

Coping With Grief

Five things to do if you have lost a loved one during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused great change and led to multiple losses. People cope with loss in different ways. If you have lost someone dear to you during the pandemic or you are grieving other significant losses, there are certain things you can do to help yourself cope.

If you have lost a loved one

Losing someone we love stirs up powerful feelings—from shock to sadness, guilt, anger, and fear. Experiencing loss can feel overwhelming, exhausting, and even physically painful. Grief can make it difficult to sleep well, eat, or concentrate. Grief can also make us question things we may not have questioned before, such as our identity and faith.

These are all normal reactions to loss. The more significant the loss, the more intense grief tends to be and grieving the loss of someone you love while also coping with ongoing anxiety and stress related to the pandemic can feel particularly overwhelming.

Grieving is a very individual experience, and it is a process that happens in fits and starts. People often talk about grief coming in waves or being like a roller coaster ride—some days and hours feel harder, darker, or scarier than others. Whatever your experience with grief, it is important to be patient with yourself. And while grieving loss is an inevitable part of life and impossible to rush, there are some things you can do to help yourself cope better as the process unfolds.

1. Connect with other people

Pain has a way of turning our attention inwards, towards ourselves, and grief can make us feel very isolated and alone. However, one of the best things we can do during this season is to connect with people we love and trust. Even if you cannot gather physically with friends and family you can:

- ✓ Call (and host conference calls) with family members and friends
- ✓ Ask family and friends to share stories and pictures with you (e.g., by email, video chat, messaging apps, group chat, Facebook.)
- ✓ Coordinate a date and time for others to honor your loved one by taking a particular action (such as reciting a selected blessing, poem, or prayer) within their own household.

2. Do things to help create memories or honor your loved one

Grief takes time, and it can help to give it some dedicated time and attention along the way. For example, you may want to set up a sacred space in your home (or in nature) where you can come to acknowledge your grief for 10-15 minutes a day. You can place photos, candles, and other special objects here to honor your loved one or find other ways to express yourself. Creating this space can

allow you to find a rhythm of sitting with your grief for a period and then letting it go and attending to other tasks and responsibilities. Here are some other things you can do:

- ✓ Develop a virtual memory book, blog, or webpage to remember your loved one. Add your own thoughts and photos and ask family and friends to contribute memories and stories.
- ✓ Hold a virtual memorial or thanksgiving service.
- ✓ Do something (such as planting a tree, preparing a favorite meal, or supporting a charitable cause) that has significance to you and the loved one who died.

3. Pay attention to the basics of sleeping, eating, and movement

Intense grief can feel all-consuming. It can make it difficult to sleep or eat well or find the energy to get out for a walk or move our bodies in other ways. However, attending to the basics of sleeping, eating, and movement is critical. These foundational areas are the pillars of health. If you can take care of yourself in these areas, you will have more resources available to deal with powerful feelings and other challenges, and you will cope much better over time.

4. Be patient, and do not pressure yourself to “get back to normal”

It is important to remember that there is no “normal” timetable for grief. Some people start to feel better in weeks or months. For others, it can take a lot longer. Grief has its own rhythm, nature, and timing that we cannot entirely control. Even after years pass, strong feelings related to grief and loss may well up from time to time. This is an opportunity for revisiting this significant loss and more healing and growth.

5. Ask for help and support from others

Almost anything you experience during the early stages of intense grief is normal—including feeling like you are stuck in a bad dream or questioning your religious beliefs. If you feel like grief is too much to bear or if the intensity of emotions such as sadness, guilt, and anger does not ease over time, find a mental health professional with experience in grief counseling. They will be able to support you as you work through intense emotions and overcome obstacles to healing. You may want to:

- ✓ Seek out grief counseling, mental health services, or support groups. If you are not sure where to start you can contact employee assistance, search out services online, contact your local doctor or call a local hotline.
- ✓ Seek support from faith-based organizations, including any religious leaders and communities you are connected to.
- ✓ Seek support and advice from other trusted community leaders and friends.

Finally, do not forget to celebrate any positive changes, new perspectives, and moments of happiness. As the waves of grief become less frequent and intense you will likely begin to notice that you are finding fresh energy, enjoyment and hope. Acknowledging these does not diminish your loss. Rather, it can become another way to honor a loved one.