

# Coping with Loss and Grief During the COVID-19 Crisis

What to expect, when to seek help.



Grief is a natural response to loss, and feelings of loss can be compounded during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Sometimes, grief-related pain and symptoms—which can be emotional, physical, cognitive, and spiritual—can feel overwhelming, especially for people who are already mourning the death of a loved one.

Keep in mind that grieving during non-crisis times is a highly individual experience. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, no “normal” timetable for grieving. Healing happens gradually and cannot be hurried.

In times of crisis, however, key factors and reactions can intensify your grief and hinder your ability to heal and recover from it.

## Common Reactions to COVID-19:

- **Heightened anxiety**, linked to uncertainty about the future, the loss of familiar routines, and concerns about your own or your loved ones' health/well being
- **Heightened sense of loss**, linked to the death of a loved one or pandemic-related losses that leave you feeling overwhelmed, wondering how to put life's pieces back together
- **Increased isolation and intensified grief**, whether from stay-at-home orders or social distancing measures that have compromised the critical, valuable support provided by funerals, memorials, and religious services

If you are in mourning, the intensity of your reactions will vary, depending on the nature of the loss and its meaning in your life, the nature of your relationship with the person who has died, other life stressors, and your personality, coping style, and life experiences.

## These Are Common Reactions to Grief:

- Profound sadness, loneliness, emptiness
  - Crying over seemingly nothing
  - Despair about unrealized dreams
- Fear about getting sick (yourself or loved ones)
- Anger that the death occurred, that your loved one “abandoned” you, at healthcare institution/practitioner, at a deity or faith institution.
- Short temper, irritability, or annoyance at others
- Guilt (e.g., feeling responsible for the death or suffering, regretting things that did/did not happen in the relationship, feeling guilty you survived)
- Insomnia or excessive sleeping
- Change in eating behaviors (eating less or more)
- Difficulty being with others
- Difficulty concentrating and retaining information; forgetfulness
- Re-living or re-experiencing prior losses

Generally, many grief-related symptoms will fade over time.

# When and How to Reach Out for Help

If grief-related symptoms do not ease—AND if you find yourself having difficulty functioning—it is important to reach out for professional help. Call your physician, a mental health professional, or your faith practitioner if you experience any of these profound symptoms:

- Intense sorrow and painful rumination about your loss
- Increased alcohol or substance use
- Inability to focus on little else but your loved one's death
- Excessive avoidance of any reminders of your loved one
- Intense and persistent longing or pining for your loved one
- Extreme difficulty accepting the death
- Numbness or detachment
- Extreme anger or bitterness about your loss
- Feeling that life holds no further meaning or purpose
- Avoid unhelpful coping strategies and substances, such as tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs.
- Be careful with “what if” thoughts. Manage your worst-case scenario thinking.
- Engage in personal self-care activities that bring joy (e.g., phone/virtual communication with friends and family, reading, listening to podcasts, watching comedy).
- Practice relaxation, meditation and self expression via books, apps and online videos (e.g., yoga, mindful meditation, relaxation, writing, music, art, dance).
- Stay in the present. Take one day at a time.
- Utilize spiritual faith resources.
- Consider telehealth for mental health support (online consultations, teletherapy).
- Eat sufficient and healthy food. Exercise when you can.
- Monitor yourself for prolonged sadness, difficulty sleeping, hopelessness.
- Remind yourself how you coped with past life challenges and enact those coping strategies today.
- Call 911 for any health emergencies or if you have thoughts of harming yourself or others.
- For COVID-19 information, visit [CDC.gov](https://www.cdc.gov) or the CDC's “Stress and Coping” web page.

## How to Care for Yourself and Get the Support You Need

Calming your anxiety begins with learning how to process grief during a crisis. Consider these self-care tips:

- Minimize watching, reading or listening to news that causes you to feel anxious or distressed. Seek information only from trusted sources.