



# AURORA@ COVID19-EU

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



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This publication has been produced as part of the Cooperation for Innovation and Sharing of Good Practices action, KA2 - Strategic Partnerships: Professional Training of the "AURORA@COVID19-EU (2021-1-PT01-KA220-VET-000033092)" project, which aims to facilitate an articulated response to support grief and suffering in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.



**This Manual production had the University of Maia (UMAIA) and the ULSSJoão lead with the collaboration of the AURORA@COVID19-EU team. If you want to reference this document, please use the following:**

Nogueira, D., Barbosa, E., Pinheiro, P., Cunha, C., Soares, J., Venuleo, C., Jodar-Anchia, R., Gamoneda-Larripa, J., Østergaard, T., & AURORA@COVID19-EU team (2024). *Good Practices Guidelines Manual – Articulating a Unified Response to the Covid-19 Outbreak Reconstruction After Loss in Europe*. Maia: UMAIA Press. ISBN 978-989-35689-2-7.



**Funded by  
the European Union**

*The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein*

## INTRODUCTION

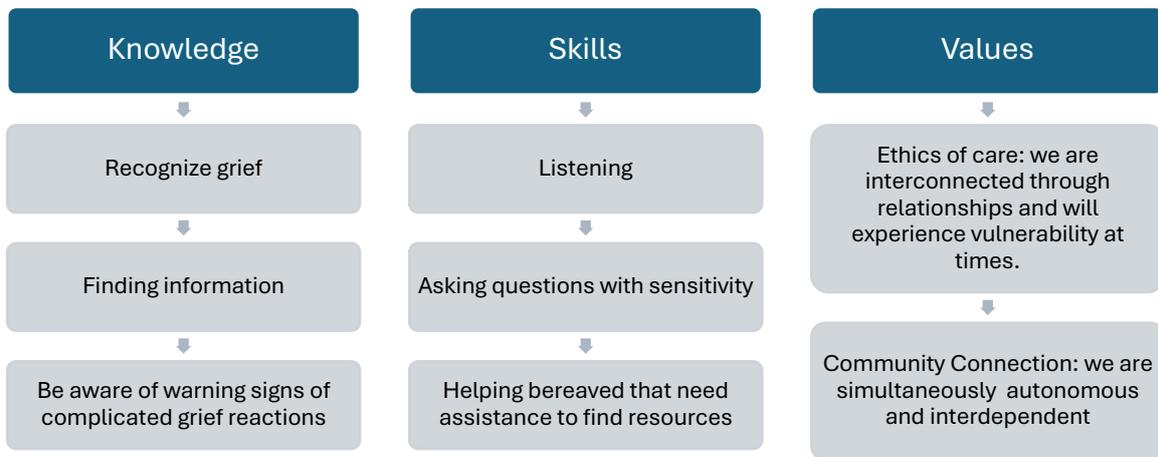
The AURORA@COVID19-EU project aimed to provide a coordinated response to the needs of the bereaved after the COVID-19 pandemic, based on a community counselling model, or four stage model of public health intervention (Aoun et al., 2019) with actions at micro, meso and macro levels. The partnership developed training resources for different professionals involved in end-of-life care and bereavement and to the wide community. This includes providing tailored therapy and professional interventions to vulnerable individuals, including specialized psychotherapy: Manual I – Training For Psychologists (R1). The Manual II – Training for Direct Agents (R2) was aimed specifically at direct agents, i.e. non-mental health professionals who play a fundamental role in the pre- and post-death period. The pandemic scenario has highlighted more than ever how important the role of health professionals (beside psychologists), priests, teachers, police, pharmacists and other community practitioners can be in modulating bereavement and preventing prolonged or complicated grief reactions. Manual 3 - Training for Indirect Agents (R3), aimed at the wider community of all bereaved people, is a proposal for the enrichment of grief literacy movement with first-hand voices of bereaved people during the pandemic.

Finally, in this manual (R4), we suggest reaching out to indirect community services with activities such as influencing public policy to support the community and create systematic change. As part of our advocacy, we are committed to provide community education and the development of different materials that can be available to all. Our main purpose is raising societal grief literacy and public awareness.

Our inspiration and background are rooted in the grief literacy movement, which focuses on understanding the social contexts that impact our bereavement processes. This aligns with the Compassionate Communities philosophy, which empowers communities to counteract the trend towards medicalization and institutionalization of health care, building a community capacity that

relies on local caring networks where emotional and social support is offered (Zuniga-Villanueva, et al., 2021; Ummel et al., 2021). **It is our shared responsibility to address the issues of death and dying**, and as Kellehear (2013, p.1074) states: “**everyone has a role to play, however modestly**”.

According to Breen et al. (2022), Grief literacy should enable the general public and professionals to more easily recognize grief, seek relevant information and appropriate support, and thereby proactively avoid complicated grief reactions. This multidimensional capacity to access, process, and use knowledge regarding the experience of loss is divided in the following components:



Using the aforementioned considerations and following the manual’s production and training of the various agents that interact with bereaved individuals, the present good practice manual (R4) aims to compile and include a set of practical guidelines in the form of interactive and appealing formats, such as leaflets and short videos, with the intention of disseminating and spreading them publicly in order to foster a grief literate society.

This manual was developed on the foundation of Breen's (Breen et al., 2022) questions on What a Grief-Literate Society Should Look Like. It served as a source of inspiration and provided guidance on the selection of key ideas to be incorporated into the material. It also considered evidence from the experience of bereavement during the pandemic. In line with these assumptions, it was found that dying during the pandemic exacerbated the difficulties of bereavement. It is recommended that these insights are incorporated as learning opportunities in preparation for potential future pandemic scenarios. All the material presented here was created with the help of Artificial Intelligence, namely with the help of the CANVA program to create the images and videos presented here as resources.

Based on these ingredients, we've created a series of scenarios and developed small videos and Leaflets with messages based on literature review and previous manuals.

## 1<sup>ST</sup> SITUATION

### NOT BEING ABLE TO SAY GOODBYE

The first situation is based on the Covid 19 experience of losing during the pandemic and of not being able to say goodbye to the loved one. A man who says, “*I feel bad because I was not allowed to see my mother in hospital when she died.*” The image generated by the artificial intelligence was used and is followed by a recommendation regarding active listening and understanding, and a practical example of something we could say to the bereaved at that moment.



Fig. 1. – Video 1 - Sad man complaining about the impossibility to say goodbye to the loved one

<https://auroragriefcovid19.eu/r4video/>

The inability to properly say goodbye to someone who dies, before or after the death, increases the risk of complicated grieving, especially in situations like the Coronavirus pandemic (Hernández-Fernández & Meneses-Falcón, 2021). It becomes more challenging to come to terms with the reality of death and accept that it has occurred when one is unable to see the body of the deceased. Families have requested information from healthcare workers regarding the timing of their loved one's passing, and occasionally asked for evidence such as a photograph or personal items to help them come to terms with and understand the situation. Funerals play a significant role in the process of grieving, both culturally and religiously (O'Rourke et al., 2011); therefore, the absence of a funeral created a sense of not being able to bid a proper farewell and acknowledge the death. Traditionally, funeral and memorial services provide a chance to express love and respect for the deceased and say goodbye. They mark a transition where the death can be fully accepted, but they also give the bereaved a chance to express their emotions and get social and psychological support from their loved ones (Mortazavi et al., 2021). The disruption of these rituals during the pandemic has forced many to find alternative ways to grieve

and honor their loved ones. Virtual memorial services, online tributes, and other digital means have become common, allowing families and friends to connect and share their memories despite physical distance. These new forms of mourning, while not a complete replacement for in-person gatherings, provided a semblance of closure and collective support, helping to mitigate the feelings of isolation and unresolved grief.

Moreover, mental health professionals have emphasized the importance of seeking support during these times. Counseling, grief support groups, and even teletherapy have been crucial resources for those struggling with loss. They offer a safe space to process emotions, share experiences, and receive guidance on navigating the complexities of grief.

As the world continues to adapt to the challenges posed by the pandemic, it is essential to remain compassionate and understanding towards those who are grieving. Recognizing the profound impact of not being able to say a proper goodbye, society must strive to offer alternative means of support and remembrance. In doing so, we honor the memories of those who have passed and provide solace to those left behind, fostering a sense of community and resilience in the face of adversity.

## 2<sup>ND</sup> SITUATION

### PHYSICAL ISOLATION AND LACK OF SUPPORT

In this situation, a woman complains about not being able to support her friend when she lost her mother during the COVID19 pandemic. This was a very common situation during the pandemic where social support was inhibited, leaving the bereaved with a sense of isolation and abandonment. The important message we want to convey is that, even though she was unable to attend the funeral, compassion and support can be expressed at any time.



Fig. 2. – Video 2 - Someone who has not been able to be present in support of the bereaved friend.

<https://auroragriefcovid19.eu/r4video/>

During the pandemic, families have had to grieve alone, without the support of their social networks. This unprecedented situation has highlighted the importance of finding alternative ways to connect and support each other. Virtual memorial services, online support groups, and video calls have become crucial tools for maintaining connections and providing comfort from afar. Despite the physical distance, the enduring bonds of love and memory can provide solace. Remember that no one has to navigate grief entirely alone; even in isolation, there are ways to find and offer support (Fernández & González-González, 2020; Lyons & Chamberlain, 2006).

### 3<sup>RD</sup> SITUATION

#### THE AMBIGUOUS CHARACTER OF THE DEATH

In this situation, we wanted to illustrate the challenge of not being able to see the deceased at the moment of dying. This imposes a degree of ambiguity and uncertainty that defies acceptance of reality and may contribute to inhibiting the natural grieving process. The important message we want to emphasize is that we should acknowledge this difficult circumstance without trying to minimize the pain or suffering. It is incredibly hard not knowing the exact circumstances of your loved one's death, and it's perfectly normal to feel overwhelmed by uncertainty.



Fig. 3. - Video 3 - Bereaved husband that was not allowed to be with his wife at the moment of death

<https://auroragriefcovid19.eu/r4video/>

In the context of certain health crises, especially pandemics, there are protocols that can prevent loved ones from being present at the moment of death. Communication of these protocols is sometimes unclear, or there is not enough time to explain and process the received information. In many cases, death occurs very suddenly, and the family member receives an urn with ashes or sees a coffin from a distance, with the message that these are the remains of their loved one. In these circumstances, it is very difficult to fully perceive the death, as events occur extremely quickly and are shrouded in unreality.

Additionally, such sudden and surreal circumstances can constitute a traumatic experience, where the loved one feels overwhelmed and carried away. These are factors that can precipitate difficulties in grieving, as people may remain stuck in the feeling of unreality surrounding the death, hindering acceptance. The sensation of expecting to see the loved one anywhere intensifies and can become chronic (Cipolleta et al., 2021).

These circumstances brought by COVID-19 were similar to what we know as ambiguous loss: deaths where the body is not recovered (e.g., disappearances). Moreover, information about the specific circumstances of the death was scarce, which triggers ruminations in the loved ones (e.g., "I don't know if they suffered, if they were afraid, if they wondered why they were alone, why I wasn't with them..."). All these factors added an additional burden to the grieving person, creating a source of demands that can prolong and complicate the mourning process (Menichetti-Delor et al., 2021). Be aware of these difficulties and provide your support with empathy and presence to the bereaved.

#### 4<sup>TH</sup> SITUATION

##### MYTHS ABOUT BEREAVEMENT

##### 'RIGHT WAY TO GRIEF?'

The first myth is the common assumption that grief needs to be normalized and fit into a pattern. We would like to emphasize that although there are some general and common reactions and behaviors in grief, there are different ways of expressing grief and all ways are legitimate.

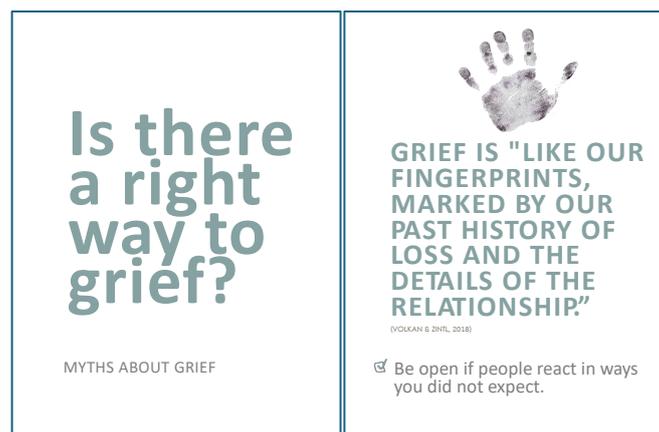


Fig. 4. - Video 4 - Myths - Right way to grieve

<https://auroragriefcovid19.eu/r4video/>

Many people think that there is a right way to grief: for instance, bereaved people should cry or should not cry, they should share or should not share their feelings, they should take a break from work

or return quickly to their tasks and activities...In fact, grief is unique, "like our fingerprints" (Volkan & Zintl, 2018) and, even within the same family, no two people experience and express pain in exactly the same way. Reactions to grief depend on personal characteristics, nature and circumstances of loss (e.g. expected/unexpected and sudden; natural/violent), kind of bond with the deceased person, type of support received, family and cultural norms. Grief can be expressed through emotional reactions (e.g. shock, nostalgia, sadness, anger, guilt, relief, fear, anxiety, insecurity, lightheadedness), physical reactions (e.g. difficulty sleeping, changes in appetite, headache, stomach pain, heart palpitations, restlessness, tiredness), behavioral reactions (e.g. social isolation, avoidance, agitation, hyperactivity), cognitive reactions (e.g. difficulty concentrating, confusion), existential reactions (e.g. feeling of meaninglessness, loss of identity and confusion, experience of injustice – "Why me?") and also through all these channels. All ways are legit, so...suspend the judgment, that is, acknowledge that each person has a unique way of expressing their pain and allow the grieving person to express their grief in the way they need to.

## 5<sup>TH</sup> SITUATION

### MYTHS ABOUT BEREAVEMENT

#### 'MOVE ON'

What does move on mean? Should I forget the deceased in order to move on with my life? These are the typical suggestions people offer to those who have lost a loved one, but they are not always well received because they imply that the bereaved must move on from their grief. To grieve does not mean to forget. Remembering is an integral part of grieving.

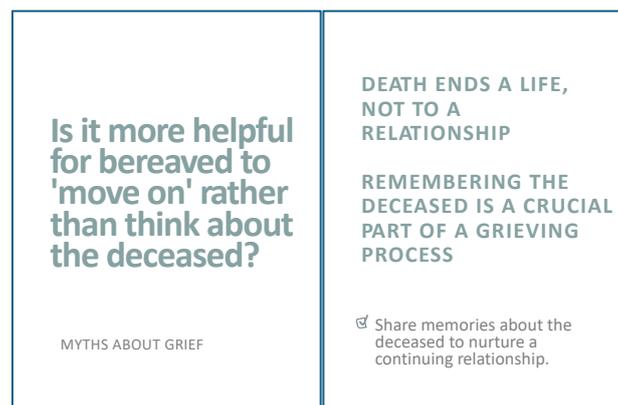


Fig. 5.- Video 5: Myths - "Move On"

<https://auroragriefcovid19.eu/r4video/>

It is a common belief that, to 'overcome' the loss, it is more helpful for people to 'move on' with their lives rather than thinking about the memories of the deceased. This belief leads us not to name the deceased with the grieving person, to attempt to change the subject and distract them when they

do. In fact, remembering the deceased is one of the main needs of bereaved people, a way through which they can learn to accept the loss in the acknowledgment that the death ends a life, not a relationship. Looking at photos, telling stories about the deceased person, including their name in conversations, recognizing themselves in their gestures, their mannerisms, their teachings are just a few of the ways people continue to maintain a connection with the deceased and integrate it into their lives for the future. This can mean that the memories of the deceased are still associated with sadness and feelings of loss, but also with other aspects such as happy memories, gratitude, joy for what was shared. In your role as a support agent, then, make yourself available to listen to the bereaved person when they feel the need to remember the characteristics of the loved one or to tell you about an experience with them; and allow yourself to do the same. For the bereaved, knowing that the loved one lives in the memory of others can be a source of great comfort.

## 6<sup>TH</sup> SITUATION

### MYTHS ABOUT BEREAVEMENT

#### 'CHILDREN DON'T GRIEVE'

It is a common belief that bereaved children do not suffer as much as adults. In fact, children experience grief just as much as adults, although they may experience it differently. For instance, unlike adults, children often oscillate between different emotions in a short time, so don't be surprised to see a small child overwhelmed with sadness and within five minutes happily playing with their toys again. Reactions will depend on their age, their understanding of death, their connection to the person who died, the reactions of other family members, and their personalities. Young children may be occupied with thoughts such as losing the parent who knew how to cook their favorite dish, while more mature children or adolescents understand the implications of death in a larger context (e.g. they may be worried about being perceived as different from their peers or harboring guilt over conflicts they had with the deceased person). The only thing you achieve by not talking about the loss is to make children think that emotions cannot be expressed and shared.

<p><b>Children do not suffer as much as adults and should be protected from bereavement!</b></p> <p>MYTHS ABOUT GRIEF</p> 	<p><b>CHILDREN EXPERIENCE GRIEF JUST AS ADULTS</b></p> <p><b>CHILDREN SEE SUFFERING AROUND THEM, AND AVOIDING GRIEF MAKES IT MORE DIFFICULT TO EXPRESS OR SHARE EMOTIONS</b></p>	<p><b>INFORM THE CHILD ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED AS SOON AS POSSIBLE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>☑ Use honest, clear, and age appropriate language.</li><li>☑ Allow time for the child to understand.</li><li>☑ Let the child know that it's okay to have all kinds of feelings.</li><li>☑ Talk to the child about the funeral and rituals.</li></ul>
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Fig. 6.- Video 6: Myths C - Children don't grieve

<https://auroragriefcovid19.eu/r4video/>

Therefore, we recommend that you inform your child about what happened as soon as possible; use simple, clear language to communicate the bad news (phrases like "went to the angels" or "went to sleep" or "went away" can be confusing); let your child know that it is okay to have all kinds of feelings; let them know that you are feeling sad, angry, or tired too; let them know who else they can talk to and offer outlets for them to express their grief, such as drawing, making cards, or using puppets; as much as possible, try to maintain a routine for your child, as family activities can help them feel more confident; if possible, try to include the child in funeral arrangements and activities. A very young child may be encouraged to do a drawing or another activity to commemorate the deceased person, as adults go to the funeral. Older children may want to see the body or have a role in the funeral ceremony or memorial. Tell them what to expect and decide how best to include them, providing them the ability to choose and decide on their own, whenever possible. Recognize the different ways through which children express their grief and offer them space and time to express and share their emotions.

## 7<sup>TH</sup> SITUATION

### MYTHS ABOUT BEREAVEMENT

#### 'EVERYONE NEEDS PROFESSIONAL HELP'

Very often, we tend to think of grief as a kind of disease and of the mental health professional support as the only adequate support that can be suggested (Marinaci et al., 2024). In fact, common

reactions to grief are an adaptive response to the loss of a loved one. ‘Natural’ does not mean ‘easy’. Dealing with a major loss is often painful and confusing but this does not mean ‘pathological’. Most people would only need the support of their referral network.



Fig.7.- Video 7: Myths D - Everyone needs professional help

<https://auroragriefcovid19.eu/r4video/>

Some suggestions on what can mean to be supportive with bereaved people:

- Allow them to feel and express the full range of difficult emotions (sadness, anger, fear, guilt, relief...).
- Reassure them that grieving is a natural and healthy reaction and is not something to be ashamed of.
- Show your interest; emphasize that you are available if they need to confide in you.
- Welcome their need to talk about the deceased person.
- Avoid clichés (e.g. "He is in a better place now" or "He is in heaven"), do not provide simplistic solutions and do not offer unsolicited advice. They can make the bereaved feel like they are not fully recognized and understood in what they are going through, or even that they are experiencing/doing something inadequate or inappropriate.
- Express gestures of closeness: holding the person's hand, putting your hand on their shoulder, or hugging them can be an effective way to let them know that you're there and that they're not alone.
- Offer hands-on support. As it is often difficult for many bereaved people to ask for help, make things easier for them by giving specific suggestions (e.g. "This afternoon I'm going to the market. What can I bring you from there?").



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- Consider the opportunity for informational support (e.g. suggestions, advice, guidelines, or information on funeral arrangements, or on bureaucratic matters, or even on forms of support for themselves and their loved ones).
- Offer ongoing support: the pain may decrease in intensity over time, but the sadness may never completely disappear. Holidays, family milestones, birthdays, and anniversaries often awaken grief. Be sensitive on these occasions. Let the bereaved know that you are there for whatever they need.
- Evaluate the opportunity to suggest a specialized support if the bereaved does not feel any change or improvement in the way they feel and function after many months by their loss.

Depending on your level of concern, you may consult your GP and/or consider seeing a psychologist. There are also several mutual help groups where bereaved people can share their experiences, emotions, thoughts, and in doing so, feeling less alone.

## LEAFLET 1 – EXPERIENCE OF GRIEF

### GRIEF AS AN IDIOSYNCRATIC PROCESS

Grief is a natural and important part of life. Sharing loss and grief with others can help us heal and find support in our surroundings. Emotions and reactions related to loss are very strong and intense and they are also very individual and evolving over time. For a few bereaved people, grief becomes prolonged, and complex, with very different and varied expressions. They may need professional help to process the loss and grief before they can learn to live with it. For most bereaved, with time and adequate support from family and friends, grief becomes an integrative part of life that we learn to live with. Grief never goes away – it is the price you pay to love someone, and it stays with us forever.

There is a general lack of knowledge about loss and grief in most societies and combined with the stigma and taboo that surrounds this part of life, most people find it difficult what to say and what to do when meeting bereaved people. With heightened awareness and knowledge in general, we would perhaps be more able and open to reach out and help each other when loss and grief comes our way.

Bereaved often find it lonely to mourn the loss of a lost one and very difficult to talk to others. They argue that people around them ask about their loss for the first few months. After that, there is a general notion that the bereaved person will have moved on. However, if we are unable to talk to others about the people we love and lose, then it may feel as if they never lived. In our different roles as family, neighbor, friend, colleague, etc. **it concerns us all supporting each other** in times of loss and grief also over time. There is no right or wrong way to ask and show sympathy. Just do it. **Grief is everyone's responsibility** (Breen et al., 2022).

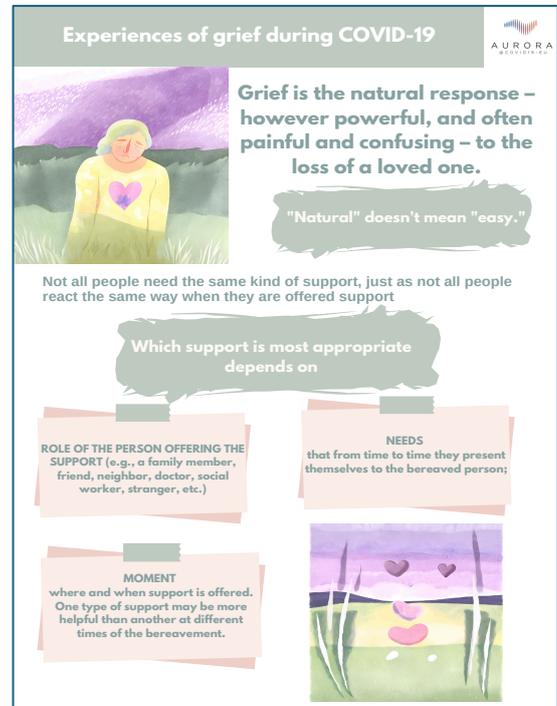


Fig. 8.- Leaflet 1- Grief as an idiosyncratic process

<https://auroragriefcovid19.eu/elementor-14495/>

## LEAFLET 2 – PRACTICAL TIPS TO HELP A BEREAVED

### *DON'T LET THE FEAR OF SAYING OR DOING WRONG STOP YOU FROM COMMUNICATING*

Those who are bereaved often express feelings of abandonment by friends, colleagues and healthcare providers, who may lack empathy and make insensitive comments or clichés due to a lack of understanding of how to provide support (Aoun et al., 2018). This lack of understanding and empathy can exacerbate the feelings of isolation and pain experienced by the bereaved. It is important for those around the people who are grieving to educate themselves on how to provide meaningful support. Simple acts of listening, acknowledging the loss and being present can make a significant difference. In addition, some of the burdens of grief can be eased by offering practical help, such as helping with daily tasks or offering a shoulder to cry on (see more in Manual 2).

Training courses and resources for friends, colleagues and health care professionals can help equip them with the skills they need to provide effective support to the bereaved. Creating a compassionate and understanding environment not only helps healing, but also strengthens community bonds. By fostering a culture of empathy and kindness, we can help to ensure that no one must travel alone on the difficult journey of grief and bereavement.

Fig. 9. - Leaflet 2: Practical tips to help a bereaved

<https://auroragriefcovid19.eu/elementor-14495/>

## LEAFLET 3 – TALK ABOUT GRIEF WITH CHILDREN

### TALK ABOUT GRIEF TO A CHILD OR ADOLESCENT

Talking about death and grief with children can be difficult for parents and caregivers, as they often aim to protect them from emotional pain. However, it is impossible to shield them from the sorrow of losing a loved one. Instead, it is essential to have open talks with children and adolescents about these subjects, allowing them to express their feelings and concerns in a supportive and understanding environment. This environment plays a crucial role in shaping how they experience and process their grief (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2013; Kentor & Kaplow, 2020) and regarding whom they can turn to in case they need to further express and talk about these issues. Acknowledging and validating their personal experiences reassures them that they are not alone and that there is someone to help them cope with their loss and grief.

**Experiences of grief during COVID-19**

**How can I talk about death with a child or teenager?**

**COMMUNICATE CLEARLY, HONESTLY, AND AGE APPROPRIATELY**

Even very young children feel the pain of bereavement, but they learn to express their grief by **observing the adults** around them. After the loss, especially of a sibling or parent, **children need support, stability, and honesty.**

Telling the truth in an empathetic, age-appropriate way is often the most caring support we can offer a child.

- When explaining death to a child, answer questions honestly using simple and concrete terms to prevent them from blaming themselves.
- Encourage children to express distressing feelings through stories, games, and artwork to understand how they are coping.

**VALIDATE THE CHILD'S FEELINGS**

Unlike adults, children often oscillate between different emotions in a short time, so don't be surprised to see a small child overwhelmed with sadness and within five minutes happily playing with his toys again.

Children can express a number of feelings when they are grieving, the expression of which should be welcomed and encouraged.

Young children may be worried with thoughts such as losing the parent who knew how to cook their favorite dish, while adolescents understand the implications of death in a larger context.

**INVOLVE SCHOOL**

When children grow older, they spend more time outside the home. In challenging times, involve others to support them. Encourage children to communicate their needs at school for a sense of engagement and safety.

Fig. 10. - Leaflet 3: Talk about grief to a child or adolescent

<https://auroragriefcovid19.eu/elementor-14495/>

## FINAL REMARKS

The primary goal of this manual was to strengthen best practices for providing grief and bereavement support in alignment with the public health model. By establishing clear guidelines and recommendations, it aimed to ensure that support services are both accessible and effective for individuals and communities experiencing loss. We emphasized the importance of culturally sensitive approaches, recognizing that grief manifests differently across various cultural contexts and that tailored support can significantly enhance the healing process.

Through collaborative efforts and the sharing of knowledge, the manual aimed to create a more compassionate and responsive system of care. Those devoted to supporting others through the challenging journey of grief found a boost of guidance and inspiration in it, ensuring that no one must face their pain alone.

By presenting and proposing specific appealing material that can be used both in training and in the dissemination of good practices, we aimed to overcome the difficulties addressed by specific professionals and the wider community. This approach aims to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, ensuring that the concepts are not only understood but also effectively implemented. By doing so, we can foster a more cohesive and informed community, where professionals are equipped with the tools they need to excel in their roles, and the wider community benefits from enhanced services and support.

Drawing upon a multidimensional capacity to acquire, analyze, and apply knowledge concerning the understanding of loss (Breen et al., 2022), our goal was to encourage a cohesive, articulated approach to address the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on grief and mourning challenges. This initiative aimed to facilitate a more resilient process of recovery following a loss among vulnerable individuals in the hardest-hit nations. By integrating psychological support, community resources, and culturally sensitive practices, we sought to create a comprehensive framework that could be adapted to various contexts. This approach emphasized the importance of mental health professionals collaborating with local leaders and organizations to provide tailored support that acknowledges the unique experiences of each community.

By integrating these strategies into the training process, organizations can ensure a more compassionate and effective approach to addressing bereavement issues, ultimately fostering a healthier and more supportive environment for all participants.

Our ultimate vision was to build a network of support that not only addressed immediate grief and bereavement challenges but also strengthened the overall resilience of societies in the face of future pandemic crises.

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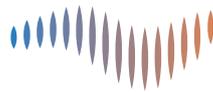
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# AURORA

@ COVID19 - EU

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(2021-1-PT01-KA220-VET-000033092)



## PARTNERS

