

Loss of a loved one to COVID-19

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Death is an inevitable part of life. Grief is a natural reaction to death and is part of the healing process. Dealing with a significant death can be one of the most difficult times in a person's life. There is no categorically right or wrong way to feel; grief is personal and everyone experiences it differently. This is especially true during a pandemic which has impacted every facet of daily life.

Sudden or shocking losses, such as that by COVID-19, can be traumatic in that they challenge your sense of security and confidence in the predictability of life. And trying to find healing in a world which has been turned upside down by a pandemic can compound that trauma. Under normal circumstances, we turn to others in our lives for support. We might gather with friends and family to cry, share happy memories, and offer care and support to one another. The coronavirus pandemic has affected many of these usual supports and grieving rituals.

Signs of Grief

The length of the grief process is different for everyone as there is no predictable schedule or timeline for grief and many usual supports are changing in response to the pandemic. Although it can be quite painful at times, it is important to be patient with yourself as you experience your unique reactions to the loss – it cannot be rushed. When experiencing grief, it is common to:

- Feel like you are "going crazy"
- Have difficulty concentrating
- Feel sad or depressed
- Be ambivalent
- Feel numb
- Lack energy and motivation
- Have trouble sleeping
- Be irritable or angry (at the deceased, oneself, others, higher powers)
- Feel frustrated or misunderstood
- Feel disbelief or unreality of the loss
- Nightmares
- Experience anxiety, nervousness, or fearfulness
- Feel like you want to "escape"
- Experience guilt or remorse
- Feel regret

With COVID19, feelings of guilt or regret may be heightened because you may not have been able to be there to support your loved one in their final moments. Or perhaps you were present but felt distanced due to having to wear PPE. While these feelings are difficult, it is important to remember that this is not a situation you could control and you are not alone in your grief.

With COVID19, we may have missed final moments. For many people, the days and hours at the end of a loved one's life are especially poignant. It can be a time to reconnect intentionally to say good-bye. With strict isolation measures in place, people are missing out on those final farewells. Technology is an imperfect substitute for the in-person embraces that we may long for.

With COVID19, there can be a loss of traditions due to corona virus restrictions. Every culture has its own customs and rituals for mourning loved ones which involve social connection and sharing that grief as a community. Many are actively working to figure out new ways to engage in such social connection while practicing physical distancing. Spiritual and cultural rituals and traditions that take place after death are designed to honor the deceased and offer emotional and instrumental support to those who are grieving as well as to engage in reaffirming life. For some, not being able to perform these final rites can be yet another source of distress and loss. Physical distancing means that friends and family cannot gather in the usual way to hold a funeral, memorial, or another spiritual service. The inability to spend time with loved ones afterward can make it more difficult to come to terms with the reality of death.

With COVID19, feelings of isolation can become intensified. Grief can be an isolating experience under normal circumstances, but social distancing and quarantine have made the process lonelier still. Loss is a reminder of how many things are out of our control—and sudden and unexpected loss can bring on feelings of anxiety and fear along with that grief.

Grief as a Process of Healing

The good news is that people tend to be resilient in the face of grief. Whatever type of loss you have experienced, it is important to remember that your feelings are valid and that you are not alone in this. The grief process is not linear, but is more often experienced in cycles, similar to climbing a spiral staircase where things can look and feel like you are just going in circles, yet you are actually making progress. It is normal for significant dates, holidays, or other reminders to trigger feelings related to the loss. Taking care of yourself, seeking support, and acknowledging your feelings during these times are ways that can help you cope. With time and support, things generally do get better. If you feel stuck in your grief, talking to a counselor or a supportive person may help you move forward in the healing process.

Your cultural background affects how you understand and approach the grief process. Talking with family, friends, or clergy/spiritual leaders is one way to strengthen your awareness of possible cultural influences in your life. Friends and family may be able to help you generate ideas to create your own rituals. Reaching a place of acceptance takes time, but in doing so you are able to acknowledge that your loved one is no longer physically here, but that you will always have the memories, joy, and love that you shared with that person.

Each one of us has our own style of coping with painful experiences which will have to be adapted to the physical distancing requirements/guidelines in our area. The list below may help you generate ideas about how to manage your feelings of grief. Additional grief resources and tips are available on our website at www.pacificu.edu/counseling under our [Coping & COVID-19](#) page.

- Practice basic self-care: eating, staying hydrated, getting enough rest, moving your body, eating healthy foods
- Let yourself feel grief – all of your feelings are valid – it takes time to integrate this loss into your life, especially when your usual routines have been disrupted
- Be patient with yourself and your process
- Listen to music
- Express your experience of grief through creative outlets such as painting, poetry, drawing, sculpture
- Create a sense of predictability and routine or structure
- Reach out to family and friends to share memories and experiences and connect emotionally
- Consider planning for a later memorial or other gathering
- Consider engaging in mindfulness, journaling, visualization, prayer, or meditation
- Seek support from the grief community; join a support group
- Seek spiritual support
- Reach out to the Student Counseling Center

Complicated Grief

It is particularly important to reach out to a professional if you are having trouble coping. You may be experiencing what is known as complicated grief. This condition occurs in about 7% of people who are grieving and is marked by an inability to think of anything but the loss, excessive avoidance of any reminders, or even thoughts of suicide or self-harm. If you are having suicidal thoughts, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 for support and assistance from a trained counselor. If you or a loved one are in immediate danger, call 911.