

# LOSS, GRIEF AND COVID-19: HOW TO SUPPORT SOMEONE

In the age of COVID-19, physical distancing is driving a wedge in those moments of connection. One of the most time-tested ways of coping with grief is to practice social connection. Now, individuals are coping with grief and sorrow alone, socially isolated and without the physical comfort we often need from friends and family.

## Missing Final Moments

The act of saying goodbye to a loved one often begins well before a funeral or burial. For many people, the days and hours at the end of a loved one's life are especially poignant. With strict isolation measures in place in most hospitals, people are missing out on those final farewells. That's true when people die from COVID-19, but also from more familiar causes such as heart attacks or cancer. While critical to slowing the spread of the disease, those measures also make it hard for mourners to come together to grieve.

Some people have begun filling that void with virtual funerals, but technology is an imperfect substitute for an in-person embrace. Being in close physical proximity with friends or other mourners helps us produce feel-good hormones like oxytocin, dopamine and serotonin. When people aren't physically present to say goodbye and grieve with other mourners, they may be more likely to experience a sense of ambiguous loss, where it's hard to get closure. There's often a lot of frustration and helplessness, because people feel disempowered.

## Prolonged Grief Disorder

Such difficult circumstances may increase the odds that an individual experiencing bereavement will develop complicated grief, also known as prolonged grief disorder. Prolonged grief is an intense grief that is distinct from depression but endures and interferes with normal functioning. Prolonged grief is marked by persistent longing and sadness for the deceased, and a sense of disbelief or inability to accept the loss. Without treatment, prolonged grief increases the risk of substance use, sleep disorders, impaired immune functioning and suicidal thinking.

## 10 Ways You Can Support Someone Grieving During the Coronavirus Crisis

- Don't minimize what someone is going through
- Validate their feelings
- Let them know whatever they are feeling is perfectly normal
- Make an effort to reach out regularly: Touching base could go a long way, even if you simply send a card, email or text.
- Ask them what would help: Never impose what you know works for you on them.
- Listen but don't try to fix the situation: All too often, we offer quick fixes or minimize a person's feelings because of our own discomfort in watching them grieve. But the best thing we can do is be a witness to their pain, acknowledge it and hold that space with them.
- Host a virtual memorial, candle-lighting or storytelling event
- Encourage them to get professional support: Visit [findtreatment.samhsa.gov](https://www.samhsa.gov) to search for treatment available close to you.