

Reflective Suggestions for Grieving Families During the COVID-19 Crisis

During this time of uncertainty, we are likely feeling more anxious and scared. Certainly, if you have recently lost a loved one it will complicate your grief even more. In this time of unprecedented events, the bereaved are entering into a time of potentially delayed and extended times of grief. Losing a loved one can be isolating enough, and now the mandated isolation guidelines force us into a new type of mourning period.

As a grief therapist, I have worked through many scenarios that demanded a more creative form of goodbyes rituals. Each circumstance was as unique as each person. I know that there is so much that is not ever in our control with death. This is especially true now. It is natural to feel cheated and angry about not being able to hold the service you desire and receive the physical support from your community. It is important to remember that delaying a service has nothing to do with the level of love you have for your beloved.

I have heard people say that they rationally understand why they cannot plan the funeral service they originally would have, yet they feel their beloved deserves more. Because these services are actually for the benefit of the living, it will be important for you to acknowledge this additional loss you may feel. It doesn't have to be "ok" with you just because the entire world is going through this. Your loss is the most significant right now, because it has happened to you.

With many states under strict guidelines for funeral services, what are your options? The important thing to remember is that a ritual to acknowledge the death is what matters and is so important. However, the magnitude of this ritual is not the central focus. What will be missing, unfortunately, is the close physical support that many rely on following a death. The services following death are geared for you, the living. Therefore, it is important to still participate in a form of ritual that allows for an acknowledgment of the loss. It's also "ok" if this pandemic isn't the most difficult thing in your world right now. In grief, the pandemic a complicating factor, yet the loss and the long-term implications are likely the focus for you.

What are some ways you can foster closure during this unique time?

- Get a memory candle and light it as a family, either in person or by a Zoom, Skype, or a FaceTime call. Each family member lights a candle and says what they will miss most about the deceased and what they learned from the deceased. It is important this is not a rushed experience and that time is taken to pause between each person's

turn sharing. If you feel drawn to share what may be the thing you miss the most about them in this unprecedented time, it is perfectly acceptable. We know that no one can change the circumstances, yet we certainly are allowed to have any emotions that arise.

- **Schedule family dinner with immediate family if it feels safe to do so.** It will be very important to stay connected whether by phone, text, emails, Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts, etc. For people of certain age groups there may be discomfort in using technology, therefore, a good old-fashioned phone call and letters in the mail will help immensely.
- **Donate money in memory of your loved one to a nonprofit that resonates for you and resembles their passion.** Create a virtual fundraiser in your beloved person's name.
- **Plant a tree in your yard to have a designated focal point of remembrance**
- **Have a picture of your loved one enlarged and framed with a special candle placed by the picture.** Light the candle in moments of intense darkness or in times of quiet. Talk to your person out loud. This is perfectly acceptable and can be very cathartic for many.
- **Start a journal and each day designate time to write out your feelings.**
- **If you are on social media, some closure can be felt if we publicly announce the death.** The important part is to write their name and say it as often as you can. This allows for the reality to gently settle within.
- **Set a designated time as a family to read a page from a grief book together each night and discuss.**
- **Hold a prayer service over the phone or other methods.** This may be helpful to do as a family. Many clergy are providing online services during this time. If your loved one was in a hospice program, they may have chaplains and spiritual resources available that could facilitate something private for you.
- **For those that want a traditional burial, it is still an option in some states, just with a limited amount of people.** This may feel like enough of a ritual for your family, and you may decide on a picnic or receptions at a later in their honor. Nothing regarding the future plans need to be confirmed now.
- **With cremation, some are choosing to wait until we are through this time to organize a service and are having a small candle lighting and blessing as a family.** Needing to postpone the service for a couple months also has some advantages as this is often a time when the bereaved feel people have moved on and forgotten the death and their loved one. This is an opportunity to come together as a community when

typically, the numbness is subsiding, and you may be able to be more present for the actual service. This time also allows for us to be more intentional about our choices. There are benefits in having some time to make these decisions.

What is key is that no matter when the actual “formal” service happens, those closest to the deceased create a goodbye ritual that feels right. Grief should not, nor can it be ignored because of the health crisis in this country. **Grief does not care. Grief needs attention and love regardless of the current situation.** Some people want to use this time to not deal with the grief. Not dealing with it now will have dire consequences later. Allowing this new reality to be acknowledged and present is important.

I also want to mention that it may feel overwhelming right now to think about having some type of service now, and then a larger one later. What I suggest is to not commit to anything in the future. When later arrives, see what feels right. A family must do what feels right for them. We should not be judgmental of others or ourselves. Your Funeral Director will be an excellent person to help you process all of this. What matters is only today and what you need in this immediate time. Your Funeral Director is there to aid in your mourning process, helping it to continue while offering you some of the important support resources, within safe guidelines.

It is also important that people be creative in how they will reach out to one another who are suffering. The bereaved will need extra support in this time. Unfortunately, some could not say goodbye before the death occurred due to the strict visiting restrictions implemented at many locations. This too is a complicating factor. Let people love you in the best way they can right now.

- I have seen the love and support shared through various **greeting card initiatives** where people are sending the immediate family a greeting card each week until this all ends. They are consistently sharing their sympathies. This is incredible support and, in some ways, a practice I would hope to see continue long after this health crisis ends.
- I hear about people **dropping off meals** at the front step with disposable dishes, so everyone stays nourished, safe and healthy.
- **Flowers** are being sent as a gesture of love.
- **Pictures of lit candles** are being texted as a way of sending light to the family.
- People are receiving **emails about favorite memories** people have that are focused on their loved one.
- **Social media is full of pictures** of the deceased and loving thoughts.

People are being more intentional during this time of reaching out to support. Please keep doing so. There are some online grief groups that may be helpful to join now to connect with others who understand your emotions and can offer support, too.

Grief is very taxing on our immune system, and it is easy to not care as much about hygiene and immunity–health during grief. Now, more than ever, we need to protect our immune systems! During this pandemic it is essential to:

- Stay hydrated
- Eat something healthy when hungry
- Get fresh air and take walks if it feels right
- Sleep when you are tired (sleep tends to be the first to get affected in grief)
- Continue to take your vitamins and supplements
- Wash your hands often
- Connect at least once a day with a close friend – cry, scream, and laugh when you feel it
- Practice meditation and/or prayer – this can boost your overall wellbeing.
- Do yoga, gentle self-talk, or breathing with your hand over your heart to stay connected to yourself
- Listen to calm music –this can help you relax
- Find comfort in reading some calming short quotes or listening to grief books on audio

My sincere sympathies to those of you who are dealing with such a painful loss during a time where the world feels even more uncertain. Grievers become experts in living within uncertainty. Our best plan of action is to find the present moment and be in it. In grief, the “NOW” can feel very painful, so we rely on the suggestions above and our breathing to comfort us. I truly hope that you and your family will take time (within the guidelines) to find a safe and meaningful ritual that helps you to keep moving with your grief. We cannot go around it and we do not move on.....we move with our grief... at our pace, our timeline, and our style.

When we love deeply, we grieve deeply. May each one of you find a safe place to land that brings comfort and reassurance during this uncertain time.

“Your body is away from me, but there is a window open from my heart to yours.” –Rumi

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