



# Guide for Bereaved People *During a Pandemic*

This guide was prepared by Formations Monbourquette sur le deuil.

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## Introduction

Right from the start, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the holding of funeral rituals. Out of concern for limiting the negative impacts of the partial holding, postponement or absence of funeral rituals on bereaved people's process, the Formations Monbourquette sur le deuil team began to think, read and consult with other professionals in the field about this issue.

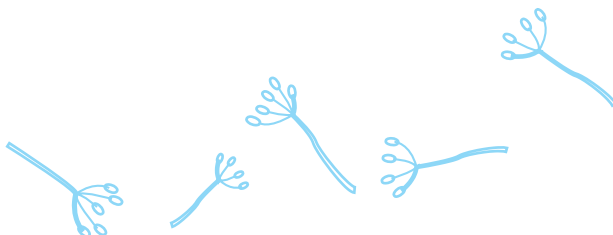
Two initiatives emerged from that reflecting:

- Identify **remote support resources for bereaved people** who need support during this period that is already hard due to the lock-down;
- Prepare **a guide for bereaved people during a pandemic** in order to provide a range of suggestions that are safe (in keeping with the Public Health guidelines), creative and tailored to the needs of people who are grieving during the lock-down period.

The objective of this guide is to reduce the negative impacts of the pandemic on bereaved people, and to support their resilience. It does not claim to provide all the answers. It is simply meant as a reference and reflection tool providing options for bereaved people, their friends and family, as well as their support workers.

### Formations Monbourquette sur le deuil

provides professional and personal development activities to various workers who have a role to play with bereaved people in Quebec and to members of civil society. Those activities and training are based on Jean Monbourquette's approach and teaching, on academic expertise, and on the professional knowledge from the areas of practice.





## The grieving process

Grieving is considered by many to be an adjustment process following the death of a loved one. The attachment bond is central to the mourning process because that loss is deeply linked to the role that the deceased played in the bereaved person's life. Although there are milestones marking out the bereavement path, each person's bereavement is unique.

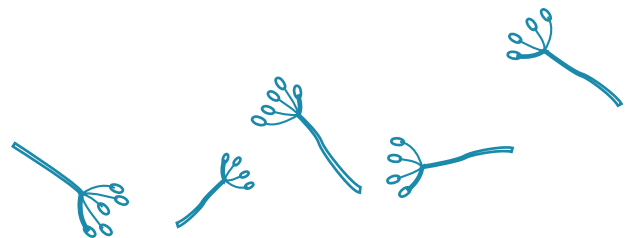
Grief affects a person on a number of levels: emotionally, relationally, spiritually, day-to-day organization, etc. The grieving person must cope with the absence of the deceased and gradually reclaim what the deceased meant to them. More broadly, the death also affects the groups to which the deceased belonged: his/her family, friends, colleagues and community.

Grieving is a normal transition in life, and human beings usually have the inner resources needed for coping with the ordeal. However, the intensity and duration of the grieving can vary depending on various factors, such as preparation for the death, circumstances of the death, type of relationship with the deceased, personal characteristics of the bereaved person, the support network and ritual support.

### *Grieving, a healing journey*

[Translation] "Grief is a healthy response and a state of suffering and sadness following the loss of a loved one (...). But the human soul knows how to lose and recover during its losses. Grieving can be likened to a psychological and spiritual scarring over and healing process."

- Jean Monbourquette, *Excusez-moi, je suis en deuil*, pg. 28.





## The stages of grief

When the death is announced, the grieving begins with a state of shock and denial, where the grieving person often has the impression that his/her world is crumbling. Then comes a disorganization phase, where the bereaved person loses his or her usual bearings. The more opportunities that bereaved people have for expressing what they are experiencing, the more progress they can make towards a reorganization phase.

Jean Monbourquette<sup>1</sup>, a pioneer in the field of bereavement in Quebec, identified eight stages that can serve as identifiers in this process:

- shock;
- denial;
- expressing emotions and feelings;
- completing the tasks related to grieving;
- discovering the meaning of the loss;
- forgiveness;
- letting go claiming;
- legacy.

These stages, which must be understood in a dynamic (not linear) sense, make it possible to slowly become detached from the deceased in his/her physical form and succeed in internalizing the relationship with him/her. The love experienced remains forever.

Bereavement can take a number of years. When it ends, the bereaved person can again talk or hear about the deceased without being emotionally destabilized. He/she has regained his/her physical and mental energy, regained a taste for living and making new emotional connections, resumed his/her personal, professional and social activities (or created new ones), feels at peace with the loved one's death, and has internalized the relationship with the deceased.



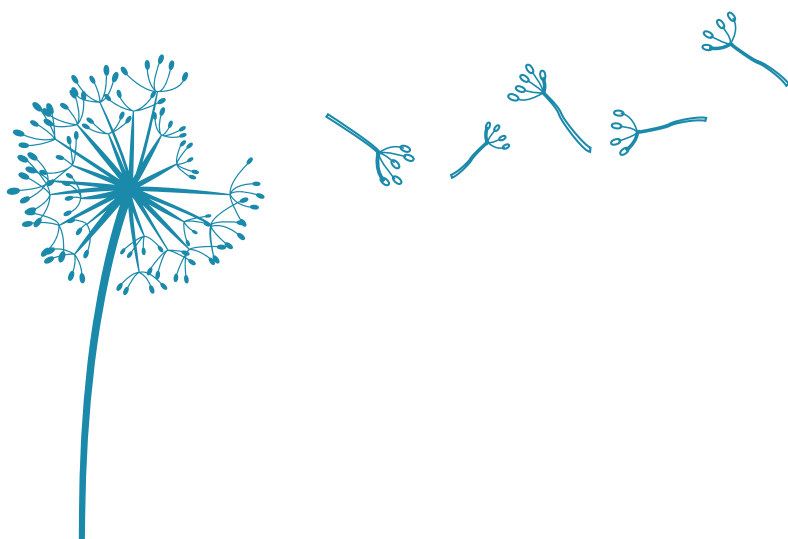
<sup>1</sup> Jean Monbourquette, O.M.I., Ph.D., (1933-2011), priest, psychologist, author and internationally renowned lecturer.

## The importance of funeral rituals

Funeral rituals have important functions in the grieving process. Their role is to mark a person's death, honour his/her memory, bring the family and community together around that event, give a feeling of passing to that death, and support the relatives that are starting their bereavement. When these rituals cannot be carried out, their absence affects the ensuing grieving process, for individuals and families as well as for communities.

### *Funeral rituals ease the suffering*

In our western societies, death and grieving are very often taboo subjects. It can be tempting for people to forego the funeral rituals with the thought that they are dispensing with the suffering or the grieving process. However, the funeral rituals do not create suffering. On the contrary, they give it a place and support the families in the mourning process that begins with the death of the loved one.





## End of life: preparing for the death of a loved one

When the end of a loved one's life is approaching, his/her relatives usually feel the need to be at his/her bedside. In a pandemic context, unfortunately, that may not be possible. Yet there are other ways to connect with the person at the end of life, inside oneself, by finding a way to symbolize the bond through the heart.

### Objectives in preparing for the death of a loved one

- To say goodbye to him/her;
- To express one's gratitude or love to him/her;
- To ask for forgiveness or grant forgiveness;
- To support that person in his/her transition towards death;
- To tell him/her about one's confidence in his/her ability to get through this major time, even alone;
- To let him/her go.

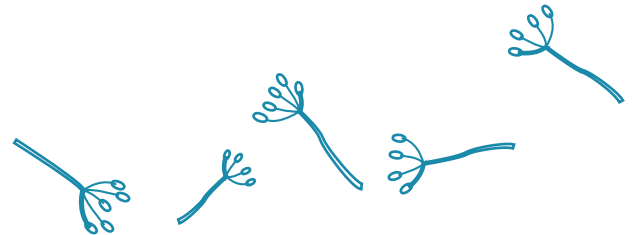
### ► Concrete ways of adjusting based on the context

#### *Towards the person at the end of his/her life*

- Communicate with the person at the end of life by phone or other means of communication;
- Ask the care providers to arrange a video meeting;
- Compose a song or choose a song that is comforting for him/her and have him/her listen to it remotely;
- Write a short letter to the person at the end of life.

#### *For yourself, in connection with him/her*

- Listen to his/her favourite music or other music that connects you to him/her;
- Go out into nature to communicate differently;
- Pray or meditate for the person who is going to pass;
- Express your feelings to other relatives, and vice versa.



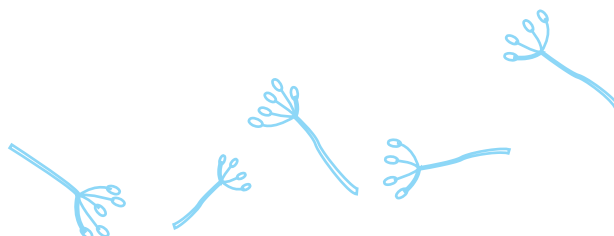


### *Express your message as soon as possible*

Even during a “non-pandemic” period, it is desirable to express one’s message as soon as possible and avoid waiting for the last moment, when the person at the end of life may be unconscious. This aspect is especially important during a pandemic, when the person will probably die alone or in the presence of a healthcare provider.

### *Deal with the limitations*

The lock-down forces relatives and the person at the end of life to make painful sacrifices. It is no longer possible to experience that time in the way it was desired or imagined. To reduce the level of suffering, it is important to loosen one’s expectations about what should have happened or what one would have liked. Stay in contact with your need or intention and come up with another way to connect with the loved one.







## Starting one's grieving differently

Since time immemorial, humans have developed funeral rituals for marking the death of one of their own. In a pandemic, however, funeral rituals have to be adjusted to the Public Health directives and must also comply with the *Funeral Operations Act* Regulations.

Even so, it is possible to begin the grieving process by finding other ways to mark the death, even if the conventional funeral rituals are postponed.

For a ritual act to be helpful, it must have meaning. And for that meaning to unfold, it is necessary to experience it with others, even if the ritual is very simplistic. It is also important to draw from the wealth of history and traditions for giving shape to that meaning: religions, music, poetry, diverse reflections, and acts of sharing.

Connect to the life that you lived with the deceased and with what was important to him/her, and see what arises for you.

### Proven benefits of the funeral rituals

- To help with realizing the loss of the deceased;
- To express emotions and feelings regarding the deceased;
- To honour his/her memory by bringing up traces of his/her existence and by marking his/her legacy through the sharing of memories;
- To refer to a system of values or beliefs specific to the deceased and possibly shared by the others;
- To receive support from extended family, friends, the community, and be able to exchange expressions of affection;
- To officially say goodbye by disposing of the deceased's body;
- To take the time to give meaning to the life-death-life passage: in addition to contributing to the grieving process, funeral rituals also enable everyone to deal with human finiteness.

► **Concrete means or symbolic acts to be adapted to the context**

There may be several moments of rituals, even in minimalist forms.

**First ritual moment** – *Several hours or days after the death*

With the funeral home staff, arrange an initial goodbye in the presence of the deceased's body<sup>2</sup>, just for the close family, in keeping with the rules of physical distancing, even quarantine isolation.

- If the body is not embalmed, the maximum time for this initial goodbye moment is 48 hours. If the body is embalmed, the maximum time is 30 days with an open casket and 60 days with a closed casket.
- Take a photo (which can be blurred depending on sensitivities) or make a short video for family or friends who are unable to attend.
- Some funeral homes also offer a broadcast service on their website<sup>3</sup> for the viewing and for the funeral, if the latter option is chosen.



*Rituals in the event of COVID-19-related deaths*

If COVID-19 is the cause of death, it is unfortunately impossible at this time to arrange a private moment for seeing the deceased one last time. For those families, it is strongly suggested that they mark the passing of their loved one in other ways (see the second and third ritual moments below).

<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing this guide, it was still possible to do so. However, the Public Health directives may have changed since then.

<sup>3</sup> Broadcasting is available in real time and after the event.

**Second ritual moment** – *Several days or weeks after the death, in the presence of the urn if possible*

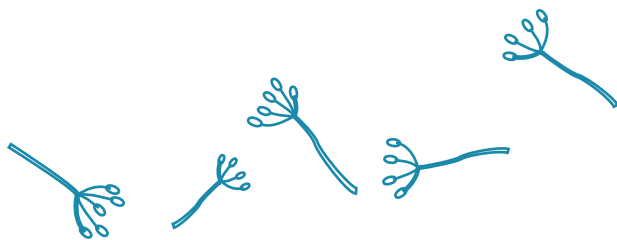
Arrange a virtual group to enable family and friends to gather, while observing physical distancing. Even if the participants meet virtually, it is still possible to maintain the basic principles of the rite, namely:

- Attesting to the reality of both the loss and the past existence of the deceased<sup>4</sup>, for example by gathering two or three items associated with the person who has passed;
- Making room for the expressing of each person's emotions;
- Reflecting together on human destiny, through the use of meaningful texts, silences, music, or other meaningful aspects.

**This second moment is important for “real-time” acceptance of the emotions and upheavals associated with a dual hardship: the collective hardship of the multiple deaths caused by the pandemic and the hardship of losing a loved one.**

*Why delay the funeral rituals?*

In a pandemic context, people are wrapped up in the health crisis. By delaying the arranging of the funeral rituals, you will be able to experience those sacred moments in a better frame of mind, with the entire community. Postponing the funeral rituals helps ensure that the people who died during this period aren't forgotten about and enables the bereaved people to receive the attention and social support they need. A ritual activity can also take a simple form.



<sup>4</sup> If needed, the virtual group can use the digital platform offered free of charge by the company Fragment at [fragment.life/en](https://fragment.life/en). This tool can be used to gather memories of the deceased person in one place.

### **Third ritual moment** – *Funeral rituals after the lock-down*

Due to the pandemic, the official funeral rituals will have been postponed. Once the lock-down is over, they can then be held with extended family, friends and the community in attendance. On this occasion, you can repeat or deepen the same acts that were done during the first and second moments.

In these exceptional circumstances, what the participants say and hear enables them to reorganize the emotions brought on by doing without the familiar social rite. It strengthens each person's capacity to face these unusually difficult times and strengthens the bonds among the living. The ritual, experienced collectively, then takes on its full meaning because the death of a human being is part of the history of an individual, a family, a community, and society as a whole.

#### ► **Concrete means or symbolic acts to be adapted to the context**

- Arrange funeral rituals with the support of a funeral home or a ritual practitioner;<sup>5</sup>
- In addition to the contribution from some participants, use photos or videos made during the first goodbye in the presence of the deceased's body;
- Incorporate a period for condolences, a secular or religious celebration, and a reception, if desired;
- Incorporate songs and tributes written by family or friends;
- Gather words of love written to the deceased after his/her death, and place them in the grave during the lowering.

<sup>5</sup> If needed, you can find a list of ritual practitioners on the Ho Rites de passage site at [horites.com](http://horites.com).



## Private ritual acts – *Beneficial at any time*

Private ritual acts are beneficial at any time and help in the grieving process.

- At home, place a photo of the deceased in a chosen spot, light a candle, or burn incense;
- Compose a song in honour of the deceased;
- Write a letter to the deceased;
- Listen to his/her favourite music, which the two of you shared or that comforts you (even if it makes you cry);
- Go out into nature, breathe deeply and peacefully, and observe the life-death-life cycle;
- Pray or meditate for the deceased



### *Rituals, precious moments in grieving*

During funeral rituals, [translation] “relatives and friends have a unique opportunity to progress in their grieving by speaking to the deceased. They have the opportunity to express their forgiveness, to complete unfinished discussions, to pray for the repose of the soul, to say goodbye, etc. Relatives receive the expressions of sympathy and are comforted by them. It is a valuable moment of socialization and reconciliation...”

- Jean Monbourquette, *Excusez-moi, je suis en deuil*, pg. 140.



## The physical and psychological manifestations of grief

In the first few months of bereavement, it is normal to see manifestations on various levels:

- **physical:** fatigue, knot in one's stomach, tightness in the throat or chest, hypersensitivity to noise, difficulty breathing, muscle weakness, lack of energy, etc.
- **cognitive:** confusion, denial of reality, memory loss, difficulty concentrating, preoccupation or obsessive thoughts, etc.
- **emotional:** shock, sadness, guilt, anger, anxiety, loneliness, powerlessness, relief, numbness, etc.
- **behavioural:** difficulty sleeping, change in appetite, distraction, isolation, dreams of the deceased, search for the deceased, agitation, crying, etc.

**If you are concerned about yourself or someone close to you, consult a health professional who is able to remotely assess the situation with you.**



## *Grieving and children*

Remember that children are part of the family. It's important to explain to them what is happening and to involve them in funeral rituals and throughout the grieving process<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> If needed, go to the website of Deuil-Jeunesse ([deuil-jeunesse.com](https://deuil-jeunesse.com)) or of La Maison des petits tournesols ([lamaisondespetitstournesols.com](https://lamaisondespetitstournesols.com)).



## For people who are not grieving

- Enjoy daily life with your loved ones.
- Take care of the most vulnerable people in your entourage.
- Get used to the daily griefs and the life-death-life cycle, which prepare for future grieving.
- Think about the meaning and importance of funeral rituals, and broach the discussion with your family or friends.
- Consider making a will and a protection mandate if not already done.
- If grief from the past resurfaces, accept it with kindness and give yourself the means of expressing what needs to be released. Consult a professional resource if required.





## Resources

- Tel-Écoute/Tel-Aînés help line (french):  
1888 LE DEUIL (1 888 533-3845)
- List of remote support resources for bereaved people:  
[fas.umontreal.ca/deuil](https://fas.umontreal.ca/deuil)
- Fragment: [fragment.life/en](https://fragment.life/en)
- Ho Rites de passage: [horites.com](https://horites.com)
- For children and their family:
  - Deuil-Jeunesse : [deuil-jeunesse.com](https://deuil-jeunesse.com)
  - La Maison des petits tournesols:  
[lamaisondespetitstournesols.com](https://lamaisondespetitstournesols.com)
- Corporation des thanatologues du Québec:  
[domainefuneraire.com](https://domainefuneraire.com)
- Fédération des coopératives funéraires du Québec: [fcfq.coop](https://fcfq.coop)

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