



# Coping With COVID-19 Grief

WREP Quick Tool #3 – Provided by Jessica Jacoby, LCSW

The loss of a loved one is difficult in any circumstance but grieving a death during or due to the COVID-19 pandemic is especially challenging. The grief reactions and process affect all aspects of one’s life including the ability to be effective at work. Due to the restrictions and changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, the loss of loved ones is much different and the ability to grieve and cope is complicated. This article will provide background on grief, special considerations of a loss during COVID-19 and several ways of approaching grief that can assist in moving through the painful process.

Grief is the natural human reaction to loss. Although grief is an experience that is universal, the specific response is different for each person. Grief reactions include but are not limited to:

Physical	Hyperactive or underactive, physical distress such as headaches, nausea, abdominal pains, etc., change in appetite, fatigue, sleeping problems, restlessness, emptiness or heaviness, crying
Emotional	Numbness, sadness, anger, fear, relief, irritability, guilt, loneliness, anxiety, apathy, vulnerability, abandonment, meaninglessness, longing, helpless/powerless, hopeless, worthless/inadequate
Social	Overly sensitive, dependent, withdrawn, avoiding others, lack of interest or initiative, angry or critical towards others
Behavioral	Forgetfulness, slowed thinking, dreams of the deceased, sense of the loved one’s presence, wandering aimlessly, trying not to talk about loss, needing to retell the story of the love one’s death, searching for deceased, neglect good health habits or self-care, difficulty concentrating

There are several misconceptions regarding clearly defined stages and the time that it takes to go through the grief process. As with the grief reactions, there are common phases that the client may find themselves in but it is by no means linear and they can be experienced differently for each person. It may be that these phases are not applicable. Grief also does not follow a specific time frame and the process can unfold uniquely for each person. Attempting to “hurry it along” or “get past it” can disrupt the natural course of the grief journey.

[\[Link to pdf of “From Loss to Loss Adaptation”, Gary Byrd\]](#)

**The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted, complicated and intensified the grieving process for many who have lost someone to the virus.** Due to the nature of the virus, worsening of symptoms often occurs quickly and can lead to sudden and unexpected death. There are still many questions that remain about the virus and how it affects people differently which leads to loved ones being unprepared for the loss. Additionally, there are restrictions placed on being able to visit COVID-19 patients when hospitalized. The ability to say goodbye to the loved one is impacted both by the unpredictable nature of the virus and not being physically present with them. This leads to a traumatic loss experience.

After the death, clients are inundated by the COVID-19 coverage in the media, the reminders of social distancing and masking and the changes in daily life because of the virus. This means that grief triggers are constant and unavoidable as the world continues to struggle with the virus. Also, the limitations for grieving rituals like funerals or memorials means that these may not be available to the grieving persons. It is painful when we are unable to say goodbye in the formal ways and with family and friends like we might in ordinary times. When attempting to cope, there are again limitations to what one can do given shut-downs or mitigations due to the virus. Certain hobbies, self-care, physically being with family and friends and engaging in enjoyable activities may not be available. **All these factors make bereavement a much greater challenge and call for extra care and consideration for clients’ well-being while grieving.**

After losing someone to COVID-19, clients may struggle to be effective or productive at work. This is quite normal; however, it is important to be aware of signs that would necessitate a referral for professional help to deal with the grief. These include frequent or prolonged bouts of hopelessness, losing excessive amount of weight or becoming weak, feelings of guilt become pervasive, difficulty performing daily tasks and constant fighting with family or friends. You may consider referring to a therapist to guide the client in the grief journey.

Some clients may find it useful to work through the grief on their own or with the help of their support network. If that is the case, the following are helpful strategies in assisting clients to cope with their grief.

### ***Observe, Name and Acknowledge the feelings that come up around the loss***

Many painful thoughts and feelings will arise after the sudden loss of a loved one to COVID-19 and these may seem threatening or dangerous. Although we may desire to avoid or rid ourselves of these feelings, doing so does not facilitate the grief journey and, instead, keeps us stuck. It is painful but more helpful for healing to make room for the feelings. Even if this feeling is numbness, we can still acknowledge and make room for the experience. When

noticing an emotion, label it by saying, “There is sadness. There is anger. There is numbness.” Allow it to be there without judgement knowing that it these emotions will come and go in their own good time.

There may be a “storm” of emotions that threaten to blow you away, and that is normal. Turn your attention to your breath which is a way that we can “drop an anchor” in this emotional storm. Ups and downs are expected in the grief journey and we can get carried away by them at times. At any time or place, we can always access our breath and body. In the “Dropping Anchor” exercise, we move between noticing the pain and also “anchoring” in the present moment by observing our environment.

[\[Link to pdf Dropping Anchor script, Russ Harris\]](#)

[Dropping Anchor Audio Recordings](#)

### ***Exercise Self-Compassion***

It is tempting to blame ourselves for various aspects of the loss, judge ourselves for the way we are responding or lose patience with our own journey of healing. However, this often serves to increase our suffering. What if we were to show ourselves some kindness? Self-compassion includes three elements: self-kindness, mindfulness and common humanity. Self-kindness means being warm and understanding towards ourselves rather than “beating ourselves up.” In order to practice compassion, we need to observe our feelings rather than ignoring or getting caught up in them. Lastly, we acknowledge that we are not alone in our suffering and that humanity is also struggling with all types of pain.

The exercise “Hand on Heart” adapted from Kristin Neff is a good way for clients to practice self-compassion:

- When you notice you’re under stress, take 2-3 deep, satisfying breaths.
- Gently place your hand over your heart, feeling the gentle pressure and warmth of your hand. If you wish, place *both* hands on your chest, noticing the difference between one and two hands.
- Feel the touch of your hand on your chest. If you wish, you could make small circles with your hand on your chest.
- Feel the natural rising and falling of your chest as you breathe in and as you breathe out.
- Linger with the feeling for as long as you like.

Another way of engaging in self-compassion is considering how you support others and vice versa. What type of compassion would you give to a friend or family member if they were struggling? The link below is to the “Compassionate Friend” exercise in which we treat ourselves like a good friend would.

[Compassionate Friend Audio Recording](#)

## ***Engage in Self-Care***

Encourage clients to take care of themselves during this time despite the limitations of a shut-down. They may need to be a little creative since the usual hobbies or self-care strategies are not available to them. For example, they may want to take a brief walk outside, journal, draw a bath, watch their favorite movie, etc. Eating healthy, exercising, and creating a flexible schedule is also important despite what we have the urge to do. One way to maintain a schedule is by writing down the desired tasks or activities in a weekly schedule. There are times when grief may have clients thinking, “What’s the point? What does it matter if I do these things?” However, taking care of themselves and building a routine it is an essential part of healing.

[\*\[Link to excel Activity Schedule\]\*](#)

## **Remember and Honor Loved One in Creative Ways**

Due to the often-traumatic nature of a COVID-19 death, it can be easy to get lost in recalling the circumstances surrounding the loss and this is normal. It can be an impactful experience for clients to write their deceased loved one a letter. It is a way of making communication with them more tangible and complete. The “Loss Letter” worksheet by Gary Byrd provides prompts that can assist in determining what to say to our loved one who has died.

[\*\[Link to pdf Loss Letter, Gary Byrd\]\*](#)

Clients may want to consider setting up a phone call or virtual gathering with family and friends to remember their loved one. It is difficult when gatherings are limited and the “normal” way of formally grieving are not available. It may be necessary to get creative with regards to the ways of remembering the deceased. During holidays or anniversaries, an object or physical reminder of the loved one can make that person’s presence more real. Speaking about the loved one during those times can be an opportunity for healing.

## ***Reach out for support***

Turning into ourselves during grief often feels natural but this can lead to isolation and the grief journey can be much more bearable with others for support. Clients may benefit from reaching out to trusted friends or family members to discuss their feelings. They may also benefit from joining a grief support group. Sharing their story with a group of people can be very empowering; the group members are witnesses to each other’s feelings. Questions from other grief group members or facilitators may prompt new ways of looking at things. Lastly, it is also a way of gaining friends and allies with whom clients can share mutual support.