

Grieving a Coronavirus Death: Help for Special Circumstances

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

If someone you love has died of the novel coronavirus, it is likely that you are facing a number of challenging circumstances. Grief is always difficult, but it is especially difficult whenever a death is sudden, unexpected, and unfolds in ways that violate our expectations and put up barriers to the cultural grief rituals that help us through.

I have been a grief counselor and educator for over forty years, and this pandemic is unlike anything I have encountered. I am sorry you have been so deeply affected by this hardship.

First, it is important to understand that grief is always normal and necessary. It is part of our love. But in complicated loss situations, the grief that follows often gets complicated, too. It is essentially normal grief in an abnormally challenging loss situation.

If this is where you are finding yourself right now, I hope this article will offer you some affirmation, comfort, and hope in the weeks to come.

If you couldn't be with the person who was dying, or if you couldn't view or spend time with the body after the death

In most cases, infectious-disease protocols are keeping loved ones apart from those who are critically ill or dying. Whether you were across the country or just down the road, you probably felt frustrated and maybe even distraught that you couldn't be by your loved one's side. While the enforced separation may have been necessary, you may understandably feel cheated of precious last moments and goodbyes.

Sometimes hospital caregivers have been able to use technology to help families communicate with loved ones dying of COVID-19 (or other causes during this period of restrictions). I hope this was true for you, but I also realize that these measures are not the same as being there.

Holding the hands of the dying and spending time with the body afterward are ways that we as human beings acknowledge the reality of a death and begin to embrace the pain of the loss. These are two essential mourning needs that will be naturally more difficult for you to meet in the weeks and months to come.

I encourage you to talk out your thoughts and feelings about these circumstances with people who are good listeners. When the time is right, I also encourage you to reach out to the hospital and/or funeral home staff who cared for your loved one and ask them to tell you anything they can. If you can reconstruct what happened even a little bit, you will likely

feel better. Often our minds are searching for a few details and assurances, and when they're provided, we can rest a little easier.

If a funeral wasn't possible or has been delayed

Funerals are essential because they help us begin to meet all of our mourning needs. The mourning journey often takes years, and a good funeral sets us off on a good path.

Funerals help us acknowledge and accept the reality of a death, share memories, convert our relationship with the person who died from one of presence to one of memory, give and receive social support, express our grief out loud, consider the meaning of life and death, and help us start to think about how to live life forward with meaning and purpose.

Yet I realize that in this pandemic, many gatherings have been rendered impractical or impossible. I've been encouraging funeral directors and families to try to have a brief immediate ceremony, even if only by Zoom or Skype, followed by a larger memorial service once the restrictions are lifted. Some people have also been holding an informal, intimate service in their own homes to mark the death and honor the person who died.

Please know that it's never too late to have a ceremony, and especially if you weren't able to be with the dying person or the body afterward, holding several ceremonies is a good idea. Ask a clergy person, celebrant, or friend to help you. You will find that people who were unable to support you at the time of the death will want to provide you the support you need and deserve. And inviting friends and family to support one another is something you will always be glad you did. To achieve the goal of multiple ceremonies, you might have an immediate candle-lighting service in your home, a graveside or scattering service as soon as possible, and a tree-planting ceremony on the anniversary of the death, for example.

Essentially, ceremony and ritual have the power to partially fill some of the holes created by the COVID-19 death circumstances. And it's never too late to use them.

If you're separated from your support systems

While most of us are sheltering in place, we're apart from the people we would normally talk to, hug, and hold close during a time of great loss.

If this is true for you, I urge you to use all the technology tools you can to reach out to the people you care about. Video calls are probably the best substitute for face-to-face conversations. Voice calls come second. After that, emails, texting, and social media work too. And don't forget the power of the handwritten letter! The point is to stay connected as much as possible AND to be open and honest in those communications about whatever it is you are feeling or struggling with at the moment. Your candor will encourage others to be honest as well, creating the opportunity for mutual support and kindness.

In addition to creating a lifeline in the time of separation, these tools will help you maintain and build your important relationships so that when gathering and travel restrictions are finally lifted, you will have the strong connections and good momentum you need. Everyone will be on the same page and ready to support one another in person. You can even use this homebound time to plan ceremonies, build online memorial pages, and gather photos, video footage, and memorabilia of the person who died.

If you're angry, anxious, self-blaming, or feeling guilty

In complicated grief circumstances, these feelings are especially common. They're normal! Feelings aren't right or wrong—they just *are*. Please don't make it even harder on yourself by judging your feelings or thinking that you're abnormal.

Maybe you're angry about how the person who died contracted coronavirus or was cared for while ill. Maybe you feel anxious that you or someone else will get the disease (and perhaps die), or maybe the death has given rise to anxiety about finances and other life realities. Maybe you blame yourself about some aspect of what happened. And maybe you feel guilty that you are still living while your loved one is not.

Again, these and other feelings are normal and common in grief, and especially in complicated grief. Whenever you're having an uncomfortable or "stuck" feeling, the key is to express it as much and as often as it takes for it to begin to soften. You express it by sharing it with a friend, writing about it in a journal, or talking about it in a support group or to a grief counselor, for example. Expressing your grief is called mourning, and mourning is how, over time, you step one day at a time toward healing.

I understand that right now, the traumatic nature of your loved one's COVID-19 death and your thoughts and feelings about it may color every aspect of your grief. It is part of your grief, but it is not the totality of your grief. Other factors that contribute to your grief include the nature of the relationship you had with the person who died, your unique personality, your religious and cultural backgrounds, your gender, your age, your previous experiences with loss, as well as others. Your grief is a complicated blend of thoughts and emotions, most of which stem from your love for the person who died. Over time you will come to find that your grief is as much or more about the life than it is about the death.

If you are able to muster the courage to actively mourn and use ceremony, over time you will find a path to a renewed life of meaning and purpose. Remember, you are not alone, and there are no rewards for speed. I hope you will share your coronavirus story and grief tips with me at drwolfelt@centerforloss.com.

About the author

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