

# PATHWAYS CENTER

## for GRIEF & LOSS

### COPING WITH A CORONAVIRUS DEATH

If you are grieving a death due to the coronavirus, your reactions may seem intense and overwhelming. Some people feel as though they are “falling apart,” and are overwhelmed by their reactions. Others may feel numb and barely able to function. You have nothing you can compare this experience to and that can be scary. Part of what is difficult about this death is that you are struggling to believe they are really gone. So of course you are struggling to cope.

Know that your reactions are normal; it is the situation that is unusual. You have never lived through a pandemic before. The world you once knew has dramatically changed. Phrases such as “global crisis,” “epic proportions,” and “disastrous” are causing most people to feel anxious and uncertain even if they don’t know someone who has died from the virus. You may also wonder who else might die who you care about. Take some time to look honestly at what *you* need, and how you might meet those needs. Know that you will experience a wide variety of reactions, even throughout the course of one day. This affects you in all ways—physically, emotionally, cognitively, socially and spiritually. By looking at *how* you are affected, you will understand how you can cope and survive this difficult time in your life.

- **Physical** – It may be that you are reacting to this loss in a physical way. Some describe it as a punch in the abdomen or as though they have “undergone surgery without anesthesia.” Initially people may have trouble sleeping or may sleep for only two to three hours at a time. Initially, nightmares or bad dreams are common. Many feel exhausted. In the best way it can, your body is telling you that you have been significantly impacted by this loss.
- **Emotional** - The emotional aspect of your reactions is often what you - and others - are aware of. This isn’t just your tears, it may be your *inability* to cry. Other strong feelings you may experience include: fear, vulnerability, guilt, or rage. Your feelings of grief maybe stronger due to social isolation. Finding outlets for intense emotions is important. Decide whom you feel safest with to “let loose” and express all that you are feeling. Remind yourself that you cannot control everything and that often, your expectations for yourself or others may be unrealistic. It’s okay not to be okay.
- **Cognitive** - Perhaps you keep thinking, “It can’t be true, how can this have happened?” It is natural to replay details over and again in your mind. If you couldn’t be with the person who was dying, or spend time with them after the death you may understandably feel cheated of precious last moments and goodbyes. Know that you may:
  - Have difficulty concentrating
  - Wonder “How did I survive and why did they die?”
  - Revisit what you wish you could or should have said or done differently

- **Social** – If you are separated from your support systems, stay connected in other ways. Use technology, pick up the phone, or even consider letter writing. Some people, out of their own need or discomfort, might tell *you* about something similar that happened to them - even though you're the one who's hurting! Or conversations may be awkward or brief. Don't make plans or decisions based on others' opinions. Discern what seems right for you at this time.
- **Spiritual** – With a coronavirus death, even very "religious" people reassess what they believe and why. What has happened may contradict what you thought you knew about what is fair and just in the world. Many find their faith eventually deepens, but only *after* a period of intense questioning. Eventually, you will realize that you are able to go on despite not having all the answers.

You were likely already experiencing anxiety, confusion and grief due to the stay at home order and all the changes in your routine. Given this, know it may take longer to grieve and adjust to this loss than it otherwise would. If a funeral wasn't what it "would have been" or has been delayed, this too can cause your grief to take longer to resolve. Be patient with yourself, grief doesn't have a timetable. Funerals help you realize the death has really occurred and provides the opportunity to give and receive support, including physical hugs, from others. Finding ways to honor and remember the person who died is something you can do now, as well as later. Perhaps find a time each day to think about and remember the person you have lost. Look at pictures, talk with someone you trust about fond memories or what is hardest for you at the moment. Create a small 'memorial' area in your home with mementos, comforting readings, and photographs.

In time, as you adjust to the changes brought about by your loss, your attention will focus more on what you want to remember. Your hurt will lessen as you discover and begin to figure out what is healing for you. Meeting with others who have had similar experiences can be helpful as you realize that many of the reactions, questions, and feelings you have are not unique. You can learn what worked for others and find affirmation and encouragement. Although grief is an individual experience, those who have been there are often the best teachers for those living through the experience. Call a Pathways Center for Grief & Loss counselor to learn more about the support available to you.



Prepared by Pathways Center for Grief & Loss, 4075 Old Harrisburg Pike, Mount Joy, PA 17552  
 Phone: (717) 391-2413 or (800) 924-7610 ♦ info@pathwaysthroughgrief.org  
 www.pathwaysthroughgrief.org ♦ Permission to copy required