

Grief and Bereavement for Health Care Professionals

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the way people are living and managing illness. COVID-19 threatens the way a significant number of Australian's will die. The pandemic will cause sudden deaths in a small percentage of Australians infected by the virus. People over 70 years of age have a higher risk of dying from COVID-19 despite immunisation. [1] Risk of death is also increased in people who are vulnerable or who are living with comorbid conditions. [1] These deaths may occur in hospitals or aged care facilities where the barriers that keep the infection controlled may also isolate the patient, family and loved ones at the end of life.

Due to ongoing visitation restrictions, people who are sick in hospitals or aged care facilities are likely to have decreased visits from families and friends. Grieving, bereavement and ritual in the era of COVID-19 will change as a result. Family members are being instructed to avoid any contact with the deceased (such as touching or kissing). [2] People may be buried or cremated quickly as the numbers of those dying increases, and while this is familiar and usual within some cultures and religions, it is not in many others.

If people are unable to say goodbye in the traditional way, then different rituals of mourning and of remembrance will need to be created. One way may be via the online environment (Skype, Facetime) or social media (Facebook) where this has become a more familiar sight in recent years. Even if people are not able to physically attend a funeral, a ritual can be organised to remember that person – perhaps lighting a candle, playing their favourite music while reminiscing about them, spending time in the garden if that was one of the things they loved doing. Even though there are physical restrictions, this does not mean people need to be emotionally cut off from saying goodbye. Many funerals can be recorded via video or audio for those unable to attend. During this pandemic period people all over the world have found creative ways to communicate and stay connected to others – think outside the box and create a personal memorial. Another longer-term possibility is to plan for a memorial service or funeral to be held later, as sometimes the planning itself can help.

In the longer term, some people may suffer the effects of sudden deaths, the inability to say goodbye or from the lack of a traditional funeral or being unable to attend one. The effects of social isolation in grief and loss could also impact on mourning. Grieving and mourning from a distance can also be very hard if people are unable to travel. Health professionals need to be aware that while COVID-19 will come to an end, the effects could be longer term.

Peer reviewed August 2022

References

- [1] Immunisation Coalition, Risk of Dying from COVID-19, January 2022, available at https://www.immunisationcoalition.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/2022_03_24_Covid-risk-chart-MJA.pdf
- [2] NSW Health, COVID-19 – Handling of bodies by funeral directors, March 2020, available at <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Pages/covid-19-funeral-directors.aspx>

Resources

Harvard Review – the discomfort you are feeling is grief

- <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>

From the Irish Hospice Foundation

- <https://hospicefoundation.ie/bereavement-2-2/covid19-care-and-inform/grieving-in-exceptional-times/>

Collective loss

- <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/well/family/coronavirus-grief-loss.html>

No funerals

- <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-rites-insight/there-are-no-funerals-death-in-quarantine-leaves-nowhere-to-grieve-idUSKBN2161ZM>

Forbidden mourning

- <https://overland.org.au/2020/03/forbidden-mourning-how-covid-19-threatens-our-collective-memory/>

Children's deferred grieving during the pandemic

- <https://www.winstonswish.org/pandemic-grief/>

Support Organisations

Beyond Blue

- [Looking after your mental health during the coronavirus outbreak](#)

BACP – British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

- [Coronavirus anxiety: how to cope if you're feeling anxious about the outbreak](#)

CDC – Centers for Disease Control & Prevention

- [Mental Health and Coping During COVID-19](#)

The University of Melbourne – Counselling & Psychological Services:

- [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): managing stress and anxiety](#)

APS – Australian Psychological Society

- [Tips for coping with coronavirus anxiety](#)

Psychology Today

- [How COVID-19 May Impact Mental Health](#)
- [COVID-19 Fears: How to Calm a Child's Anxiety](#)

APA – American Psychological Association

- [Psychologist leads innovative approach to tackle psychological toll of COVID-19](#)
- [Speaking of Psychology: Coronavirus Anxiety](#)