

Bereavement and the COVID-19 pandemic

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has not only impacted the physical, mental and emotional health of individuals worldwide, but has also affected our economic security, our livelihoods, our connection with others and many aspects of our daily lives. (2) The coronavirus has changed the way we live, and we are now surrounded by heightened fear, anxiety, and illness. For many people, it is changing the way we live, die, mourn, and grieve. (1)

COVID-19 has affected our social networks and the experience of bereavement, with both states being additionally challenging during the pandemic. (1) In the current COVID-19 pandemic people may be faced with the sudden, tragic death of loved ones in difficult circumstances. Restrictions on gathering and travel can mean that the traditional ways of saying goodbye are disrupted. (3) Many people will be on their own dealing with their grief, and carers may be self-isolating during bereavement. Many will not attend a funeral service, and some may experience multiple bereavements. (3, 4) Providing bereavement support should be an integral part of healthcare and is recognised as an essential component of palliative care service delivery. (5) Palliative care and bereavement services need to be aware of the potential for individuals to develop Prolonged Grief Disorder and of the collective grief experienced by communities in the face of the pandemic. (3)

WHAT IS GRIEF?

Grief is a natural reaction to loss. Common feelings associated with loss may include disbelief, sadness, anger, anxiety, relief, irritability or numbness. (3, 6, 7) While loss and grief are fundamental to human life, the course and consequences of bereavement will vary for each individual. For some people grief may be more complicated, leading to Prolonged Grief Disorder, or sometimes post-traumatic stress disorder. The impact on physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health can lead to social and work impairment, that may require further specialist support. The impact on health may lead to increased mortality, cardiac problems, and depressed immune function. (8, 9)

The COVID-19 pandemic is changing our traditional ways of respecting the lives of the deceased and our ability to voice our emotions. Physical distancing means that the usual practices of saying goodbye are disrupted. Rituals and traditions offer people an opportunity for comfort and to share thoughts and feelings. However, adaptations may be required due to COVID-19 in order to maintain their importance in our society. This is likely to affect the grief response. (3, 4)

COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE GRIEVING ⁽⁴⁾

Many people, including healthcare professionals, find it difficult to communicate with people who are grieving. As clinicians, we are not immune to the grief and suffering of others. Sometimes a death can have more of an impact than others, and it is important we look after ourselves.

It is important to accept and acknowledge the emotions that individuals and communities are feeling. As healthcare professionals, perhaps our best advice to friends and family is to listen and be present for the grieving person. The acknowledgement of the death provides an opportunity to share in their grief, as well as offer support and condolences. Most bereaved people value and appreciate the sharing of memories of the deceased, however, it is also important to respect their wish not to discuss the past. Advise people to remain connected to those who are grieving, whether to provide a listening ear, share thoughts and feelings, or being prepared to help practically, as required. As COVID-19 has demonstrated, remaining socially connected can be important, but there are also times when being alone can be equally valuable.

People should be advised that saying the “right thing” is likely to be impossible. As noted above, grief affects people differently and can vary moment to moment. Being present, active listening and observing non-verbal cues can help gauge the situation, and people should be guided to opening conversations only if desired by the person who is grieving. Remember that we connect via conversations that involve engagement and curiosity in order to understand. Following a script is not recommended, but some suggested phrases are listed below, if people request examples of what to say:

- I’m not sure what to say, but I am so sorry to hear this news.
- I am so sorry for your loss – you are in my thoughts.
- I’m so sad to hear this and I’m here if you need to talk.
- He/she was such a wonderful person/so selfless – full of positivity/kindness [whatever feels appropriate] they will be hugely missed.
- He/she will be missed so much – they were so special. You are in my thoughts.
- I am so very sorry to hear this sad news. I cannot imagine how devastated you are.
- I cannot imagine the hole that she/he will have left. If you need anything, let me know.
- So very shocked and saddened by this sad news. Hard to believe [name] has gone. I am here when you need me.
- This is so heartbreaking – I wish I could be there to hug you.

SUPPORTING PEOPLE WHO ARE GRIEVING ⁽³⁾

Healthcare professionals not only support patients and their families, but also other colleagues. The suggested advice below may be important in supporting the people around us during the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of deaths could be considerable, and everyone will feel vulnerable to varying degrees. See appendix 1 for a printable Patient Information Sheet.

- It is normal to react to loss and people may exhibit feelings of anger, sadness and frustration about what they have experienced.
- In the days after the loss, physical needs may change. Utilising relaxation strategies may be helpful in restoring sleep cycles. Keeping hydrated, maintaining regular and healthy mealtimes, and exercise, are also important.
- The normalization of daily activities and maintaining routines can help regain some control over the uncertainty of COVID-19. Regular wake-up times and sleeping patterns can also help physically and psychologically, as well as exercise routines.
- People should be encouraged to seek support:
 - Emotional isolation should be minimised. Even if people cannot visit, or the funeral or memorial service was different than expected, individuals can offer their condolences and show support in different ways. Phone calls are still possible, and emails, letters, and messages through social media.
 - It is important to remain in contact with significant people in our lives. Even though physical isolation exists, remaining connected via the telephone or other media can reassure us. A regular flow of communication reminds people that they are not alone, and that other people are still thinking of them and prepared to support them.
 - Attending a funeral or memorial service may become problematic for many people during spatial isolation. However, video recordings, livestreams and participation via online platforms can facilitate a presence in another way. It may be important for people to set time aside for reflections, reminiscing and planning special ways to remember the deceased, e.g. a private goodbye, looking at pictures, lighting a candle, creating a digital slideshow, or singing and

playing music with others online, or individually. Given the restrictions during COVID-19, people may arrange a private memorial service for a time when some normality returns to our societies.

- People should be reminded that asking for help is okay, and that support services are readily available. Many people will be struggling, but not everyone will display their emotions outwardly. The provision of opportunities to share stories and reflect upon events will be integral to our psychological wellbeing.
- Suggest boundaries to limit distress. For instance, minimize news and media consumption, and seek information from trusted sources.
- Download the **MyGrief App** which provides information, tools and resources to support bereaved people, and also provides practical strategies for families and friends on how best to support someone throughout their bereavement. Available on both the App Store and Google Play.

BEREAVEMENT CARE

Palliative care and bereavement services worldwide should be prepared to deliver bereavement care differently during the coronavirus outbreak. Alternative services could include, for example, online resources, social media information, updating written information, setting up phone or web-based services, or referring persons to available resources. (3) Palliative care memorial services may also be more important over time to support the collective grief of the community. As a health care professional, and if you feel comfortable, be active in the planning or delivery of the service, even if you have not done so before. An opportunity to honour those who have died and connect with a grieving community can have a significant healing effect.

SELF-CARE FOR CLINICIANS

As clinicians, we are not immune to the grief and suffering of others. The pandemic may increase the personal impact clinicians feel in caring for others. It is important that clinicians look after themselves and, each other, and utilise resources to enhance this support. This may include using local employee assistance programs or “in-house” resources, seeking the support of your own care providers, and using resources such as those listed below. It is also important to recognise the imperfections in our healthcare system and advocate for working cultures that are conducive to the wellbeing of all parties concerned.

If you need to talk to someone immediately you can call

- [Beyond Blue](#) (1300 22 4636)
- [Lifeline](#) (13 11 14)
- [Mensline](#) (1300 78 99 78)
- [Suicide Call Back Service](#) (1300 659 467)
- [1800 RESPECT](#) (1800 737 732)
- [Q-Life](#) (1800 184 527)

ADDITIONAL HELP AND RESOURCES

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement is an independent, not-for-profit organisation and operates the Statewide Specialist Bereavement Service. ACGB provides a range of education, clinical and research and consultancy services including the:

- Practitioner Consultancy Service: 1300 858 113
- Bereavement Information and Referral Service: 1300 664 786
<https://www.grief.org.au/>

Social Work & Bereavement Services Australia:

https://padlet.com/pippa_blackburn/4swt8e5poqzt

Lifeline: (13 11 14)

<https://www.lifeline.org.au/>

MindSpot:

<https://mindspot.org.au/>

Grieflink:

<https://grieflink.org.au/>

Beyond Blue:

https://www.beyondblue.org.au/?&gclid=EAlaIQobChMliNPzlvrs6AIVwZSPCh0CIQ-CEAAYASAAEgJN5fD_BwE

10 Psychological Tips for Coping with Coronavirus (COVID-19):

https://mindspot.org.au/assets/pdf/10_Tips_for_Coping_with_Infectious_Diseases.pdf

Black Dog Institute:

<https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au>

Grief Centre New Zealand:

<http://www.griefcentre.org.nz/>

Centre for loss and life transition:

<https://www.centerforloss.com/2020/03/funerals-coronavirus-families/?fbclid=IwAR2YHrPDyIM1W5eapHcRVoWRnWSCOkYwZWYAu1kiNbQg5mewZKbg4K68XE0>

Funerals - when you can't be together:

<https://whatsyourgrief.com/funerals-when-you-cant-be-together/>

Grieving in exceptional times from Irish Hospice:

<https://hospicefoundation.ie/bereavement-2-2/covid19-care-and-inform/grieving-in-exceptional-times/>

Corona Virus - Dealing with Grief and Bereavement:

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus-dealing-bereavement-and-grief>

What's your grief? (Includes 10 Meaningful Ideas for Funerals or Memorials in Isolation):

<https://whatsyourgrief.com/funerals-when-you-cant-be-together/>

National Bereavement Alliance

<https://nationalbereavementalliance.org.uk/>

NOTICE: This ANZSPM guidance document has been prepared by the ANZSPM COVID-19 SIG. It is subject to regular review and revision in response to the changing COVID-19 environment. Check anzspm.org.au for updates and speak to your local Palliative Care Team.

Coronavirus and the palliative care response: EAPC web page to source and share information, with many links to publications and resources including national guidelines videos, scientific journal collections
<https://www.eapcnet.eu/publications/coronavirus-and-the-palliative-care-response>

The Centre for Complicated Grief:

<https://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu/for-the-public/resources/>

Coping with Grief and Loss tips:

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/grief/coping-with-grief-and-loss.htm>

Resources for clinicians' self-care

<https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/ten/>

<https://www.palliaged.com.au/tabid/4316/Default.aspx>

<https://palliativecare.org.au/resources/self-care-matters>

THIS INFORMATION IS OF A GENERAL NATURE AND SHOULD BE ADAPTED DEPENDING ON LOCAL PROTOCOLS.

For further assistance, please contact THE PALLIATIVE CARE TEAM on _____.

APPENDIX 1: PATIENT INFORMATION SHEET

At a time of loss, it can be very difficult to know what to do. Below are some suggestions which have helped families who are dealing with grief during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What do I do now?

It is normal to react to loss be kind, tolerant and compassionate to yourself. Allow yourself to feel and react in ways that feel natural to you.

What does my body need?

In the days after the loss, your body might react. Take good care of yourself. Try to use helpful strategies to restore sleep and be able to relax. Remember to keep hydrated and uphold regular and healthy mealtimes to restore your body. Try to normalize daily activities and keep routines. Regular bedtimes and getting-up times can be of help, as well as exercise or going out in the garden or for a walk if possible.

How can I deal with my grief during the COVID pandemic?

Try to keep contact with those you care about, and who care about you, even if times of social distancing.

Choose options that are suitable for your circumstances:

- Be mindful not to become emotionally isolated. Even if people cannot visit or the funeral or memorial service was different than expected, allow others to offer their condolences and show support in different ways. Phone calls are still possible and emails, letters, and messages through social media.
- Stay in contact with the people closest to you. Even though you cannot be physically near, reach out to them and keep conversations going through the telephone or other media. A regular flow of communication can remind you that you are not alone, and that people are thinking of you and are there for you.
- If you or your network cannot attend a funeral or memorial service, it is still possible to feel part of the event by setting up video recordings, a livestream and participation by online platforms.
- Be mindful of setting time aside for a private goodbye, look at pictures, light a candle, create a digital slideshow or sing and play music together online. Arrange a private memorial service for later when it is possible.
- Remember it is ok to ask for help! Even though many people are struggling, your own feelings are valid. Be mindful that you ask for the care and attention you need. Sharing your thoughts and feelings and listening to the experience of others can be helpful.

How can I reduce the stress that I am under?

Limit distress, if possible, by reducing news and media consumption and seeking up to date COVID-19 information from trusted sources. Take steps to protect yourself and loved ones. Try to accept offers of help from loved ones and to take things slowly.

Where can I get more help?

Download the **MyGrief App** which provides information, tools and resources to support bereaved people and also provides practical strategies for families and friends on how best to support someone in the midst of their bereavement. Available on both the App Store and Google Play.

Call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or your local bereavement service on _____

Visit _____

*insert which websites would be most helpful for grief during COVID pandemic.

REFERENCES

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