



Grieving a Loved One During COVID-19

The Covid 19 global pandemic has resulted in experiences of loss that are new to many of us. Loss of our communities, of our routines, of our safety, of traditions and celebrations, as well as loss of employment has left us with much to grieve. One of the most unthinkable losses however, is the loss of the opportunity to be present with our loved ones during the end of their lives. Because of isolation and social distancing restrictions, whether our loved one is dying from the virus or from another illness or accident, this inability to be with them and to participate in rituals following their deaths may interfere with our ability to process their death and to grieve.

The absence of physical closeness

Not being physically present with a loved one who is dying or to witness their passing may leave a bereaved person with a sense of uncertainty or disbelief that they are gone. Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition, identifies two essential mourning tasks in Western cultures that are now missing for the bereaved, holding the hands of the dying person and spending time with their body afterward. These opportunities allow one to acknowledge the reality of a death, and begin to embrace the pain of the loss, a pain that is natural to grieving. In the absence of these essential mourning tasks it is now more difficult for those who are bereaved to come to terms with their loss.

The absence of in-person rituals and traditions

Following the death of a loved one, family and friends typically support the bereaved and help them to gradually return to their lives and to begin to adapt to the loss. At this time, the inability to participate in rituals and traditions following the death of a loved one, including gathering with community in-person to support one another, may make grieving more complex. According to Dr. Katherine Shear, MD, Founder and Director of The Center for Complicated Grief, with the loss of family members and friends during the COVID 19 pandemic, one may be left with a grief process that looks different and makes accepting the loss and closure more difficult. In the absence of usual rituals and traditions grief may become prolonged, persistent and pervasive, interfering with functioning and lasting longer as one struggles to adapt to the loss.

Guilt and anger

Family members may be left with feelings of guilt that they didn't do enough for their loved one, that they could have done more to prevent them from getting sick or hospitalized. They may feel guilty that they abandoned them when they were most in need. Feelings of anger, a natural grief response, may be directed toward the physical distancing rules that prevented them from taking care of their loved one and from being with them. They may feel anger at the hospital for taking their loved one away from them or for not saving them. They may feel anger at the virus itself for the way it has interfered in their lives in such a profound and personal way. Therapist and grief specialist, Joan Monheit, LCSW, suggests that there may even be an aversion to their loved ones death, where one becomes ambivalent about adapting to the loss, and to accepting the reality of their death.

Acknowledging grief

The bereaved may feel that they have dishonored or betrayed their loved one due to the circumstances of their death and the loss of rituals and traditions, thus derailing the grief process. Marvin K. White, minister of celebrations at Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco, states, “I don’t know if it’s about finding closure at this moment. Extend your grief and live in the question and don’t worry if it’s right or wrong.” While traditional rituals may not be accessible for now, accepting grief into one’s life is essential to healing and well being. Engaging in alternative ways to honor and acknowledge those who have passed may provide a source of solace.

Alternative rituals

“It’s hard to find a new ritual and give it meaning. It’s hard because you might have to break the mold of a traditional memorial and funeral service, which requires removing judgment about what we’re doing or not doing,” states death doula Alua Arthur. While it isn’t equivalent to sitting in the same room, holding hands or hugging loved ones who are grieving at this time, video and voice technology can allow for us to check-in with others, find social support, and share stories and memories about the deceased. Online memorial walls or religious services can also become a virtual space that allows for communities to gather and grieve collectively, while engaging in rituals at the same time in different locations, such as lighting a candle and placing it in the window or listening to specific pieces of music, can also comfort and connect us with loved ones as we honor those who have passed.

Looking to the future

Another way in which we process grief is to anticipate the future. Although it may be difficult to do so in these uncertain times, and painful to think about in the absence of a deceased loved one, envisioning a celebration of their life may provide a sense of hope to individuals, family members, and the community.

For Staff, Faculty, and Post-Docs

Be Well at Work Employee Assistance is a free, confidential resource staffed by licensed mental health professionals who can provide direct support as well as connect you with referrals covered under your insurance plan. Appointments are available by phone or video using a HIPAA-compliant platform. To schedule an appointment, please call (510) 643-7754 or email employeeassistance@berkeley.edu

For Students

CAPS offers short term counseling for academic, career, and personal issues and also offers psychiatry services for circumstances when medication can help with counseling. There is no charge to get started, and all registered students can access services regardless of their insurance plan. Students can call (510) 642-9494 to make an appointment with a counselor.

References

- 1.) Dr. Katherine Shear, MD, Founder and Director of The Center for Complicated Grief, and Dr. Richard Hara, faculty member, Columbia University School of Social Work, on 4/7/20.
- 2.) Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Director of the Center for Loss and Transition, in conversation with Elizabeth Yuko, Rolling Stone, “Processing Grief During a Pandemic, When Nothing is Normal” 4/10/20.
- 3.) Joan Monheit, LCSW, grief specialist, in consultation with Maureen Kelly, LCSW on 4/14/20.
- 4.) Alua Arthur, Death doula, in an interview with Alex Ward, Vox, “How coronavirus is changing the ways we grieve and mourn the dead,” 4/7/20.
- 5.) Marvin K. White minister of celebrations, Glide Memorial Church, in an interview with Ryan Kost, S.F. Chronicle, “Even death has changed,” 4/26/20