

Supporting You with Your Grieving Process, During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Floating the Waves of Grief



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1. A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

We would like to express our deepest sympathies to you and yours, who have been affected by the loss of your loved one. We are deeply sorry that you are grieving the loss of your loved one, during these exceptional times.

To help to protect public health and reduce the spread of COVID-19, the Government of Ireland have implemented restrictions, which will likely effect your bereavement process. The death of a loved one is always a challenging event, even during times where such restrictions are not in place. Unfortunately, during COVID-19 and resulting restrictions, the grieving process will be even more difficult. This will feel truly unfair; we extend our heartfelt condolences to you, during this time.

This handbook seeks to provide information and support on grief and bereavement, with a particular focus, on grieving during the COVID-19 pandemic. The handbook provides information and suggestions on how you may cope with your grief and also, how you may support others who are grieving during COVID-19. We hope that you find some of the information in this handbook to be supportive to you, and others, during these exceptional times.

“What we have once enjoyed deeply, we can never lose. All that we love deeply, becomes a part of us.”



2. GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT

The death of a loved one is one of the most challenging psychological and emotional events that we experience in the course of our lifetime. Although tremendously painful and overwhelming, grief or bereavement, is a normal and natural response to our loss.

The process of grief is experienced differently by everyone. Your process of grief will be unique to you, your circumstances, and the significant loss that you have experienced.

It is said that the process of grief does not follow a linear path. Instead, it can be likened to waves, which ebb and flow. Just like waves, the feelings, thoughts and symptoms associated with your grief, will likely come and go. They may come and go in strong and powerful waves. At times, the waves may feel intense and overwhelming. You may experience difficult and unexpected emotions, ranging from shock, numbness and disbelief, to anger, despair and deep sadness. It is a common experience to feel relieved after the death of a loved one; you may feel relieved that your loved one no longer has to bear any pain or suffering. Cognitively, you may find it difficult to stop thinking about your loved one's death. You may find it difficult to process their death, and the circumstances which surround it. Physically, you may experience symptoms such as a reduced appetite, bodily aches, extreme tiredness or difficulties sleeping. Behaviourally, you may find that you are avoiding places which remind you of your loved one, or you may excessively seek to spend time in these places. You may find yourself withdrawing from your social networks and/or interests, or you may find that you are trying to keep yourself busy. This process is unique to the individual and so, you may find that you experience some, or none of these feelings, thoughts or symptoms.

It is important to remember that just like the waves, the feelings, thoughts and symptoms, that you do experience, will likely, come and go. Over time, their intensity will gradually lessen, as you re-adjust to a life, without your loved one. For the majority of individuals, this may take some time. It may range from months, to years.

It is natural for grief to be felt long after the loss of your loved one. However, if you find that the intensity of these feelings, thoughts or symptoms are having an adverse effect on your daily life, do not hesitate to seek support from your GP, or a relevant mental health professional. Please see Table 1 (section 6, page 8) in this handbook, for signs of helpful and unhelpful grieving responses.

“Death ends a life, not a relationship”



3. GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT DURING COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, you may lose a loved one to COVID-19, or to natural causes. Grieving, at any time, is a tremendously painful and overwhelming process. Unfortunately, COVID-19, may likely pose additional challenges, to your grieving process. The challenges that you may experience during this time, will be discussed later in this handbook.

It may be hard to envision now, but in time, the COVID-19 pandemic will pass. When it does, you will have an opportunity to celebrate the life of your loved one, as you wish to do now. You will be able to do so, with the close physical support of your family and friends and, with an appropriate memorial service. Until such time, this handbook hopes to provide you with some suggestions on how to say goodbye and cope with your grief, during these exceptional times.

“What will survive of us, is love”



4. PSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL OF GRIEF

'Five Stages of Grief' Model (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2014)

While grieving, some people may find it helpful to relate to a psychological model of grief, to help them to understand and process their loss. The 'Five Stages of Grief' model (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2014) may be a helpful framework for you to do so. Please see Image 1, in Appendix A, for a visual representation of the 'Five Stages of Grief' model.

This model of grief proposes the varying emotional responses that you may experience in response to the loss of your loved one. The five stages are namely, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. The stages of this model are not intended to be linear in nature. There is no set time frame for each stage. You may not go through the stages in a prescribed order and you may not necessarily experience the emotions of each individual stage. You may find that you experience emotions associated with one stage, before reverting to a previous stage. You may even find that you skip some of the stages and find yourself experiencing emotions associated with the later stages of this model. Despite this, a breakdown of how you may relate to each stage may be a helpful tool for you to refer to while you are grieving your loss, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. **Denial** – during this emotional response stage, you may find yourself experiencing emotions such as shock, disbelief and numbness. You may feel unable to process the enormity of the loss of your loved one, in addition to the stress of COVID-19. It is normal to feel such emotions. This emotional response stage may stop you from feeling overwhelmed and may help you to survive and cope during this time.
2. **Anger** – you may be angry at yourself, your family, your friends, your loved one's doctors and nurses, the government, and even, at the virus itself. It is normal to experience feelings of anger in response to the loss of a loved one. Even more so, it is normal to feel such anger while you are coping with this loss, as well as the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. You may feel angry because you were unable to visit your loved one in their final hours, as a result of the visiting restrictions which were in place in the hospital. You may feel angry because your extended family, friends and colleagues cannot attend the funeral service, as a result of the funeral restrictions. You may feel angry because your wider support network and community cannot physically support and comfort you, during this time, as a result of the restrictions in social contact. You may even find that on top of that anger, lies the tremendous pain that you are having to contend with, from the loss of your loved one, during these exceptional times.
3. **Bargaining** – in the bargaining stage of grief you may find yourself lost in a spiral of thoughts, including "What if...?" or "If only..." thoughts. You may wonder "What if there was a vaccine for COVID-19 when he got sick?" or "If only I was able to see her at the end" but were unable to, due to COVID-19 visiting restrictions. If your loved one died from natural causes, you may find yourself wondering "What if I encouraged her to go to the doctor earlier?" or "If only, I was able to see him, one last time". Feelings of guilt may also surface during this stage. You may feel guilty that you put visiting on the long finger and later on, may have been unable to visit due to current restrictions in social contact. Try not to be so hard on yourself, if you find yourself experiencing

elements of this emotional response stage. You cannot change the past, however it may be helpful to remind yourself, that you did your very best to support your loved one, during exceptional times.

4. **Depression** – during this emotional response stage you may find yourself feeling flat and empty, as the reality of your loss sinks in. It is normal and appropriate to feel low after such a loss. Grieving during the COVID-19 pandemic may exacerbate these feelings, as restrictions in social contact and outings will make it easier to isolate yourself from the world, thus negatively impacting on your mental well-being. To ease the weight of these feelings during this time, try to keep up a routine and contact with those you are closest to (via social media outlets, if you cannot be physically close). Engaging in soothing activities may also be helpful if you find yourself feeling low. Other suggestions that you may find helpful during this stage, will be outlined later in this handbook.

If you are feeling low and it is impacting on your ability to function in your daily life, please contact your GP, or an appropriate mental health professional for support, advice and/or treatment options. For your reference, Table 1 (section 6, page 8), outlines some helpful and unhelpful grieving responses.

5. **Acceptance** – over time, you may gradually come to accept the loss of your loved one. Acceptance does not mean that you have forgotten about your loved one or that you have ‘gotten over’ their loss. It does not mean that you will no longer bear the pain of this loss. Instead, it may mean that you accept the reality of your loved one being physically gone from your life. During this stage, you may learn to live with a new ‘normal’ and you may begin to readjust your life around your loss. Even though your loved one is physically gone from your life, you may find special ways to remember them and include them in your life. For example, you may wish to write a letter to your loved one, write in a journal, or plant a tree in their memory. As you move through the process of acceptance and readjustment, you may gradually feel yourself beginning to live and engage in life again. Nonetheless, your loved ones anniversary, certain life events and important milestones, may evoke unexpected emotions. This is normal and does not mean that you are regressing. Instead, it shows the depth of your love.

“Those we love, never truly leave us”



5. COLLECTIVE GRIEF

The COVID-19 pandemic is both a medical and a psychological crisis. As the pandemic has developed, collectively, we have all been subject to a series of losses. It is likely that globally, most people will have experienced, or have been affected, by some of the following losses: the loss of normality, the loss of a sense of safety, the loss of psychological well-being, the loss of social connections, the loss of personal freedom, the loss of a job and/or the loss of financial security. These losses have led to a shared experience of collective grief, as globally, we are all experiencing some loss, as a result of this pandemic. As the pandemic continues to progress, we may find ourselves subject to further losses, which we cannot predict at this time. If you are reading this handbook, you, or someone you care about, may be grieving at this time. We are deeply sorry that you, or yours, are grieving the loss of someone close, in addition to experiencing collective grief.

“We are all dealing with the collective loss of the world we knew”



6. COMPLICATED GRIEF

If you are having trouble coping with your loss, and it is having an adverse effect on your daily life, you may be experiencing what is known as ‘complicated grief’. Complicated grief may present when the circumstances surrounding one’s loss are unique. As time goes on, you may notice that your attempt to cope is having a negative effect on your day to day functioning, your psychological well-being and your physical well-being.

Complicated grief may cause you to feel like:

- you cannot bounce back to your normal routine
- it is impossible to carry out your everyday responsibilities and tasks
- you are stuck
- you are struggling to cope with the emotional impact of your grieving process
- communicating with close family and friends is difficult

To help you to understand your grieving process and be aware of helpful and unhelpful grieving responses, please see Table 1 below. If you are concerned about your grieving process, or if the intensity of your feelings are having an adverse effect on your daily life, please contact your GP, or an appropriate mental health professional for support, advice and/or treatment options.

Table 1. Signs of Helpful and Unhelpful Grieving Responses

Signs of Helpful Grieving Responses	Signs of Unhelpful Grieving Responses
Experiencing a range of difficult and unexpected emotions	Feeling and/or bottling up intense emotional pain (emotions such as disbelief, numbness, anger, self-blame, loneliness, detachment)
Talking about your loss	Lack of pursuit of interests or hobbies
Trying to maintain a relatively normal lifestyle	Feelings of emptiness or meaningless
Taking care of yourself	Diminished sense of identity
Connecting with and staying with family/friends	Loss of trust of others
Spending time alone	Avoiding reminders of your loved one
Practicing self-care and engaging in soothing activities	Inability to have positive memories of your loved one
Trying to keep busy as a form of distraction	Intense yearning or longing for your loved one
Doing something creative to remember your loved one	Difficulty accepting the loss of your loved one
Forgiving yourself for all you did, or did not say or do	Preoccupation with your loved one and/or the circumstances of their death
Allowing yourself to take a break from grieving	Desire to reunite with your loved one
Triggering of intense and unexpected emotions around anniversaries, life events or milestones	Using alcohol or drugs to escape the pain of your loss
Seeking support from your GP or a relevant mental health professional, if you are struggling with the feelings, thoughts or symptoms associated with your grief	Thoughts of suicide or self-harm

7. COPING WITH GRIEF

Every individual person will cope with their grief in a way that is individual to them. There is no 'right way' to grieve. You may experience grief similarly to how someone you know has, but equally, you may experience grief very differently. When dealing with the shock and sadness after you have lost a loved one, you may wish to know how you 'should' grieve, or how long your grief 'should' last. Remember, there is no map for grief. Your reaction to loss, and how you grieve, may be impacted by your values, your personality, your culture, your emotional wellbeing, your religious beliefs or the circumstances surrounding your loss. Your experience will differ from others' and your own experience may adapt and change over time.

Grief at this time is more challenging, than coping with loss outside of a world health pandemic. You have additional sources of stress to contend with, which may add to the already, difficult experience of grief.

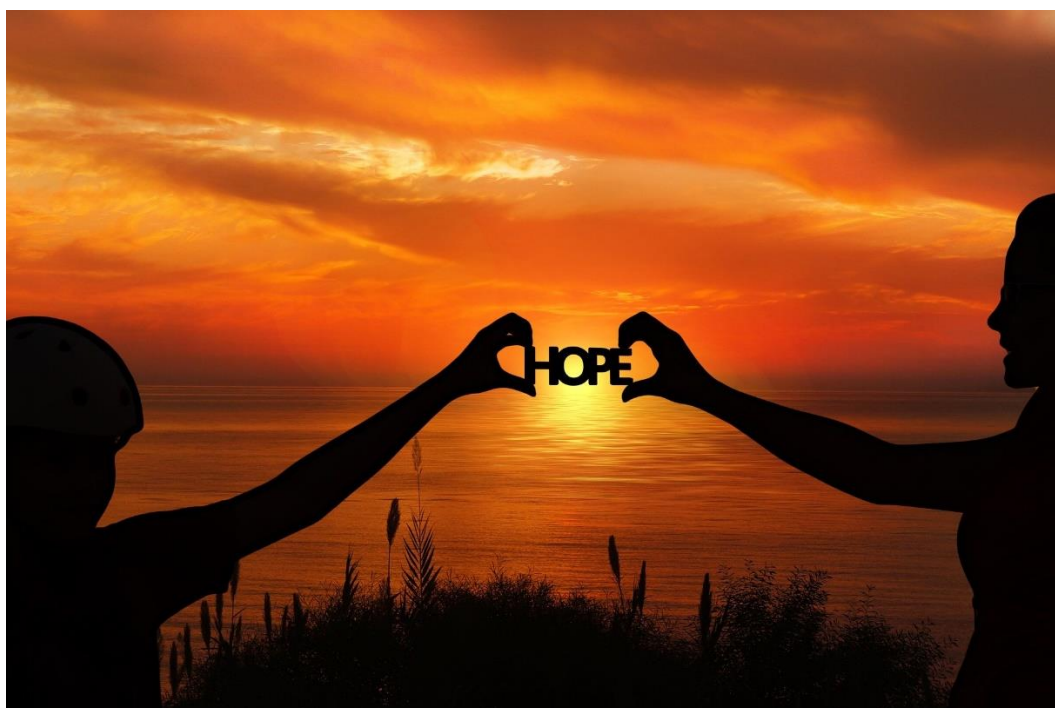
7.1. Additional challenges at this time

- 1. Reduced Social Support** - you may be already experiencing reduced social support as a result of governmental instructions and guidelines. Staying connected to others is inherently challenging at this time. You may be isolated, or feel lonely, whilst working through your grief in the absence of close physical connection with your loved ones.
- 2. Feelings of being overwhelmed from the news reports and social media** - you may feel overwhelmed by the negative news in the world, and feel helpless in the current circumstances. Regular exposure to worrying news, may give rise to feelings of anxiety, as this outbreak and its implications feel largely out of our control.
- 3. Self-care** - when the time is right, and you feel emotionally ready to engage in hobbies or activities, you may be unable to do the things that usually support you through difficult times due to COVID-19 restrictions. The typical self-care activities that you engage in, may be impacted by physical distancing recommendations e.g. playing a sport, visiting friends, going to the gym etc.
- 4. The loss of 'normality'** - you may feel unsettled by the fast-changing circumstances, crave what once was, and what you have lost in terms of your previous 'normal' life and livelihood. It is common to grieve the loss of normal work, routine, socialisation and activities/interests. You may experience waves of emotions in relation to these temporary losses, which exacerbate the loss you experience when a loved one passes away.
- 5. Anticipatory anxiety or grief** - you may experience anxiety about the virus in relation to 'what' is coming and 'when' it is coming. Anticipatory grief is the experience of grief that occurs before an impending loss. You may experience this in relation to loved ones who are unwell, or those at risk of developing the illness.
- 6. Unexpected grief due to COVID-19 illness** – the nature of COVID-19 illness is that, it progresses quickly, and in a way that is unanticipated. This can be an additional factor in adding to the painful

experience for the grieving person. Many people have never lost someone to a fast progressing illness like this, and the experience is uniquely different to losing someone in other circumstances.

7. **Being 'absent'** – in the lead up to your loss, it is very possible that you have not been able to spend any time - or as much time as you usually would - with your loved one. Many people like to be present at the time of a loved one's death, to hold their hand and talk with them as they pass away. This can provide comfort in those final moments of someone's life, as well as help with the on-going grieving process going forward. COVID-19 restrictions have meant these comforting experiences have been impossible for many, and this may have ongoing implications for feelings of guilt about not being there in one's final moments.
8. **Unfamiliar territory** – with strict isolation and physical distancing measures in place, many people are missing out on the final farewells they are accustomed to e.g. religious, spiritual, or other ceremonies. New and alternative ways of mourning are being adapted, but these may lack the comfort you would receive from more traditional practices. Many traditional practices offer comfort through the physical presence of people you know; those closest to you as well as your extended family and community. People often liken this experience to being 'wrapped around by the community'. Unfortunately, in the current climate, the physical presence of others is greatly missed by those who are grieving.

“Every sunset brings the promise of a new dawn”



7.2. Emotional supports to help you cope with grief

Remember, your grief is individual to you and your experiences. The following are suggestions that may be supportive to you, at this difficult time. You may benefit from some of them, but it is important not to feel pressure to grieve in any specific way.

1. **Permission to feel** - allow yourself space to feel whatever it is you are feeling. Accept this experience as it is, and refrain from wondering if what you're feeling is '*normal*'. At this extremely difficult time, you could feel any number of emotions, all of which are unique to your experience, and a part of the natural grieving process.
2. **Connect** - grieving is a uniquely personal experience, and along with many emotional responses previously discussed in this handbook, it also can bring feelings of isolation. Seek to keep in contact with those you are closest to. Granted, current circumstances may inhibit you to have close physical contact with your friends and loved ones.

You may have to show flexibility and ingenuity in how to achieve connection at this time i.e. through phone calls, video calls, texts, emails, and social media. Having conversations through WhatsApp, text or Facebook can facilitate regular flow of contact over a period of time.

Often we don't feel like talking to others, after losing a loved one. This is a common, and normal experience to have. While many lack motivation to connect, it is also common to benefit greatly from such connections. You may wish to try keep some contact with friends and loved ones when you feel up to it.

3. **Check-in** - grieving can be an exhausting process, physically and emotionally. Tend to your basic bodily needs by eating healthily, and staying hydrated.

As previously outlined, grief can impact on your mind, body and behaviours in a variety of ways. Remain aware of changes that are occurring. Many grief symptoms can be uncomfortable, and sometimes they may be distressing.

The key here is to be patient with yourself and your body. Remember that what you are feeling is normal, and that in time, the discomfort will pass.

- 4. Practise self-compassion** - try to be tolerant and kind to yourself. Grief is an overwhelming experience; sometimes compounded by feelings of guilt, regret, shame, low self-esteem, and loss of identity. Self-compassion entails being warm and kind towards oneself, when encountering pain and personal challenges, rather than, ignoring them or hurting oneself with self-criticism.

When grieving, it is common to have thoughts such as *“I’m not strong enough to deal with this.”* *“I don’t know who I am anymore.”* *“I should be feeling better by now.”* *“I wasn’t a good wife/husband/son/daughter/etc.”* *“I should not be angry or happy or relieved”*.

Being self-compassionate means looking at, these thoughts and taking into consideration what you might say to a dear friend, in a similar circumstance. In essence, it means being kind to yourself.

There are a number of links to resources and supports, to help you engage in self-compassion in Appendix C of this handbook.

- 5. Mindfulness and Relaxation** – mindfulness is the practise of being aware of the present moment, which includes our thoughts, feelings, physical experiences, and the world around us.

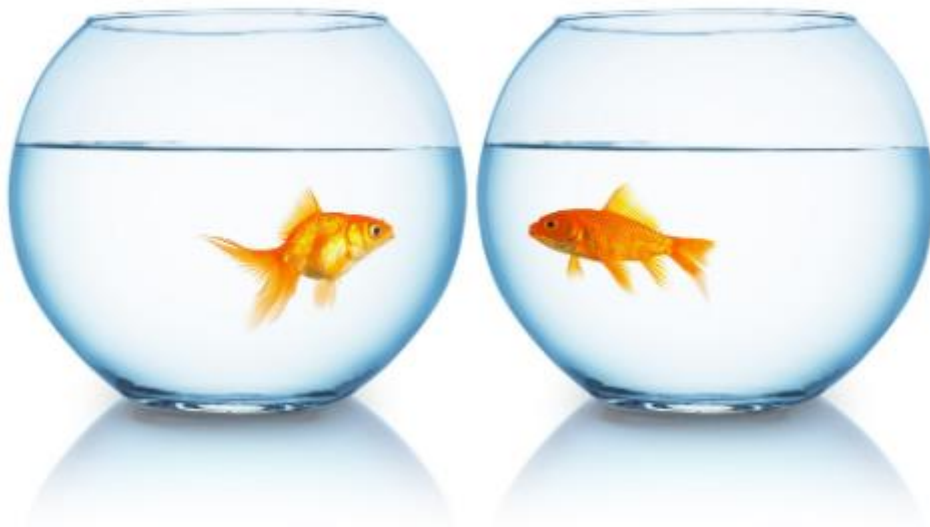
Of particular worth, mindfulness can help us to observe our thoughts and make a conscious decision on, which thought to focus on and give energy to. This is a crucial skill to practice during this time, when fearful thoughts about the COVID-19 outbreak may be overwhelming our minds.

Mindfulness-based meditation can support you to create inner-calmness, as you open your mind to process your grief. Compassion-focused meditation, will help you be kind to yourself, and give you permission to explore all aspects of the grief process without self-criticism. Reflective meditation scripts can be helpful, as you consider the ways in which you, and your life has changed. Reflective meditation can also support you to integrate this experience into your life.

6. **Striking Balance** – when you are ready, it might be of benefit to engage in loss-related activities. This might mean doing something creative to process your loss, such as thinking about, or telling stories about the person that has died. Also, ideas such as looking at photographs, creating collages, writing music etc. can be helpful.

Equally, when the time is right for you, it can be helpful to cultivate opportunities to engage in restorative behaviours. These are behaviours that support you to move forward, in the context of your loss. This could involve future-planning, and engaging in hobbies etc. At a pace that is right for you, a balance between loss-related practices and restorative practices will, help you move through your grief, and adapt to the changes in your life, as time goes on.

“The need for connection and community is primal; as fundamental as the need for air, water, and food”



7.3. Practical ideas for supporting you, with your grief

Due to COVID-19, the circumstances in which your loved one was buried or cremated are likely to have been unfamiliar to you. You may feel that you didn't have any opportunity to say your goodbyes. You could explore other ways of saying your own goodbyes; ways that fit with your values and beliefs. Some grieving individuals find, the following practices comforting during this difficult time, when it hasn't been possible, to reach out and be physically present in the time leading up to their death, or in the moments of their last breath.

- **Prayer or religious engagement** - some people will find comfort in their faith at this time, through prayer and other spiritual rituals associated with their beliefs.
- **Writing a eulogy or a letter to the person** - a eulogy is often associated with funerals. 'Eulogy' means high praise, and usually entails a telling of an individual's life, describing their life experiences, interests, values and personality. The practice of writing a eulogy or a letter to the person you have lost, could still be carried out, even if you don't intend to share it with others. As you write, you may wish to consider what the person meant to you, how they contributed to your life, and memories you have of them.
- **Organising or creating mementos into a collage or display** - this may involve gathering objects and materials that remind you of your loved one. For example, this could include photographs, letters, cards, or other things you associate with the person.
- **Symbolic Gestures** – common ways for people to say goodbye to their loved ones, are through symbolic gestures, such as lighting a candle or letting off a balloon.
- **Music** - you might want to listen to an artist, a song, or an album that your loved one liked. There may also be music that you personally relate to when you are grieving. The internet has vast access to free music that allows you to access any genre or any specific piece of music you wish, at your fingertips. Many people will also like to put their own words to a piece of music, or write a poem.
- **Art** – drawing, painting or other creative processes can be deeply therapeutic for many people. Sometimes it can be easier to express yourself through art than through words, when you are experiencing deeply painful emotions associated with your grief.

***“When someone you love becomes a memory, that
memory becomes a treasure”***



8. SUPPORTING PEOPLE YOU KNOW WITH THEIR GRIEF

8.1. Supporting Family, Friends, and Loved ones

You may wish to support someone you care about, when they are grieving a loss. At times like this, it can be difficult to know what to say or do. As outlined, people that are grieving often struggle with many intense and painful emotions. Often, they can feel isolated and alone.

How to help - it can be very hard to know how to help in such circumstances, and while you want to, you may not know where to start. You may be afraid of intruding, saying the wrong thing, or fearful of making your loved one feel even worse, at such a difficult time. You may think there is little you can do to make things better, that's understandable. But don't let discomfort prevent you from reaching out to someone who is grieving. Now, more than ever, your loved one needs your support, even if you can't be physically present. You don't need to have answers or give advice, or say and do all the right things. The most important thing you can do for a grieving person is to simply be there. It's your support and caring presence that will, help your loved one to cope with the pain and to help them gradually begin to heal.

During COVID-19, it may not be possible to be physically present with your loved one during this difficult time. Some things you could do include:

- Reaching out by virtual means (Facebook, Zoom, WhatsApp), and let your grieving loved one know you are there to listen
- Traditional, non-technological methods, can also be used to stay connected e.g. writing letters, posting photos or making a simple phone-call
- Remain understanding that everyone grieves differently and for varying lengths of time
- Offer to help in practical ways e.g. collect shopping, cook dinners etc.
- Maintain your support in the days, weeks, and months after the burial/cremation. Your loved one, friend, colleague, acquaintance may need on-going support for a prolonged period of time. For some, this pain may continue on-and-off for years after their loss

What to say - many people are concerned about knowing what to say to someone who is grieving. It is more important, however, to *listen*. Oftentimes, well-meaning people avoid talking about the death, or change the subject when the deceased person is mentioned. Some people feel like there is nothing they can say to make it better, and some people may avoid the grieving person altogether.

It can be helpful to acknowledge others' grief, to show that it is something you are willing to speak about, and that their loved one is not forgotten. One day, a grieving person might want to cry, on another day, they may want to vent, sit in silence, or share memories. By being present (even virtually) and listening compassionately, you can take your cues from the grieving person.

In the absence of traditional mourning during COVID-19 i.e. religious, spiritual, or other ceremonies, individuals grieving at this time are likely to feel, even more isolated. Grief is an intensely personal and individual feeling, bringing with it, emotional isolation. You may wish to engage in some creative means to be present, without physical closeness, at these times.

Some ideas include the following:

- physical distancing guard of honour
- live streaming of religious ceremonies
- organising a gathering via video call to share stories/poetry/music/prayer
- expressing your condolences via www.RIP.ie website
- creating and sharing a virtual photo slideshow via social media
- arranging for family members to engage in a specific activity on the same day at the same time (e.g. lighting candles, singing a song, or letting off balloons) to create a sense of togetherness

8.2. Supporting Children with Grief

Grief and bereavement is a confusing and complicated emotion for all of us. Children experience similar uncertainties. Being familiar with your child's age, developmental stage, and their understanding of death and dying, will help you to be attuned to their needs.

As children grow and mature, their understanding of death and grief will develop. Therefore, sometimes children will revisit their grief at a later stage, when they begin to understand more about the concept. This can be surprising for adults, that children are exploring what happened some time ago. Remember, for children too, grief is not linear. It will ebb and flow, and this may take place over a number of years.

1. **Honesty** - adults are naturally inclined to want to protect children when a loved one, or someone close to them, passes away. The most beneficial thing to do in these circumstances, is to provide children with honest age-appropriate information about death and dying. This may go against your instinct to protect them from the painful facts. However, it is known to be beneficial for them to have access to truthful information. Age and developmental stage is relevant, when considering how to communicate with children. A simple guide has been drafted by the Irish Hospice foundation to advise parents on this sensitive issue, and a link can be found in the resource section of this handbook.
2. **Answering Questions** - at this extremely busy, and distracting time, children and young people may feel confused and alone. Set aside time to answer any questions they may have, about death, dying, their loved one, or COVID-19. Remember, we develop greater understanding for these difficult concepts as we age, and with life experience. Children may be experiencing bereavement for the first time, and will often be dependent on their adults for access to reliable information.

3. Set aside time to talk about grief - facilitate opportunity for children to talk about their grief. You may wish to explore their emotions, and support them to work through the meaning of their loss. Some questions you might ask are:

- 'How do you feel today?'
- 'What do you miss most about e.g. Granny today?'
- 'Can you name a favourite memory you have of e.g. Granny?'
- 'Can you think of something funny you associate with e.g. Granny?'
- 'How can I help you at this time?'
- 'What helps you when you are sad/angry/frustrated?'

4. Opportunities for reflection - as discussed earlier with respect to adults' grief, it can also be useful for children to take time to reflect on the person they have lost. Children and adolescents can be encouraged to use their creativity to remember their loved one, or to express themselves when they are grieving. This could be done by gathering photos, stories, and mementos relating to the individual they have lost. They could write journals, or develop a blog. They may wish to plant a tree, play music or dance. Again, there is no 'right' way for them to remember their loved one or process their loss. Give them some ideas, and work together to consider what might suit your child. This could be a familial activity, and may prove therapeutic to the adults too. Additional resources and links to ideas can be found in Appendix B of this handbook.

5. Cultivate fun when it feels right for you and your family - it can help to remind children and teenagers, that it is still acceptable for them to have fun, laugh, and enjoy themselves, even in the context of a recent loss. When it feels right, for you and your family, it can be of benefit to children and young people to engage in some fun activities. Embracing connections within the family may include board games, puzzles, watching films, having quizzes or making playlists. At this difficult time - both when grieving a personal loss or experiencing the collective grief previously referred to – children will benefit from some relief by having fun.

“Grief is big, when you are small; but just as big, when you are tall”



9. SUPPORTING HEALTHCARE STAFF WITH THEIR GRIEF

9.1. Supporting Healthcare Staff

Healthcare staff, often, develop close relationships with persons supported. The experience of loss of a person supported can be similar to what is experienced when grieving a friend or family member.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of persons supported, who have passed away in healthcare settings, has dramatically increased. Many healthcare staff, have had the experience of losing a person supported in the past. However, it may be additionally difficult to cope with the experience of multiple losses, in such a shorter period of time.

Part of healthcare staffs' role at end of life, is to provide comfort, manage pain, and maintain dignity of the person supported.

Staff, at this time, may experience many additional challenges including:

1. **Guilt** – they may feel they were unable to care for the residents, in the way that they would have liked to, because of the restrictions on contact and the need to wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).
2. **Additional Responsibility** – the circumstances under which persons supported pass away, during COVID-19 are unfamiliar to their peers, healthcare staff and families. Healthcare staff are tasked with, supporting the person at end of life, but also play a key role in, offering comfort and reassurance to families and friends of loved ones, who are not permitted to be there.
3. **Fear of contracting COVID-19** - healthcare staff may be more frightened when offering care, regardless of whether the resident has tested positive for COVID-19 or not. This fear, can lead to feelings of guilt. This misplaced guilt can have a negative impact and add to the experience of grief. It is important to understand that fear is normal. It is essential that the way in which care is offered, changes, in order to protect healthcare staff, the residents, and others.
4. **The unknown** - common traditional and familiar ways of coping with the death of a person supported prior to COVID-19 restrictions, are no longer available. This can evoke a range of feelings such as feelings of powerlessness and despair for healthcare staff, as they grieve the loss of those they care for.
5. **Staff and PPE shortages** - staff shortages as colleagues become ill, as well as the availability of PPE, are an additional cause of pressure, stress and anxiety, which can impact on the grief of healthcare staff.

Strategies

1. **Be Kind to yourself** - during this time, you may find that you are trying to manage your own grief, as well as, the grief of others (i.e. the family of the individual who has passed away and/or other individuals that resided in the same setting as the deceased). This is a huge burden to contend with. Be gentle and kind to yourself during this time. Self-compassion exercises are helpful in doing so (see Appendix C). You can also be kind to yourself by engaging in self-care and soothing activities outside of work i.e. going for a bath to wind-down in the evening after work, practicing meditation or mindfulness, or using a journal to note your daily gratitude list. Section 7.3, earlier in this handbook, has further practical ideas which may be supportive to you during this time.
2. **Peer Support** - following a loss, sharing your experience and emotions with your peers, may help you to work through your grief. Although your peers will have experienced the same loss, you may find that they appear to be managing their grief differently. You may find that while you cry, your peers may be angry, or use humour to cope with their grief. It is normal for each individual to experience grief differently. Nonetheless, sharing your experience and emotions with those who have experienced the same stress and loss, can be a healthy outlet. Also, if you are comfortable in doing so, being present and listening to the experience and emotions of your peers, will make a difference to them.
3. **'Check-ins' with management** - to support you during this time, supervisors and those in positions of management may offer regular individual check-ins with members of their staff team. If you are comfortable in doing so, you may find it helpful to avail of these check-ins and use them as an opportunity to voice your story, your experience and your emotions, as you move through your own grief process. On the other hand, you may prefer not to avail of these 'check-ins', and that is okay too.

9.2. Advice for management in supporting Healthcare Staff

Managers, like many others, may find it difficult to know what to say, and worry about saying the wrong thing, to grieving healthcare staff members. This unprecedented situation, is like nothing many services have ever had to manage before. Like healthcare staff, managers too, can feel powerless, overwhelmed and feel there is little they can do to help.

If you are in a position of management, you may find it difficult to know what to say to those who are grieving. Especially, given that the experience of grief in the context of COVID-19 is unprecedented, and not like anything we have experienced to date. You may find yourself worrying about how you can meet the needs of your staff, during these exceptional times.

Below are a number of practical strategies, which you may find helpful:

1. **Express Gratitude** - express understanding and compassion for healthcare staff, whilst reminding them of how important their care has been and how much they are valued.
2. **Foster Openness** - foster an open, and approachable environment whereby staff can feel that they can make contact with their senior colleagues for support.

3. **Rest** - practically speaking, develop rotas that allow for regular and frequent breaks. There are of course challenges to this, at a time when there may be issues with staff shortages. However, staff wellbeing should continue to be prioritised, particularly where they are faced with, additional emotional challenges such as, a bereavement. Scheduling more regular and frequent breaks for staff will be helpful for additional down-time, to aid in their recovery process.
4. **Regular check-ins** - it is so important that staff feel that that they can speak with, and seek support, from those in management. To do so, schedule regular check-ins with staff to ask them how they are feeling and to ascertain if they require any support. These could be scheduled at the end of each shift, so that staff can voice their experience and emotions before they go home. The check-in does not need to be lengthy – even 10 minutes is sufficient. Also, remember that grief is experienced and managed differently by each individual, so you will likely find that not everyone will take up this offer of a check-in. This is okay too. Sometimes, simply knowing that another is there to listen, can be powerful in itself.
5. **Remembering** - together with staff, brainstorm the different ways that staff may like to remember and celebrate the life of the individual supported, who has died.
6. **Encouragement** - it is likely that at this stage of the pandemic, and after experiencing the loss of an individual supported, staff may feel helpless and overwhelmed. It is so important to offer staff words of encouragement during this time, by reminding them how important their care has been and how valued they are, to the organisation and to the persons supported.

“You can’t pour from an empty cup. Tend to your needs, too.”



10. APPENDICES

10.1. Appendix A. 'Five Stages of Grief' Model

'Five Stages of Grief' Model (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2014)

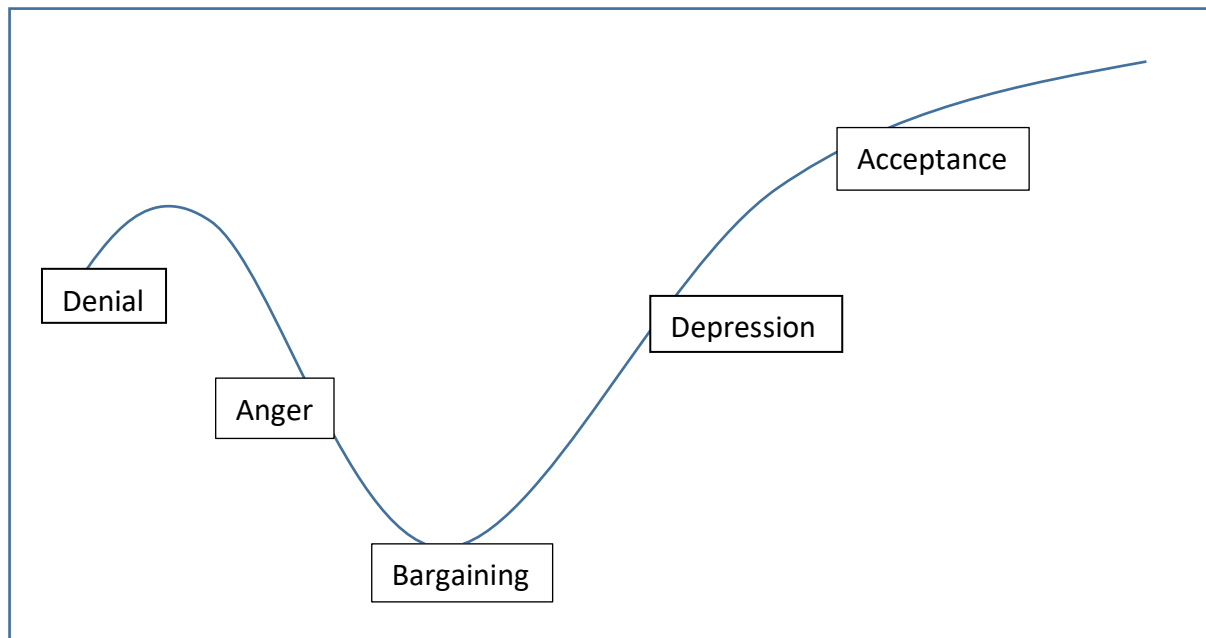


Image 1. Visual representation of the 'Five Stages of Grief Model' (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2014)

The 'Five Stages of Grief' model is a psychological framework of grief, which has been developed to help those who are grieving to understand and process their loss. The stages, namely, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, represent the varying emotional stages that you may experience throughout your grieving process.

As you can see from the image above, the stages are not intended to be linear in nature. Because of this, you may find that you experience emotions associated with one emotional response stage, before reverting or progressing to experiencing emotions associated with a different stage. For example, you may initially find that you are unable to process the enormity of your loss, in addition to experiencing the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic (denial stage). Soon thereafter, you may find yourself lost in a spiral of "What if?" or "If only..." thoughts (bargaining stage). For example, you may find yourself wondering "What if there was a vaccine for COVID-19 when he got sick?" or "If only I was able to see her at the end" but were unable to, due to COVID-19 visiting restrictions.

It is important to remember that this framework is a tool to help you to understand the emotional responses that you may have during your individual grieving process. As explained, not everyone will go through each stage, nor will everyone experience the stages in a prescribed sequence.

10.2. Appendix B. Additional Resources

General Grief Resources

- Irish Hospice Foundation - Bereavement
www.bereaved.ie
- Irish Hospice Foundation – COVID-19 Care and Inform
www.hospicefoundation.ie/bereavement-2-2/covid19-care-and-inform
- What's Your Grief? Taking Care of Your Mental Health During Coronavirus
www.whatsyourgrief.com/mental-health-and-coronavirus

Links for Children & Adolescents

- The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network
www.childhoodbereavement.ie
- Irish Hospice Foundation – helping children grieve during COVID-19 restrictions
www.hospicefoundation.ie/bereavement-2-2/covid19-care-and-inform/helping-children-grieve-during-covid-19-restrictions
- Irish Hospice Foundation – supporting teenagers to grieve under COVID-19 restrictions
www.hospicefoundation.ie/bereavement-2-2/covid19-care-and-inform/supporting-teenagers-to-grieve-under-covid-19-restrictions
- Cruse Bereavement Care – Coronavirus: children and young people
www.cruse.org.uk/coronavirus/children-and-young-people

Supporting others with Bereavement

- Cruse Bereavement Care – Coronavirus: what to say when someone is grieving
www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus/coronavirus-what-say-when-someone-grieving

10.3. Appendix C. Mindfulness, Relaxation and Self-Compassion Exercises

Grief-Focused Mindfulness and Relaxation Exercises

- Mindfulness and Grief Institute – mindfulness for grief and loss
www.mindfulnessandgrief.com/meditation-for-grief

General Mindfulness and Relaxation Exercises

- Smiling Mind – free mindfulness app
www.smilingmind.com.au/smiling-mind-app
- Insight Timer – free app for sleep, anxiety and stress
www.insighttimer.com
- Stop, Breathe and Think – guided meditations and mindfulness
www.stopbreathethink.com
- UCLA Mindful – free mindfulness app
www.uclahealth.org/marc/ucla-mindful-app

Self-Compassion

- Mindfulness and Grief Institute – self-compassion as self-care for grief
www.mindfulnessandgrief.com/self-compassion-as-self-care-for-grief-meditation
- What’s Your Grief? – the need for self-compassion in grief
www.whatsyourgrief.com/self-compassion-in-grief

Exercise: Self-Compassion Break

To start, invite your mind to something that is causing you stress or pain at present. Take time to consider how this makes you feel. When you are wholly aware of this situation, and of the feelings associated with it, say the following to yourself:

- *“This is a moment of suffering.”* This will activate mindfulness; other options include *“This hurts,” “This is stress,”* and, simply, *“Ouch.”*
- *“May I be kind to myself”* Alternatively, you can use other phrases that may apply better in your current situation, such as *“May I forgive myself”* or *“May I be patient.”*

You can experience relief from re-affirming that you are experiencing suffering and pain at present. Acknowledging that pain is a difficult, but natural part of life. It is important to set your intention on being kind and patient with oneself.

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*'Always together, never apart maybe
in distance, but never at heart'*



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