

# Onslaught of Complicated Grief

Dr. Karen S. Scott



## *Death in a Pandemic*

The COVID 19 Pandemic is leading to an onslaught of complicated grief. All the situations contributing to this are absolutely necessary but have devastating impacts on the bereaved and threaten to leave long-lasting complications of grief. First, are the families who are grieving the death of someone from the virus. Their loved ones were quarantined in hospital settings that prevent worried family members from being able to visit and provide personal care and encouragement they would normally provide to an ill relative. Being at the bedside of a loved one who is critically ill is an extremely important expression of love but one that is not possible due to physical distancing required to prevent the spread of COVID 19. Loved ones are left in their private anguish of helplessness, knowing that healthcare workers are trying frantically to mitigate this terrible disease with no known cure. The inability to visit also deprives loved ones of the opportunity to have those important final conversations before death. Medical facilities do all they can to facilitate communication by phone as long as the ill person is able to speak, but often the person dies without family present. While loving healthcare workers are present and do all they can to provide support, bereaved family members are still left with intense regret, guilt, and feelings of helplessness. They understand at a cognitive level that they had no other choices, but in their hearts, they carry the pain of wondering what the final moments were like and wishing they had been able to be present.

Grief is also complicated by the traumatic nature of the deaths. The sudden onset of the virus, the speed with which loved ones go from fairly healthy to critical, and the traumatic nature of the final hours adds to the trauma. The virus is ruthless as it attacks the lungs and causes complications leading to the need for ventilator support to breathe. When this life support measure is to no avail, families are left with traumatic images and difficult end-of-life decisions, adding more trauma to the heartbreaking situation. Those whose loved ones were on ventilator support for weeks who kept vigil and rode the waves of progress followed by complications and steps backward experience physical and emotional exhaustion once the final outcome occurs.

Finally, grief is complicated by the entire environment of chaos and fear in which the disease unfolds. Death itself is very dysregulating. These deaths occur in a world that seems surreal. Gone is the world we used to know. We are left with a world that seems unsafe and one that changes daily as news of the spread of this pandemic overwhelms us and leaves us feeling helpless. All this takes a tremendous emotional toll on loved ones and friends who have tried to balance hope with preparing for a terrible outcome in a setting unlike anything they ever imagined. This toll is largely unnoticed, taking a back seat to more urgent concerns, but will most certainly become apparent in the coming years and months. We must all learn how to provide effective, ongoing support and understanding to assist the many who will be affected by complicated grief.

## *Lack of Public Mourning Rituals*

The Pandemic is also leading to an onslaught of complicated grief because of the lack of public mourning rituals. The limitation of public gatherings deprives the bereaved of the very important rituals that normally occur following a death. These rituals serve important psychological and sociological functions that assist in the grieving process. The rituals provide the setting and social norms for how the bereaved move from private mourning to re-entering social contact with friends and families. They also provide the setting for friends and family to reach out to the bereaved to express their sympathy and love. These expressions of support assist families in coping with the sadness of loss and affirm that their loved one was valued by others.

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## *Lack of Public Mourning Rituals, continued*

In the midst of the pandemic, grieving families are not able to have visitations, wakes, or even a public funeral, thereby depriving them of support, words of comfort, and the sharing of memories offered by friends and extended family. Instead, they are left alone with a sense of emptiness as they try to deal with their grief in the midst of a climate of unparalleled anxiety and uncertainty. Services can be held later, but that does little to fill the emptiness and lessen the sense of shock. Without these ceremonies, the process of offering support seems awkward and more difficult. With the rest of society gripped in fear and uncertainty, friends and family may simply forget to make calls or send condolence cards. Holding memorial services later once the ban on gatherings is lifted will be extremely important to give the bereaved a sense of having appropriately honored the lives of their loved ones. Attendance at these services by friends and loved ones offers a crucial expression of support and caring.

An added complication occurs when other family members are isolated due to possible exposure or, worse yet, fighting their own battle against the virus. Families are not able to come together, even in small groups, to offer support to each other. The grief and complications seem to go on and on while families absorb the news of more deaths in their communities, leading to grief overload and emotional exhaustion.

The potential for complicated grief expands to the entire community as friends are not able to participate in timely grief and remembrance rituals. They, too, are left with a sense of emptiness. Dr. Deborah Birx warned in a news briefing Sunday, March 29, that every family will eventually be touched by this virus. As the number of deaths rises, almost everyone in the community will be impacted, leaving a sense of profound sadness over entire communities.

So what can we do? First, understand the difficulties faced by these families in uncharted waters of grief and loss. Secondly know that despite not being able to have in-person contact, there are ways in which you can offer meaningful support. Make personal phone calls to the bereaved, not to ask prying questions, but to simply let them know they are not forgotten. Share special memories of the deceased. Don't be afraid to say their name--over and over. Don't let your communication with the bereaved stop. You need to have contact with them often over the coming days, weeks, and months. Send condolence cards, again sharing memories of the deceased and offering words of kindness and encouragement. Thank any health care professional you know, as they are on the front line every day, fighting this invisible enemy, absorbing numerous losses, and working to the point of exhaustion. In a season of loss, small acts of kindness make a great impact.

Finally, when this is all over and services can be held, attend the services so families don't feel their loss was swept away in the flood of loss and bad news. You may find that you have many services to attend which can be emotionally draining, but focus on the healing power of your presence and caring. Maybe, just maybe, we will come out of this with a greater sense of kindness, less self-absorption and busyness, and a true understanding of what it means to be a compassionate friend.

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