

# Grieving during COVID-19

## What older adults need to know



COVID-19 has left many experiencing high levels of grief and loss around the world.<sup>1,2</sup> As an older adult, you may be dealing with other losses in your life (mobility, work, relationships, health-related, etc.)<sup>3-5</sup> that may make it especially challenging to work through the feelings of loss and loneliness you may be experiencing due to pandemic guidelines, such as stay-at-home orders. While these guidelines keep us safe physically, they may also keep us apart from our support network and usual routines.

This fact-sheet is meant to give you a better understanding of the feelings you may be experiencing and strategies you and/or your loved ones can use to cope during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### What is grief?

Grief is a normal reaction to the loss of something or someone important to us.

When we experience loss, it can affect our sense of self and identity and significantly disrupt our usual lifestyle, as well as how we interact with others.<sup>6</sup>

During the pandemic, you may have lived through:

- the loss of a friend or loved one
- the loss of a job or income
- the loss of regular contact and celebrations
- the loss of community and your normal support systems.

The more losses one experiences, the harder it can be to process and cope. It is important to raise awareness of this by talking about the pandemic and the losses we face, so that we can recognize where we are struggling and seek help if and/or when we need it.

## Signs of grief

There is no “right” way to grieve a loss. Everyone experiences loss differently and the experience is often shaped by your own early experience with loss, your culture and belief system, as well as your support network.<sup>8-11</sup> However, we do know of several feelings and behaviours that are commonly experienced while grieving. These can include:

- feeling sad and crying
- anger at the situation
- fatigue and changes in sleep (difficulty sleeping/sleeping more)
- feeling alone
- guilt and anxiety over the current situation
- decreased desire to engage in your routine.<sup>12-14</sup>

## Types of grief

Did you know that a “normal” grief reaction can linger for several months? Having a healthy social support system and responding to your pain with self-compassion and kindness can be helpful to support your healing. Typically, during a “normal” grief reaction, you are able to continue with your day-to-day routine, although it may feel hard. Sometimes, grief can progress to something more complicated that can require more formalized support, such as therapy.<sup>15-18</sup>



Other types of grief you may have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic include anticipatory grief, which can happen when we are expecting a big loss,<sup>19</sup> or disenfranchised grief, which can happen when we cannot share our grief with others or use the rituals we usually practice.<sup>20</sup>

## Grief and trauma

This pandemic, co-occurring societal events, and shelter-in-place guidelines have changed our lives in many ways. These changes have been a traumatic experience for many older adults. Trauma increases the likelihood of a more difficult grief experience.<sup>15-18</sup> If this sounds true for you, please seek support from a clinical professional.

## How can I cope with grief during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- **Connect as regularly as you wish with loved ones** (i.e., family, friends, trusted community members) using a long-distance communication medium of your choice (i.e., letters, telephone calls, or video-conferencing software). See the Resources list for links to download and learn more about connecting through different media.<sup>21-22</sup>
- **When it feels safe to do so, “name and claim” your grief.** Identify and write down the losses you’ve experienced. Then, consider your strengths and possible coping strategies for each.
- **Maintain healthy eating habits and incorporate indoor fitness activities into your daily routine.** Try your best to eat a well-balanced diet consisting of vegetables, fruits, nuts, and lean proteins, and aim for 150 minutes of aerobic exercise per week.<sup>22</sup>
- **Don’t hesitate to seek help from professionals when you need it.**



## Resources

### Regarding grief management, by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)

- [CAMH COVID-19 Tips for Managing Grief](#) (YouTube video)
- [Loss, grief, and healing](#)
- [Grieving: Where to go when you're looking for help](#)
- [Coping with loss and grief](#)

### Regarding grief management, by organizations external to CAMH

- [Grief Resources During COVID-19 \(Families First\)](#)
- [COVID-19 Resources Toolkit \(Spectrum Health Care\)](#)
- [Understanding Grief in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic \(by Kendra Cherry for VeryWell Mind\)](#)
- [Understanding and Coping with Loss and Grief \[Canadian Mental Health Association \(CMHA\) Ontario\]](#)
- [Grieving \[Canadian Mental Health Association \(CMHA\) National\]](#)
- [How to Support Someone who is Grieving \(Families First\)](#)
- [Grief Resources \(Families First\)](#)
- [Understanding Grief in the Context of Job Loss and Lifestyle Adjustment \(Millicent Nuver Simmelink for the National Career Development Association\)](#)

### Specific to Indigenous communities

- [Indigenous Voices: Honouring our Loss and Grief \(Video; livingmyculture.ca\)](#)
- [Teachings to Support Grief and Loss in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Communities \(Cancer Care Ontario\)](#)
- [Complicated Grief in Aboriginal Populations \(Spivak et al., 2012\)](#)

### Telephone support lines for older adults

- **Talk2NICE by the National Initiative for the Care of the Elderly (NICE)**
  - Call or request to receive a friendly outreach/brief support service call from NICE social workers or social work students. Note: This is not a crisis line.
    - Call: 1 -844-529-7292 ([Request a call](#))
- **Seniors' Safety Line (toll-free from anywhere in Ontario)**
  - A telephone counselling and support service for elders experiencing abuse or at risk of abuse.
    - Call: 1-866-299-1011 [Understanding Grief in the Context of Job Loss and Lifestyle Adjustment](#)

## General Wellness Tips

Geriatric Psychiatry Community Services of Ottawa (2020): Five Winter Wellness Tips for Older Adults

### Learn the basics of video-conferencing

- Facetime
  - Video tutorial
- Google Duo
  - Video tutorial
- Skype
  - Video tutorial
- Zoom
  - Video tutorial
- Google Meet
  - Video tutorial

### References

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