

GRIEF AND COPING WITH DEATH IN FAMILIES DURING COVID-19



Families are feeling overwhelmed by the number of COVID-19 deaths around us and worldwide. You may have lost someone close to you or may know people who have lost a loved one. Grieving our losses during this time feels different than loss during other times. Illness from the virus comes suddenly and unexpectedly. We are isolated from each other and we are unable to be physically present with those who are ill or dying. We cannot comfort others who also share this loss or take part in religious or cultural rituals. And there are millions of families who are also grieving and may be facing many of the same challenges.

For you and your family, it helps to recognize your feelings and give permission to grieve your loss.

WHAT IS GRIEF?

Grief is a reaction to loss that death brings. Death re-shapes roles and relationships in families. Feelings of grief can come and go. They may last longer than you expect, and they may come in waves, so you may not consistently feel reactions as strongly or as often. It is a personal experience that is different for each person, and you can support family members who react to loss differently than you do.

Common activities that reflect grieving include eating too much or too little; withdrawing from others or daydreaming; feeling restless and needing to be occupied; using alcohol or drugs; treasuring reminders of the person you have lost, and also avoiding reminders of that person as well.

Common emotions during grief include sadness; irritability and anger; guilt or regret; anxiety; yearning for the loved one; loneliness; or numbness and loss of energy.

Common thoughts during grief include thinking the loss did not happen (especially when the loss is sudden); preoccupation with the person who died and wanting to be with them; feeling lost without direction; or questioning your beliefs. Some people have difficulty concentrating.

LOSING PARENTS, GRANDPARENTS, AND PARTNERS

Family relationships are central to our lives, and the loss of a loved one due to COVID-19 is a critical turning point in the lives of everyone in our families.

The loss of a parent or grandparent is the loss of someone who has always known you or your children. Under isolation, you may be unable to speak to or see them once the virus makes them ill, and unable to be by their side as they face death. This separation is difficult whether you have an open and close relationship, or a strained one. Share your grief with your spouse or partner and your children, who are also grieving in different ways. Also, engage in forgiveness, as the death of a parent at a distance can leave unresolved concerns and unspoken words.



The loss of a spouse or partner to COVID-19 may also take place at a distance, for fear of spreading the virus. You may feel that “we are in this together” as a committed couple facing the fear of the virus, and loss of that support leaves a void. Family members need to provide understanding for surviving spouses, being present any way they can as they can to combat loneliness and depression.



These losses will be personal to each member of your family, but be there to care for others, especially children. **Children’s grieving** may be less intense and more sporadic; it also can last for a longer time. They may worry that they caused the death or that it will happen to them, and they may seek distraction to deal with immediate feelings of loss. The scale of loss during COVID-19 pandemic may be overwhelming to adults, but children also feel overwhelmed and may be grieving in their own way even if it seems as if they are not.

WAYS TO COPE WITH FAMILY GRIEF

Families can help each other manage reactions to loss and death in many ways, including

- **Ask for support and provide care** for children, spouses, and partners. We need to tell our stories of loss many times over, and close family members may be more accessible during the pandemic. Talk with a family member or friend who is a particularly good listener.

- **Engage in meaningful and comforting rituals**, even in isolation. We may want to grieve together and in-person by the bedside, at funerals and memorials, and it is a deep loss not to be able to share those rituals. Instead, hold memorial services online on apps that allow large groups of people to see each other and offer comfort collectively. Send condolences through on-line guestbooks, or postpone gatherings until families can safely come together. Also, create informal rituals in your immediate space to honor family members who have passed, with a lighted candle, a memory quilt or garden, even a celebration dinner to commemorate their life.



- **Make use of grief support groups**, either online or in your community. Ask hospice staff or chaplains or social workers at local hospitals about these groups.

- **Take care of your and your family members’ health** by getting enough sleep, eating healthy food, and avoiding alcohol and unprescribed drugs during isolation. As a group or by yourself, spend time outdoors and find ways to exercise and be physically active, which helps to decrease stress brought by grief and loss.

- **Write and read to express your feelings about loss**, and to find insight into how others have experienced grief. During quarantine, you can help children to create art or write letters to family members who have died.

- **Give yourself and your family time to heal**, since most people move through their grief, adjust to the loss, and resume a changed but full life. Reactions to loss usually start to fade over time.

- **If you or your family members do not feel better over time**, seek professional assistance. If grief is still interfering with daily functioning or sense of well-being, or you feel guilt about moving on with life, beyond six months after the death of a loved one, these are signs to consider additional support. If you or family members are having thoughts of suicide, seek help right away.



There are caring professionals such as your primary care practitioner, a grief counselor, mental health professionals and spiritual and religious leaders available who can help you or members of your family cope with this difficult time in your lives.

Adapted from UW School of Medicine and Public Health
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