

SUPPORTING PEOPLE THROUGH GRIEF AND LOSS DURING COVID-19



Grief Matters is a course that Christian Horizons has been offering for almost 15 years. Never has recognizing and addressing grief issues been more relevant than it is today. One of the important learnings from that course is that while grief is often recognized when a loved one dies; grief can arise out of many other losses and life experiences as well.

In these times with increasing restrictive social isolations and health protocols that many of the communities, relationships and activities that people are connected to are suspended indefinitely. It could be some time before things return to "normal." Or, the "normal" we discover may be a new way of being and acting in the world. We are all carrying the weight of these unknowns.

Suspension of our normal patterns of living and social interactions can trigger anxiety. These come with a range of responses and ways of coping. Many expressions of grief are a result of "secondary losses." These are not always recognized or acknowledged. In days of heightened emotions and uncertainty, change is the only constant and change can create uncertainty, unease, anxiety, worry, and fear.

As support one another, we need to bear in mind the varied and often-unconscious grief that people may be experiencing. This goes for our teammates and for the people who use our services. How do we best manage our own grief responses and help others through these times?

The following are some helpful tips from Grief Matters.

1. Recognize that grief due to loss of connection and in-person gathering is real

- a. Don't minimize or dismiss the impact or importance of the loss
- b. Acknowledge the loss and explore alternate ways to connect people with their friends and loved ones. Try to do so, to the best of your ability, in such a way that minimizes frustration, delays, and interruptions in people's schedules and daily routines.

2. In times of crisis people may respond out of character

- a. This can be triggered by their own feelings of anxiety
- b. As Open Future Learning reminds us, [unexpected responses are coping strategies rather than "behaviours."](#)
- c. Look for unexpected responses as potentially a sign of grief or loss, even loss of predictable patterns or routines that may now be changing.

3. Recognize that our own anxiety impacts the anxiety of others

- a. People intuitively pick up on the anxiety of others.
- b. Many people with limited verbal communication skills are even more attuned to the non-verbal responses and actions of people around them.
- c. It important for team members to acknowledge and process our own anxiety and grief and to consider how we might limit the transference of these stresses to the people who use our services.



4. Rather than simply “cancelling everything,” consider alternative avenues for connection

- a. Are there ways the person can connect to their friends or community via technology?
- b. Do they have access, or can they be given access to the necessary technologies?
- c. In all of this, look for ways that we can uphold people’s initiative and autonomy. What are ways that people can take initiative for themselves to connect with others.

5. Provide opportunities for people to tend to the spiritual reality of grief

- a. Regardless of a person’s religious beliefs or practice, grief impacts us on a deep, spiritual level. As Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD reminds us in [This Pandemic of Grief](#), “the best way to care for your spirit right now is to be intentional about giving it time and attention.”
- b. Do the people you support have daily prayer practices or religious rituals that are important to them? These can be avenues of solace and encouragement when other aspects of their lives might be changing rapidly.
- c. If people are part of a religious community, many services are moving online and pastors, synagogue leaders, etc. may be available to meet virtually. Faith communities can be powerful sources of support and ongoing friendship/relationship.

6. Recognize the importance of time and presence

- a. In a time of crisis people can be prone to not only separate physically but emotionally and move between encounters quickly and distractedly
- b. Remember to find ways to *be present* with people when you are able. Depending on protocols, this may look different than usual. Smiles, waving, friendly conversation and a listening ear all communicate support. Even if only for a moment, seek to reach others through undistracted time where they can be heard and re-assured.

7. Grieving death loss may be particularly difficult at this time

- a. If a friend or loved one dies, it may be particularly difficult for people with developmental disabilities to mourn due to restrictions on social gatherings.
- b. Brainstorm creative ways to respond to this need given the tools and resources that are available to you. Feel free to reach out to the Organizational and Spiritual Life team to help with this, or to a person’s pastor or faith community leader.

8. Encourage each other and celebrate the little victories!

- a. Even in times of loss, you will discover moments of beauty, gratitude, and joy. Don’t let these slip by without taking time to acknowledge them and celebrate – whatever that looks like!
- b. Small words and tokens of encouragement can be much needed “fuel” to help colleagues and people who experience disabilities get through difficult times.
- c. Remember, we are all in this together. Everyone will experience losses, though they will be in different respects and to different extents. Sharing grief, along with our celebrations, in an intentional manner can bring people together in a powerful way.

