

# Isolation, Grief, Loss & Trauma During COVID-19



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NM Behavioral Health Services Division, HSD

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# Introduction

## Isolation, Grief, Loss & Trauma During COVID-19

As New Mexico and the rest of the country self-isolates to reduce the spread of COVID-19, some profound psychological, environmental and social issues are emerging. We must collectively acknowledge the feelings of powerlessness, unmanageability, fear, anxiety, loss, grief and trauma that are being brought to light for individuals and our communities.

As a minority-majority state that holds extreme diversity between our urban and rural communities, we must offer deep care for our indigenous communities. We know that tribal and pueblo communities are at high risk due to institutionalized oppression, racism, and historical trauma. This is also true for many other people of color. During this public health emergency we must not ignore how these factors are causing an unfair distribution of suffering among our communities.

This is a time for all of us as community members, professionals in the behavioral health field, and those in policy to unite for the well-being of all New Mexicans. This document offers guidance on how to respond to isolation, grief, loss, and trauma, as well as resources for helping others in your community.

*“Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear.”*

— Ambrose Redmoon





## Isolation

Humans are social beings, and the social distancing that is necessary to flatten the coronavirus curve is hard on everyone. The forced change in social behavior and the resulting isolation can affect people's mental health in many ways. Whether you are home alone, with a sick family member, or with kids out of school, isolation can increase stress and anxiety.

Depending on your situation, isolation can impact you in different ways. From loneliness to feeling cramped, dealing with these feelings on top of worrying about the COVID-19 outbreak can be overwhelming. Isolation can also exacerbate mental health or substance use issues. You do not have to do any of this alone: the New Mexico Crisis and Access Line, as well as the Peer Warmline, are available to you at <https://www.nmcrisisline.com/> 1-855-662-7474.

### *General tips*

- Keep in touch with your social support groups virtually through social media, FaceTime, Skype, online games and other digital platforms. Call friends for help if the technology is scary or feels hard for you. Someone you know can help.
- If the weather is nice, go outside and get some fresh air. Maintain a 6-foot distance from others. Consider wearing a face covering. Make a game out of making masks; they can be decorative and fun!
- Stay busy. Read, play games or work on a project. Do the next smallest thing you can find to do; this could include cleaning one drawer or one cabinet. Call a friend to celebrate once you've completed something, no matter how small.
- Decrease the time you spend watching or listening to upsetting media coverage.
- Draw on skills that you have used during difficult times in the past to manage your emotions. That may include deep breathing, meditation, positive self-talk, etc.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle. Stay hydrated, eat nutritious meals, exercise and get enough sleep.
- Avoid using tobacco, alcohol or other drugs to cope with your emotions.
- Access information that can help you cope with stress, worry, and confusion during the pandemic.
- Get the facts about your risk and how to take precautions. Use trusted national and international resources including the World Health Organization, Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, and the New Mexico Department of Health.

### *For people living with children*

- Remember that during times of stress, it is common for children to seek more attachment and be more demanding on parents.
- Be honest when discussing COVID-19 but do so in an age-appropriate way. If your children

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have concerns, help them ease their anxiety. Allow them to have their feelings.

- Make sure you model good behavior. Children will observe adults for cues on how to manage their own emotions during difficult times.
- Help children find positive ways to express their fears about the situation. Every child has a way to express emotions. Sometimes engaging in a creative activity such as drawing can help this process.
- Maintain a safe and supportive environment and practice familiar routines in daily life as much as possible, especially if children are confined to home. Continue eating at regular times and continue with schoolwork at home, although do not overdo it.
- Provide children with engaging activities that have meaning for them.

### Resources for Families at Home

Child Mind Institute

<https://childmind.org/article/helping-children-deal-grief/>

<https://childmind.org/article/supporting-kids-during-the-covid-19-crisis/>

Kids Resources During COVID

<https://www.actionforhealthykids.org/covid-19-and-at-home-resources/>

STEM Resources for Kids at Home

<https://mommypoppins.com/family/stem/guide-to-science-experiments-for-kids-and-fun-stem-activities>

Stay at Home Self-Care

<https://www.premierhealth.com/your-health/articles/healthnow/25-stay-at-home-self-care-ideas-during-covid-19>

*For caretakers of older adults*

- Provide practical and emotional support by sharing simple facts about what is going on.
- Give clear information about how to reduce the risk of infection in words older people with/without cognitive impairment can understand. Repeat the information whenever necessary.
- Engage your family and other support networks in providing information and helping all of us practice prevention measures (handwashing, proper sneezing and coughing techniques, etc.).
- Be aware that older adults in isolation and/or those with cognitive decline/dementia may become more anxious, angry, stressed, agitated or withdrawn during this time.
- Encourage older adults with experience and special skills to help others by providing virtual peer support, reading to children over the phone and the like.

### Resources for Care Givers

Family Caregivers

<https://www.caregiver.org/coronavirus-covid-19-resources-and-articles-family-caregivers>

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Older Adults & Caregivers

<https://www.ncoa.org/covid-19/covid-19-resources-for-older-adults/>

Coronavirus and Caregiving for the Elderly

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/coronavirus-caregiving-for-the-elderly>

Corona Virus Resources for Home Care and Hospice

<https://www.nahc.org/resources-services/coronavirus-resources/>

Older Adults and Family Caregiver Resources

<https://www.johnahartford.org/dissemination-center/view/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-resources-for-older-adults-family-caregivers-and-health-care-providers>

Covid and Caring for Individuals with Alzheimer's

<https://www.johnahartford.org/dissemination-center/view/fca-webinar-covid-19-and-caring-for-individuals-with-alzheimers>



*"Grief and resilience live together."*  
— Michelle Obama, *Becoming*

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## Grief and Loss During Covid-19

(APA, 4/6/20; Smith, Robinson & Segal, 2019)

“Every culture has its customs and rituals for mourning loved ones. Whether it’s sitting shiva, lining up for a New Orleans-style jazz procession or sharing a meal with loved ones after a secular memorial service, virtually every custom shares a key element: a social connection.”

In the age of COVID-19, physical distancing is driving a wedge in those moments of connection. “One of the most time-tested ways of coping with grief is to practice social connection, to be with other mourners. Now, we may be having to cope with grief and sorrow alone, socially isolated, where we don’t get the physical comfort we need from friends and family,” says Sherry Cormier, Ph.D., a psychologist retired from private practice who now focuses on grief training and mentoring. “We’re having to figure out new systems and new rituals for trying to honor death when everything else around us is shifting.”



### *Missing Final Moments*

The act of saying goodbye to a loved one often begins well before a funeral or burial. For many people, the days and hours at the end of a loved one’s life are especially poignant. “Normally, we can hold a loved one’s hand, have meaningful conversations, affirm the bond, make amends,” says Robert Neimeyer, Ph.D., director of the Portland Institute for Loss and

Transition and professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Memphis. “When we can practice these things, it softens the blow of loss.”

With strict isolation measures in place in most hospitals, people are missing out on those final farewells. That’s true when people die from COVID-19, as well as from more familiar causes such as heart attacks or cancer. While critical to slowing the spread of the disease, these measures also make it hard for mourners to come together to grieve.

Some people have begun filling that void with virtual rituals and funerals, but technology is an imperfect substitute for an in-person embrace. “Being in close physical proximity with friends or other mourners helps us produce feel-good hormones like oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin,” Cormier says.

When people aren’t physically present to say goodbye and grieve with other mourners, they may be more likely to experience a sense of ambiguous loss, she adds. “With an ambiguous loss, it’s very hard to get closure. There’s often a lot of frustration and helplessness because people feel disempowered,” she says. “The question becomes, how can we construct new rituals to help us cope with death and dying for this situation that we’re in right now? We’re facing the question of needing to find some new way of honoring the dying process and also coping with our grief. And we might have to look to psychologists, along with faith leaders and others, to find those new mechanisms.”

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## The Grieving Process

Grieving is a highly individual experience; there's no right or wrong way to grieve. How you grieve depends on many factors, including your personality and coping style, your life experience, your faith, your community traditions and how significant the loss was to you.



Inevitably, the grieving process takes time. Healing happens gradually; it can't be forced or hurried—and **there is no "normal" timetable for grieving.** Some people start to feel better in weeks or months. For others, the grieving process is measured in years. Whatever your grief experience, it's important to be patient with yourself and allow the process to naturally unfold. Grieving is a highly individual experience; there's no right or wrong way to do it.

### Myths and facts about grief and grieving

**Myth: The pain will go away faster if you ignore it.****Fact:** Trying to ignore your pain or keep it from surfacing will only make it worse in the long run. For real healing, it is necessary to face your grief and actively deal with it.

**Myth: It's important to "be strong" in the face of loss.**

**Fact:** Feeling sad, frightened, or lonely is a normal reaction to loss. Crying doesn't mean you are weak. You don't need to "protect" your family or friends by putting on a brave front. Showing your true feelings can help them and you.

**Myth: If you don't cry, it means you aren't sorry about the loss.**

**Fact:** Crying is a normal response to sadness, but it's not the only one. Those who don't cry may feel the pain just as deeply as others. They may simply have other ways of showing it.

**Myth: Grieving should last about a year.**

**Fact:** There is no specific time frame for grieving. How long it takes differs from person to person.

**Myth: Moving on with your life means forgetting about your loss.**

**Fact:** Moving on means you've accepted your loss—but that's not the same as forgetting. You can move on with your life and keep the memory of someone or something you lost as an important part of you. As we move through life, these memories can become more and more integral to defining the people we are.

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## *How To Deal With The Grieving Process*

While grieving a loss is an inevitable part of life, there are ways to help cope with the pain, come to terms with your grief, and eventually, find a way to pick up the pieces and move on with your life.

1. Acknowledge your pain.
2. Accept that grief can trigger many different and unexpected emotions.
3. Understand that your grieving process will be unique to you.
4. Seek out support from people who care about you.
5. Support yourself emotionally by taking care of yourself physically.
6. Recognize the difference between grief and depression.

### *Emotional Symptoms of Grief*

**Shock and disbelief.** Right after a loss, it can be hard to accept what happened. You may feel numb, have trouble believing that the loss really happened, or even deny the truth. If someone you love has died, you may keep expecting them to show up, even though you know they're gone.

**Sadness.** Profound sadness is probably the most universally experienced symptom of grief. You may have feelings of emptiness, despair, yearning, or deep loneliness. You may also cry a lot or feel emotionally unstable.

**Guilt.** You may regret or feel guilty about things you did or didn't say or do. You may also feel guilty about certain feelings (e.g. feeling relieved when the person died after a long, difficult illness). After a death, you may even feel guilty for not doing something to prevent the death, even if there was nothing more you could have done.



**Anger.** Even if the loss was nobody's fault, you may feel angry and resentful. If you lost a loved one, you may be angry with yourself, God, the doctors, or even the person who died for abandoning you. You may feel the need to blame someone for the injustice that was done to you.

**Fear.** A significant loss can trigger a host of worries and fears. You may feel anxious, helpless, or insecure. You may even have panic attacks. The death of a loved one can trigger fears about your mortality, of facing life without that person, or the responsibilities you now face alone.

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## *Physical Symptoms of Grief*

We often think of grief as a strictly emotional process, but grief can involve physical problems, including:

- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Lowered immunity
- Weight loss or weight gain
- Aches and pains
- Insomnia



## *Seek Support*

The pain of grief can often cause you to want to withdraw from others and retreat into your shell. But having the support of other people is vital to healing from loss. Even if you're not comfortable talking about your feelings under normal circumstances, it's important to express them when you're grieving. While sharing your loss can make the burden of grief easier to carry, that doesn't mean that every time you interact with friends and family, you need to talk about it. Comfort can also come from just being virtually together with others who care about you. The key is not to isolate yourself.

**Turn to friends and family members.** Now is the time to lean on the people who care about you, even if you take pride in being strong and self-sufficient. Rather than avoiding them, draw friends and loved ones close, spend time together and accept the assistance that is offered. Often, people want to help but don't know how, so tell them what you need—whether it's a shoulder to cry on, help with funeral arrangements, or just someone to hang out with. If you don't feel you have anyone you can regularly connect with in person, it's never too late to build new friendships.

**Accept that many people feel awkward when trying to comfort someone who is grieving.** Grief can be a confusing, sometimes frightening emotion for many people, especially if they haven't experienced a similar loss themselves. They may feel unsure about how to comfort you and end up saying or doing the wrong things. But don't use that as an excuse to retreat into your shell and avoid social contact. If a friend or loved one reaches out to you, it's because they care.

**Draw comfort from your faith.** If you follow a religious tradition, embrace the comfort its mourning rituals can provide. Spiritual activities that are meaningful to you—such as praying, meditating, or going to church—can offer solace. If you are questioning your faith in the wake of the loss, talk to a clergy member or others in your religious community.

**Join a support group.** Grief can feel very lonely, even when you have loved ones around. Sharing your sorrow with others who have experienced similar losses can help. To find a bereavement support group in your area, contact local hospitals, hospices, funeral homes, and counseling centers, or see <https://www.griefshare.org/>

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**Talk to a therapist or grief counselor.** If your grief feels like too much to bear, find a mental health professional with experience in grief counseling. An experienced therapist can help you work through intense emotions and overcome obstacles to your grieving.

<https://www.nmcrisisline.com/> 1-855-662-7474



### *Take Care of Yourself as You Grieve*

When you are grieving, it's more important than ever to take care of yourself. The stress of a major loss can quickly deplete your energy and emotional reserves. Looking after your physical and emotional needs will help you get through this difficult time.

**Face your feelings.** You can try to suppress your grief, but you can't avoid it forever. To heal, you must acknowledge the pain. Trying to avoid feelings of sadness and loss only prolongs the grieving process. Unresolved grief can also lead to complications such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and health problems.

**Express your feelings tangibly or creatively.** Write about your loss in a journal. If you have lost a loved one, write a letter saying the things you never got to say. Make a scrapbook or photo album celebrating the person's life, or get involved in a cause or organization that was important to your loved one.

**Try to maintain your hobbies and interests.** There is comfort in routine and getting back to the activities that bring you joy and connect you closer to others. These can help you come to terms with your loss and aid the grieving process.

**Don't let anyone tell you how to feel, and don't tell yourself how to feel either.** Your grief is your own, and no one else can tell you when it's time to "move on" or "get over it." Let yourself feel whatever you feel without embarrassment or judgment. It's okay to be angry, to yell at the heavens, to cry or not to cry. It's also okay to laugh, to find moments of joy, and to let go when you're ready.

**Plan ahead for grief "triggers."** Anniversaries, holidays, and milestones can reawaken memories and feelings. Be prepared for an emotional wallop and know that it's completely normal. If you are sharing a holiday or lifecycle event with other relatives, talk to them ahead of time about their expectations and agree on strategies to honor the person you loved.

**Look after your physical health.** The mind and body are connected. When you feel healthy physically, you'll be better able to cope emotionally. Combat stress and fatigue by getting enough sleep, eating right, and exercising. Don't use alcohol or drugs to numb the pain of grief or lift your mood artificially.

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## *When to Seek Professional Help for Grief*

Sometimes grief can turn into complicated grief or clinical depression. These can lead to significant emotional damage, life-threatening health problems, and even suicide. But treatment can help you get better.

Contact a grief counselor or professional therapist if you:

1. Feel like life isn't worth living
2. Wish you had died with your loved one
3. Blame yourself for the loss or for failing to prevent it
4. Feel numb and disconnected from others for a period of time that is abnormal for you
5. Have difficulty trusting others since your loss
6. Are unable to perform your normal daily activities



## **Trauma-Informed Response Considerations**

(Taken from Traumainformedoregon.org and modified by NM BHSD)

### *Rationale*

For most people, COVID-19 will be associated with increased uncertainty and stress. When we are under acute stress we are more likely to be operating from the survival areas of our brain. This means that our thinking becomes much more black and white, our attention is more narrowly focused on the immediate here and now. We may start to have difficulty planning or thinking ahead. We may have difficulty regulating our emotions, and we become less able to make decisions. Stressful times are associated with threats to our safety and a loss of power and control. A trauma-informed approach can help reduce or prevent a trauma response.

### *Considerations*

Please consider the following trauma-informed care (TIC) principles to guide our interactions as we all move through this public health crisis.

- Support regulation – when stressed, people have a harder time managing emotions and staying regulated. Build in time for regulation practices like breathing, grounding exercises, and movement. Model the calm behavior you want people around you to mirror. Remember that right now people need co-regulation, not self-regulation, this is a *we* process not an *I* process.
- Prioritize relationships. Social support and connection can buffer a stress response. During times of stress, it's important to find ways to connect and support each other.
- Explain the “why” behind decisions. Understanding why something is happening can give people a sense of control and decrease a stress response.

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- Help people around you know what to expect to the extent possible. In uncertain times, having any amount of certainty or predictability is helpful. We aren't suggesting that you provide answers that you don't have; however, sharing information when it's available will decrease stress.

- Reframe behaviors. It's important to remember that emotional regulation and impulse control are more difficult during times of stress. People may not be showing up as their best selves during this period of fear and chaos. We need to give everyone grace and realize that challenging behaviors reflect the stress we are under. We need to exercise patience and understanding. Give people the benefit of the doubt and assume that they are doing the best that they can. The following are some considerations related to the principles of TIC.



#### *Physical Safety*

A safe environment decreases the stress response and ensures that rational thinking, judgment, and attentional control can occur. It's important to address the safety concerns related to the physical space and the people using and providing services. During a health-related crisis, physical safety will be a priority. A trauma-informed response includes:

- Ensuring behavioral health providers, community members and other stakeholders feel they are being protected and that their physical safety is a priority as people initiate crisis response efforts.
- Communicating clearly to behavioral health providers, services users, and community partners about the crisis response efforts, eliminating any shaming or stigmatizing language.
- Soliciting input and feedback from all stakeholders – with the goal of understanding whether there is anything behavioral health organizations, staff, and other stakeholders can do to increase the sense of safety.
- Attending to unease from anyone you encounter.

#### *Emotional Safety*

It's important to minimize surprises and understand that our entire community is looking out for everyone's wellbeing. A trauma-informed response includes:

- Helping everyone around you understand what to expect.
- Demonstrating flexible consistency. Uncertainty is very stressful, so to the extent that can we can be consistent and predictable this will lower stress levels. Flexibility is needed during times

of rapidly changing conditions. For stressed individuals, rapid change may be unsettling, but we can find ways to demonstrate flexible consistency.

- Paying attention to nonverbal communication. A stressed brain will pay extra attention to nonverbal language including gestures, facial expressions, movements, and tone of voice. Be mindful of this form of communication.



- Building in time to check in about feelings. Facts are certainly needed, but emotions may be even more important. We all need to feel supported and safe to speak about vicarious trauma, work-related stress, stress-related to social determinants of health, and other emotional considerations during this crisis.

### *Peer Support and Relationships*

Positive attachment and bonding can suppress a stress response. Social support is key to an individual's ability to be resilient in the face of trauma and toxic stress. Build on existing ways to connect or create new ones. If you are working remotely, this will be especially important. If you are displaced or have lost social connections due to COVID-19 this is extremely important. A trauma-informed response includes:

- Supporting multiple ways for communicating, e.g., video conference, email, phone or text.
- Encouraging opportunities and methods for virtual face-to-face contact, e.g., zoom or facetime.
- Setting up and supporting regular peer check-ins to connect.

### *Trust & Transparency*

Being transparent fosters trust and creates a sense of value and belonging. To grow trust, a trauma-informed response includes:

- Communicating regularly. Clear, direct, and frequent communication will help put anxious people at ease. Stressed brains fill in missing information and what people hear may be different from what is said. Regular updates are important.
- Explaining "the why" behind decisions, policies, or practices. Even if the decision, policy or practice is met with resistance, people will feel less worried and stressed if they understand why decisions were made or policies enacted. This goes for children too.
- Being transparent with changes. Make decisions, policies, and practices available to see and communicate out when changes are made, e.g. "starting tomorrow we are going to have staff working remotely for two weeks."

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- Conveying strength and sensitivity. During a time of crisis, people look for strength and leadership. This creates trust. However, it's also important to convey compassion and sensitivity. People need to feel they are cared for, and when they do, this builds trust too.



#### *Voice, Choice, and Empowerment*

This public health emergency will result in a loss of control and power for people. Providing information to and soliciting input from those around you is empowering. A trauma-informed response will include:

- Sharing power. For example, what decisions can people make without approval?
- Providing choices whenever possible.
- Providing behavioral health staff with the information needed to explain the situation and policies to service users. Also, give tools and techniques to support one another and community members.
- Listening to other peoples ideas and input about being trauma-informed during this crisis. For example, “Have you noticed something that demonstrated trauma-informed care?” “Have you noticed a moment that could have used a TIC approach? Where did you see compassion today? Who did something nice for you?”

#### *Cultural Responsivity*

This crisis will affect groups of individuals differently based on multiple factors, e.g., history, access to services, racism, and systemic oppression. It's important to think about the communities that will be affected by decisions, policy, and practice changes. A trauma-informed response includes:

- Recognizing and building upon the cultural strengths of the populations you are a part of or serve.
- Ensuring intended and unintended consequences of policy and practice decisions do not create harm for the populations you are a part of or you serve.
- Being mindful of historical contexts for the populations you are a part of or serve, especially related to public health efforts.
- Using strategies that encourage engagement and minimize mistrust.



### *Collaboration*

This public health emergency is requiring organizations and communities to think differently about how they engage one another, conduct their work, and provide services. Given the tremendous need and the huge numbers of people affected, it will be necessary to merge, expand, or

collaborate across communities and organizations. We can't do this in isolation. A trauma-informed response includes:

- Making decisions with other systems in mind. Collaborating with other systems will ensure policy and practice decisions do not create barriers to service delivery in any other sector.
- Working together to create policies that promote shared delivery of services and working to eliminate policies where shared delivery is hindered.
- Initiating new partnerships and non-traditional collaborations.
- Collaborating within communities and organizations, across departments, teams, or sites to ensure greater effectiveness and efficiency.