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## **National Day of Reflection: coping with grief after losing a loved one to COVID-19**

Since the pandemic began, the number of people in the UK who have died with COVID-19 listed as the cause of death has reached over 185,000. Restrictions on social contact have had a major impact on the bereaved and how they have been allowed to grieve. This year, the National Day of Reflection is honouring those we've lost.

### **What is the National Day of Reflection?**

The National Day of Reflection on Wednesday 23rd March is a day for people across the UK to come together in solidarity, reflect on our collective trauma, show support for those who have been bereaved, and remember [those who have died](#) from COVID-19.

Run by [Marie Curie](#), this year the awareness day aims to turn the legacy of COVID-19 into one of compassion and community. The day will not only encourage people to talk and support one another but will also shine a light on issues relating to [grief and bereavement](#).

### **What challenges can grief present after losing a loved one?**

Grief can create difficulty in carrying out everyday activities, it can cause a sense of guilt for continuing life without the person who has died. There can also be a preoccupation with that person, a feeling of constant longing for them. It is normal to have feelings of anger, despair, guilt, and fear following the loss of a loved one.

Marie Curie bereavement coordinator Louise Bowen stresses that grief is a personal experience and everyone will be affected in different ways.

"It can feel like your whole world has been turned upside down. You can feel numb and disorientated at first, with little motivation and energy. Despair and hopelessness can be very common too, especially in early grief which can feel like a very lonely time. Our ability to concentrate can also be adversely affected," she says.

Grief can also have [physical effects](#) on the body, including:

- Joint pain.
- Headaches.
- Digestive problems.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Extreme fatigue.
- Reduced appetite.
- Weaker immune system.

## **Grieving after losing a loved one to COVID-19**

"The death of someone from COVID-19 or indeed any other cause during the pandemic has been very difficult, as many were not able to grieve as they have needed to," says Bowen.

Restrictions on the number of attendees allowed at funerals prevented family members and friends who would usually have been there from going. Government restrictions also meant they could not be beside their loved ones during their last few months, weeks, days, or hours of life.

Some people have had to join funerals via video links or say goodbye to someone over FaceTime. This lack of human communication can make someone's death difficult to accept as true, causing the grieving process to feel even more distressing.

## **Can losing a loved one to COVID-19 cause anxiety?**

If your loved one [died of COVID-19](#), it's understandable why you might have anxieties around catching and spreading the virus.

Bowen explains that having such a devastating encounter with COVID-19 can mean someone feels unsafe going about their daily lives while we continue to live through a pandemic.

"It can bring up a lot of thoughts and feelings about the actions of other people, as well as your own. Confidence can be seriously affected, with people feeling anxious to go out and potentially catch the virus, in turn passing it on to another loved one and having to endure the same pain. There may be feelings of anger that others don't take the level of risk seriously as well."

## **Practising self-care after losing a loved one during the pandemic**

Marie Curie emphasises the importance of doing what feels right for you as you grieve as there is no rule book or a one-size-fits-all approach to self-care after losing a loved one.

You might prefer to be alone, or only see and speak to a small number of people. On the other hand, you might wish to go about your days as normal. Either way, people will understand that it is your way of processing what has happened.

"Remember to have regular check-ins with yourself to ensure you are not getting too tired, hungry, or thirsty. Rest when you need it and [get some fresh air](#) when you can, rather than shutting yourself away permanently," says Bowen.

She adds that you shouldn't feel ashamed to accept help from those around you, but you should also feel empowered to say no to the demands of others when necessary.

Other methods of self-care during the grieving process include:

- Listen to your body - cry when you need to.
- Lower expectations for yourself - you don't need to run at full capacity.
- Do familiar things - try to maintain some normality with activities and routines.

- Write it down – keep a journal to help you process what has happened.
- Pamper yourself – whether it's a bath, hair appointment or massage, nurture yourself.

### **Things to remember if you have lost a loved one during the pandemic**

- You are not the only one who is finding it difficult.
- Help is available.
- It will take time to build your life back up.
- You need to be gentle with yourself.
- There is no singular way to grieve.
- Grief comes in stages and isn't a straight line.

## **A personal story of loss during the pandemic**

Dave lost his mother on 1st April 2020 when she was 86-years-old. His mother had been in a care home 60 miles away for six months and she died of old age.

He said they visited the weekend just before the lockdown began and, while his mother going into a home wasn't unexpected as her health had begun to deteriorate, it was still a shock.

### **The challenges of grieving during a pandemic**

"The practicalities of trying to sort details out following her death were difficult. Death certificates, coroner reports, funeral home details, it all had to be done via phone and email due to lockdown. The coroner at the time would only accept hand-delivered death certificates, but this was waived as it was impossible to do so under lockdown restrictions," says Dave.

"At that time it was a little frustrating as we couldn't do what we needed to around her remains, funeral, or memorial. We couldn't even spend time together as a family due to restrictions."

His mother was cremated on 18th April with no family members allowed at the crematorium. Dave knew his mother's remains were being processed at 7 am, so all he could do was acknowledge the time in his garden 60 miles away.

They attempted to arrange a family memorial in October 2020, but that was thwarted by the Tier System, which affected the number of people allowed to gather. Local lockdowns in other countries meant relatives couldn't travel to join.

Dave's mother's ashes have still not been scattered and the family have not been able to have a memorial. He imagines it will be a far more low-key event now when it does happen.

### **The frustrations of others not following the rules**

In late January 2022, reports that Conservative Party staff held parties and gatherings during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021 when restrictions prohibited most gatherings were released. The reports sparked public outrage, particularly from frontline workers and those who couldn't say goodbye to loved ones.

"It makes me so angry that they did not follow the rules that they set out," says Dave.

He adds that he's also felt frustrated by members of the public who did not follow the rules in terms of social gatherings, face masks and advice on [getting vaccinated](#).

"In general, the vast majority of the public I saw followed the rules, but the rules themselves have been exceptionally confusing and it hasn't always been clear what is and isn't allowed."

### **Moving forwards**

Dave tries to keep his mother's memory alive by thinking about her often and speaking about her with others. He hopes the coroner and will solicitors are now continuing their loosened criteria for their processes so others can have less of an ordeal as they grieve.

"We will have to continue to adapt as we move forwards, and create our own meaningful ways to remember her for ourselves."

# Where to find support while grieving

If you need a listening ear or some support, you can contact the Marie Curie Information and Support Line on 0800 090 2309. There is also a check-in and chat service, where you can receive ongoing emotional support from the same person each week. You can find out more information by visiting [mariecurie.org.uk](https://mariecurie.org.uk).

To find out more about the National Day of Reflection visit [mariecurie.org.uk/dayofreflection](https://mariecurie.org.uk/dayofreflection).

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