

How to prepare for end-of-life care and cope with loss during COVID-19

COVID-19 is raising many issues about how care is being delivered for those with serious illnesses and those at the end of life. Furthermore, because of the pandemic, some people might be unable to be with a loved one when they die, or unable to mourn someone's death in-person with friends and family. During these difficult times, it's important to take care of your mental health while also developing a clear coping plan to navigate the stressful and difficult circumstances.

Prepare for end-of-life care

Older people often live with one or more chronic illnesses and need a lot of care for days, weeks, and even months before death. For some, the body weakens while the mind stays alert. For others, the body remains strong and the cognitive skills diminish greatly. Comfort care is an essential part of medical care at the end of life. People who are dying need care in four areas:

- Physical comfort
- Mental and emotional needs
- Spiritual issues
- Practical tasks once they pass

Being a caregiver for someone at the end of life can be physically and emotionally exhausting. In the end, accept that there may be no perfect death, just the best you can do for the one you love. And, the pain of losing someone close to you may be softened a little because, when you were needed, you did what you could.

Cope with grief

Everyone is living under difficult and stressful circumstances. The pandemic will be especially challenging for the bereaved. Having a clear coping plan is essential, and some of the strategies suggested below may form a part of that plan.

- **Take a much-needed break** by taking over small daily chores around the house—such as picking up the mail, writing down phone messages, doing a load of laundry.
- **Set up an outgoing voicemail message**, a blog, an email list, a private Facebook page, or even a phone tree to reduce the number of calls you have to make. Some families create a website to share news, thoughts and wishes.
- **Coordinate a date and time** for family and friends to honor your loved one by reciting a selected poem, spiritual reading, or prayer from within their own households.
- **Take part in an activity** that has significance to you and the loved one you have lost, such as planting flowers or a tree or preparing a favorite meal, in memory of your loved one.

Make funeral arrangements

Grieving the loss of a loved one during the fear and anxiety about the COVID-19 pandemic can be overwhelming. It may be difficult for people to make decisions about how to safely grieve and honor their loved one. Consider these tips for making arrangements.

- Discuss your cultural or religious traditions and the funeral wishes of the deceased, if applicable, with family members and the people you are working with (funeral home staff, clergy or officiants).
- Consider options—Would it be acceptable to hold modified funeral arrangements by limiting attendance to a small number of immediate family members and friends shortly after the time of death? Could it be hosted virtually or by phone instead of in-person meetings with funeral home staff, cemetery staff, clergy or officiants and others to plan funeral arrangements?

- If you need to meet in person, follow everyday preventive actions to protect yourself and others from COVID-19, such as wearing a cloth face covering, social distancing, washing your hands often and covering coughs and sneezes.

Help is available. Your program is completely confidential and here to help you and your household members 24/7/365. No situation is too big or too small. Give us a call or visit your program website to get started.

Source: "Providing Care and Comfort at the End of Life." National Institute on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.nia.nih.gov/health/providing-comfort-end-life