



Center for Applied  
Research Solutions

# Five Years After: Meaning- Making, Grief, and Collective Coping in the Aftermath of COVID-19

**A Practice of Shared Witnessing and Meaning Making**

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## A brave and compassionate space in which, we will:

- **Acknowledge and honor collective loss** by naming the grief many continue to carry five years after COVID-19.
- **Find comfort in community** through shared stories and reflection that reduce isolation and deepen connection.
- **Explore shared meaning-making** by identifying moments of renewal, resilience, or joy that have emerged alongside loss.
- **Strengthen collective support** by offering and receiving compassion, insight, and perspective across roles and communities.



Photo by: Northwest Meadows

**WHAT THIS TIME TOGETHER MIGHT FEEL LIKE**

# OUR TIME TOGETHER TODAY

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1. Welcome and Grounding
2. The Power of Naming: Our COVID Experience
3. Zooming into Our Crisis Experience During COVID
4. Collective Coping, Meaning & Renewal
5. Integration and Closing



Photo by: Northwest Meadows

# Engaging in Deep Listening and Generative Conversation



Though **this should feel therapeutic**, this is not therapy



Respect one another's "**complex personhood**"



Being here is **participating**



Practice **contextual confidentiality**



There is **always enough time** for the right work



There is a conversation that only the people in this room right now can have. **Find It.**

A field of purple flowers in the foreground with mountains in the background. The flowers are in sharp focus, while the mountains are blurred. A white box with a black border contains the text "GROUNDING DOWN TOGETHER".

# GROUNDING DOWN TOGETHER

Credit: Getty Images

## Take the next sixty seconds to engage in any of the following practices:

1. Drop your shoulders.
2. Exhale deeply. Audibly.
3. Unclench your jaw. Your belly.
4. Take a big stretch.
5. Sip water.
6. Shake it out a little.
7. Find a warm tone in your body. Offer gratitude.
8. Feel into your feet. wiggle your toes.
9. Look around the room, find exits, notice light, signs of life



Photo by: Larysa Pashkevich

# SETTLING INWARD



# COMMUNITY CONNECTOR

## (Share in the chat)

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Which type of COVID-related loss feels most present in your context right now?

- Death loss
- Ambiguous loss
- Burnout/moral injury
- Disconnection
- Something else

*Before the virus, I went to school, everything was happy.*

*Now I see people with face masks and few cars*

*but I am happier to have more time with my mom and I have more days to play.*

*I'm afraid that my family and friends will get sick.*

*I miss playing with my friends at school.*

*I miss visiting my grandparents at their house.*

*I dream about seeing my best friend and then us going to the beach.*

*While this [lockdown] happens, I draw pictures, I play and I do homework.*

*I hope that this ends so I can go back to seeing my friends.*

*When all this ends, I will go to the park to skate.*

*All this will pass, we will be fine, if we take care of ourselves [and] wash our hands, the virus will die.*

*Stay at home so we can go out.*

**Velma, 10 years-old**

A field of purple flowers in the foreground with mountains in the background. The flowers are in sharp focus, while the mountains are blurred. A white rectangular box with a thin black border is centered horizontally, containing the text. Two horizontal bars, one orange and one purple, cross behind the white box.

# CREATING OUR COVID STORY LIFEMAP

# — THE FIVE GATES OF GRIEF —

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- Everything We Love We will Lose
- The Places that have not known love
- The Sorrows of the World
- What We Expected and Did Not Receive
- Ancestral Grief





Created by RYSE, 2017



Art by Mer Young

A close-up photograph of pink cherry blossoms in full bloom, with some buds still closed. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue sky. The flowers are the central focus, with their delicate petals and stamens clearly visible.

## Freewrite Practice: Our COVID Story

**On a separate piece of paper, respond to the following prompts as they come up.**  
Use images, symbols, words, colors, stories to respond.



Who you  
were prior to  
2020?

Your  
COVID  
Life Map

**Consider:** work and family, lifestyle, communities, sense of belonging and connection, interests, your values.

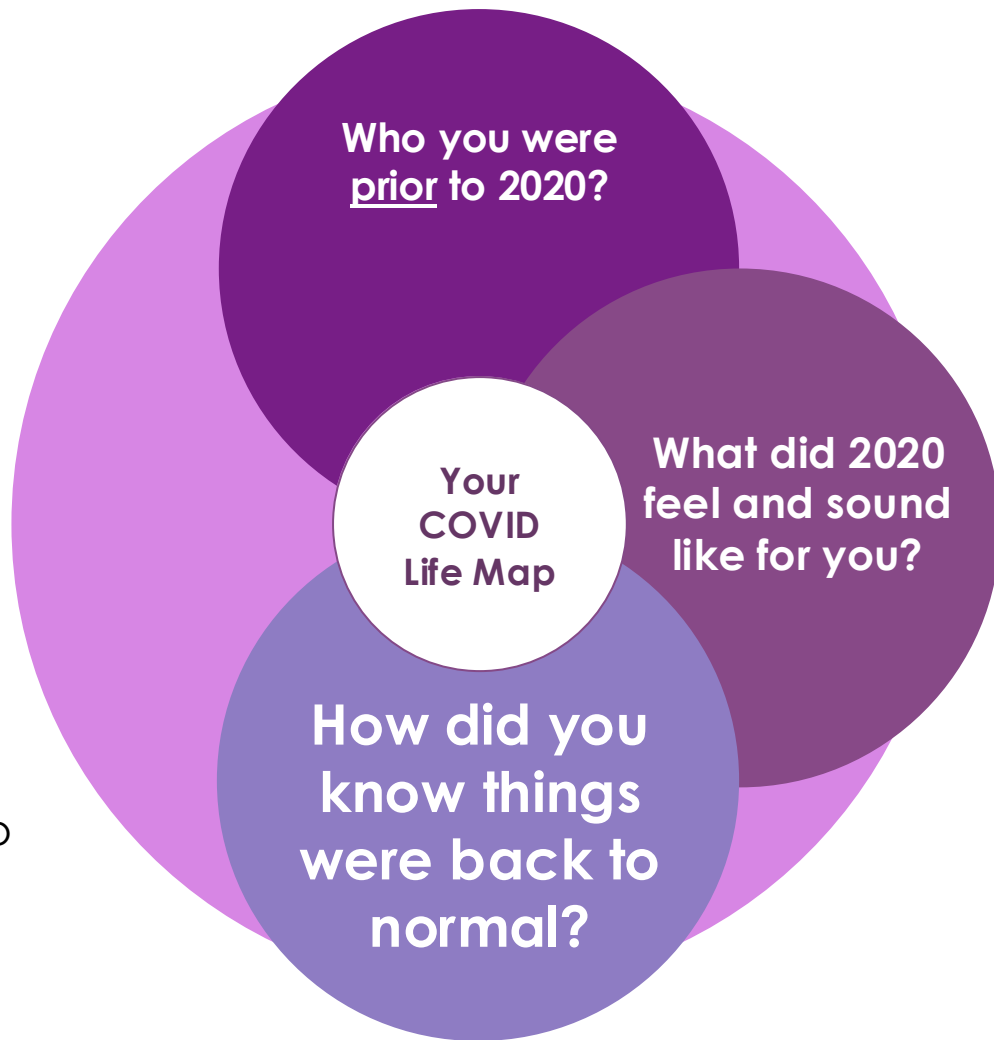


Who you were  
prior to 2020?

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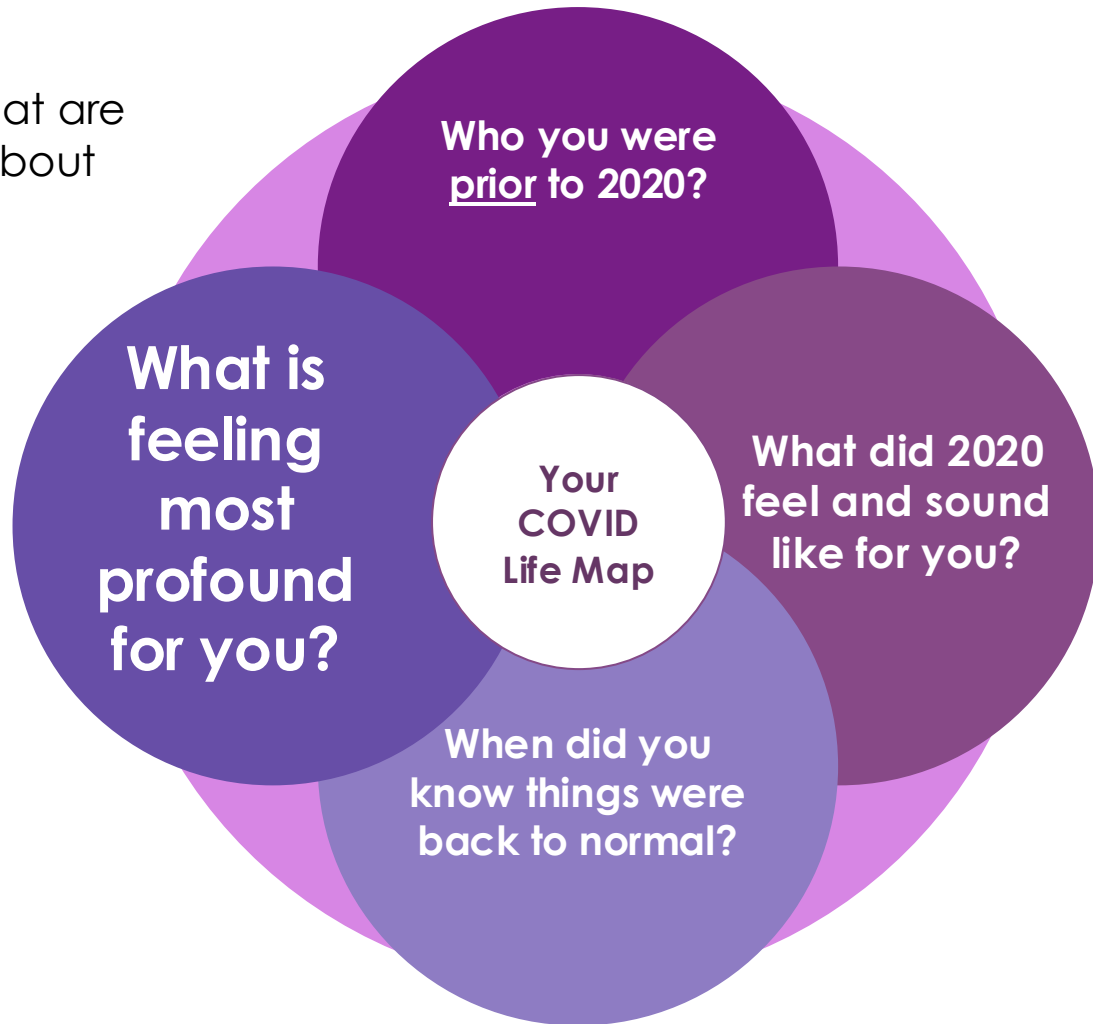
What did  
2020 feel  
and sound  
like for  
you?

**Consider:** What phrases do you remember hearing most in 2020? What do you remember about your embodied energy, biggest fears and curiosities?



**Consider** With the mandate to return to “normal”, what are you ignoring or denying?

**Consider:** What are you noticing about how it feels to remember?





# SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

What is your COVID Story?

1. How have you been *touched* by it? Consider it's impact... On your body, heart, spirit, and mind?
2. Share one or two things you highlighted from your free write.
3. What is your reflection causing you to wonder in this moment?



**ZOOMING IN ON OUR CRISIS RESPONSE DURING COVID**

Credit: Getty Images



## PAUSE AND REFLECT

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Identify a work-related or personal moment in your *COVID* story that really stands out to you

# Attuning to the Impact of Crisis in Our Lives

## On a piece of paper:

1. Identify a moment of crisis you experienced within your covid story.
1. Using the analogy of a flower, explore the quality and influence of the noted elements.
1. In your experience and along your healing journey, where have you found soothing, what has been activating?
1. How might this past crisis experience be showing up for you present day?

## Weather

**Conditions:** What local and federal policies/trends/tones influenced your experience and outcomes?

**Petals:** Where did you find unexpected blooming or growth in or after this experience?

**Leaves:** What existing or new relationships were strengthened or emerged? Where did you experience relational harm or caused harm?

**What was your past crisis Experience?**

**Soil:** How might your ancestral legacy and historical trauma been healed, activated or exacerbated as a result of this experience?

**Roots -** What existing core elements of your community or cultural norms are important to acknowledge

# Voices from the Field: Reflections on COVID - Looking Back to Look Ahead

Summer 2021

## The climate of the crises was harsh & harmful because...

- SO MUCH OF THE WORK FELT TRANSACTIONAL
- THE SENSE OF URGENCY LED TO ISOLATION
- PEOPLE'S LIVES WERE ON THE LINE (VS AS EDUCATORS, THE COMMUNITIES WE SERVE)
- THEY LOST IMPORTANT CONNECTIONS WITH STUDENTS AND CAREGIVERS
- THEY OVEREXTENDED OURSELVES OUT OF FEAR
- THEY EXPERIENCED FEAR-BASED, REACTIVE POLICIES



## Educator tenacity bloomed because...

- THEY BUILD OUTSIDE-THE-BOX COALITIONS TO SERVE SCHOOL COMMUNITIES
- THEY INCREASED OUR AWARENESS OF THE NEED TO IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS AND STAFF
- THEY BECAME MORE ADAPTIVE AND AGILE, CANDID, SUPPORTIVE AND BOUNDARIED WITH THEMSELVES AND EACH OTHER
- THEY BUILT BRIDGES BETWEEN EDUCATION + BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SYSTEMS TO CREATE RESPONSIVE AND INDIVIDUALIZED SERVICES
- THEY LEARNED IT'S OK TO NOT HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS
- THEY TENDED TO THEIR NERVOUS SYSTEMS (EVERY DAY) AND SELF-REGULATED THROUGH COLLECTIVE CARE



## Partner with educators to continue nourishing growth by...

- EXPLORING HOW IDENTITIES INFLUENCE LEADERSHIP - THIS WORK IS PERSONAL
- CREATING HUMANIZING SPACES AND STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING ONLINE (ESPECIALLY ONLINE)
- GENERATING MENTAL HEALTH AND GRIEF SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS AND STAFF
- REGULATING OURSELVES AND EACH OTHER DAILY
- BUILDING MEANINGFUL CONNECTION ACROSS SECTORS AND IN AFFINITY BY ROLE (STATE LEADERS NEED THEIR OWN SPACE TO NURTURE THEIR CRISIS LEADERSHIP)
- CONNECTING VERSUS ASSESSING (THEY'LL TELL YOU WHAT THEY NEED YOU TO KNOW)
- PROTECTING AND SUSTAINING EDUCATORS - INCLUDING SUPPORT STAFF - SO WE DON'T LEAVE THE FIELD

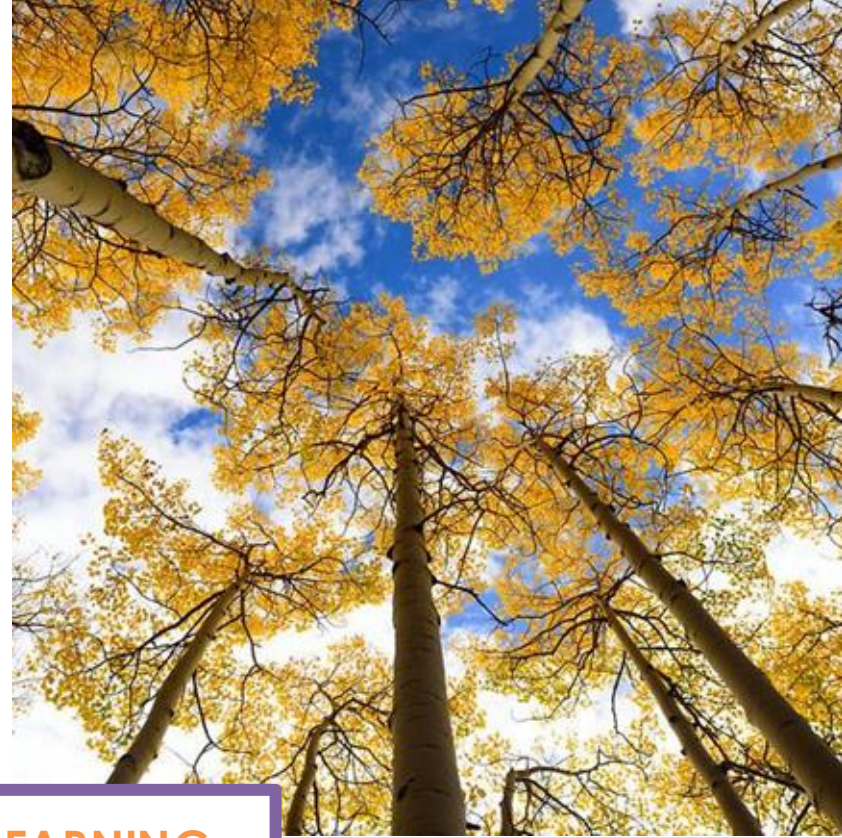


How has our story evolved?

A field of purple flowers in the foreground with mountains in the background. The flowers are in sharp focus, while the mountains are blurred. A white box with a black border is centered in the image, containing the text. Two horizontal bars, one orange and one purple, cross the white box.

**CLOSING REFLECTION  
CLOSING PRACTICE**

- What came up for you in the journaling exercises?
- Who and what do you wish to honor and/or resist?
- What's an everyday way? What's a "big" way?
- What do you already do towards this? What are your communities' strengths?
- *What is the conversation only the people in your room can have?*



**CONNECTING + COLEARNING**



All of my pain is a spider  
I've learned not to crush  
with the heel of my shoe  
but to guide with a page  
of my journal  
into an empty glass  
asking questions about  
its life,  
its purpose, as I walk  
careful out to the  
garden  
and rest it down on the  
earth.  
My pain, how happy it is  
to leave me whenever  
I treat it kind.

—ANDREA GIBSON

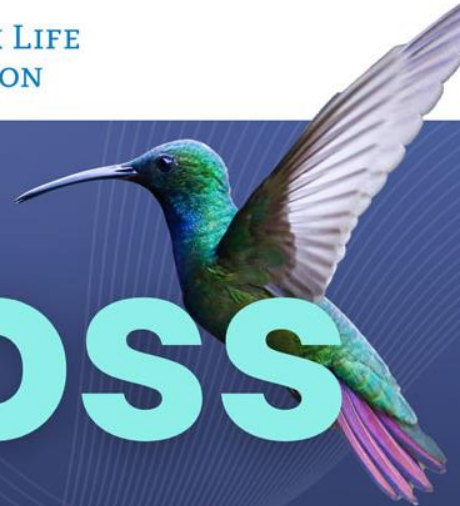
A vibrant pink flower, possibly a Bergfenchel, grows on a rocky mountain peak. The flower is in sharp focus, showing its many small, light pink petals. It has a green stem and several green leaves. The flower is growing out of a patch of brown and green moss on a grey, textured rock. In the background, a vast mountain valley is visible, with rolling hills and mountains under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is a beautiful, high-altitude landscape.

Thank you

Image by Irena Chublina



# Life After Loss



**A Special, No-Cost Two-Day Virtual Summit Exploring Grief Aftermath  
for Educators, Mental Health Providers, School Leaders, and Child Advocates**

# Introducing Our Global Learning Community



**CARS**  
LEARNING  
EXCHANGE



**SCAN TO LEARN MORE AND  
JOIN**

[cars-community.mn.gov](https://cars-community.mn.gov)

- **FREE & Secure Online Community** – Supporting work in behavioral health, crisis response and recovery, student and staff wellbeing, and community wellness.
- **Extensive Resource Library** – Tools, trainings, and webinars for ongoing professional growth.
- **Engage & Connect** – Join discussions, learning collaboratives, and live



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Ready to  
connect?  
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touch  
with us.

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work:

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➤ Request support:

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➤ Explore partnership opportunities:

[carsinfo@cars-rp.org](mailto:carsinfo@cars-rp.org)

