

Grieving and Supporting the Bereaved in a Time of Social Distancing

People cope with grief in many ways. Grieving depends on our individual personalities as well as our relationship with the person who has died. One thing is for certain, however: the process is never easy. Unfortunately, that process has been made all the more difficult amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Our normal routines for processing grief – wakes, funerals, memorial services, family gatherings – are disrupted by our need to self-isolate and our inability to travel.

With many of our customs and rituals now upended but quarantine and self-isolation, we are being forced to adjust the way we express grief. It's important to understand that we cannot just pause the process and pick it up again once life returns to normal. Our coping can be an important factor in healthy grieving for those closest to the deceased.

The following can help you process your grief and aid those who are grieving even when you may be isolated and unable to attend the funeral or wake.

- Reach out to help them. Don't let your fear of saying the wrong thing prevent you from reaching out to those who have lost someone. These days, we all need social contact. Even a few kind words can mean the world to someone who is hurting and alone.
- If you're uncomfortable over the phone, write an email or send a card. Include any fond memories you may have of the deceased and offer your help.
- If you're comfortable talking on the phone, give them a chance to speak about their feelings, especially the frustration they may be experiencing due to losing a loved one during self-isolation. Many people preplan their funerals and wakes. Unfortunately, their loved ones may not have been able to follow those plans due to current circumstances.
- Be consistent in your support. Someone who is grieving wants to know that they and their grief matter at this time. Add a time to your calendar to consistently call, send a text or email, and check-in with the person. Keep them in your thoughts so that when you see an article, video, or something that might speak to them, you can share it and let them know they are on your mind. Be consistent. This is a time when it is easy to be forgotten.
- Offer to stay in contact regularly and ask if they're open to video chatting. Seeing facial expressions and other non-verbal cues can help you better understand what they're experiencing.
- These can be very lonely times to grieve. It is important to acknowledge that this is a difficult time to experience a death by naming it. Follow up by asking, "how have people been supporting you?", and if you are sincere about it, "if you are lonely or want to talk about your person, you can call me. I will answer or call you right back."
- Text or email inspirational words or photos of the deceased, if you have any. Or just send a card saying I'm thinking of you.
- If you live nearby, you can offer to pick up groceries or run other errands. This can be especially important to older friends and family, who may be having a hard time shopping and providing for themselves during the pandemic.
- Try to arrange a place and time to visit outside somewhere where you can practice safe social distancing but still talk face to face.



- Suggest that they arrange a memorial gathering after threat of the virus has passed. That way everyone who knew the deceased can have a chance to honor his or her memory.
- Make a donation. It can be comforting to know something meaningful and good is being done in memory of a loved one. Make a gift to a charity in memory of the person who died, then pick up the phone and speak to the grieving about your gesture.

At-Home Memorial Service

Many of us will be mourning the loss of a loved one without being able to attend a funeral service. Good Grief, a non-profit organization that provides education and support for people, and especially for children, dealing with grief, offers the following guidance on holding a simple home memorial for a loved one who has passed.

Tips for Planning a Memorial at Home

1. **Ask** others how they would like to contribute
 - Invite those who will be with you to write some remarks
 - Invite those who cannot be with you to email or send their thoughts which you can read aloud
2. **Consider** inviting someone to join you via Skype or Facetime
3. **Prepare** any children in the household
Honestly tell them:
 - What you will do
 - Why you will do it
 - What it means to be dead
4. **Plan** the ritual by identifying each part and who is responsible for what first
5. **Assemble** videos or songs you want to play
6. **Set Up** the space where you will do the ritual
 - Remove distractions
7. **Remember**, creating a funeral is not about it being perfect, but it is about the ritual being an authentic mourning experience for you and anyone who can join you.

Sample Ritual for a Memorial at Home

8. **Music** Play an opening song
9. **Candle Ceremony** Light a candle and sit in silence for a few minutes
10. **Reading** Read a poem or listen to someone reading it online
11. **Activity** Do an activity you and your family selected
12. **Music** Play a song
13. **Sharing** Share memories, feelings, and reflections
14. **Gratitude** Write in a gratitude journal or share words of thanks
15. **Ritual** Place an object or memento, like a letter to the person who died, in the earth
16. **Music** Play a closing song

Resources

- AARP Grief and Loss Resources: www.aarp.org
- Americans for Better Care of Dying: www.abcd-caring.org
- Good Grief: www.goodgrief.org

