

Loss and Grief During the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Jeff Stock, Spiritual Care Coordinator at
Good Shepherd Community Care

Recently, in a moving article constructed as a condolence letter to a woman in New York who lost her father to COVID-19, New York Times journalist Jodi Kantor shared the prediction that this public health crisis would transform the way we grieve. “These kinds of catastrophes are what push us forward in our mourning rituals,” she wrote. “We are [now] poised to make another leap.”

True to her prediction, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on people’s end-of-life experiences as well as the ways in which we mourn and grieve our loved ones. Due to restrictions on assisted living facilities and nursing homes, and safety precautions to limit the risks of infection, many families have not been able to visit their loved ones during the final weeks of their lives. Wakes have either not been allowed, or have been restricted to immediate family; funeral homes and cemeteries have been limiting the number of people who can attend the graveside; restrictions on large gatherings have made public, in-person memorial services difficult or impossible.

Yet one thing that has not changed is our persistent need to ritualize loss and to connect with others in our grief. In an effort to continue to hold space for these symbolic events, many people have chosen to use modern technology to host virtual gatherings. Some have reported benefitting from the support they received through the use of applications like Facetime, Google Hangouts, and Zoom. In short, people are finding creative ways to continue to honor their loved ones and connect with others when they need it most, despite the unusual restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

Some other rituals and activities you might choose to participate in during this time are:

- Light a sky lantern to honor the person who has died and coordinate a simultaneous launch with friends and family.
- Write a letter to the person who has died.
- Organize a time for local friends to drive by your home to wish you condolences, comfort, encouragement (or suggest this to others you know who are grieving and may be isolated).
- Play your loved one’s favorite music to mark significant anniversaries (i.e. one month, two month, six month anniversary, loved one’s birthday, national holidays, etc...).
- Schedule a group chat with friends and family.
- Take care of your body by walking, doing yoga, or moving in any way.

We are living in a strange and unusual period of time. The amount of individual and collective loss, and the toll it takes on each of us, can seem unbearable at times. But we human beings have faced uncertainty, calamity, and catastrophe since the dawn of civilization. Throughout

human history, our ancestors, too, felt fear, despair, and exhaustion much as we may today. Yet time and again, they summoned whatever sense of hope and fortitude they had to forge on. As we draw from our own well of strength each day, perhaps we might find some small consolation in knowing that it is an ancient, essential part of the human spirit to persevere in the face of adversity. Perhaps, as unprecedented as our current situation is, we can feel in ourselves the courage and resolve that unites the human race across time. We wish all of our readers strength and comfort.