

APRIL 2021

Grief, Death, and Dying During a Pandemic: Volume 2



A resource for anyone experiencing grief and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic

This resource is a complement to [one created in April 2020](#). It builds upon the themes discussed in version one and explores grief, death and dying a year into the pandemic. It tackles topics specific to grief and isolation, ways to honour people who have died and how to support someone who is grieving. The authors include practitioners and scholars in the areas of social work, palliative care, counselling, bereavement, spiritual care, death education, and funeral services. It includes information on:

- When we feel grief
- After a death has occurred
- How to support someone who is grieving



When we feel grief

I feel alone in my grief and being required to physically isolate isn't helping. How can I connect with others so I don't feel so lonely?

On its own, grief can be an incredibly isolating and lonely experience. Add in a pandemic that's forcing us to physically stay apart and it becomes even more challenging. It's important to note that physical isolation and emotional isolation are different and that being alone doesn't necessarily mean feeling lonely. If you are feeling alone in your grief and are looking for connection:

- Plan ahead and be intentional with how you are going to connect. Making connection a planned part of your day can help ensure it happens. Create a daily routine/schedule/list of things you want to accomplish to provide structure each day. Keep it flexible! If you don't achieve what you wanted to, it's okay! Try again tomorrow.
- Connect with friends and family virtually, on social media through emails and/or text messages, hand-write letters or cards, phone a friend or family member, or spend time outside with a friend or family member if you're able to do so safely.
- Plan for time outdoors to take in fresh air and get your body moving. Even if you are not directly connecting with another person, getting some fresh air and passing other walkers can be helpful.
- If you feel you need extra support, don't be afraid to ask. Peer support groups and bereavement walking groups are positive ways to connect with others who are also grieving. Also remember that not everyone needs professional or peer support - and that's okay too. Sometimes accessing online resources or reading stories about others' experiences is enough to feel connected. Do what feels right for you. Everyone's grief journey and experience is unique.

After a death has occurred

When the pandemic began, I couldn't have imagined that a year later we would still be isolating and our ability to honour our loved ones in the usual ways restricted. How will this impact my grief journey and ability to heal?

Be kind and gentle with yourself. This is uncharted territory for everyone and it is important to remember there is no right or wrong way to grieve or honour your person – only what feels right for you.

Delaying funerals and other rituals does not mean you are delaying your grief. Several months after a death, those who have had even a small, simple ritual at the time of the death may feel they are 'moving along' their journey with grief, such that they don't plan to proceed with a deferred or larger gathering. And you may need to give yourself permission not to do so.

If you feel some sort of ritual is wanted/needed, a funeral director, faith community leader or individuals/organizations who support the grieving population can provide guidance.

With traditional funeral and memorial options still being restricted, how can I honour the person in my life who died?

If you decided to wait until restrictions are lifted, or have decided to forgo a traditional funeral altogether, there are many other ways to acknowledge your loss and honour your loved one. For those who had someone die early in the pandemic, you have experienced a year of firsts without your person and you may not have planned to acknowledge milestones like birthdays, anniversaries or special occasions. Thinking ahead to this year, be intentional with how you would like to honour the memory of your person and be open to changing traditions.

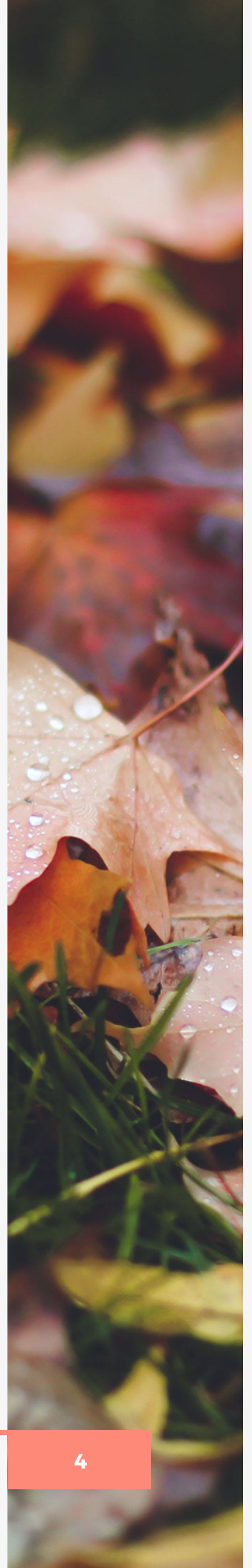
Some pandemic-friendly options to do with family and friends include:

- Making an online photo collage or scrapbook and having friends/family each create a page
- Having a virtual get-together and invite people to share a favourite story, memory, song or picture
- Create a playlist of favourite songs or songs that remind you of your person with family and friends or listen together online
- Creating a recipe book with your loved one's favourite meals and cook one together virtually.

If none of this feels doable, that's okay too. How you choose to honour your person is not a reflection of your love for them nor the depths of your grief. Memorializing is as personal as your relationship to the person who died.

Is it okay that I feel relieved that we aren't able to follow the usual rituals and formalities after someone dies?

Yes, absolutely. What you are feeling is understandable and valid. The death of a loved one is an intensely stressful time, which can result in conflicts with family and friends for many reasons. If removing the pressures of planning a funeral or not having to interact with certain people brings relief and comfort, that is okay. We often get caught up in doing the expected rituals following a death for that exact reason, because they are socially expected and not necessarily how we wish to acknowledge the death or the person who died. The current situation is forcing us to think and do things differently and that can be a positive thing, not something to feel guilty about.





How to support someone who is grieving

I'm struggling what to say to my friend who is grieving. I don't want to say the wrong thing or make them feel worse.

It is natural to feel nervous out of fear of offending but don't let that prevent you from acknowledging your friend's loss – saying nothing at all is worse.

What not to say: "At least"... "At least they didn't suffer. At least you can have another child. At least you can marry again." It's best not to start any sentence with "at least" when speaking to someone who is grieving. It invalidates what they are experiencing.

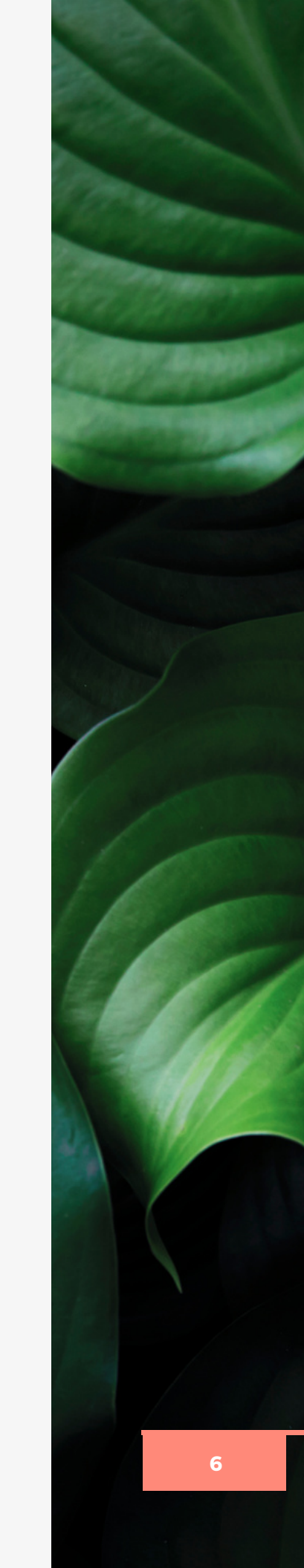
Instead: "My favourite memory of your person is..." When you share your memory, say their person's name. People often shy away from talking about the person who died out of fear of upsetting the griever. More often, the person grieving wishes for and welcomes the opportunity to talk about them.

What not to say: "I know how you feel." Even if you have experienced a similar loss, you don't know how they feel. Everyone's experience is different and everyone's grief unique. It's not useful to compare.

Instead: "I can't imagine what you are going through."

What not to say: "They are in a better place now" or "It was God's plan". For many who are grieving, the best place for their person to be is with them, here and now. For some, this may bring comfort but for others religion and faith in a higher power are challenged after a death.

Instead: "I wish I had the right words." There is nothing wrong with acknowledging you aren't sure what to say.



What not to say: “Let me know if you need help with anything/Let me know what you need.” This statement puts the onus on the grieving person to ask for help. In the days, weeks, months after a death people who are grieving don’t know what they need nor how to ask for help.

Instead: Tell them HOW you can help. Pick up or order groceries, drop off dinner, shovel the driveway, fold and put away their laundry, pick up the kids from school. Make sure if you offer, you follow through.

What not to say: “It’s been months. Aren’t you over this yet?” There are no timelines in grief – no stages to finish or finish line to cross. Grief is not something you get over, it something we carry with us for a lifetime.

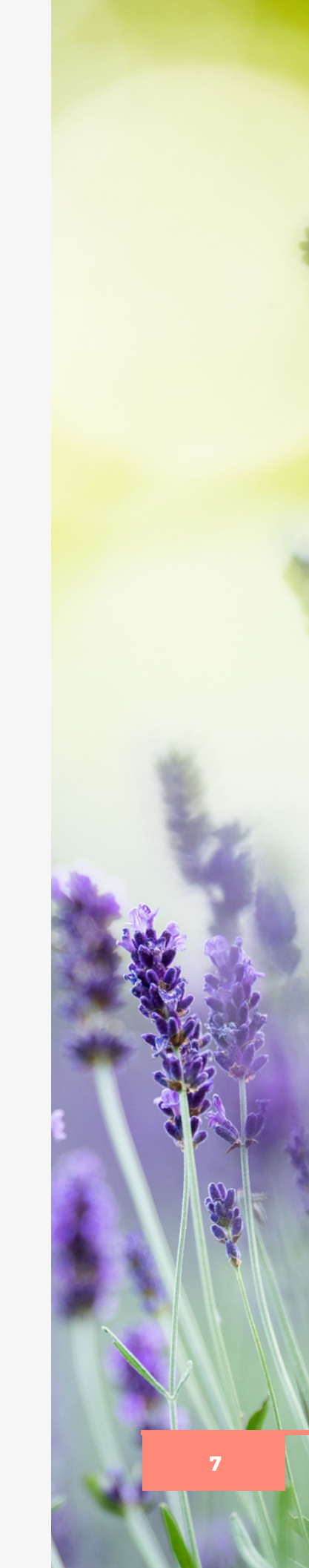
Instead: It’s been about ____ months since your person died. What have you found to be helpful during this time?/Have you noticed any changes in how you’re feeling in regard to your grief?

How can I support someone who is grieving?

It is not your job to “fix” someone who is grieving - there is nothing to fix – they aren’t broken. Grief is a natural response to loss and something we have to travel through, not get over. There are ways you can help:

Get comfortable with being uncomfortable: Talking about death is not easy. Try to remember this isn’t about you, it’s about the person who is grieving and what they are going through. Be intentional about making time and space for this person and be present for the conversations they want to have, when they are ready to have them. Be present. Listen more. Talk less.

Respect how they are grieving: The relationship with the person who died, culture, beliefs, upbringing, and more can influence how a person grieves. Refrain from telling them what they should/shouldn’t be doing. There is no right or wrong way, only their way.



Help with the funeral/memorial – whatever that looks like: Offer set up a digital “guest book” that people can sign acknowledging the person who died, compile email messages or social media posts from friends and create a keepsake, help your friend go through photos to create a slideshow.

Think past the first week of meals: Work with other friends to coordinate and organize meal deliveries that extend past the immediate days/week after the loss. Not having to worry about meals removes can help reduce some stress.

Acknowledge the milestones: Make a point of checking on the small days as well as the big ones. Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays are going to be tough. Offer practical ways you can support someone through them – organizing a memorial, preparing a special meal, putting together a slide show.

Continue checking in: The bereaved are often inundated with support in the days and weeks following a death but that initial support peters out or disappears altogether. While some may welcome the respite from calls and casseroles, others may start to feel lonely and isolated. Checking in can be as simple as a phone call, text, video call or porch visit letting the person know you are thinking of them.

Resources

Delton Glebe Counselling Centre (519-884-3305)
<https://www.glebecounselling.ca/>

Distress and Crisis Ontario (416-486-2242)
<http://www.dcontario.org/centres.html>

Grand River Hospital and Regional Cancer Centre (Spiritual Care) (519-742-3611 Ext. 2142)
<http://www.grhosp.on.ca/care/visitors/spiritual-care>

Hospice Waterloo Region (519) 743-4114
<http://www.hospicewaterloo.ca>

Interfaith Grand River
<https://www.facebook.com/IGR2001>

KidsGrief.ca
<https://kidsgrief.ca/>

K-W Counselling Services (519-884-0000)
<https://www.kwcounselling.com/>

LivingMyCulture.ca
<http://livingmyculture.ca/culture/>

Multifaith Information Manual (print resource)
<http://canadianmultifaithfederation.weebly.com/shop-manual.html>

Muslim Social Services (519-772-4399 ext. 2707)
<http://muslimsocialserviceskw.org/pdf>

MyGrief.ca
<http://www.mygrief.ca/>

Shalom Counselling Services of Waterloo (519-886-9690)
<https://shalomcounselling.org/>

Advance Care Planning Information (1-800-349-3111)
<https://www.speakupontario.ca/>

Bereaved Families of Ontario (Midwestern Region) (519-603-0196)
<https://bfomidwest.org>

Cambridge Memorial Hospital (Spiritual Services) (519-621-2333)
<https://www.cmh.org/programs/spiritual-services>

Canadian Mental Health Association (Waterloo Wellington)
Here 24/7: 1-844-HERE-247(437-3247)
<https://cmhaww.ca/>

St. Mary's General Hospital and Regional Cardiac Centre (Spiritual Care) (519-744-3311)
<https://www.smgh.ca/care-services-support/spiritual-care>

Waterloo Wellington Local Health Integration Network (1-888-883-3313)
<http://www.waterloowellingtonlhin.on.ca/>

When Someone Dies (brochure)
<http://www.hospicewaterloo.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2016/01/WhenSomeoneDies5thEd.pdf>

When Someone is Dying (brochure)
http://hpcconnection.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2016/08/whensomeoneisdying_community_18jan2018_final.pdf