

Grief, Bereavement and Loss during the COVID-19 Pandemic

When a loved one has died in hospital

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Introduction

When someone you love dies, your emotions, health, social life and spiritual wellbeing can change. You may feel upset by these changes. These feelings and changes are a normal reaction to your loss.

Having a loved one die during the COVID-19 pandemic brings additional challenges. Your loss is affected by the pandemic whether or not your loved one had the virus.

- You may not have had time to prepare. You may feel extra emotions because you were unprepared.
- Your loss may seem especially surreal (dreamlike) and difficult to handle. You may find it difficult to do regular tasks.

This resource was developed by a group of health care professionals at UHN to guide you through the steps you need to take after your loved one's death in hospital. We are here to support you.

Preparing for your loved one's death

Can I be with my loved one at the hospital?

UHN is limiting who can enter the hospital to lower the risk of spreading COVID-19. You may not be able to visit your loved one.

As much as possible, we help patients and their loved ones communicate with each other by messages, phone or video.

- We make every effort to tell families if we expect death will be soon. However some people with COVID-19 have died with little warning.

You may feel sad, helpless, regret or anger that you cannot visit your loved one, say goodbye in person or be with them at the time of death. Know that we continue to provide your loved one the best medical and compassionate care. Your loved one is not alone.

If you have religious or cultural practices for end of life: Ask to speak with Spiritual Care about your options for end-of-life religious or cultural practices.

What to expect immediately after death

How will I be notified of my loved one's death?

A member of your loved one's health care team calls the next of kin given when your loved one arrived at the hospital.

Many people find it important to know details about their loved one's death. We will share these details with the next of kin if they want to know. For example, we may share:

- whether your loved one was aware
- what symptoms they had
- what their last moments were like

I am my loved one's next of kin. What do I need to do?

You need to decide on a funeral home for your loved one.

- Someone with legal authority (such as an executor, spouse, child or parent) must select a funeral home within 24 hours of your loved one's death. See the [Selecting a funeral home](#) section in this document for more information. Let us know if you are finding it difficult to find a funeral home.
 - **If you do not select a funeral home within 24 hours:** Your loved one may be moved to a transitional (temporary) funeral home called MacKinnon and Bowes. You will need to call them to move your loved one to the funeral home you choose. Phone: 416 465 7508
 - **If you only need a basic cremation or burial:** You can arrange for direct cremation and burial services. Call the Bereavement Authority of Ontario at 1 844 493 6356 for more information.

- Tell your loved one's health care team as soon as you have selected a funeral home. We share your information with the funeral home and arrange for your loved one to be moved there. We tell them:
 - the name of your loved one
 - your name
 - your contact information
 - whether or not your loved one had COVID-19. We must share this information with the funeral home so they can follow the necessary safety measures.

Note: The funeral home gives you copies of the 'Funeral Director's Statement of Death'. The hospital does not provide you with a certificate of death.

Can I see my loved one before they are moved from the hospital?

If your loved one had COVID-19 or was suspected to have COVID-19: No, you are not able to see your loved one's body at the hospital. Your loved one's body will be moved to the funeral home as soon as possible. As difficult as it is, the limits keep everyone as safe as possible.

If your loved one did not have COVID-19: You may be able to see your loved one's body at the hospital. Speak with the health care team to make arrangements and learn about the visiting policy.

How do I get my loved one's belongings from the hospital?

Usually the belongings your loved one had at the hospital are sent to the funeral home. Call the funeral home to make arrangements to pick them up.

- If the belongings are still at the hospital: A member of your loved one's health care team calls the next of kin and makes arrangements for them to be picked up.

Read [Handling Your Loved One's Belongings](https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/Handling_Your_Loved_Ones_Belongings.pdf)

(https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/Handling_Your_Loved_Ones_Belongings.pdf) for instructions on how to clean and disinfect your loved one's belongings when you bring them home.

Can I donate my loved one's tissues, organs or body?

Your loved one may have wanted to:

- donate their tissues or organs to save or improve lives. Speak to your loved one's health care team for more information.
 - The Trillium Gift of Life program cannot accept tissue and organ donations from people who have died of COVID-19. This may be disappointing for some families.
 - Tissue and organ donation may be possible for people who did not have COVID-19.
- donate their body for medical research. The Willed Body Donation Program is closed during the pandemic and is not accepting bodies.

Selecting a funeral home

How do I decide on a funeral home?

Call a few funeral homes and ask about what is important to you and your family.

- You may find it helpful to have 1 or 2 close family members or friends help you.
- Use the worksheet at the end of this guide to collect information from different funeral homes.

You may be familiar with a funeral home you have visited in the past. Some funeral homes specialize in the traditions of specific religions or cultures. Most funeral homes are willing to support a range of traditions.

For information and a list of funeral homes in Ontario, visit the [Ontario Funeral Service Association](http://www.ofsa.org/) (<http://www.ofsa.org/>) website.

What do I ask when calling a funeral home?

There are limits on funeral services because of the pandemic. Funeral homes will work with you to plan a meaningful service that follows these limits. Expect that some religious or cultural traditions may not be possible right now.

You may want to ask:

- **if you can follow your religious or cultural traditions and if the usual order and timing can be followed.** You may need to be flexible because of COVID-19 limits. Speak with a faith or community leader about any concerns you may have.
- **if you can see and touch the body at the funeral home.** For your safety, you may not be allowed to touch the body. Ask the funeral home.
- **if there is a limit on how many people can attend a funeral service.** Public Health Ontario is limiting how many people can attend a funeral. Ask the funeral home for the most up-to-date information.
- **if the funeral service can be shared online** for more family and friends to attend virtually.

- **if they allow open casket viewings.** Ask if there are additional safety precautions or costs to having an open casket viewing. Some funeral homes are not allowing open casket viewings as a safety precaution.
- **if they will embalm** (preserve the body with chemicals). Some funeral homes are not embalming for the safety of their staff.
- **if you can have a memorial service at a later time.** You may want to plan a memorial service when more people can attend in person. Funeral homes may have limits on future memorials services. Remember, we don't know how long the pandemic and physical distancing rules will last.
- **if there is a limit to how many people can be at the grave site for the burial.** Public Health Ontario is limiting how many people can attend a burial. Ask the funeral home for the most up-to-date information.

You may also want to ask:

- how long can the service be?
- what will the funeral cost?
- are there programs available to help me pay for the funeral? The funeral home can give you information on programs that may help pay for the funeral, such as:
 - Canada Pension Plan death benefit
 - Department of Veteran's Affairs Pension or Allowance
 - First Nations, Inuit and Métis programs
 - social services, such as Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program and programs for persons with limited income

Planning a funeral service

How do I plan a funeral or memorial during the pandemic?

Planning a funeral or memorial service during the pandemic can be challenging.

- Many funeral homes are using online tools to plan funeral services.
- You may be able to make arrangements at the funeral home. Ask about their safety procedures. For example, the funeral home may limit how many people can be with you while planning the service. They may screen you for symptoms of COVID-19 over the phone before you are allowed inside.
- You must wear a mask while in the funeral home.

Can I delay the service, burial or cremation?

No. Funeral services, burials and cremations cannot be delayed to accommodate family and friends who are self-isolating or cannot travel.

How can I plan a meaningful service during the pandemic?

There are ways to make services meaningful while following physical distancing rules. For example:

- Have a small service and use a live stream (video shared online) to include family and friends at home.
- Plan to have a memorial service when it is safe and you feel ready.
- Follow religious or cultural traditions with a small group at the appropriate times.
- Use online condolence books to record messages of love and appreciation.
- Create a slideshow of memories.
- Ask people to send you a letter with their memories of your loved one.
- Encourage children to draw pictures or write poems.
- Talk about your loved one with family and friends.

- Have a group video call with family and friends to bring everyone together.

Funeral and memorial services are how we celebrate and honour those who have died. Remember: death does not end your relationship with your loved one. You are still connected to them.

Adapted from [Planning a Funeral in Exceptional Times](https://hospicefoundation.ie/bereavement-2-2/covid19-care-and-inform/planning-a-funeral-in-exceptional-times/) (https://hospicefoundation.ie/bereavement-2-2/covid19-care-and-inform/planning-a-funeral-in-exceptional-times/) from The Irish Hospice Foundation

Can I return my loved one's body to the country where they were born?

It may not be possible right now. Contact the country's Consular office for more information. Find contact information for [Consular offices in Ontario](https://www.ontario.ca/page/consular-offices) (https://www.ontario.ca/page/consular-offices).

What do I do about my loved one's estate?

You may have questions about your loved one's estate (belongings, wealth and property), such as:

- how to pay your loved one's bills
- what to do with their bank accounts and investments
- what to do with their home

Many funeral homes provide aftercare services that can help you with settling the estate and notifying services of your loved one's death, such as OHIP, banks, life insurance providers, health care providers, the Ministry of Transportation and Canada Pension Plan.

The funeral home gives you copies of the 'Funeral Director's Statement of Death'. You need this document to settle your loved one's estate.

You may need to consult a lawyer if the estate is complicated or if there is no will.

Understanding and coping with grief

What is grief?

Grief is a normal reaction to a loss. Grieving helps us come to terms with loss.

Grief is different for everyone. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.

- Grief often begins with shock, numbness and disbelief. It may affect your memory, focus and ability to do daily tasks.
- After the shock you may feel deep sadness, emptiness and yearning to be with your loved one. You may feel regret or guilt about past conflicts. You may feel despair, helpless, anxious or fearful.
- You may feel physical symptoms such as muscle tightness, body pains, restlessness or tiredness.

These feelings are normal. Talk with your doctor if they become overwhelming or concerning.

Your grief will change over time. You may feel grief less often and less intense as time passes. However, it is normal to feel grief many years after your loved one died.

Grief during the COVID-19 pandemic

In normal times the death of a loved one can deeply affect your life. Your life has already been affected by the pandemic.

- Your daily routines have been disrupted.
- You may be finding it difficult to do regular tasks.
- You may be feeling isolated and alone.
- You may be worried about your own risk of illness or death.
- You may be more aware and cautious about your health habits and those around you.

Your loss may seem especially surreal (dreamlike) and difficult to handle because of the pandemic.

How the pandemic affects grief

Your grief is affected by the pandemic whether or not your loved one had COVID-19.

- You may not have been able to visit your loved one in hospital because of visitor policies. You may feel you let your loved one down by not being with them. You may feel you lost time with your loved one.
- You may have fewer people close by to support and comfort you, such as friends and extended family. You may feel cheated or angry that you can't have the support you need.
- You may not have had time to prepare for the loss. You may feel extra emotions because you were unprepared.
- You may not be able to do some religious or cultural traditions that comfort you because of safety precautions.
- You may not be able to have the funeral you want for your loved one because of physical distancing rules and travel restrictions. You may feel disappointed that you cannot honour your loved one in the way you want.
- There are fewer ways to take your mind off your loss when there are pandemic restrictions.

If your loved one had COVID-19:

- You may wonder how your loved one got sick.
- You may blame yourself or others for your loved one's death.
- You may blame yourself for not recognizing the symptoms or getting medical help sooner.
- You may worry you have or had COVID-19.
- You may worry others have COVID-19 and could give it to you.

- You may feel upset or angry with others not taking COVID-19 safety precautions seriously.
- Some people find any news about the virus hard to listen to after a loved one has died from COVID-19. Other people are unable to turn off the news and want to know everything they can.

Our knowledge of COVID-19 is changing as we learn more about the virus. Your grief may feel stronger when there is new information about COVID-19.

How can I cope with my grief?

- **Honour your loved one by planning their funeral or memorial service.** It will be painful but important and comforting. The funeral home will work with you to plan a meaningful service that follows physical distancing rules during the pandemic.
- **Take care of yourself.** Try to eat and get rest when you need to. You may find it helpful to keep routines for getting up in the morning, eating meals, taking care of your hygiene and going to sleep.
- **Ask people you trust to help with tasks.** For example, they may help you make phone calls, do paperwork or remember information.
- **Use technology to communicate with people you cannot be with.** A phone or video call can be comforting when they cannot be with you.
- **Turn off the news if you find it distressing.** The news may remind you of your loss and raise new concerns about COVID-19. Try strategies that lower your anxiety but still keep you informed.
 - Limit how much time you spend listening to or reading the news. Only go to trustworthy news sources.
 - Ask someone you trust to watch the news and tell you any important information.
- **Talk with and message family and friends as much as you are able.** It is OK if you cannot manage a lot right now.

- **Allow other people to help.** Doing small acts of kindness lessens feelings of helplessness.
- **Talk to people who have experienced a similar loss.** Some people may feel alone in their pain. People who have experienced a similar loss may understand and help you feel less alone.
- **Trust that you will feel better eventually.** It may be hard to believe that you will ever feel better again. But trust that you will feel better in time.

Helping children cope with grief

Children may have many questions, worries and strong emotions about death and COVID-19.

It is normal to want to protect your child from pain. It is best to tell them what is happening and include them in the grieving process. Most children are aware something is happening and need honest information to make sense of it.

How to talk with children about death

The following guidelines can be helpful when speaking to children about difficult topics such as death and the pandemic.

- Recognize they are grieving. Children’s grief looks different than adults. For example, they may:
 - throw tantrums or be very angry
 - do things they had grown out of, such as wetting the bed or sucking their thumb
 - want more physical affection (hugs, holding and cuddling)
 - avoid talking about your loved one

Learn more about children’s grief: [Understanding Children’s Grief and Finding Teachable Moments](https://kidsgrief.ca/mod/lesson/view.php?id=151) (https://kidsgrief.ca/mod/lesson/view.php?id=151)

- Include them in religious or cultural traditions. Children benefit from being included in traditions that are appropriate for their age.
- Use real and accurate words such as “dying” and “died”. Avoid euphemisms such as “long sleep”, “at peace” or “gone to a better place” because children may not understand or be confused.
- Tell your child the truth. For example, tell your child if their loved one died from COVID-19. Children may fill in information if they are not told the truth. Children of all ages cope better when they have honest information.

- Ask your child to share their feelings. But don't make them share if they don't want to.
- Let them ask questions. Use their questions to guide your conversations.
- Reassure your child they are safe and cared for.

Remember: Your child is an expert in their grieving process.

While your loved one is in the hospital

- Explain why your child can't visit your loved one. You can decide how much detail to give your child depending on their age.

Find examples of what you can say in [Supporting Children Experiencing the Loss of a Loved One from a Distance](http://www.grhosp.on.ca/assets/documents/spiritual-care/Supporting-Children-Grieving.pdf) (<http://www.grhosp.on.ca/assets/documents/spiritual-care/Supporting-Children-Grieving.pdf>) by Lucile Packard Children's Hospital.

- If your loved one has a cellphone or tablet, let your child talk to your loved one. Arrange to have phone or video calls or help your child send messages.
- Allow your child to have their feelings (like sadness, anger, anxiety) and encourage them share them with you.
- Continue doing things that help your child feel safe and loved, such as keeping a routine, showing affection and making time for play.
- Remind your child that your loved one is not alone. There are health care providers caring for them.

Preparing for your loved one's death

- Be honest about your loved one's condition. You can decide how much detail to give your child depending on their age.
- Allow your child to express their feelings.
- Help your child build relationships with trusted family members and friends.
- Find ways to honour your loved one together. You could:

- collect photos or mementos of your loved one.
- do an activity your loved one enjoyed.
- write notes or draw pictures for your loved one.
- share special memories or stories about your loved one.
- Give them a photo or special belonging to remember your loved one.
- Involve your child in religious or cultural traditions when appropriate.

After your loved one has died

- Let your child attend the funeral or memorial service if they want to. Including children allows them to feel safe, supported and part of the family. It also normalizes the grieving process. But don't make them participate if they don't want to.
- Find other ways to include them if your child is unable or does not want to attend the service. You could:
 - watch a video of the service together.
 - participate in a group video call to celebrate your loved one.
 - allow your child to create their own memorial service.
- Try to keep your routines as much as you can.
- Allow your child to express their feelings as often and for as long as they need.
- Let them see that you are sad and grieving too. But take time for yourself first if you are feeling overwhelmed.

Resources

Tips when you are grieving

- [The Six Needs of Mourning](https://www.centerforloss.com/grief/six-needs-mourning/) (https://www.centerforloss.com/grief/six-needs-mourning/) from Center for Loss & Life Transition
- [Grieving During a Pandemic](https://www.dana-farber.org/uploadedFiles/Pages/For_Patients_and_Families/Care_and_Treatment/Support_Services_and_Amenities/grieving-during-a-pandemic.pdf) (https://www.dana-farber.org/uploadedFiles/Pages/For_Patients_and_Families/Care_and_Treatment/Support_Services_and_Amenities/grieving-during-a-pandemic.pdf) from Dana-Farber Cancer Institute

Grief and bereavement support

- [Bereaved Families of Ontario](#) (BFO)
BFO has bereavement groups for children and adults, and one-to-one support from trained volunteers who have experienced a similar loss.
Phone: 416 440 0290 (Toronto)
Website: <http://www.bfotoronto.ca/>
- [Canadian Virtual Hospice](#)
Website: <http://www.virtualhospice.ca/>
- [Living My Culture from Canadian Virtual Hospice](#)
Website: <http://www.livingmyculture.ca/>
- [My Grief from Canadian Virtual Hospice](#)
Website: <http://www.mygrief.ca/>
- [Family Service Ontario](#)
Offers counselling with accredited therapists on a sliding fee scale. Visit the website and click "Our Members" to find an agency near you.
Phone: 416 231 6003
Website: <http://www.familyserviceontario.org/>
- [Family Service Association of Toronto](#)
Phone: 416 595 9618
Website: <https://familyservicetoronto.org>

Grief support for Indigenous people

- [Processing Grief During COVID-19](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/566604882399a3d028922f9a/t/5ed02e5cfae07973960c4cd2/1590701739377/COVID+Grief+Fact+Sheet_20200519_Rev3.pdf)
(https://static1.squarespace.com/static/566604882399a3d028922f9a/t/5ed02e5cfae07973960c4cd2/1590701739377/COVID+Grief+Fact+Sheet_20200519_Rev3.pdf)
from Moring Star Lodge at the University of Saskatchewan

Grief and bereavement support for children

- [Talking with Young People About Illness and Dying](https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Patient_Services/Documents/TalkingWithYoungPeople.pdf)
(https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Patient_Services/Documents/TalkingWithYoungPeople.pdf)
from Mount Sinai Hospital and The Dr. Jay Children's Grief Program
- [Support to Help Children and Youth Cope With the Death of a Loved One](https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/Support_to_help_children_and_youth_cope.pdf)
(https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/Support_to_help_children_and_youth_cope.pdf)
from University Health Network
- [Helping Children Deal With Grief](https://childmind.org/article/helping-children-deal-grief/) (<https://childmind.org/article/helping-children-deal-grief/>)
from Child Mind Institute
- [Responding to Change & Loss: In support of children, teens & families](https://indd.adobe.com/view/924b5436-fca0-4a15-901a-9233134766e4)
(<https://indd.adobe.com/view/924b5436-fca0-4a15-901a-9233134766e4>)
from National Alliance for Grieving Children
- [National Alliance for Grieving Children Hero Toolkit: In support of super heroic grieving children & teens](https://indd.adobe.com/view/5229bd5d-3bbe-460d-9558-e3fcdd327194) (<https://indd.adobe.com/view/5229bd5d-3bbe-460d-9558-e3fcdd327194>)

COVID-19 grief and bereavement support for children

- [Talking With Kids About COVID-19](https://andreawarnick.com/product/talking-with-kids-about-covid-19-90-minute-recorded-webinar-free-to-watch/) (<https://andreawarnick.com/product/talking-with-kids-about-covid-19-90-minute-recorded-webinar-free-to-watch/>)
with Andrea Warnick, Nicola Elbro, Lisa Robinson and Dr. Susan Woolhouse

- [Supporting Children Experiencing the Loss of a Loved One from a Distance](http://www.grhosp.on.ca/assets/documents/spiritual-care/Supporting-Children-Grieving.pdf) (http://www.grhosp.on.ca/assets/documents/spiritual-care/Supporting-Children-Grieving.pdf)
from Lucile Packard Children's Hospital
- [Helping Children With Traumatic Separation Or Traumatic Grief Related to COVID-19](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/helping_children_with_traumatic_separation_or_traumatic_grief_related_to_covid19.pdf) (https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/helping_children_with_traumatic_separation_or_traumatic_grief_related_to_covid19.pdf)
from The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
- [Children & Funerals in a Global Pandemic](https://childrengrieve.org/about-us/news/covid-19/10-education/219-children-funerals-in-a-global-pandemic) (https://childrengrieve.org/about-us/news/covid-19/10-education/219-children-funerals-in-a-global-pandemic)
from National Alliance for Grieving Children

Important: The University Health Network is not responsible for the companies or services listed here. This is not a full list of vendors. We have done our best to provide up-to-date information, but it may change quickly. Please contact the locations directly to make sure the information is correct.

Funeral Planning Worksheet:

For information and a list of funeral homes in Ontario, visit [Ontario Funeral Service Association](http://www.ofsa.org/) (http://www.ofsa.org/)

Funeral Home:	
Contact Person:	Phone:

Questions to ask:

Can I see and touch my loved one?	
Are funeral services allowed? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the limits?• How many guests?• Can the service be available online?	
Can I have an open casket viewing? Are there added costs?	
What safety precautions can guests expect?	
Can I be there during the burial? What are the limits?	
Can I be there during the cremation? What are the limits?	
What are the costs? Are there supports to help me pay?	