



COVID-19 PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLNESS GUIDE:

GRIEF AND MOURNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Grief is the emotional state we enter when we lose someone or something permanently or when we anticipate such loss. This can occur when someone dies, there is the breakup of a relationship, a job is lost, something intangible (sense of safety) is lost, or we lose a sense of normalcy. There are six phases of grief and loss that do not necessarily occur in any specific order:

- Denial – People deny the reality of the situation (e.g., think the diagnosis is wrong, deny that death is permanent) even though they know the facts. During this phase, people often feel numb or isolated.
- Anger – People may feel angry at the dying or deceased love one, if though they know they are not to be blamed and feel guilty for being angry. Or they may feel angry at themselves, like for not doing enough. People may also just feel angry in general or feel angry toward specific other people, like the healthcare team.
- Bargaining – People often deal with their feelings of helplessness and powerlessness by trying to reclaim what they lost or are losing. They may try to get control through “if only” statements (If only they had received different medical attention) or try to make deals (e.g., if God keeps them alive, I will pray more). Sometimes during this phase people have discussions that go nowhere.
- Depression - People often feel sad because of the pain of their loss. They may cry a lot, have changes in their appetite or sleep patterns, or have unexplained aches and pains. This sadness often passes as people move to acceptance. However, it may reappear during death anniversaries or other times that were important or meaningful related to the person or thing that was lost.
- Acceptance - In this phase, people understand what they have lost and how important the person or thing was to them. They no longer feel angry or sad and they are done with bargaining to get it back. They are ready to begin to rebuild their life. Often, they feel a sense of peace.
- Meaning making – It is often during this phase that healing takes place as people move beyond acceptance to making meaning. This meaning making can take many different forms. Finding meaning cannot erase grief, just the pain of grief. And it can help people move forward.

Grief-related emotions often come in waves that seem uncontrollable, intense, and even painful at times.



Mourning is the external demonstration of grief. It involves the behaviors, rituals, or traditions we engage in while we are grieving such as time alone, wearing certain clothes, praying, and gathering with family and friends. One of the most challenging aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic is accepting or working through adjustments to our traditional ways of mourning, including funerals and life celebrations. There may be delays in funerals or limits on the number of people who can attend. COVID-19 may overshadow those people who are losing family and/or friends to other causes. There may be frustration around not being able to honor a person's wishes after their death (open casket, certain flowers, gathering together, etc.).

This Wellness Guide will help you cope with these losses and find comfort and even meaning as you move through the grief process. Helpful resources are also included.

Understand the Grief Process

- Name your losses or anticipated losses
- Recognize the stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, acceptance, and meaning making
 - Name the stage of grief you are experiencing
 - Appreciate that grief is a normal process, even if it is upsetting
 - Know you may feel different feelings in each of these stages
 - Understand that people can go through these stages multiple times and they don't always happen in the same order
 - Pay attention to whether your feelings during each stage are getting stronger or are becoming less intense
 - Remember, people go through the grief phases differently

Accept and Feel Your Feelings

- Give yourself permission to feel your grief-related feelings – it is essential for coping with grief
 - Recognize what your feelings relate to
 - Do not suppress your feelings – suppressing feelings delays coping and moving forward



- Voice your feelings, like anger or sadness, to help yourself keep your feelings from controlling your behavior – for example, talking about anger can help you avoid lashing out (yelling, breaking things, sending angry emails)
- Give yourself time and space to grieve
 - Explain gently to those in your life (children, partner, work colleagues) what your needs are during this difficult time - if you are infected with COVID-19, allow yourself time to physically heal and know that your ability to focus and concentrate will take some time to recover as well
- Be compassionate
 - Be kind and gentle toward yourself
 - Avoid blaming yourself or others for losses, no matter how large or small you understand the loss to be
 - Be kind and gentle toward others – realize others around you may also be grieving and under more stress than normal
- Stay focused on the present and ride the waves of your emotions
 - Try this approach - when waves of grief hit you, imagine riding the wave; know that the wave will peak, crest, and then disappear; do not try to change the path of the wave; allow yourself to recognize its presence, ride it, and watch it break on the beach
- Seek others with whom you can share your grief
 - Talk through thoughts and feelings with family, friends, support groups, clergy and/or a mental health professional
 - Connect socially and avoid psychological isolation, even while you distance physically
- Be aware of the signs of complicated grief or depression, in both you and your support system
 - Note if you have persistent depressed mood, lack of enjoyment that begins affecting activity and relationships, excessive guilt, suicidal thoughts, and the use of substances such as alcohol or drugs to cope
 - Recognize that these can be signs of a more serious issue and you should seek professional care from a mental health provider
- Try to determine the meaning of the loss for you, even if it's difficult in the moment
 - Recognize that your values affect how you view your losses



Mourning

- Create new rituals that maintain physical distancing while still honoring the deceased
 - Create a formal livestream funeral to make sure the deceased's larger community can say their goodbyes
 - Hold a virtual memorial service where people can share pictures, videos and stories of their loved one
 - Plan a memorial service or party in person once the pandemic is over
 - Share the deceased's favorite meal or drink together online along with favorite memories of the person
 - Start a Facebook or Instagram page for people to post pictures and comments
 - Engage in generous and creative ways of supporting the deceased
 - Raise funds for a charity or cause that was important to the deceased
 - Start a GoFundMe for people in need that have similar interests or values as your loved one
- Contact the National Funeral Directors Association to find a highest standard funeral home (see resources, below) - there are frustrating logistical challenges that include funeral homes refusing to care for and prepare the bodies of individuals that died from COVID
- Ask for help addressing the logistical challenges in obtaining death certificates, accessing the deceased's bank accounts, and taking care of the other business matters of the deceased
 - Ask the funeral home to provide death certificates
 - Look into policies, which are different for each city, county, and state
 - Check with the local Department of Health

Helpful Resources

- Emory Staff Wellness Resources: www.emoryhealthcare.org
- Griefshare: <https://www.griefshare.org/>
- National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization: <https://www.nhpco.org/patients-and-caregivers/grief-and-loss/>
- Centers for Disease Control Guidelines: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavi->



- <rus/2019-ncov/community/tribal/faq-burial-practice.html>
- Spiritual health: <https://www.emoryhealthcare.org/spiritual-health/staff-resources.html>
 - Berinato, 2020; Kessler, 2020: <https://www.purdue.edu/caps/covid-19/coping-with-grief.html>
 - National Funeral Directors Association: <https://www.rememberingalife.com/find-a-funeral-home>
 - Palliative Care in COVID Twitter feed: <https://twitter.com/hashtag/palli-covid?lang=en>
 - Green Burial Council: <https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/>
 - Five Wishes: <https://fivewishes.org/>
 - Kessler, David. *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*.
 - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/fixing-families/202004/survivors-guilt-and-covid-19>
 - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/how-be-yourself/201711/six-tips-handling-survivor-guilt>
 - <https://www.businessinsider.com/5-steps-to-deal-with-guilt-during-covid-coronavirus-pandemic-2020-4#5-talk-to-yourself-like-a-trusted-friend-5>
 - <https://www.inquirer.com/opinion/commentary/coronavirus-african-american-cases-deaths-survivors-guilt-20200506.htm>