

# Coping With Grief During COVID-19: Saying Goodbye to Loved Ones



Fire service personnel are not strangers to grief. Whether it's a line-of-duty death or the loss of a friend or family member, dealing with loss is a common experience for many fire fighters and paramedics. The tradition of honoring the deceased by their family, community and nation is so deeply engrained in the fire service culture that, for many, the grieving process cannot begin without it.

As the world continues to fight the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the lives of so many have been taken, disrupted or forever changed. In many communities, it feels like death is everywhere. Everyone is grieving something or someone during this time. In the era of social distancing, the inability to gather and mourn with loved ones has left the bereaved perplexed as to how to move forward. Both within the fire service and our larger society, the most basic rituals to honor the deceased and facilitate the grieving process are currently not possible.



## Facing Grief

Whether the death was caused by COVID-19 or an unrelated condition, grief is sure to follow for those left behind. Grief is defined as a normal response of sorrow, heartache or loss that occurs after losing someone or something important to you. Grief is not a psychological disorder, but does involve several emotional, behavioral and physical reactions that cause distinct changes:

- Intense feelings of sadness, emptiness, loss or feeling nothing at all (numb)
- Waves of anger towards God, other people, the deceased or nobody in particular
- Difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness or slowed thinking
- Muscle weakness or tension, abdominal discomfort or changes in appetite
- Difficulty sleeping or persistent fatigue
- Desire to withdraw from others or disengage from usual activity
- Questioning the meaning and purpose of life

While grief feels different for each person, all these reactions are considered normal. Some may find relief in the support of their crew and family; others will prefer to be alone. Fire service personnel may find comfort in the structure and fast pace of work, while others may struggle to function on the job. For most who have lost someone, the experience of grief will linger, but eventually becomes tolerable within a few weeks or months after the death. People find a way to accept the loss and function in their life, as it is now.

## Complicated Grief

Sometimes, grief can remain all-consuming and a new sense of normal never seems to come. When grief does not resolve or becomes maladaptive, this is called complicated grief. Complicated grief can be diagnosed as clinical depression or prolonged grief disorder.

One factor that can contribute to complicated grief and is common among fire service personnel is survivor's guilt. Fire fighters and paramedics have a calling to protect each other and people in their community. If the life of a crew member or citizen cannot be saved, sometimes an individual will feel a sense of guilt that he or she is alive. For example, if a fire fighter died as a result of COVID-19 complications, fellow crew members may think, "Why wasn't it me?" Such guilt can linger and trigger unhelpful beliefs that delay the grieving process. It is important to acknowledge these feelings and talk with someone to work through them.

Below are some key differences between normal grief and complicated grief:

### Normal Grief

- Waves of emotion come and go
- Despite desire to withdraw, the individual benefits from social support
- Days are a mix of good and bad
- Daily functioning is minimally impaired, sometimes not at all
- Thoughts of death are sporadic and tied to a desire to reunite with deceased or curiosity about death

### Complicated Grief

- Sadness, anger or despair are daily, persistent and intolerable
- Individual is unable to feel comfort from social support
- Days are mostly bad
- Daily functioning is significantly impaired
- Thoughts of death are recurring and tied to feeling worthless, undeserving or unable to cope

## How Is Grief During a Pandemic Different?

Grief is always difficult, but the social distancing requirements of COVID-19 have fundamentally changed the ways we grieve. Mental health professionals agree that due to the absence of important traditions that formally honor the deceased, there is a greater risk for complicated grief . Without the ability to formally say goodbye to a loved one at their bedside or during a funeral or memorial service, those left behind may feel a sense of ambiguous or delayed grief. It can feel as though the person has not really died, despite rationally knowing otherwise. Others may feel angry that they were not able to say goodbye.

## Honoring the Deceased During COVID-19

As a society, we have developed many ways to honor people we've lost. Hosting a wake, viewing, funeral service, a celebration of life or Shiva are just some of the ways we honor our loved ones. In the fire service, witnessing a badge presentation or bagpipers are sacred rituals that help express what cannot be said in words. While each practice has nuance, these traditions share some common goals that are essential to the grieving process:

- Acknowledge the reality of the death
- Express emotions caused by the loss
- Remember or honor the deceased
- Find meaning in the loss
- Receive and give support
- Say goodbye to the deceased

Although it may seem impossible to achieve these goals without in-person gatherings, we must try. This means finding new ways to facilitate the grieving process. Every family, community, crew or department that has lost a loved one during the COVID-19 pandemic is faced with the same challenge. If you are among those who have lost someone you care about, consider how the person would have wanted you to honor their memory. Try these strategies to take care of yourself and facilitate the grieving process:

- **Acknowledge that this is hard.** Losing someone you care about is already extremely difficult, while current circumstances only exacerbate the struggle. Give yourself permission to feel what you are feeling without judgment.
- **Maintain boundaries.** Although we remain physically separated from others, in many ways our world has never been more connected. In the age of social media, texting and video chats – you may feel pressure to check in with others before you are ready. Take the private time you need to grieve.
- **Balance loss activities with healthy distraction.** Loss activities that help you connect to your grief may include journaling or looking at old photos of the deceased. Activities such as exercise, cleaning, cooking or a watching a good movie can also provide a healthy break from the intensity of your emotions.
- **Write a letter to the deceased.** If you feel like you never got to say goodbye to your loved one, consider writing a letter. If you did have the opportunity to say goodbye at a bedside or wake, what would you have said? Take your time with this exercise. Consider reading it aloud to someone you trust.
- **Attend or host an online funeral service.** While funeral services during the COVID-19 pandemic are typically only open to immediate family members, some families are adapting by using video platforms to livestream the service online. While a video funeral can leave much to be desired, some may find that witnessing the funeral in real time remains a meaningful experience.
- **Do something to honor the deceased.** As a gesture of remembrance of the deceased, cook their favorite meal, watch their favorite movie or donate to their favorite cause. Consider telling other family and friends about your action. They will likely provide you encouragement and support.
- **Host an online celebration of life.** Similar to an online funeral service, video platforms can be used to gather select family and friends to honor the deceased and provide encouragement to each other. Participants may choose to share stories, a picture or video.
- **Stay connected to family, friends and support.** The simple act of hearing or seeing people who care about you can play an essential role in your healing. If you need more specific support, consider attending a grief support group online.

If you are struggling to process your grief and feel stuck, it may be time to ask for professional help. Telemental health services can be a great alternative to office-based counseling. See the [IAFF Telemental Health Guide](#) to learn more.

## Stay Connected and Informed

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the IAFF is here to keep you informed and connected to a brotherhood and sisterhood that cares deeply for you. Visit [www.iaff.org/coronavirus](http://www.iaff.org/coronavirus) for the latest information and resources related to COVID-19, as well as behavioral health support.

For additional COVID-19 behavioral health resources and support, visit  
<https://www.iaff.org/coronavirus/#behavioral-health-resources>

<sup>1</sup> The Center for Complicated Grief, Columbia School of Social Work (2020).