



Grief & Gathering: Commemoration, Celebration, and Connection in a Distanced World

April 16, 2020 | The following, penned by Judi's House/JAG Institute Chief Clinical Officer Micki Burns, PhD, highlights how individuals experiencing a death loss can adapt; how friends and family can offer support and how all of us are connected and impacted by grief.

I was a senior in high school when a classmate and friend went missing during the winter holiday. In the days that followed, hundreds of relatives, friends, and neighbors gathered at his family's home offering support. Eventually, his body was discovered—he was the victim of a senseless, brutal murder. Despite the school break, students poured into the cafeteria to be together. More than 800 people attended his funeral where overflow mourners watched via simulcast in the church basement. In the subsequent months, we gathered to commemorate a life cut short through memorial and graduation ceremonies. We gathered to accept, to mourn and to grieve, but most importantly, we gathered to heal.

Rituals and rites connected to death and bereavement often involve gathering and are pivotal to the grief process. Although grief is individually unique, cultures universally have mourning practices such as sitting shiva, praying rosaries, and publicly eulogizing. Many of these practices are designed to be collective. Grief is isolating and these traditions bring together a community for the mourners while giving tribute to the deceased. Our end of life customs bring meaning and structure to an unsettling and unpredictable experience. They mark the loss and begin the transition to developing continuing bonds that transcend the physical world.

Worldwide, the Coronavirus has acutely increased grief and loss while simultaneously thousands are dying from causes such as cancer, heart disease, suicide, and overdose. Each life lost is significant. The related physical distancing dictates that we sacrifice our normal, communal mourning practices for the greater good. Yet, the grieving process cannot be halted the same way we pause nonessential services. We have no choice but to adapt our ceremonies, memorials, traditions, and supports. This is not time to minimize the grief experience. This is time for compassion for self and others.

Ceremonies.

Funeral directors and bereavement professionals offer meaningful ceremonial alternatives. If contact with the deceased is restricted, remote enactments of customary rituals, such as preparing the body, may help fill the void. Although funerals may be limited to ten or fewer, technology options including recording or live streaming allow more to attend. Families may consider a processional where friends and acquaintances pay their respects by driving past a designated location where immediate family members are present.

Memorials.

With the uncertainty of the pandemic, some families are choosing to postpone memorial services until they can gather in person. While this decision offers ample time to thoughtfully prepare remarks outside of the initial shock, it comes with the fear of delaying the grieving process and the anticipation of reopening wounds in the future. Online tributes through funeral homes or social media platforms can provide a historical record of the memories shared and comforting words provided.

Traditions.

Restrictions on traditional practices may complicate the grief process. Developing new customs can foster a sense of control despite the uncertainty. Families can designate areas at home for honoring and acknowledging their loved one. Scheduling consistent time for remembrances ensures space for grief in daily life.

Supports.

Our society has always grappled with a desire to avoid the concept of death. Many bereaved individuals indicate the act of grieving itself creates isolation or a sense of social quarantine. While it may not be possible to extend traditional condolences, it is still possible to bear witness and support meaning making for those who are grieving.

Suggestions include:

- Reach out via phone, text, video calls, and mail.
- Write down your reflections on your relationship with the deceased or the bereaved.
- Send essential goods or gift certificates to local restaurants or grocery stores.
- Make charitable donations in memory or honor of the deceased and the family.
- Collect stories, photos, and memorabilia to create memory books, videos, etc. with permission.
- Send activities to pass the time at home such as coloring books, puzzles, or games.

My adolescent grief experience following the loss of my friend fundamentally impacted the way I've approached death throughout my life, contributing to my role as a psychologist and the Chief Clinical Officer of Judi's House. It is here that I witness the capacity of the human spirit to endure suffering, to make space for vulnerability, and to find connection that fosters healing. I trust that despite the current unprecedented challenges we face, resilience will allow us to find ways to gather, if not physically, expanding the circle of support and meeting the needs of the bereaved.

The mission of Judi's House/JAG Institute is to help children and families grieving a death find connection and healing. Our vision is that no child should be alone in grief. To learn more about Judi's House and the services we provide, please visit judishouse.org.