RESOURCES TO SUPPORT BEREAVED FAMILIES DURING COVID-19

Evidence summary and links to resources for child and youth mental health service providers

Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child & Youth Mental Health

Centre d'excellence de l'Ontario en santé mentale des enfants et des adolescents

CMHO

Children's Mental Health Ontario

Santé mentale pour enfants Ontario

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Background

Throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, some children, youth and families have experienced the loss of loved ones due to COVID-19 or other health-related causes. COVID-19 has impacted the way families and children are able to grieve and mourn the death of a loved one. Physical distancing restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have made it difficult for people to be present or to physically comfort family members or friends who are ill or dying (Farahmandnia et al, 2020; Moore et al., 2020). Service providers have identified the need for knowledge around the unique complexities of mourning and loss during a pandemic and key considerations when supporting bereaved children, youth and families.

The Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health (the Centre) and Children's Mental Health Ontario (CMHO) have compiled evidence and resources to help child and youth mental health service providers support families experiencing grief during the pandemic.

In this resource, we share:

- evidence on the unique challenges associated with the grief process during the pandemic,
- key considerations when supporting families during this difficult time and
- resources for both service providers and families on grief and bereavement.

The contents of this document were gathered through a rapid, non-systematic scan of practice guidelines with the goal of providing timely support to direct service providers. A search of academic and grey literature produced several relevant, evidence-based resources offering practical recommendations on how to support families who are grieving during the pandemic. We also consulted with clinicians for greater insight into grief and bereavement support to inform the development of this resource.

The resources shared here were not collected through an exhaustive search or systematic review but reflect information available at the time of writing. As new practice evidence emerges, recommended resources may evolve.

Experiencing and processing grief during covid-19

Physical distancing measures have impacted traditional mourning practices (e.g. funerals, memorials, burials, visiting with bereaved families, providing meals and other caregiving activities) that give people who have lost a loved one an opportunity to express feelings and emotions related to their loss.

Grief is a natural and healthy response to a significant loss. In most cases, bereaved family members will experience normative grief and will adjust to the death of a loved one without substantial intervention (Morris et al., 2020). However, researchers have noted the potential for increased instances of complicated or prolonged grief due to the pandemic (e.g. Eisma et al., 2020; Wallace et al., 2020).

[Complicated grief](#) is defined as a persistent, intense and disabling form of grief (Mayland et al., 2020) and is characterized by maladaptive thoughts, feelings and behaviours that impede daily functioning (Levin, 2019). Within the literature, the term "complicated grief" is often used interchangeably with "prolonged grief" (e.g. Eisma et al., 2020), as complications in grieving are often associated with an extended period of grieving.

Many of the factors that contribute to complicated grief may be amplified during a pandemic, whether the death is caused by complications due to the infectious outbreak or unrelated causes (Morris et al, 2020). The following factors may intensify the stress related to loss:

- the suddenness of a death (Eisma et al., 2020)
- not being able to visit a dying family member before they die (Mayland et al., 2020)
- limited direct and in-person support (Wallace et al, 2020)
- severe symptoms of [anticipatory grief](#) (Wallace et al., 2020)
- absence of traditional grieving practices and rituals (Eisma et al., 2020)
- disruption and stress occurring in other aspects of life (e.g. separation from school, religious institutions, extracurricular engagement) (Morris et al., 2020)
- frequent exposure to reminders of the pandemic (e.g. media coverage) (Whaley et al., 2017)

Grief-related mental health disorders

Complicated and/or prolonged grief can give rise to mental health challenges (Farahmandnia et al., 2020). According to Morris et al. (2020), mental health service providers are currently seeing an increase in bereaved individuals seeking support since the emergence of COVID-19. Family members may be more likely to experience grief-related mental health disorders if they are unable to say goodbye, if their loved one dies in isolation/incubation or the family experienced poor communication during the end of life stage (Morris et al., 2020). Those with pre-existing mental health concerns are at risk for poorer bereavement outcomes and experts anticipate an increase in Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) during and post pandemic (Morris et al., 2020).

Considerations when supporting bereaved families

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the context of community support for bereaved families. Drawing on what has been learned from previous outbreaks and disasters (e.g. Bear et al., 2020), we list considerations below for service providers planning supports for bereaved families during the pandemic and after restrictions have lifted.

How children grieve

Children and youth understand death and loss differently depending on their developmental age and stage, which can result in a range of grief reactions. It is common for children - from toddlerhood through middle childhood - to regress developmentally, become withdrawn, or act out behaviourally after the death of a loved one (e.g. Ferow, 2019; Machajewsk & Kronk, 2013).

The literature on the psychology of disasters also shows that young people's reactions to major events like natural disasters and infectious outbreaks vary based on their developmental stage (Whaley et al., 2017).

The combination of stress and loss due to the pandemic and the death of a loved one means children's grief reactions at this time may be unexpected, complicated and vary widely (Ferow, 2019). Young people are susceptible to feelings of survivors' guilt and can feel responsible for major events, such as disasters and pandemics, blaming themselves for the death of loved ones experienced during this time (Whaley et al., 2017). Preschool-aged children are particularly susceptible, as egocentric cognitive processing (a young child's inability to understand a situation from another person's point of view outside of their own) is typical at this age and stage can result in feelings of guilt and blame.

To support children through grief, please see CMHO's resource on [Helping children through grief.](#)

Supporting parents and caregivers

In times of grief, children and youth tune into how their parents/caregivers manage grief and take cues from their actions (The Dougy Centre, n.d.; Whaley et al., 2017). Caregivers and families will benefit from direct support services as they often provide the primary support and guidance for bereaved children (Whaley et al., 2017). For additional support for parents/caregivers, please see these [resources](#) at the end of this document. The Centre has also developed a resource on [talking to children and youth about COVID–19](#) to help guide conversations with children and youth around the current environment and understanding the pandemic.

Physical isolation following death

Families may be unable to visit dying family members in the days/weeks leading up to their death. Family members who are able to visit loved ones at end-of-life may need to physically isolate from family and others following the loss. These isolation requirements can potentially disrupt grieving processes and mourning rituals (Moore et al., 2020).

Accessibility of technology

The use of technology can help families connect with their social networks and more formal supports, including bereavement groups and telephone or text-based support lines (Bear et al., 2020; Levin, 2019). Although technological solutions may not be accessible within and across all communities throughout the province (Moore et al., 2020), child and youth mental health agencies should explore how best to connect grieving families with these different technology-facilitated supports.

Social stigma

Stigma and shame may impact the way families are able to grieve (Bear et al., 2020). The stigma connected to the transmission of COVID-19 and associated death may alienate families from their social networks and limit their access to wider community supports (Levin, 2019; Zhai & Du, 2020). Stigma related to COVID-19 may also become conflated with pre-existing social conflicts and can reinforce the marginalization and discrimination experienced in a community (Levin, 2019). Service providers should consider how the stigma associated with COVID-19 may intersect with these other forms of discrimination and affect community members' recovery. Taking an anti-oppressive approach to practice may mediate unintended harm families may experience within the current global context (Baines, 2017).

Restricted mourning rituals

Grief reactions may look different from culture to culture; it's important that service providers attend to culture when supporting bereaved families (Ferow, 2019). In some faith-based communities, mourning rituals have been restricted or altered as a result of the pandemic, causing considerable distress for bereaved family members. For example, in Sikh, Hindu, Muslim and Jewish communities, the body of a loved one must be processed right away, which isn't always possible during the pandemic (Bear et al.,2020). While traditional customs and mourning rituals may not be possible, it is important to support families in finding innovative ways to mourn (e.g. communal memorials at later date, community-wide memorial acknowledgement, virtual/telephonic/text support services for families) that focus incorporating aspects of their existing social or cultural rituals as much as possible (Bear et al., 2020).

Extended and specialized support

Scholars have noted the need for longer-term preparation when managing the potential increase of prolonged grief reactions from the pandemic (e.g. Bear et al., 2020). Planning for community memorials or public recognition of grief after restrictions have lifted, for example, may provide bereaved families with a sense of closure, allow for collective grieving, or reduce stigma surrounding the virus (Bear et al., 2020; Levin, 2019).

There may also be value in offering specialized, responsive, and long-term grief and bereavement support for families that have experienced death during the pandemic (Bear et al., 2020). There are, for example, mental health organizations that have established a new role dedicated to responding to specialized mental health needs for those experiencing loss during the pandemic.

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Trust in institutions

Some individuals may experience a loss of faith in health institutions, employers or governmental leaders over the course of a pandemic (Levin, 2019). It's important to be mindful of feelings of distrust or negative beliefs that may linger after restrictions are lifted, and ignoring these feelings could lead to alienation, despair and stigmatization.

Resource list

Canadian resources

Canadian Mental Health Association Ontario

- CMHA also provides a number of resources and information on grief and bereavement including an [information Sheet on Grief and Loss During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).
- [Loss and grief during the COVID-19 pandemic (information sheet)](#)

Canadian Psychological Association

- ["Psychology Works" fact sheet: Helping teens cope with the impacts of a restrictions related to COVID-19](#)
- ["Psychology Works" fact sheet: Grief, bereavement and COVID-19](#)

Canadian Virtual Hospice

- [Additional resources and information on grief and loss duration the pandemic](#)

Children's Mental Health Ontario

- [Helping children through grief](#)

Kids Help Phone

- [Supporting the young people in your life during COVID-19](#)

Lighthouse for Grieving Children

- [For bereaved children & youth dealing with all the unknowns from COVID-19 (tip sheet)](#)
- [Supporting a grandparent death during a pandemic (tip sheet)](#)
- [Death of a family member during a global pandemic: Supporting children and finding ways to mourn together (tip sheet)](#)

International resources

The Dougy Center

- [Grief resources for children & families](#)

National Alliance for Grieving Children

- [Webinar: Children and funerals in a global pandemic](#)
- [Toolkit: Responding to change & loss](#)

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

- [Helping children with traumatic separation or traumatic grief related to COVID-19 (tip sheet)](#)

Stony Brook Medicine

- [Dealing with loss during COVID-19: Helping children and families](#)

Glossary

Grief and the grieving process

Grief is a natural response to death and loss (Farahmandnia et al, 2020). Grief can affect how an individual thinks, feels and behaves throughout their everyday life (Saxon et al., 2015). Grief reactions present differently from person to person (Zhai & Du, 2020) and may manifest as shock, sadness, fear, anger, guilt or anxiety (Canadian Mental Health Association Ontario, n.d.; Levin, 2019).

Bereavement

Bereavement is the state of being after the death of a loved one (Saxon et al., 2015). While the term bereavement is often used interchangeably with grief and loss, these other terms can be used in other contexts outside of death (i.e. grief associated with job loss and financial instability).

Mourning

Mourning is the outward expression of grief that helps people adapt to death and loss (Saxon et al., 2015). Typically, mourning occurs through cultural or social customs and mourning rituals (i.e. funerals).

Complicated grief

Complicated grief can be defined as a persistent, intense, and disabling form of grief (Levin, 2019; Mayland et al., 2020). This form of grief is characterized by maladaptive thoughts, feelings and behaviours that impede daily functioning (Levin, 2019).

Anticipatory grief

Sometimes individuals may experience grief before the death of a loved one. This is called anticipatory grief (Wallace et al., 2020). Particularly in the midst of a pandemic, the looming uncertainty surrounding how changing hospital and facility policies will impact a loved one's death or concern regarding how a disease will progress can lead to feelings of grief in anticipation of the loss.

Disenfranchised grief

Disenfranchised grief occurs when a loved one's death is not publicly mourned by an individual's larger community (Wallace et al., 2020). Due to social distancing restrictions, many traditional grieving practices, like funerals and wakes, may not be possible. The absence of these rituals can greatly impact grieving.

Traumatic grief

The traumatic nature of the death of a loved one can influence grieving. Sudden death or the inability to say goodbye, for example, can disturb one's grieving process (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.; Whaley et al., 2017).

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