With COVID-19 cases falling in some places and rising in others, it seems likely that the coronavirus pandemic will continue to affect all of our lives for some time, even if it’s not as widespread in the future. Even as we try to assess what the new “normal” is, the lives of so many have already been taken, disrupted or forever changed due to COVID-19.

Whether death is caused by COVID-19 or an unrelated condition, grief is sure to follow for those left behind. Grief is a normal response of sorrow, heartache or loss that occurs after losing someone or something important to you. Grief is not a psychological disorder, but does involve emotional, behavioral and physical reactions that cause distinct changes:

- Intense feelings of sadness, emptiness, loss or feeling nothing at all (numb)
- Waves of anger towards God, other people, the deceased or nobody in particular
- Difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness or slowed thinking
- Muscle weakness or tension, abdominal discomfort or changes in appetite
- Difficulty sleeping or persistent fatigue
- Desire to withdraw from others or disengage from usual activity
- Questioning the meaning and purpose of life

While grief feels different for each person, all of these reactions are considered normal. For most people, the experience of grief lingers, but eventually becomes tolerable within a few weeks or months. People find a way to accept the loss and function in their daily lives.

**When Grief Doesn’t Pass: Complicated Grief**

Sometimes, grief remains all-consuming and makes transitioning to a new sense of normal or moving forward almost impossible. This is called complicated grief. Complicated grief can be diagnosed as clinical depression or prolonged grief disorder. For example, if a worker dies from COVID-19, fellow coworkers may think, “Why wasn’t it me?” Such guilt can linger and trigger unhelpful beliefs that delay the grieving process. It is important to acknowledge these feelings and talk with someone to work through them.

**COMPLICATED GRIEF**

- Sadness, anger or despair are daily, persistent and intolerable
- Individual is unable to feel comfort from social support
- Days are mostly bad
- Daily functioning is significantly impaired
- Thoughts of one’s own death are recurring and tied to feeling worthless and unable to cope

**How Is Grief During a Pandemic Different?**

Grief is always difficult, but the social distancing requirements of COVID-19 have fundamentally changed the ways we grieve. Mental health professionals agree that the absence of important traditions that formally honor the deceased increases risk for complicated grief. Being unable to gather and mourn with loved ones and formally say goodbye at a bedside or during a funeral or memorial service can cause a sense of ambiguous or delayed grief in those left behind. It can feel as though the person has not really died; others may feel angry that they were not able to say goodbye.
Honoring the Deceased During COVID-19

As a society, we have many ways to honor people we’ve lost. Hosting a wake, viewing, funeral service, a celebration of life or Shiva are just some of the ways we honor our loved ones. While each practice has its own variations, these traditions share many elements that are essential to the grieving process:

- Acknowledging the reality of the death
- Finding meaning in the loss
- Expressing emotions caused by the loss
- Receiving and giving support
- Remembering or honoring the deceased
- Saying goodbye to the deceased

Although it may seem impossible to achieve these goals without in-person gatherings, we must try. This means finding new ways to facilitate the grieving process. If you are among those who have lost someone you care about, COVID-related or otherwise, consider how the person would have wanted you to honor their memory. Try these strategies to take care of yourself and facilitate the grieving process:

**Acknowledge this is hard.**

Losing someone you care about is extremely difficult; current circumstances only worsen the struggle. Give yourself permission to feel what you are feeling without judgment.

**Attend or host an online funeral service.**

While funeral services during times of social distancing are typically only open to immediate family, some families are adapting by using video platforms to stream the service online. While a video funeral can feel awkward or uncomfortable, some may find that witnessing the funeral in real time remains a meaningful experience.

**Host an online celebration of life.**

Similar to an online funeral service, video platforms can be used to gather select family and friends to honor the deceased and provide encouragement to one another. Participants may choose to share stories, pictures or video.

**Maintain boundaries.**

Although we may remain physically separate, in many ways our world has never been more connected. In the age of social media, texting and video chats, you may feel pressure to check in with others before you are ready. Take the private time you need to grieve.

**Balance loss activities with healthy distraction.**

Loss activities that help you connect to your grief may include journaling or looking at old photos of the deceased. Activities such as exercise, cleaning, cooking or watching a good movie can also provide a healthy break from the intensity of your emotions.

**Write a letter to the deceased.**

If you feel like you never got to say goodbye to your loved one, consider writing a letter. If you did have the opportunity to say goodbye at a bedside or wake, what would you have said? Consider reading it aloud to someone you trust.

**Do something to honor the deceased.**

As a gesture of remembrance of the deceased, cook their favorite meal, watch their favorite movie or donate to their favorite cause. Consider telling other family and friends about your action. They will likely provide you encouragement and support.
**Stay Connected and Find Support**

Stay connected to family and friends. The simple act of hearing or seeing people who care about you can play an essential role in your healing. If you need more specific support, consider attending an online grief support group. If you are struggling to process your grief and feel stuck, it may be time to ask for professional help. Telemental health services can be a great alternative to office-based counseling. Check with your LIUNA Health & Welfare Fund to see if telemental health services are available and how to access them.

**Resources**

- The Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia School of Social Work
- American Foundation of Suicide Prevention