

# Grieving Alone in the Age of Covid-19

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Early in April, I learned that a very good friend of forty years was very ill, and days later I learned he died. It was shocking, upsetting and my immediate thought and reaction was to contact his widow (also a very good friend) and drive 90 miles in order to attend the funeral. And then, it occurred to me that, because of the coronavirus, there would be no funeral, and that I couldn't just drive to their home and that this family (including their two grown sons) would be alone in their grief, and that none of us would have the benefit of the extended hugs we would share.

Offering condolence or going through the process of grieving a loss is never automatic; we typically become a bit more emotional. For me personally, I become more subdued, thoughtful and overwhelmingly sad. If we are the ones experiencing the loss, we may also feel lost, not knowing what to say or do. Everyone is unique - we all react differently, and there are no rules about dealing with loss. What is typical is that we usually will receive support from those closest to us - family and/or friends. Phone calls, handwritten notes and personal visits along with the hugs, the hand holding and even the arm around the shoulder.

Typically, there are also rituals - often religious or cultural - that many of us follow when someone dies. These rituals almost always involve personally sharing our condolences, person-to-person support, and storytelling to honor or memorialize the person who died. There may be a ceremony, a burial and times designated for visits. However, in addition to feeling cheated by death, we are also cheated of all the in person support we so dearly need due to the restrictions in place to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

## **What can we do?**

Humans can be very creative and adaptable to unusual circumstances when necessary and grieving in the time of Covid-19 is a time where flexibility and creativity are necessary. We cannot rely only on our old practiced responses. We may be creatures of habit, but those are the habits that work in normal times. These are not normal times.

## **Some alternate suggestions:**

Accept that these are not normal times and we have no idea when any sort of normalcy will return or what it will look like! This becomes an additional part of our loss! We need to give ourselves permission to grieve in our own way and give ourselves the freedom to seek alternative ways.

It will be helpful to name what we are feeling! One way to do this is to think of an image that describes what we are going through. Examples include *feeling like the rug got pulled out from under me*, OR *feeling like I'm on an emotional roller coaster*, OR *feeling like I'm lost in the woods and I don't know the way out!* In a time of grieving, we will have a wide range of emotions and needs - solace, support, a listening ear, reminders of the 'good times,' the freedom to cry, feeling lonely, anxious, fearful, sad,

angry, etc. Unfortunately, we will probably not have the physical presence of others that usually helps to fill these needs.

We will be more responsible than usual to let others who we are close to know that we are hurting - even if we don't usually do that. Those who are closest to us emotionally will know how to be helpful to us. We may not feel like using email or like talking on the phone or being on a video or FaceTime call. We can choose who to talk to or how long to stay on a call. It may also be helpful to do some writing in a journal if you keep one, or in a tablet or on any other paper that's available. Write down anything and everything that you are thinking and feeling and remembering. Talking or writing will bring back memories - this is part of appreciating what we had and what we have lost, and both are part of the grieving process.

Because a death in the family can be upending, it can be helpful to try to stay mindful in the present moment and to try to stay grounded. Mindfulness can help us take the uncertainty of the future one day at a time, one step at a time. In times of an emotional crisis, we need to slow ourselves down. In times of uncertainty, it's also helpful to remind ourselves of who we are and what we know. For some, that includes religion; for others, its focus is the physical world and nature. I get particular joy from a walk in a park or even sitting in my garden. Even a once a day practice of each of these reminders can help us know that we will continue to live in ways that will help us to adjust to our new realities.

I sent my newly widowed friend a few emails about my own thoughts and feelings about her and her family's loss. I did not receive a response from either of the first two emails. In the third, I reminded her that when I moved away, 25 years ago, I transplanted two rose bushes they gave me as a birthday present, and that they have been producing delicate pink flowers every year since. She loved hearing that and we continued a conversation about her husband's love of gardening. These are the type of images and memories that outlive all of us and that we all appreciate hearing and holding onto.

If you feel the need to talk to someone who can help, you can find the name of a qualified psychologist in your area by trying our [Psychologist Locator](#).