



The Death of a Loved One from COVID-19
A handout on grief, adaptation to loss, and complicated grief
M. Katherine Shear M.D.

The current pandemic is taking a large toll in human lives. While the rate of death from Covid-19 is thankfully low, more than 800,000 close relatives and friends are often deeply affected by these losses. The inability to hold a funeral or any in-person social gathering, makes grieving even more difficult. The sudden and frightening nature of the loss and the fact that we cannot be at the side of a dying loved one is very troubling. The seemingly randomness of who lives and dies can also be disturbing. These and other features of the pandemic can make it more difficult to adapt to the loss and stall the progress of grief. Mental health clinicians are aware of the importance of loss of close relationships, yet many are unclear about how best to understand and support acute grief and how and when to recognize and treat prolonged grief disorder.

Definitions: *Grief* is the response to loss. It begins acutely and gradually integrated into our lives as we adapt to the loss. **Prolonged Grief Disorder** occurs when adaptation is derailed and grief becomes persistent and pervasive, interfering with functioning and lasting longer than expected. Grief is complex and multifaceted, containing thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and physiological changes. When it's acute, it often takes over a person's life. This is natural and expected. Others gather around, supporting a bereaved person and gradually helping them move back into their lives. To do so, a bereaved person needs to adapt to the loss. It takes time to **adapt**, often longer than people expect, and entails accepting the reality of the loss and restoring well-being.

What you can do to promote adaptation

1. Understand and accept grief: it can help to understand that grief is natural after loss - it's a form of love; allow it to wax and wane naturally.
2. Manage emotional pain: accepting emotions and naming them can be helpful; letting them wax and wane naturally as much as possible; experience positive emotions - doing something pleasant each day - almost as a kind of ritual.
3. See some possibility of a promising future: taking some time to begin to think about what is important, meaningful, intrinsically interesting and what kind of activities are in line with this.
4. Strengthen relationships with others: allowing others in, sharing stories, accepting support and comfort, lower expectations for reciprocity for a time, sharing memories.
5. Tell the story of the death: sharing the story, dealing with troubling aspects, honoring a person's death as a part of their life.
6. Learn to live with reminders: gradually finding ways to return to the world of reminders rather than avoiding them; discovering meaningful and comforting memories in reminders.

7. Feel a sense of connection to memories of the deceased: recognizing a changed relationship with the person who died; understanding that memories are a living part of ourselves; learning how to use memories of the person who died in meaningful ways.

What can derail the process of adapting to loss: It's important to know the kinds of things that can derail the progress of adapting to a loss. One way grief is complex is ambivalence about adapting. We resist accepting the reality of the death. The attachment system that underpins the formation and maintenance of close ties includes protest, anxiety guilt and anger in response to their loss. Additionally, our complex adaptive human brains are inclined to generate counterfactual simulations when something unwanted happens. This can often be adaptive but it happens even when it's not adaptive. Another thing we do is anticipate the future by identifying things we want; but when we lose someone we love, we think that all we want is to have them back. People often feel uncomfortable or even guilty thinking about a promising future without a deceased loved one. Furthermore, we shy away from emotional pain. We often do this automatically. Grief is a time when we need to allow ourselves to accept some emotional pain. These natural tendencies can derail adaptation if they gain a foothold. Examples include:

- Continued protest that the death is wrong or unfair
- Persistent strong feelings of anxiety, self-blame and/or anger about the death
- Survivor guilt and difficulty experiencing positive emotions or pleasant activities
- Ruminating over "if only" scenarios
- Holding onto the idea that bringing the person back is all that can help
- Over-focus on escape and avoidance

Derailers can be enhanced by the circumstances of the death. Many of the circumstances of the covid-19 deaths can increase the likelihood of derailers. These include the fact that many people die alone, that the death happens quickly and unexpectedly, that the physical presence of comforting social contact is not possible, the randomness of the death and the fact that so much in the community and the nation are being affected by this virus.