss out on the collective celebrations and rites of passage that mark the end of formal stages of their education. The impact of these announcements, the sudden removal of the structures and social interactions of the formal school day and the fear surrounding the spread of the Covid-19 virus were going to take a huge toll on the mental health of young people. Health care providers were increasingly worried about the impact of the pandemic and subsequent lockdown on the mental health of children and young people. Several eminent institutions (University of Oxford 2020) ran online surveys to gauge the impact on young people.

Of course, the impact on wellbeing was not just restricted to young people. Research by Simetrica-Jacobs and LSE into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of people found 'substantially worse levels of wellbeing and psychological distress across the UK in April 2020, compared with the same period in 2019.' (p.3)

For our students, lockdown and social distancing were going to be emotionally testing. Students were used to balancing their social media and online activity with physically being and socialising with their friends. Face to face interactions are incredibly important for all of us but especially so for young people who are used to being surrounded by their peers at school. It was therefore increasingly obvious that we would also need to focus on supporting our students' emotional and mental wellbeing through this crisis.

As any initial feelings of euphoria at finishing school earlier and not having to sit exams, quickly moved on to disappointment, anger and futility, we needed to provide guidance and reassurance. On reading an interview with David Kessler (Berinato 2020), I began to consider that pupils were experiencing grief. Kessler is an expert on grief:

'We're feeling a number of different griefs. We feel the world has changed, and it has. We know this is temporary, but it doesn't feel that way, and we realize things will be different... The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us and we're grieving. Collectively. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air.'

He described anticipatory grief, and this is what I could see our students were facing.

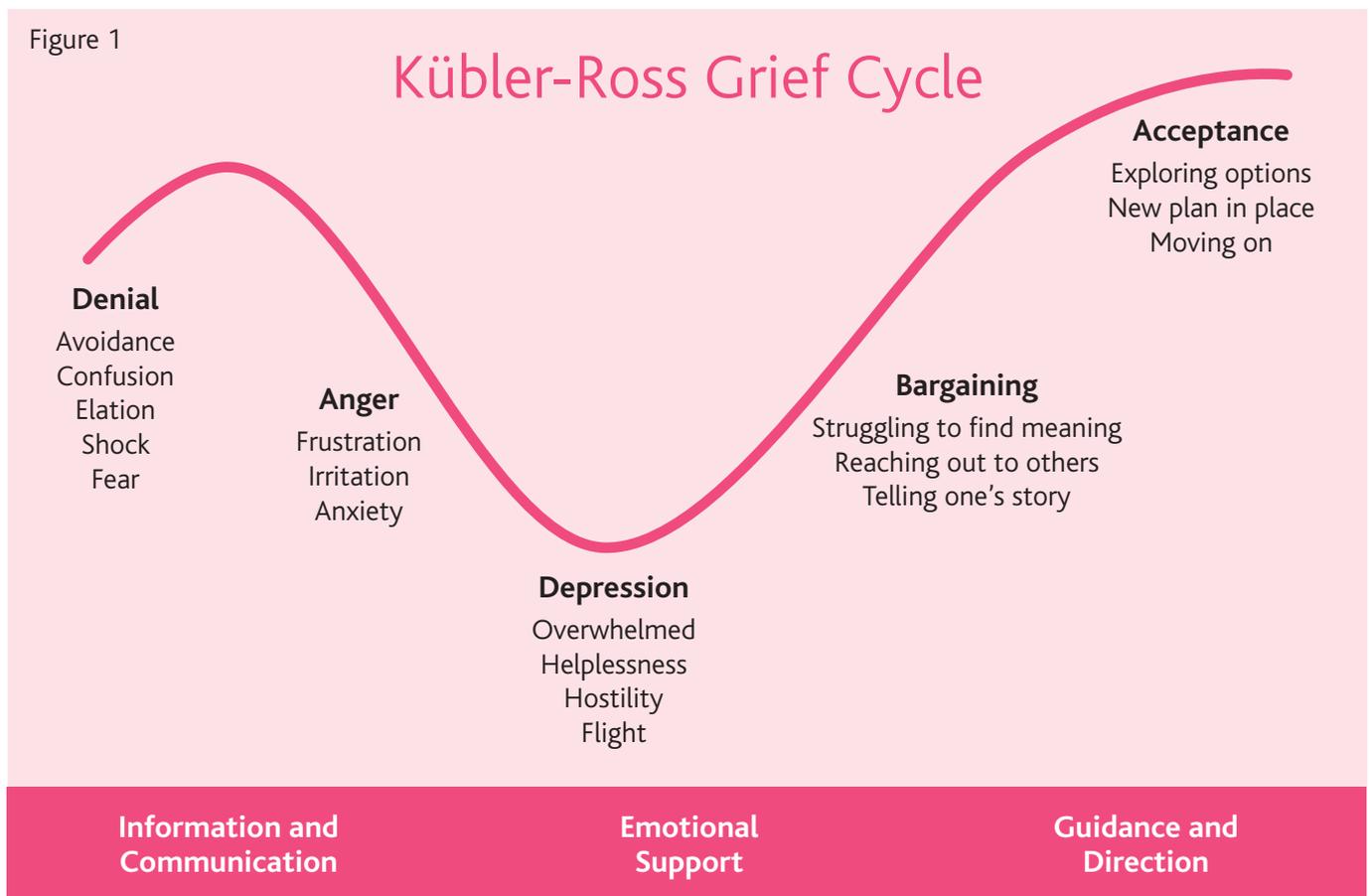
'Anticipatory grief is that feeling we get about what the future holds when we're uncertain. Usually it centres on death. We feel it when someone gets a dire diagnosis or when we have the normal thought that we'll lose a parent someday. Anticipatory grief is also more broadly imagined futures. There is a storm coming. There's something bad out there. With a virus, this kind of grief is so confusing for people. Our primitive mind knows something bad is happening, but you can't see it. This breaks our sense of safety. We're feeling that loss of safety. I don't think we've collectively lost our sense of general safety like this.'

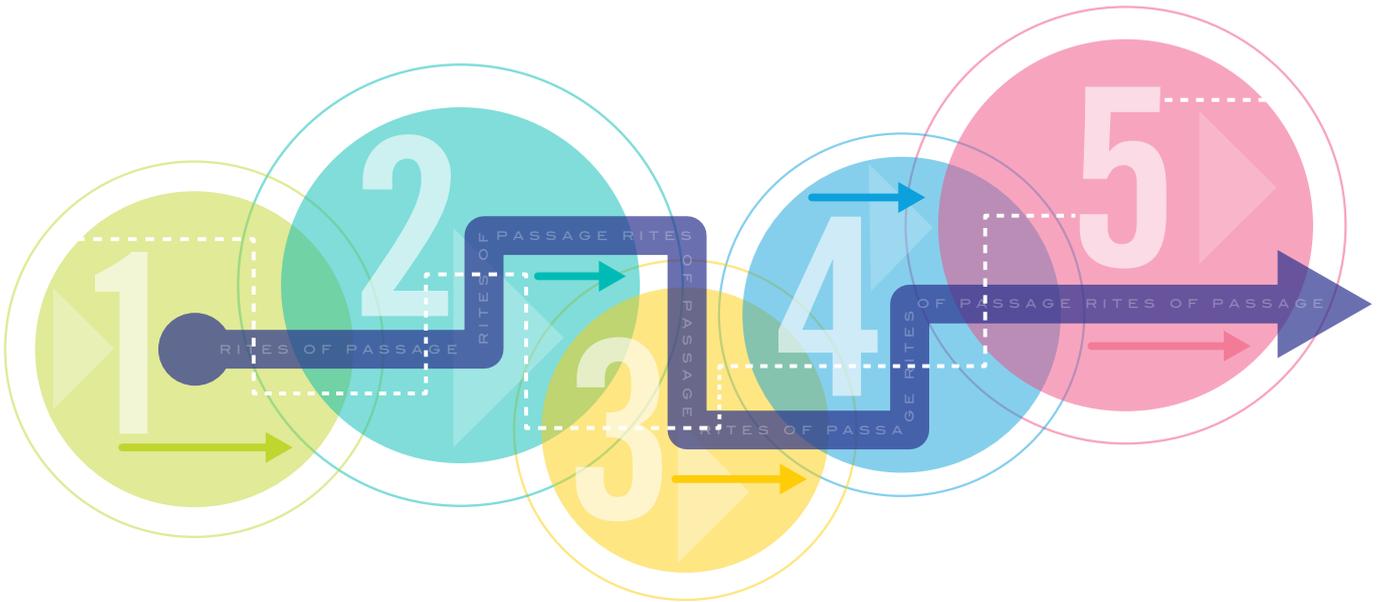
Our young people are going through this period of rapidly changing emotions and a real sense of uncertainty in a situation where the adults do not have all the answers.

Even though we cannot take away their worries or their uncertainty about the future, we can help them understand what they were feeling, why they were going through all these emotional stages and how to rationalise these thoughts. All of this seems logical to an adult, but teenagers have a strong sense of injustice and I recognised that our students would need to listen to an external voice to be able to hear the message.

To help support our students through this I approached Dr Jennifer Mahon (2020). Dr Mahon has been speaking to our students for several years now and as both a psychotherapist specialising in emotional intelligence and a parent with children at the school. Dr Mahon then developed a series of talks to make available to our students online. It was imperative to address the students in examination years but also those in Years 10 and 12 who worried about the knock-on effect of losing school-based teaching and a meaningful period of their shared school experience.

Dr Mahon crafted separate talks which became, 'What to expect to feel and how to feel ok when the world changes' and 'Missing Exams - Rites of Passage' and 'Plan your Transition'. Dr Mahon felt the focus on grief, famously modelled by Kubler-Ross (Figure 1, 1969) might be too niche a message since many young people didn't seem to be suffering from grief, especially if they felt safe within their environment. BUT all young people were definitely dealing with sudden change. The talks were therefore informed by change models, Kubler-Ross's Stages of Grief, and Prochaska and di Clemente's Transtheoretical model of change (1983), which focuses on how individuals can change their own behaviour.





Dr Mahon also identified 'rites of passage' as an important focus. Ethnographer Van Gennep (1960) is known for establishing this cultural anthropological term through his studies of the rites of passage of various cultures. Gennep compared ceremonies that celebrate an individual's transition from one status to another. Exams are an obvious rite of passage, and not just the graduation ceremony alone. Pupils were asking 'How can my teachers set my grades?' 'How can I finish school without writing my last essays?' In her talk, Dr Mahon noted:

'Whether you know it or not your exams were your time of reckoning. In a mythological, symbolic, and deeply human way you need to test yourself to feel like you're ready for the next stage of your life. Exams are the core of our culture's rite of passage from youth to maturity.'

Dr Mahon explained to our pupils what rites of passages are, what they do for us psychologically and socially, and importantly how to try to get the same effect for themselves without going through exams. Describing the common features of rites of passage, she notes they allow us to leave an old role, undergo a trial, and re-emerge in a new, higher status, role. By suggesting different strategies for producing the same social and psychological effects (of developing self-reliance, readiness for next stage of life, a feeling of legitimacy, a sense of belonging), Dr Mahon emphasised the importance of continuing to plan for transition, without going through the exams and finishing the school year as anticipated.

These talks were released over a number of weeks starting at the start of the Summer Term and have been a fantastic resource. They have all been posted on our

internal Pastoral Care pages, accessible to Sevenoaks staff at <https://sevenoaksschool.fireflycloud.net/pastoral-care-home-learning>

They were also made available to parents who have been very appreciative of the insight and support they have provided. Students have been helped to intellectually understand the emotional processes they are going through, and had an opportunity to learn about how we progress through change.

As educators, we are not able to minimise the uncertainty of living through this pandemic. However, we have been able to locate resources and suggest tools for our students to help them process their feelings and navigate these unprecedented times.

References

- Berinato, S. (2020) That Discomfort You're Feeling Is Grief. The Harvard Business Review. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief> (accessed 08.10.20).
- Gennep, A. V. (1960) The Rites of Passage. University of Chicago Press.
- Kubler-Ross, E. (1969) On death and dying. New York: Macmillan.
- Prochaska, J., and DiClemente, C. (1983) Stages and processes of self-change of smoking: toward an integrative model of change. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 51(3), 390–395.
- Mahon, J (2020) Available at: <https://jennifermahon.com/> (accessed 08.10.20).
- Simetricia-Jacobs and LSE (2020) The Wellbeing Costs of COVID-19 in the U.K. Available at: <https://www.jacobs.com/sites/default/files/2020-05/jacobs-wellbeing-costs-of-covid-19-uk.pdf> (accessed 08.10.20).
- University of Oxford (March 2020) New research Seeks to Tackle Impact of COVID-19 on Children and Young People's Mental Health. Available at: <https://www.psych.ox.ac.uk/news/new-research-seeks-to-tackle-impact-of-covid-19-on-young-people2019s-mental-health> (accessed 08.10.20).