

Grieving during COVID-19

What health service providers of older adults need to know



COVID-19 has left many people experiencing high levels of grief and loss.^{1,2} Grief may be due to the loss of a friend or loved one, a job or income, regular contact with others, celebrations, and/or community and other social support systems. While many are experiencing reduced access to health supports for chronic conditions,³⁻⁵ health service providers around the world are navigating trauma experienced on the job, compassion fatigue and burnout.⁶⁻¹⁶

Health service providers of older adults face the particular challenge of maintaining their own physical and psychological well-being while also caring for those of their clients, who are one of the most at-risk demographic groups for COVID-19. Grief may be a particularly sensitive topic as both health service providers and older adults are especially likely to experience loss at this time.⁶⁻¹⁷ This resource highlights evidence-based suggestions for health service providers of older adults to optimize their treatment of grieving older adult clients while also caring for their own well-being.

Caring for yourself while grieving during the COVID-19 pandemic

There is mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness of non-professional social support in facilitating healing from grief.¹⁸⁻²⁷ Consider the level of social connection you need in order to feel supported during this time, and develop a communication plan with your chosen social network.

- When it feels safe to do so, “name and claim” your grief. Identify and write down the losses you’ve experienced. Then, consider your strengths and possible coping strategies for each.^{28,29} Practise self-care. Honour your emotional state and engage in activities that protect your well-being.^{28, 30}
- Maintain healthy eating and fitness habits. Try your best to eat a well-balanced diet consisting of vegetables, fruits, nuts, whole grains, lean proteins and olive oil, and aim for 150 minutes of aerobic exercise per week.³⁰⁻³²
- Don’t hesitate to reach out for professional help if and when you need it. Talk to your doctor about your feelings and ask for a referral to a mental health professional. You can also search Psychology Today’s directory for a mental health professional in Ontario that matches your treatment needs.
- Consider joining online communities, such as via Project ECHO, to share your experiences with other health service providers.



Caring for older adult clients navigating grief

You can adapt the self-care tips provided above for your clients. In addition:

- Discuss with your client their preferences regarding social support, and co-develop a social connection plan to map out their ideal social support network and connection strategy, over time. See the CAMH PSSP’s social isolation knowledge product for a connection plan template and guidelines.
- Loss of routine is one of the most disruptive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.³³ Co-develop a stay-at-home lifestyle routine with your clients that includes regular exercise, a nutritious diet, and opportunities for social connection.

Resources

For health service providers

Addictions and Mental Health Ontario: Self-care for staff in the addiction and mental health sector

- Provides suggestions for mental health maintenance during COVID-19.

Ontario Mental Health at CAMH and the University of Toronto— ECHO coping with COVID

- Professional support group for health service providers that provides lectures and discussions to enhance resilience and overall well-being of health service professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic. Occurs weekly (Friday afternoons, 2:00–3:00 p.m.). Registration is required.

Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) — Mental healthcare referral service for COVID-19 frontline workers

- As part of a negotiation with the Canadian Psychological Association, listed professionals will respond to requests for services within 24 hours, and provide them at no charge to frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ontario health service professionals should contact those listed under the “Ontario” subtitle.

Ontario Palliative Care Network — Palliative Care Resources to Support Frontline Providers during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Offers support for difficult discussions and crisis communication, palliative care and end-of-life care resources, links to digital platforms and additional resources.

Hospice Palliative Care Ontario — Archived virtual sessions

- Provides suggestions for mental health maintenance during COVID-19. Includes presentation slides sessions on emotional, spiritual and compassionate care during COVID-19.

For older adults

Talk2NICE by the National Initiative for the Care of the Elderly (NICE)

- Call or request to receive a friendly outreach/brief support service call from NICE social workers or social work students. Note: This is not a crisis line.
 - Call: 1 -844-529-7292

Seniors' Safety Line (toll-free from anywhere in Ontario)

- Call: 1-866-299-1011

Ontario Caregiver Helpline by the Ontario Caregiver Association

- Call: 1-866-299-1011

Bounce Back Program (CMHA)

- Call: 1 866 345-0224

Indigenous community-focused

Canadian Virtual Hospice — Indigenous Voices: Honouring our Loss and Grief (Video)

Cancer Care Ontario — Palliative Care Toolkit for Indigenous Communities

- List of online media and resources regarding grief, bereavement, and healing in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities.

National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health Podcast: Voices from the Field 16 - Supporting grief, mourning, and mental health during COVID-19.

Native Wellness Institute — Dealing and healing from loss and grief

- Online guide for understanding and healing from grief and trauma.

Other resources related to grief during the COVID-19 pandemic

MindBeacon therapist-guided program

- Cost-free mental health support, based on cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques, for Ontario residents. This is not a crisis service.

Bereaved Families of Ontario

- Province-wide bereavement support organization with regional branches. Call (416) 440-0290 to complete an intake assessment.

CAMH—COVID-19 Tips for Managing Grief (YouTube video)

CAMH—Loss, Grief and Healing

CAMH—Grieving: Where to go when you're looking for help

City of Toronto COVID-19 mental health resources

CMHA—Grieving

CMHA—Understanding and Coping with Loss and Grief

ConnexOntario: 1 866 531-2600

Families First—[Grief resources during COVID-19](#)

Families First—[How to support someone who is grieving](#)

Families First—[Grief Resources](#)

Spectrum Health Care—[COVID-19 Resources Toolkit](#)

Telehealth Ontario: 1 866 797-0000

[Understanding Grief in the Age of the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

- By Kendra Cherry for VeryWellMind.

[Understanding Grief in the Context of Job Loss and Lifestyle Adjustment](#)

- By Millicent Nuver Simmelink for the National Career Development Association.

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