

Tip Sheet:

Grieving During a Pandemic

Sue Morris, PsyD

Director Bereavement Services

Department of Psychosocial Oncology and Palliative Care

Dana-Farber/Brigham and Women's Cancer Center

The COVID-19 pandemic has up-ended our daily lives and routines in a matter of a few short weeks, generating fear, uncertainty, and anxiety. For the majority of the population, coping at this time is extremely stressful as we adjust to staying home, working remotely and distancing ourselves from others. It is especially challenging if someone you loved has died during the pandemic, whether or not their death was a result of COVID-19.

If your loved one has recently died, these tips offer suggestions for grieving during this incredibly difficult and isolating period.

- **Acknowledge that we are in a different time**

doing so helps to manage our expectations of ourselves and others

- Living in a pandemic has changed so much of how our society functions, including our day-to-day lives, how we care for the sick, how we care for the dying and how we care for the bereaved
- Our sense of control has been challenged at all levels
- Routines and rituals that normally bring comfort aren't readily accessible, which can increase feelings of isolation and loss

- **Understand the nature of grief**

this is important, as grief is far more complex than most people think

- When a loved one dies, grief is characterized by deep sadness and a yearning to be with the person who died
- Grief is also a normal reaction following other types of losses such as being diagnosed with a serious illness or losing one's job
- Grief typically follows a wave like pattern, which tends to ease over time as people adapt to their changed circumstances and regain a sense of control in their lives
- Grief is unique - there is no 'right' or one way to grieve

- **Give yourself permission to grieve**

this creates the space to acknowledge the different emotions that come with loss

- When someone you love dies, it is common to experience a range of emotions, including sadness, anxiety, loneliness, regret, anger and guilt; you might find that some of these emotions are even more intense right now
- Replaying events and going over details are a normal part of how we try to make sense of something; it is likely that you will have many questions and perhaps few answers
- During this pandemic, our society has had to make many changes to keep everyone safe; as a result, there are likely to be many other losses that all need to be mourned, including not being at the hospital when a loved one died or not being able to sit Shiva or hold a wake and funeral

- **Create a daily routine**

this is always important when grief is new as it provides a structure to your day, *and* is even more important during a pandemic

- Try to get out of bed at the same time each day
- Try to eat at regular meal times
- Plan your day in 'chunks' of time - including meals, exercise, tasks related to your loved one's estate or death, work, or connecting online with family and friends
- Write a daily 'to-do' list and check off items as you complete them – such as attending to administrative tasks or sorting through your loved one's belongings
- Carve out time to grieve – being sad is normal when you are grieving and it's important to give yourself permission to do so and to acknowledge the other emotions you might be experiencing

- **Focus on your self-care**

this is something grief experts always recommend given how stressful grieving can be

- Practice increased hygiene, especially hand-washing with soap
- Try to eat something even if you don't feel like it
- Where possible, avoid processed foods
- Limit your alcohol intake
- Exercise as part of your daily routine – consider an online exercise or yoga class
- Try an online meditation app
- Keep a journal of your thoughts and feelings and list any questions you have
- Limit your media exposure at this time

- **Challenge your thinking**

this is important because how we think affects how we feel and what we do

- In very stressful situations where we don't have a lot of control, our thinking can often make us feel more distressed and upset
- If you are aware that you are feeling increasingly strong emotions related to your loved one's death, such as guilt, anger or distress, ask yourself: *What am I thinking?* or *What am I telling myself about what happened?*
- It can be easy to blame ourselves even when there is no evidence for doing so
- To challenge your thinking, ask yourself, *How would I advise a friend in the same situation?* or *What would my loved one say if they were here now?*
- It often helps to write down your thoughts and your answers to the questions above and try to stick to the facts
- It can be helpful to remind ourselves and others: *We are in a pandemic that has caught the entire world by surprise. Difficult decisions had to be made for the health of our society as a whole, which were beyond the control of any individual*

- **Reach out for support**

staying connected to your family and friends is especially important

- Connect daily using technology with your family and friends even if you don't feel like it
- Call your doctor's office and schedule a virtual visit
- Arrange a call with someone from your spiritual or religious group
- Consider joining an online support group
- Make a virtual appointment with a grief counselor, especially if you feel overwhelmed or have little support
- Call a national hotline

- **Adapt rituals**

you can still honor your loved one in different ways

- Plan a "virtual celebration of life" where friends and family members can come together, to share pictures, and to reminisce
- Consider writing your loved one a letter or leaving them a voicemail - you can tell them how you feel, especially if you were unable to say a proper goodbye
- Make a play-list of their favorite music and share it with others in their memory

- **Plan for post-COVID-19**

making plans helps us feel more in control

- Make a 'to-do' list of tasks that you will need to complete when the restrictions ease
- Plan a memorial event or service for your loved one if you weren't able to during the pandemic
- Consider attending a support group for bereaved families who were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic
- If you have unanswered questions for your loved one's medical team, you might want to write them down and consider contacting the team at a later date to arrange a meeting

More information about coping with grief can be found at: dana-farber.org/bereavement

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