



Grief, Loss, and Bereavement

Fact Sheet #3: Preventive Strategies and Protective Factors

This series of fact sheets, developed by the MHTTC Network, is designed to help mental health professionals and school mental health personnel support patients, students, and families who may be experiencing grief at any time, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Preventive Strategies for Complicated Grief

With the number of COVID-19 deaths continuing to increase, patients and families are experiencing death at unprecedented rates. Grief is a natural response of sorrow that occurs after losing someone or something important to us. The social distancing requirements of COVID-19 have fundamentally changed the ways we grieve. The absence of important traditions that formally honor the deceased increases the risk for complicated, or prolonged, grief reactions.¹ Moreover, without the ability to formally say goodbye to a loved one at their bedside or during a funeral or memorial service, those left behind may feel a sense of ambiguous grief in which they feel that the person has not really died, despite rationally knowing otherwise. These types of reactions may prolong the grief reaction and cause longer-term maladaptive reactions.

While it is impossible to predict exactly how one might respond to a personal loss, it can be helpful to incorporate preventive strategies for managing bereavement and grief reactions for people who have lost a loved one during the pandemic. Preventive strategies include the use of quality communication with the patient's family, advanced care planning (ACP), and honoring the deceased through a funeral or other memorial ritual.¹



Quality Communication

Care providers include the medical personnel and care team providing care to the patient and family. The team should use open and honest communication and support early in the care process. Quality communication consists of recognizing, responding to, and validating the emotional responses of patients and loved ones.² If restrictions are in place regarding



loved ones being physically present, care providers can look for alternative methods of communication (e.g., telephone calls, telehealth meetings).

Advanced Care Planning

Through quality communication, clinicians should facilitate discussions on advanced care



planning early in the care process for critically ill patients. Discussions should include end of life planning, desired spiritual practices, and plans for funeral/memorial services.³ Furthermore, care providers should consider ways in which they can facilitate the goodbye process, including incorporating cultural and family rituals. Resources can be provided to families to connect them with post-death planning needs and additional grief support.

Honoring the Deceased During COVID-19

Research suggests that attending a wake, viewing, or other memorial service can provide a sense of closure that helps us acknowledge the reality of death and begin to find meaning in the loss.⁴ Although it may seem impossible to achieve these goals without in-person gatherings, clinicians are encouraged to help clients find new ways to remember the person who has died. Examples of memorial strategies during the pandemic include attending or hosting an online funeral service, honoring the deceased by cooking their favorite meal or watching their favorite movie, and staying connected to family and friends for support.

Protective Resources for Complicated Grief

In the aftermath of a personal loss, it is common for our clients to experience an intense period of sadness, loneliness, anxiety, and/or difficulty carrying out their typical routines. While many individuals are resilient in their grieving process and gradually return to a “new normal,” a subset will develop prolonged or complicated grief reactions. Research has identified several protective factors that may help prevent the development of prolonged grief disorder, including grief counseling, social support, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and involvement in spiritual or religious practices. Cultivation of these resources when working with bereaved clients may help them regain their equilibrium and return to their day-to-day lives after the loss of a loved one.⁵





Supportive Counseling

Establishing care with a counselor soon after a loss may help some clients adjust to life without their loved one, especially for people at increased risk of developing complicated grief. For some, the grieving process can actually begin before death, and these clients may receive benefit from counseling to help prepare for death and its emotional aftermath. When feasible, clinicians should discuss bereavement counseling as part of end-of-life care. In addition, handouts with information about normal and complicated grief reactions as well as contact information for support services should be provided to families.

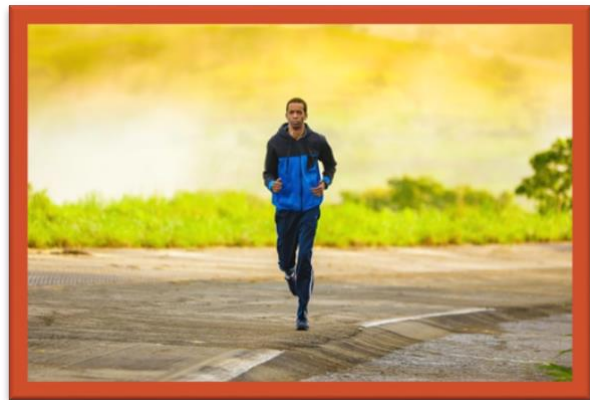


Social Relationships

Research suggests that social support buffers against the painful effects of loss and may facilitate the recovery process. Clinicians can help clients identify family and friends in their social circle with whom they feel connected and can trust. Involvement in a bereavement support group may also help strengthen support networks, address problems of loneliness and social isolation, and encourage a sense of belonging for clients.⁶

Healthy Lifestyle

Maintaining a healthy and balanced lifestyle may be a valuable tool for some clients adapting to the emotional effects of loss. For example, physical activity releases brain chemicals such as endorphins, which may help relieve discomfort and boost mood.⁷ Since sleep disturbance is common in bereaved individuals and may lead to poor physical and mental health outcomes,⁸ clinicians should consider helping clients maintain a regular sleep-wake schedule as a focus of intervention. Keeping a balanced diet and refraining from alcohol and other substances are also shown to improve mood and may help clients cope effectively with the more difficult aspects of the grieving process.



Spirituality

Religion and spirituality can bolster resilience during bereavement by providing a stable belief system and by enhancing connectedness with a community. Spiritual coping can also help people draw meaning from the stressful experience of loss. Providers may make use of the



spiritual and religious beliefs of their clients to help them explore and resolve their feelings and reactions related to the loss of their loved one.⁶

Summary

Grieving the loss of a loved one may be especially challenging during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Physical distancing and travel restrictions could mean that it will be difficult to say goodbye or gather as we traditionally would to remember the person who has died. Although everyone responds differently to the loss of someone important, implementation of various preventive strategies can help our bereaved clients avoid complicated or ambiguous grief reactions. Likewise, protective resources can help support clients in their grieving process and eventually achieve a new sense of normal.

Resources

[Center for Complicated Grief at Columbia University: Can We Prevent CG in Bereaved Caregivers?](#)
[Center for Complicated Grief at Columbia University: Managing Pre-Death Grief](#)
[Center for Complicated Grief at Columbia University: Sleep Disturbance and Grief](#)
[Center for Complicated Grief at Columbia University: Webinars](#)
[Hospice Foundation of America: How to Develop and Manage Virtual Grief Support Groups](#)
[Hospice Foundation of America: Increased Relevance of Advance Care Planning in the COVID-19 Era](#)
[Hospice Foundation of America: Making Funerals Meaningful in the Age of COVID-19](#)
[Mountain Plains MHTTC: Rural Social Isolation and Loneliness: Three-part Series](#)
[Pacific Southwest MHTTC: Crisis Readiness, Response, and Recovery Webinar Series #1: Principles of Commemoration and Memorialization](#)

Please visit the MHTTC COVID-19 Grief, Loss and Bereavement Webpage for additional resources, webinars, and training toolkits.

References

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