

Correspondence

Beyond death and afterlife: the complicated process of grief in the time of COVID-19

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has already killed more than one million people around the world. The pandemic had a profound impact on the emotional, social and spiritual life of the public. Due to self-isolation, prohibition of mass-gatherings and quarantine protocols, hospitals and healthcare facilities are closed to visitors. Clergy members are unable to be physically present with sick in their final moments. Many families cannot say goodbye to their loved ones, many people cannot attend funeral rites and many people cannot perform their final mourning rituals. These complicated situations have not only distressed some family members but also someone who is close to death. In this time of crisis, it is important to implore the global community to reflect on the unique and unusual process of grieving. This paper is a response to the recent correspondence published in this journal where the author noted the changing landscapes of death and burial practices in the context of COVID-19. This paper further adds to the emerging and complicated process of death, dying and grief and ways of coping with loss in the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords COVID-19, death, dying, grief

COVID-19 has already killed more than one million people around the world. The pandemic had a profound impact on the emotional, social and spiritual life of the public. Due to self-isolation, prohibition of mass-gatherings and quarantine protocols, hospitals and healthcare facilities are closed to visitors. Clergy members are unable to be physically present with sick in their final moments. Many families cannot say goodbye to their loved ones, many people cannot attend funeral rites and many people cannot perform their final mourning rituals. These complicated situations have not only distressed some family members but also someone who is close to death. In this time of crisis, it is important to implore the global community to reflect on the unique and unusual process of grieving. This paper is a response to a recent correspondence published in this journal where the author noted the changing landscapes of death and burial practices in the context of COVID-19.¹ This paper further adds to the emerging and complicated process of death, dying and grief and ways of coping with loss in the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 pandemic has a significant impact on how one treats the dead and the living.² Friends and families of those who have died in hospitals with strict visitation policies wrestled with the frustration at not being present during the final moments of the dying. In-person viewing of the body

of those who died from COVID-19 was prohibited. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that ‘people who have died from COVID-19 can be buried or cremated according to local standards and family practices.’³ However, with family and friends unable to say goodbye to their loved one, nurses and doctors are left to fill the void by taking care of the patient and discuss end-of-life care or relay the news of a death. Meanwhile, those trained, including palliative care and hospital chaplains are overstretched beyond their capacity to be of comfort for the dying. In some situations, priests stopped saying the last rites. Unable to enter patients’ rooms, some priests have given blessings from the hallway or over the phone.⁴

The unusual process of grief in time of COVID-19 challenges the usual process of coping with loss. For many years, the ‘five steps—denial, when they refuse the diagnosis; anger or revolt; negotiation or bargaining; depression, mourning process for the loss of life and, finally, acceptance of one’s finitude’—were the standard practice.⁵ However, the absence of standard burial practices and coping with loss in time of COVID-19 affects the grieving process. People find creative ways to express their grief by posting obituaries through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube and Zoom. Some people find comfort through art, gardening, writing, talking to friends and family, music and other means. Thus, it is

important to acknowledge the loss and the feelings of grief. One can also consider new rituals to stay connected with their loved ones.

When the 'new normal' comes, people can finally perform missed rituals and say goodbye to their loved ones. It is important for family members, caregivers, counselors, chaplains and those involved in healing process to promote healthy coping and acceptance. The process of grief has no clear timeline. People cope with losses in different creative ways. But one thing is certain: we will all grieve at one point in our lives. Finding creative ways of grieving and coping with loss fills the usual process of grieving. COVID-19 presents a new and challenging process of grieving.

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