

CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

Tips for families



Phoenix
AUSTRALIA

Dealing with the death of a loved one from COVID-19 and other infectious diseases

The death of a loved one is a painful experience, and death due to an infectious disease may be even more difficult because it can often be unexpected, and because families may be separated due to the risk of contagion and may be unable to grieve their loss in familiar ways.

When a loved one dies, we are forever changed. As we move through the pain of grief, it is important to remember that many people find new strengths and different ways to cope.

Emotional reactions

Circumstances and initial reactions

As much as one might be prepared for the death of a loved one, we are never ready to receive such news.

Deaths due to an infectious disease may occur in hospital, and many may die without their loved ones present, unable to hold their hand or grieve at their bedside. To add to the distress, family members may not find out the circumstances surrounding the death and the deceased's remains and personal belongings may not be available straight away. For families whose religion or culture prescribes rituals for the management of the body, its absence can be an additional loss.

Grief is a normal and expected reaction to the loss of a loved one. There are many ways to grieve, including emotional reactions ranging from stunned disbelief, to great sadness or rage. There is no 'right' way to express grief, especially immediately after notification when the news is fresh and feelings are raw.

Due to potential physical and emotional separation because of the disease, the death may feel less 'real'. When individuals cannot share their grief with others in ways that provide comfort and validation, they may feel that their grief is not shared or acknowledged. When grief goes unacknowledged, people may feel that their grieving is unvalued, resulting in feelings of helplessness and powerlessness.

The impacts of grief

Grief can impact nearly all aspects of our lives:

- cognitive – problems remembering, concentrating, prioritising
- emotional – strong feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, loneliness and even joy in remembering
- behavioural – increased/decreased activity
- social – craving being alone or with others
- physical – fatigue, sleep difficulties, appetite changes
- spiritual – questioning faith or increased religious activities
- secondary loss – financial insecurity or loss.



Dealing with grief

Tips for dealing with grief

- Families may need to consider modifying traditional memorial practices but it's important to find comforting ways to be together and mourn loved ones. It is important for people to grieve together, even when they are unable to be together physically.
- Adult family members should properly explain the circumstances of the death to children using simple and clear language that is developmentally appropriate for each child. Older children and teenagers may have more questions, and family members need to be prepared to share information in a calm and clear manner.
- Accept that it's normal to feel sadness, anger and tiredness.
- Reach out to others to both receive and offer support. Support can be provided 'virtually' through phone calls, texts, emails, and video chat. Being open and honest will encourage others to do the same, creating important connections.
- Practicing good self-care (e.g., eating properly, exercising, sleeping well) supports wellbeing and resilience.
- Death anniversaries can be a difficult time for families and friends but it can also be a time for remembering and celebrating the lives of your loved ones.

Grief can be unpredictable

Grief can be a long and unpredictable process. The intensity of grief usually diminishes over the first year after the death. Although grief never really 'ends', with time it usually becomes a less dominating part of one's life. However, in certain circumstances (e.g., sudden death) the intensity of the grief can continue and at times require further support.

If you are experiencing severe emotional distress or have mental health issues, speak with your GP or mental health practitioner.

For more COVID-19 related resources visit
www.phoenixaustralia.org/covid-19

*Adapted with permission from the Center for the Study
of Traumatic Stress, Uniformed Services University.*

Useful services and resources

Coronavirus Health Information Line
1800 020 080

Department of Health
www.health.gov.au

healthdirect hotline
1800 022 222