

# Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)

## Los Angeles County Departments of Public Health and Mental Health Coping with the Loss of a Loved One

As the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continues to impact Los Angeles County, many of us will suffer the loss of a family member or friend. The death of a loved one is always difficult, but the pandemic is likely to make it particularly hard to cope with your loss. Both the nature of COVID-19 illness and the steps required to contain the virus pose unique challenges. These include:

- COVID-19 deaths do not come after months of illness; they are often sudden and unexpected deaths. You, your family and loved ones may have had little chance to prepare for the loss and goodbyes may have been remote, if they took place at all.
- For many, our usual way of facing death and grief depend on bringing people together. These customs are important as rituals of faith, closure, and as a way to connect and support others. Sadly, physical distancing requirements to protect us from further spread of COVID-19 currently prevent large in-person gatherings.
- You, your family members or friends may worry or feel guilty that they brought the virus into the home, that they should have recognized signs of illness sooner or reacted to symptoms more forcefully. The truth is that many people do not know they are carrying the virus, and we can't predict how the virus affects each person. Understand that you did your very best to take care of your loved one in a difficult, unpredictable situation.
- Adding to everything else are your worries about the future: job losses, overdue rents and mortgages, medical bills, lost health insurance and reduced retirement funds. For many families, these additional challenges in your life can intensify the sadness, grief and loss that comes with the death of a loved one and can make everything feel worse.

### After the death of a loved one it is normal for you and your family to experience:

- A sense of shock and disbelief
- Feeling "lost" – especially if the person who died was an elder who anchored your family.
- Sadness, tearfulness, and depression. In fact, crying is a very normal reaction for everyone.
- Difficulty concentrating, confusion, trouble thinking clearly, completing tasks or making decisions.
- Repetitive and distressing thoughts about the loved one and how they died.
- Sense of isolation and disconnection from others, even people you or your family are normally close to.
- Physical reactions such as difficulty sleeping, upset stomach, changes in eating habits.
- In children, reactions may include the loss of developmental milestones, sleep difficulties, fears about being separated from caretakers, and concerns about other family members becoming sick or dying.

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### Coping with your loss

- **Practice self-care** – Caring for yourself is very important. Even basic things like eating regularly and getting enough rest are critical. Maintain your usual daily routine as much as you are able to.
- **Give yourself time** – Grieving the loss of someone you love is hard work. Do not try to “return to normal” right away. Give yourself time to accept the loss. As you are able, do focus on the love and savor the good memories you shared with the person who died.
- **Reach out for support** – While COVID-19 imposes barriers that rule out the physical presence of all but your household, it is still important to maintain emotional connections with your friends and family. Come together on the phone or virtually to share memories and grieve. Seek support from friends, family, your faith/spiritual community, support groups, and your doctor or mental health professionals.
- **Explore healthy coping strategies** – Focus on your personal strengths. Practice good self care. Maintain comforting spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation. Avoid using alcohol or drugs. Most importantly, take time to remember your loved one, their accomplishments, and their love and care.

### Helping a child cope with their loss

- **Be honest but age appropriate** – Remain calm and comforting. Answer their questions honestly using explanations that are right for the age of the child. Even very young children can be told that someone they loved and who loved them got very sick and died.
- **Let the child ask questions** – Encourage your child to ask questions. Share information that is right for their age. Help children find words for the emotions they are experiencing.
- **Maintain normal routines** – Maintain regular routines such as meal time, bed time, school time, and play time. This helps kids cope better with the loss of a loved one.
- **Be sensitive to any worries or fears** – Watch for signs of distress (sleeplessness, lack of appetite, disinterest in play, withdrawal or acting out). Invite the child to talk. Express love and reassurance. Don’t be afraid to share your emotions together. If a child’s distress is long-lasting, ask for guidance from your child’s doctor, school counselor, or a mental health professional.
- **Do address children’s fears about COVID-19** – Children may worry that they or other family members might become ill or die. Offer realistic reassurance. Let them know that the virus is rarely serious among healthy young adults and almost never among children. Limit time children watch upsetting TV news.

### Strategies to support someone you know who has been impacted by COVID-19

- **Reach out** – Social interactions are more challenging in light of COVID-19, but it is still possible to reach out by phone, videocall or social media to stay connected to friends and loved ones.
- **Listen** – Take the time to listen to others. It reminds people that they are not alone.

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- **Engage in shared activities** – Doing a shared activity (physically or virtually) helps people remain connected to others. This also helps support healthy coping at a time when your loved one is grieving.
- **Offer specific help** – A specific offer to help such as dropping off groceries or offering to help make calls to let friends know about the death is more useful than a general offer of help.

*Grief is a natural and challenging part of life. However, if you continue to feel depressed, are unable to stop blaming yourself, or are having difficulty functioning or coping – please seek help right away.*

### Support and help available to you and your loved ones:

- **Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health:**
  - Call the 24/7 DMH Help Line at **800-854-7771** if you find yourself having severe depressive thoughts and are afraid you might harm yourself, or if you are in a relationship where there is domestic violence that risks your safety and well-being and/or that of children in your home.
  - You can also text “LA” to 741741 to receive 24/7 support via text messaging.
  - Additional COVID-19 Mental Health resources and information are available at <http://dmh.lacounty.gov/covid-19-information>
- **Disaster Distress Helpline:** 800-985-5990
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 800-273-8255
- **National Youth Crisis Hotline:** 800-448-4663
- **Find a Therapist:** contact your health care provider or insurer, you may also visit <https://www.mhanational.org/finding-therapy>