



# AURORA@ COVID19-EU

ARTICULATING A UNIFIED RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK  
RECONSTRUCTION AFTER LOSS IN EUROPE



AURORA  
@COVID19-EU



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## INTRODUCTION

*What you can find in this manual*

This manual, and its associated resources, seeks to help communities increase grief literacy and awareness, especially in the aftermath of COVID-19, whose circumstances have been factors that can be conducive to complicated grief. After COVID-19, we can learn how to cope with losses in this type of emergency by strengthening compassionate networks in our communities (Breen et al., 2022). Each community should evaluate what would be the appropriate steps to adapt this material, and some keys to translate this manual into concrete training actions are addressed in the "Good practices guidelines manual (R4)".

In this manual you will first find stories of loss in COVID, inspired by real experiences, which narrate different processes and difficulties, told in first person. We thus approach the different circumstances, needs, sufferings and resources that people have deployed. COVID-19 has brought factors, which have not yet ended and even may reappear, as we may face pandemics or emergencies in the future. The stories also help us remember and honor those who suffered and helped in COVID.

Secondly, we present scientific evidence that speaks to the risk factors that COVID-19 has brought. Specifically, we review these factors: being unable to say goodbye, isolation and lack of social support, and the ambiguous character of the death. We also present the characteristics that allow us to differentiate Grief and when grief becomes complicated.

In a third section you will find a series of resources, hints, and tools to help people in grief: How to prepare yourself to support the other, some suggestion on how to support you friend or family member in grief, and tips on how to help children and teenagers in grief. Finally, you will find exercises and suggestions on how to deal with the process of your own finitude and death. To help others is also to open ourselves to our own grief and mortality. It is not easy to help those who grieve and suffer. Sometimes it is even more difficult because we want to help a grieving loved one, while we ourselves are grieving.

## Section 1: STORIES OF LOSS DURING COVID-19

### 1) A loss in times of COVID: A different kind of battle

John, a retired firefighter, found himself in an unexpected and challenging situation. He was living with his wife and mother when he was contacted by the hospital psychologist for support after his mother died in hospital from pneumonia due to COVID infection. These exceptional circumstances occurred during the first wave of the pandemic, with compulsory isolation.

*"I'm glad you called... because right now I'm completely alone at home, with just me and my dog. You know, I was a firefighter for many years, and I'm not used to being on the side of someone who needs help. My wife is hospitalized with COVID, my children and their families are also infected and confined to their homes, and I'm isolated prophylactically. My mother just died, and I couldn't even say goodbye to her. For years she has always been with me. I'm afraid she thought I've abandoned her in hospital".*

In this illustration we can see that John was taken by surprise by the sudden need for his mother to go to the hospital, without being able to accompany her because he was also infected and had to be isolated prophylactic. Faced with death, he felt guilty for not being able to stand beside her and for not being able to say goodbye. In addition, he was very worried about the ambiguous and unexpected situation of death and the uncertainty of the outcome, which could happen again with his wife (who was also in hospital).

The compulsory lockdown until he tested negative, which finally happened after two and a half months, forced him into compulsory prophylactic isolation with a significant impact on his perception of lack of social support in his most trying times unveiled the profound emotional struggle in silence and loneliness faced by those impacted by COVID-19 losses.

## 2) A loss in times of COVID: the impact of restriction of family visits to the hospital

Carlo lost his mother during the acute phase of the pandemic, when major restrictions had been imposed on family visits in his country's hospitals.

His mother had been hospitalized for a heart attack, which was followed by several complications. The woman died after two months of hospitalization.

During these months, Carlo had only been able to be with her for 15 minutes a day: this was the time allowed by the hospital. He had seen her body become thinner and thinner day after day; he had seen her break down, lose the confidence to go home, despair. Carlo had felt totally helpless, feeling that the support he could provide her in the few minutes he was allowed to be near her was absolutely insufficient. The sense of guilt in these two months had been accompanied by anger at the medical staff: He feared that they were not doing all they could for his mother, and he felt unheeded in his need to be near her.

Carlo remembers the occasion when he gave her his last hug.

*"That day I clearly recognized my mother's suffering and despair: she was looking into my eyes, by then too weak even to speak. I felt that the end of her days was approaching. A part of me knew that this was the last time I would see her. I thanked her for everything she had given me, for the love she had raised me with, for the values she had passed on to me. And I embraced her. In the 15th minute, the nurse called me back: I had to leave the room; the visiting minutes I was allowed were over. I cried, I begged her to let me stay a little longer, but there was nothing to be done. I had to leave the room. It is a scene I still relive today with anger, and with a great sense of helplessness. I keep thinking about the loneliness of her last days and I wonder if she didn't think I'd abandoned her."*

Carlo was able to say his last goodbye to his mother but cannot overcome his sense of guilt and helplessness for not being able to be by her side as he would have liked during

the long period of hospitalization. These thoughts and feelings are making his process of grieving even more challenging. He continues to brood over how lonely his mother felt; he wonders if she was clear that he would have liked to spend much more time with her, if she felt abandoned. These kinds of thoughts throw him into a state of despair, mixed with anger at the health personnel. He feels that neither his nor his mother's emotions were recognized and respected.

### 3) A loss in times of COVID: Tony's Dilemma

Tony, 59 years old, was a devoted husband and father, living a life centered around his family. At the time of the pandemic, his life took an unexpected turn as he became the primary caregiver for his ailing mother living just with her to protect her. She had been hospitalized twice, struggling with respiratory issues, and frequently expressed her feelings of neglect and isolation during her stays at hospital. During her third hospitalization, tragedy struck as Tony's mother died of respiratory failure. Throughout this challenging journey, Tony had the support of a hospital psychologist who had been in contact with him since the second episode. They continued to offer guidance and comfort as he navigated the tumultuous sea of caregiving during a pandemic.

*"My mum used to complain about the way she was treated in hospital, and it makes me extremely angry and furious, so I want to keep her at home as much as possible, even though I'm stuck here and can't do anything else."*

During the third hospitalization, Tony's mother's condition deteriorated rapidly. The medical team reached out to him, inviting him to come to the hospital to say a final goodbye. At that moment, Tony faced an agonizing dilemma. Although he had already tested negative for COVID-19, he was confronted with the decision of whether to obey the health delegate's order, which forbade him from leaving his home, or to visit the hospital and bid his mother a proper farewell.

*"What should I do? The local authorities won't let me leave the house, and the hospital has already called to say that my mother's days are numbered, she is dying."*

*They've already called my brothers who live abroad and they're on their way. But I'm desperate, I really don't know what to do."*

Tony's heart-wrenching predicament encapsulated the ambivalence of wanting to say goodbye while being restrained by the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic. The weight of the situation bore down on him with immense anxiety and uncertainty. Yet, amidst the turmoil, Tony found a way to connect with his mother. The hospital staff, understanding his situation, facilitated a video call that allowed him to be with his ailing mother during her final moments. In a brief but profoundly meaningful exchange, Tony was able to express his love and say goodbye, granting his mother a sense of closure as well.

This poignant moment served as a reparative experience, providing a vital opportunity for Tony to begin his journey through the grieving process. While the circumstances were far from ideal, this gesture of connection and love helped Tony find a way to let go and move forward in the face of the pandemic's challenges and the loss of his beloved mother.

#### **4) Loss in Times of COVID: Unanswered Questions**

In the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a sexagenarian woman found herself accompanying her husband to the health center as he exhibited the first concerning signs and symptoms of the virus. Little did she know that this ordinary day would be the beginning of a heart-wrenching journey filled with doubt, sorrow, and pain. After their visit to the health center, they were quickly referred to the hospital. Sadly, her husband didn't make it out alive, passing away after just one week in the hospital.

The sudden and unexpected loss of her previously healthy husband was deeply challenging to accept, compounded by unusual circumstances surrounding the hospital procedures. These circumstances left the woman with a multitude of doubts about her husband's death.

*"I could not visit him in hospital because I was also infected with COVID. So, my daughter went to the hospital, and he was fine, and she lives very close to the*

*hospital. It was just about time for her to go home and have a shower when she got a phone call from the hospital telling her that her father had died. It was all very sudden and unexpected and to make stuff more difficult, his personal belongings never turned up. As it was a COVID death, we weren't allowed to recognize the body or have a proper funeral, so we wonder if it was really my husband that dyed at that hospital. His body was cremated without our consent or the opportunity to see the body and say goodbye. All of this seems unreal, and it is very hard to believe that I really lost my husband."*

This harrowing story represents a unique form of grief known as ambiguous loss, a concept where the inability to believe that a loved one has truly passed away is marked by uncertainty, preventing the acceptance of the reality of death. In such cases, it is often described as an abduction or disappearance, where the absence of the body and the inability to perform usual farewell rituals create a glimmer of hope that the death never occurred. This uncertainty can significantly complicate the grieving process, as it leaves those left behind with unanswered questions, unresolved emotions, and a lingering sense of disbelief. In the face of such a loss, the woman, and her family grapple with the pain of never truly being able to say a proper goodbye to their beloved husband and father, all amidst the challenging backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 5) Loss in Times of COVID: The Ambiguous Character of Unseen Death

Sarah, a middle-aged woman who, like many others, found herself navigating the uncharted waters of grief during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sarah and her friend had shared an unbreakable bond. They had weathered life's storms together, celebrated each other's triumphs, and provided unwavering support during the most challenging times. The pandemic had turned life upside down, and the restrictions placed on gatherings and funerals had created a surreal and isolating environment. The inability to see her friend's lifeless body or participate in the traditional funeral rituals weighed heavily on Sarah.

The isolation and restrictions imposed by the pandemic exacerbated the grief Sarah was already grappling with. She yearned for the comfort of shared mourning, the healing embrace of friends and family, and the solace that comes from collective grief.

*"Seeing the corpse seems to be a trivial, medieval thing. But to see the lifeless body, the corpse of your loved one, and to say a final goodbye... A minimum of contact is essential for oneself. The dead person is dead. But for yourself, to understand that you must now detach from the person physically and concentrate on the spiritual level. The moment you don't see the dead person, you see a coffin, then you have an understanding that there is a dead person in the coffin. But it's an act of faith. You have to believe that the dead person is inside, anything could have happened. Then, because you haven't seen them dead, you still seek that dynamic of closeness and affection with the living person..."*

Sarah's words carry the weight of a profound truth: the significance of a final farewell, the ritual of seeing the lifeless body, and the symbolic act of saying goodbye. These actions are not trivial but rather an essential part of the grieving process.

In the absence of this expected ritual, Sarah highlights the challenge of detaching from the physical presence of the deceased. The final farewell, although painful, helps individuals understand the finality of death and assists them in finding a sense of closure. Without the ability to say a final farewell and with the ambiguous character of the death, individuals are left with a lingering sense of detachment and uncertainty. The absence of this ritual makes it challenging to transition from the physical presence of the deceased to a more spiritual connection, ultimately complicating the grieving process. It is a poignant reminder of the human need for closure, connection, and understanding in the face of loss, particularly when the reality of death remains ambiguous.

## **6) Loss in Times of COVID: A Heartbreaking Loss Amidst the Pandemic**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Mary found herself in a distressing situation, living near her elderly aunt and uncle but adhering to the recommendations to stay at home. Her weekly visits to them took place outdoors, at a safe distance, supplemented by regular

phone calls. Months passed in this way, with a sense of separation intensifying due to the pandemic precautions.

As time went on, the family noticed a distressing change in her uncle's health. His condition deteriorated to the point where he had to visit the doctor, and he was promptly admitted to the hospital. Weeks turned into a harrowing journey, and with each passing day, her strong, caring uncle transformed into a fragile, vulnerable, and increasingly weakened version of himself.

A few months later, he was hospitalized once more, but this time, it was a journey from which he wouldn't return alive. Mary, and some of their nephews, had to tell her beloved aunt that her husband had died.

*"It was excruciating to watch and to have to break the news to my aunt (his wife), his partner of more than 50 years... I can't forget her words... 'how is it possible that he went to the hospital for treatment and died there? He should never have left. I shouldn't have let him go there on his own. I know they wouldn't let me in... but I went everywhere with him, and I wasn't there for him... The thought of him dying alone breaks my heart.' These words pop up in my mind... And his funeral, with pandemic restrictions, was also difficult. Not being able to hold my aunt as she suffered was overwhelming, and we had to find somewhere outside to hold her."*

The heart-wrenching words of Mary's aunt echo the anguish that many experienced during this time. The haunting thought of her husband's solitude in his final moments underscores the deep sense of helplessness created by the pandemic's restrictions.

The funeral, marked by its restrictions, further added to the family's sorrow. Unable to offer the physical comfort and support that is expected during times of grief, they found themselves seeking solace outdoors, navigating the complex terrain of loss amidst a world that had changed so drastically.

Mary's story encapsulates the profound challenges of loss during the COVID-19 pandemic. It intertwines themes of an inability to say goodbye, the isolating impact of physical restrictions, and the ambiguous character of death in a world transformed by the virus. Her aunt's words capture the essence of a pain that many felt – the sorrow of

not being there for a loved one when they needed it most, and the grief of watching them go alone.

## 7) Loss in Times of COVID: Unfulfilled Farewell

In the unsettled times of the COVID-19 pandemic, a family grapples with the sudden loss of their beloved mother. She was a pillar of strength, known for her elegance and beauty, but when she fell victim to the virus, her family's world was turned upside down. Once diagnosed, the severity of her clinical symptoms meant that she had to be admitted to hospital. The family had desperately hoped that she would recover and return home, but unfortunately, she died in hospital. The woman's husband, Steve, had been a devoted partner for decades. Now he was left to grieve her loss without the dignified tribute she deserved.

*"She didn't get the dignified funeral she deserved. We weren't even allowed to dress her in the clothes she had carefully chosen for her final journey. It breaks our hearts to know that she was laid to rest in the most undignified manner, wrapped in a bag, as if she were indigent."*

The family's grief was compounded by the fact that they were unable to grant her final wishes. The clothes she had selected, envisioning them as her farewell attire, remained untouched. The attire that she had defined to symbolize her final journey, her elegance, and her individuality was left unfulfilled. The family was denied the opportunity to offer her the dignity she had always cherished. A poignant aspect of loss during the COVID-19 pandemic - the inability to provide a dignified farewell to a loved one. The restrictions imposed by the pandemic have created circumstances where cherished rituals and wishes would remain unfulfilled. In this case, the woman's family was left with a profound sense of sadness and frustration as they were unable to dress her in the clothes she had chosen for her final moments, a poignant gesture to honor her identity and individuality.

## 8) Loss in Times of COVID: Unsettling Moments After Losing Grandma

Following the death of her beloved grandmother as a result of a Covid infection, Sue was plunged into a world of grief and loss, the pain deepened by the unsettling moments that followed. In particular, she was asked to recognize the body from a photograph. She could not confirm that the clothes she had chosen to dress her grandmother had actually been used, as she had not seen the deceased's body.

The emotional turmoil she experienced reflected the deep bond she shared with her grandmother. Her memory remained as vivid as the precious moments they shared.

*"Having to find the clothes and not having the chance to dress her, and having to give them to complete strangers, not even knowing if they put them on because they don't show you. It's unsettling. ...I don't know, you feel like a thief entering the house. The house is yours, but it feels as if a stranger is putting their hands in your things. The same goes for loved ones; they are yours, and the thought that strangers may have replaced them, even for a moment, stings."*

Sue's words carried the weight of her emotional burden. The act of searching for her grandmother's clothes, items that held a piece of her essence, became a deeply personal journey that intertwined with the grief of her loss. The inability to dress her grandmother and the need to entrust these cherished items to unknown hands added an extra layer of anguish. This highlights the perceived ambiguity of death and the difficulty in accepting the reality of death, which can complicate bereavement.

In such moments, the idea that someone else could briefly step into the sacred space of her grandmother's memory was painful, particularly because she could not confirm since the coffin was never opened.

## 9) Loss in Times of COVID: The Burden of Loss in a Distanced World

Paul, a young adult who faced his first significant loss during the pandemic. Apart from the normal and difficult process of dealing with the reality of losing a close friend, he was disturbed by the absence of important rituals such as the emotional comfort provided

by funerals. The small gathering of family and friends, all masked and distanced, painted a stark contrast to the warm and supportive embrace that Paul needed.

*"The funeral took place in a small town, in a church that could accommodate up to a certain number of people. Then I saw on entering the church the controls, the need to keep a distance, not being able to approach people to hug, the constant wearing of a mask. The distance is painful in these contexts. If it is bearable not to hug when friends meet to eat a pizza, it certainly is not when you have to share a grief, because a mother, an aunt, a grandmother, a friend, for so many people has died. Comforting each other would have been necessary, and instead, it cannot happen."*

This narrative captures the emotional weight of navigating grief amidst the isolation and distancing necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Paul's words highlight the stark contrast between the traditional, comforting rituals of mourning and the stark reality of pandemic-era funerals.

The isolation and restrictions on physical contact exacerbated the emotional burden of loss, making the process of grieving even more challenging. It emphasizes the human need for connection, support, and shared grieving in the face of such profound losses, underscoring the unique hardships faced by those who mourned their loved ones during the pandemic.

## **Section 2: Evidence based Information.**

### UNABLE TO SAY GOODBYE

Not being able to say goodbye, not being able to say a last word or share a moment before the death of the loved one is something that fills the griever with pain and complicates accepting and processing the death, as we could see in John's case: *"My mother just died, and I couldn't even say goodbye to her"*. In the pandemic, death occurred in a context of uncertainty (Menichetti Delor et al., 2021) that together with a rapid progression of the virus and health restrictions made it difficult to be with loved ones, to support them in their last moments and to say goodbye, making it harder to accept that the person was really gone (Cipoletta et al., 2022). Therefore, the impossibility of saying

goodbye can complicate grief by filling it with uncertainty, guilt and regret of not being able to be with the person at that moment (as in the case of John: *"I'm afraid she thought I've abandoned her in hospital"*). Leaving the mourner with a sense of something unfinished. However, these kinds of difficulties not only arise from the dying process, but also appear after the death. The lack of rituals deprived of a moment of connection and support from loved ones, but also of being able to say goodbye in socially established ways that, as is the example of rituals, help to process death (Mortazavi et al., 2021). As Sarah explained upon losing her friend: *"Seeing the corpse seems to be a trivial, medieval thing. But to see the lifeless body, the corpse of your loved one, and to say a final goodbye... A minimum of contact is essential for oneself"*. But also, some people lack the opportunity to provide a dignified funeral tailored to what the deceased or the family would want, which would help alleviate the heaviness of grief, as Steve expressed regarding his wife: *We weren't even allowed to dress her in the clothes she had carefully chosen for her final journey*. Therefore, being unable to say goodbye during and after death has occurred will for many people complicate the grieving process and can fill them with feeling of regret and sorrow.

## ISOLATION AND LACK OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

It is in times of pain that we most need others by our side, and during COVID we were left without the support of those close to us, as we saw in John's case: *"My wife is hospitalized with COVID, my children and their families are also infected and confined to their homes, and I'm isolated..."*. Lack of support and loneliness during and after death is one of the predictors of complications in grief and, therefore, of psychological and emotional distress (Gil-Juliá, 2008). As we saw in the case stories, due to the measures of physical distance and home quarantine, people who lost someone were left alone during one of the most difficult and painful moments we can go through as human beings: the death of a loved one (Fernández & González-González, 2020). Also, during the funeral or at other times, as we saw with Paul: *"...the need to keep a distance, not being able to approach people to hug, the constant wearing of a mask. The distance is painful in these*

*contexts*". As Paul said, support, being able to mourn with others and having the physical presence of others is established as a protective factor to cope and process the loss (Lyons & Chamberlain, 2006) and helps us in a moment as complicated as the death of a loved one.

## THE AMBIGUOUS CHARACTER OF THE DEATH

As seen the case stories and the harrowing descriptions of illness and loss under the pandemic, some aspects of death under the pandemic, made the experience similar to what has been known as **ambiguous loss**: as said, in a suggestive way, by a mourning family member interviewed in Madrid<sup>1</sup>, "I felt like it was a kind of kidnapping". We read in the case stories of the way people lost loved ones in a rapid and unexpected way where they were unable to say goodbye to their loved ones. As in the case of the wife who never got to say goodbye to her husband after he was hospitalized with the virus after a visit to the doctor and died alone in hospital a week after. This is combined with a lack of clear understanding of how the loved ones died and not seeing the body. We hear of a woman who is unable to say goodbye to her friend due to restrictions and therefore garbles with understanding, that the friend is indeed dead. All these aspects make losing a loved one in some ways similar to what happens in the case of the disappeared, about whom there will never be the absolute certainty of their death. Bereaved people during COVID-19 may have difficulties believing that their loved one is dead since uncertainty, suddenness, unpredictability, and lack of rituals, make their loss ambiguous. This can increase the risk of grief complications where the bereaved person feels unable to overcome their loss and grief does not subside over time.<sup>2</sup>

### **Grief and when grief become complicated.**

Grief is a universal human experience. Losing a loved one is something most people will experience across their lifetime. Previously, it was a commonly held belief that to 'get over' the loss, the bereaved should move through different phases or stages of grief to come out on the other side and be done with grieving. Today, inspired by bereaved

individual's personal experiences, the theories that we adhere to believe in a more individual and dynamic grief processes. The aim is no longer to get over the loss of a loved one but to find new meaningful ways of carrying the person and the meaning of the relationship forward. We don't stop grieving the loss of a person we have loved, but instead we aim to learn to live with the loss and integrate it into our lives moving forward. This could mean that memories of the dead person are still associated with sadness and feelings of loss but also other aspects such as happy memories, gratefulness and love.

For many people, losing a loved one is one of the most emotionally challenging experiences they will endure. Grief can be overwhelming and present itself in ways that make it difficult for the bereaved to recognize themselves, which can increase anxiety and a feeling of being unsafe. Even though grief feels overwhelming and intense, it is important to remember that for most people grief is a natural process which does not need specialized intervention or treatment. It is instead a necessary process of adjustment following the loss of a loved person in our lives.

However, not all bereaved people experience a healing and adaptive grief process where the bereaved individual will slowly start to comprehend and accept the loss. Out of 10 bereaved individuals, approximately 1 or 2 will experience what can be called complicated grief reactions, in which emotions and grief reactions do not subside over time but remain intense and debilitating<sup>3</sup>. People suffering from complicated grief will need specialized therapeutic treatment to help them adjust to life without the person they have lost. Complicated grief is described by people suffering from it as feeling trapped or stuck in their grief where the grief response does not evolve and change over time. A complicated grief process can contribute to poor well-being and functioning as well as social or relational problems. People can also develop psychological disorders such as Prolonged Grief Disorder, depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)<sup>4</sup>.

Specifically, the circumstances around losing a loved one during the COVID-19 pandemic were for many bereaved a traumatic experience which increased the risk for complicated

grief reactions. Even after the pandemic has passed and lives have mostly returned to normal, it is still important to bear in mind that people who were bereaved during the pandemic can suffer from complicated grief reactions in years to come if it remains untreated.<sup>5</sup>

## Section 3: How can I be of help.

### I don't know what to say or do when someone is grieving.

When someone close to us suffers a loss, we want to support them and help them ease their pain. For many of us that task is difficult because we feel unsure of how to do that best. Below are five suggestions for how to support a friend or family member who is grieving after losing a loved one during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Prepare yourself to support the other.

Before you engage in a conversation with your friend or family member who is grieving, it may be a good idea to prepare yourself for the conversation you are about to have. It's painful to see somebody we care for suffer and it can touch upon some of our own fears of losing people we love. We ourselves might already have experienced painful losses or had traumatic experiences under the pandemic. Therefore, entering such a conversation can be challenging for many of us. Therefore, take a few minutes where you are in stillness and think the conversation through. Prepare yourself by assessing what your intentions are and how this conversation might make you feel. By thinking this through, you may be better able to support your friend in grief. What people in grief universally agree upon is that they do not need to be cheered up. Instead, they need people who are interested in their experiences and can handle their emotions, even when they are hard to bear.

*Suggestion on how to support you friend or family member in grief*

**1. Show your interest and ask questions:** Grief is a very individual process and people can react and feel in many ways. By being interested in your friend or family member's experiences and feelings, you are allowing them a valuable opportunity to feel listened too and supported. This is especially true for those who have lost a loved one under the pandemic. Many were isolated at the time of death and in the months that followed and therefore they may not have had an opportunity to share their experience with others.

## 2. There is no 'right' time to ask or 'right' thing to say, so you just have to go for it.

When you've lost someone close to you, you can feel very alone in the world. For those supporting the person grieving, it can be difficult to start a conversation, but don't be afraid of saying the wrong thing and the wrong time. Try something like *"I hope it's OK that I ask, it's been some time since you lost your husband, how are things now?"* or *"I'd like to talk to you and see how you're, how you're feeling, is now a good time?"*

**3. Offer practical help.** Cook dinner, pick the children up from school and offer to help with practical aspects and continue to do so. When you are grieving it means a lot to feel supported and held by others.

**4. Suggest a gathering or a special farewell.** For people who lost loved ones during the COVID-19 pandemic, funerals and wakes were not permitted. For others, only a small number of people were allowed. This impacted greatly on how grief was shared with family and friends and how supported and connected people felt in the months and years afterwards. To suggest for a trip to the cemetery together or a dinner honoring the person who died, will allow for a special farewell and a moment to connect with your bereaved friend or family member and their grief.

**5. Don't expect grief to go away.** Grief can take a long time as one bereaved person said, *"People think that after six months everything gets better but it's only after six months that you realize what has happened."* So, continue to show your interest, ask questions and offer support months and years after the loss of a significant other.

### When elderly adults are grieving.

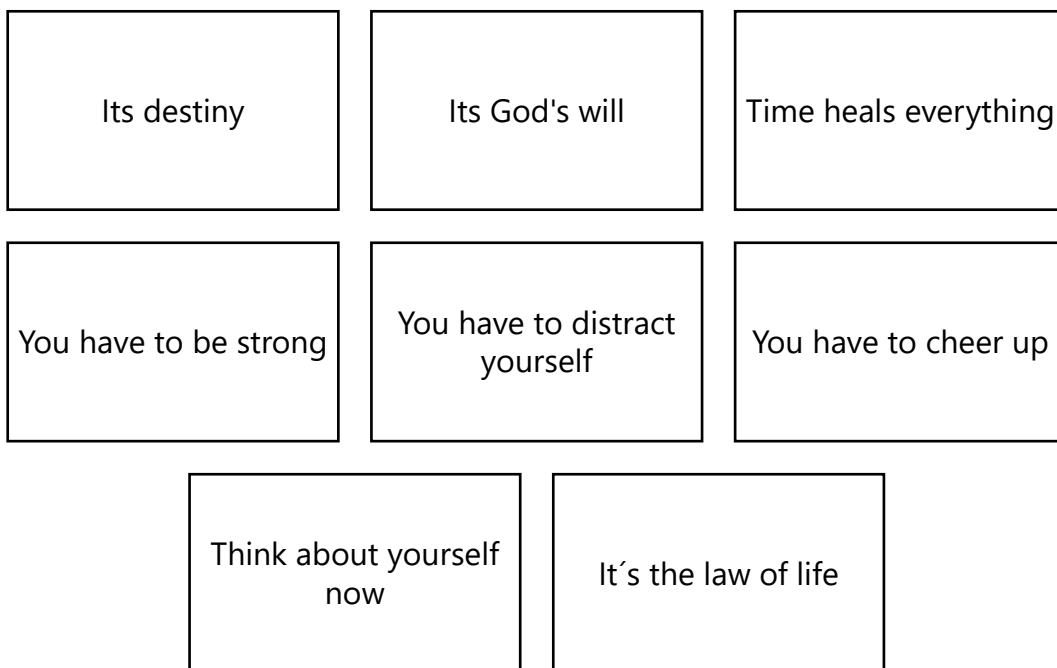
Traditionally there has been this misconception, that elderly adults are less emotionally affected by loss and their grieving is less complicated. The logic behind this assumption has been, that for elderly adult's death is expected, less of a surprise and part of the natural order of things. However, for a husband who has shared 50-60 years with his wife, her death leaves his world upside down. It is exactly the many years together, the shared

life and history which makes this loss so profound. Therefore, the same privileges and considerations should be given to elderly adults in grief, that we give to their younger counterparts.

### **Expressions to be avoided.**

Culturally we have assumed a series of expressions that are usually said to comfort the bereaved person. These are phrases that are said with the best of intentions, which are believed to be comforting but which have either lost their meaning or are not useful at a time of grief. They are expressions that can make the bereaved feel that we do not understand their pain and can even generate feelings of rejection.

These are some of the most common expressions that we should avoid saying:



### **When children grieve.**

When a child is bereaved, we must make ourselves available and show our compassion. We can support children by helping them understand what has happened and the implications this has on them and their family environment. We can also support them by taking their thoughts and feelings seriously and listening and responding in a caring and honest way. Even young children are often aware of what is going on around them

and notice if people close to them are sad and hurting. An important aspect of supporting young children is therefore to give age-appropriate information about what has happened and what is going to happen. This can increase their sense of safety in an otherwise difficult and troubling period of their lives – when adults around them are there for them and telling the truth.

Death is a complex phenomenon for adults as well as children. Even adults do not understand death and the afterlife in the same way and so when talking about death with children, we need to invite and acknowledge their take on the concept. As children grow older, their ability to grasp complex matters such as death and dying develops and so can their thought, feelings and questions on the matter.

*Suggestions on how to help children and teenagers' grief.*

1. **Communicate clear, honest and age-appropriate:** It is natural that we want to protect children from difficult and painful aspects of life. Unfortunately, this is not always possible and being honest can help the child restore a sense of security at a difficult time. Therefore, telling the truth in an empathic and age-appropriate manner is often the most caring support we can offer a child. During the pandemic, understanding that someone had died was made even more difficult due to not being able to say goodbye and see the body afterwards. This aspect underlines the need for giving children honest information and even admitting that there are things we don't know.
2. **Validate how a child feels:** Children can feel a great number of things when they are grieving which should be invited and encouraged. Young children can be occupied by aspects such as having lost the parent who could cook their favorite meal whereas more mature children or teenagers understand the implications of death in a wider context. Often children don't stay in emotions in the same way adults do, so don't be surprised to see a young child overwhelmed with sadness and within five minutes playing happily with their toys again.

3. **Encourage different expressions of grief:** Expressing grief in different ways can be helpful when a child is grieving. Create drawings about what happened or drawings of things that the child would like the dead person to see. Read books or see films which can expand the concept of death and inspire to new ways of thinking about grief. Visit the cemetery or places the lost loved one especially liked.
4. **Involve the kindergarten or school:** As children grow older their lives are lived increasingly outside the home. If your child or teenager is going through a tough time, it's important to involve others. Invite the child or teenager to express their needs, so they feel involved and in control.
5. **Look after yourself:** Caring for a bereaved child can be a practical and emotionally challenging task. Maybe you are grieving too, which makes this task even more challenging. It's important to take your own mental health seriously and seek support when you need it. Do so for your own sake as well as for the sake of your child.

### When should I be worried?

For many of us losing a loved one will be one of the most difficult experiences in our lives. Grief can elicit a strong emotional response that we are not accustomed to. This can be worrying, as we support loved ones going through grief. However, strong emotions and difficult thoughts are part of a normal grieving process and it's helpful to remember that grief can be expressed in many ways and be felt in months and years after the loss. Often bereaved people say that grief does not go away but becomes easier to live with and the loss becomes a part of who they are in their lives going forward.

However, for some people grief becomes complicated and the process of adaptation and acceptance is for some reason hindered. This can for example be due to traumatic experiences before, during or after the death, due to the quality of relationship with the lost person or a lack of social support and isolation when you are grieving. Therefore, people who were bereaved during Covid-19 are at risk of experiencing grief

complications as they were exposed to traumatic circumstances and were often left to grieve in isolation. Grief complications can affect life in many ways and will need specialized therapeutic treatment. This could be a general practitioner or a psychologist depending on the level of worry. As a friend, look for these signs in assessing when you should be worried.

1. **If grief does not change over time:** Grief is a process that evolves and changes over time. However, if a bereaved person does not feel any change or improvement in the way they feel and function after having lost a loved one after 6 months, this may be a cause for concern.
2. **When grief negatively affects other parts of life:** For some people grief will impact their lives in such a way that, that to friends and family it will be obvious that something has changed for the worse. For example, when someone leaves a previously valued job and only gets out of the house to buy groceries. Or when a previously sociable friend isolates themselves and only focuses on work.
3. **When there is no trace of grief:** When someone loses a loved one and there is no trace of them in their lives. When the bereaved prefer not to talk about the person, or to be reminded of the person and the life they used to share together, this may be a cause of concern. This is delicate as people grieve in different ways. However, if you know this to be unlike your friend, there may be overwhelming emotions holding your friend back from grieving.
4. **If life feels too difficult to bear:** Struggling with finding meaning after a loss is a common experience. Sometimes this can amount to thoughts of life itself being meaningless and for a while it can seem impossible to find a way to go forward. For a smaller group these thoughts become actual suicidal thoughts and when these thoughts appear, it's a sign that right now life is extremely difficult and professional help should be summoned.

## Section 4: Accepting death as part of life.

DEATH: SOMETHING THAT AFFECTS US ALL

Death affects us all. It is only a matter of time and we all have had or will experience major losses, and we will all, sooner or later, be faced with our own death. However, we live in a world that often tells us about the importance of not thinking about what causes us pain. There is an assumption, perhaps, that talking about what hurts us or thinking about it could make us more fragile, cause more suffering and make us unhappy. So, we often pretend it is not going to happen, we ignore it and deny it as if it were something alien to our lives. Sometimes we even pretend that we and our loved ones are immortal and – even in the case of elderly people or with irreversible prognoses – we cling to the idea that death can be avoided. However, if we are not aware of and prepared to face the death of our loved ones (and our own death), we may find it more difficult to face the grief, suffering and pain that the loss causes to ourselves and others. Death is part of our own life history. It is an important topic, an essential theme in our personal and family history. Accepting it without taboos allows us to integrate death as another part of our development and our life. Furthermore, when we can accept, think and talk naturally about death, loss and grief we are more able to support others who are grieving.

### a. **“Someday we will go away” - Death itself**

Someday we and our loved ones will leave. Confronting and accepting this inevitability of death into our lives, far from overwhelming us, can help us to experience more fulfilling and meaningful lives: to enjoy each moment more deeply, to make meaning of everything we do, and, when the time comes, to plan how we want the end of our lives to be. If we become aware that life has a limit, perhaps we will be able to appreciate each moment more with our loved ones and live in a more intense and authentic way.

Next, you will find some questions to help you to increase your awareness, reflection, and acceptance of death, hence, to improve your capability to support bereaved people.

- *What would you change in your life if you were more aware that you will die someday?*
- *What would you talk about with your loved ones, if this were their last day?*
- *Think of 3 experiences that you have not yet lived with your loved one and that you would like to live before he/she dies. Write them down. What prevents you from doing them now?*
- *Think of two people close to you, what would you like to say to them before you die? Write it down. What's preventing you from telling that to them now?*

b. **“A leaf in autumn” - The death of the other**

Being aware that the people with whom we have shared part of our life (e.g., friends, partner, family), will no longer be with us is something that can be unbearable to accept. However, the moment we realize the importance of letting go, we can integrate this as part of our path, we can give it a meaning and we can rebuild our life without the physical presence of the loved one, giving meaning to their life with us as well as to their death.

- We must accept that throughout our life we will have numerous losses with which we will have to learn to live, letting go of the previous physical relationship we had and rebuilding such relationship on different terms.
- *“Just as a tree has to lose its leaves in order to sprout strong in spring, human beings must sometimes learn to let go of their loved ones who pass away in order to rebuild and readapt to a new environment.”*

### c. "I'd rather ignore it" - Accepting the idea of death

As we discussed, ignoring what causes us pain is a mechanism that at first can anesthetize us, but in the long term does not prevent suffering. So, naturalize the idea of death in our lives can be helpful. There are some things that can help us in this process:

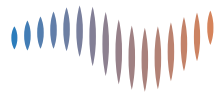
- ✓ **Talk about yours and others death.** Having conversations about how we hope life will be when the dead happen can be helpful and even comforting. There are topics we can address in these conversations that, while they may be hard at first, may be helpful to both the one who is leaving and to the one who will live without their presence. For example, plan the end of life and explore what people want to be done with their own body and their legacy, spiritual and material (e.g., collections, bank passwords, social media legacy), and unsolved issues or open wounds. Drawing up an advance directive document and making a last will and testament will reduce uncertainty.
- ✓ **Talk about the death of loved ones, naturalizing it.** Talk about how they lived and how they died. Remember them with affection and talk about them to the younger ones. Attending funerals and wakes of our loved ones help us to give meaning to farewells. Saying goodbye does not mean forgetting and it can be an opportunity to remember their legacy, name them, relive sweet moments and talk about what we learned with them. These will help us to close cycles and begin healthy grieving processes. Also, it will help us to make these rituals a part of life.
- ✓ **Visit sick friends and family members,** even in the last days. Say goodbye to them and avoid keeping unfinished business with them.
- ✓ **Accepting the fear of death** instead of running away from it, recognizing it, accepting it, integrating it and managing it, so that will not paralyze us. To be afraid of death is something that happens to many of us. We should not deny it or hide it. The best way to manage emotions, such as fear, is to recognize them, accept them and express them to others, so we can integrate them and grow.
- ✓ **Get the "backpack" ready.** Do not have open wounds with loved ones, neither challenge not faced, nor important issues unresolved.

***Accept that death is part of life!***

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