

# Coping with Grief and Loss - Facing the Changes Brought by COVID-19



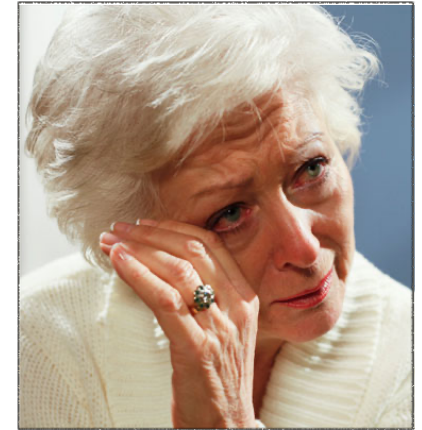
*Cat Selman, BS*  
*Faculty*

Copyright 2021 - The Cat Selman Company. All rights reserved.

## Grieving During a Pandemic

✧ Acknowledge that we are in a different time. Doing so helps to manage our expectations of ourselves and others.

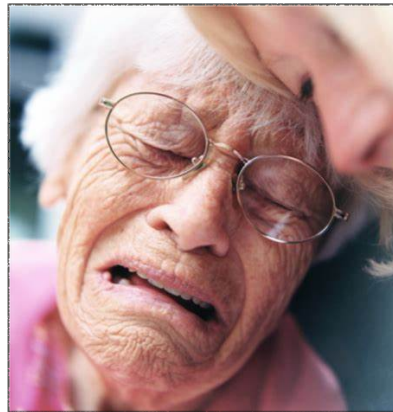
- Living in a pandemic has changed so much of how our society functions, including our day-to-day lives, how we care for the sick, how we care for the dying and how we care for the bereaved.
- Our sense of control has been challenged at all levels.
- Routines and rituals that normally bring comfort aren't readily accessible, which can increase feelings of isolation and loss.



## Grieving During a Pandemic

✧ Understand the nature of grief.

- When a loved one dies, grief is characterized by deep sadness and a yearning to be with the person who died.
- Grief is also a normal reaction following other types of losses, such as being diagnosed with a serious illness or losing one's job.
- Grief typically follows a wave-like pattern, which tends to ease over time as people adapt to their changed circumstances and regain a sense of control in their lives.
- Grief is unique - there is no 'right' or one way to grieve.



## The Stages of Grief

### 1. Denial

- The first stage in this theory, denial helps us minimize the overwhelming pain of loss. As we process the reality of our loss, we are also trying to survive emotional pain.
- It can be hard to believe we have lost an important person in our lives, especially when we may have just spoken with this person the previous week or even the previous day.



# The Stages of Grief

## 1. Denial

- \* Our reality has shifted completely in this moment of loss.
- \* It can take our minds some time to adjust to this new reality.
- \* We are reflecting on the experiences we have shared with the person we lost, and we might find ourselves wondering how to move forward in life without this person.



# The Stages of Grief

## 1. Denial

- \* This is a lot of information to explore and a lot of painful imagery to process.
- \* Denial attempts to slow this process down and take us through it one step at a time, rather than risk the potential of feeling overwhelmed by our emotions.
- \* Denial is not only an attempt to pretend that the loss does not exist. We are also trying to absorb and understand what is happening.



# The Stages of Grief

## 2. Anger

- \* It is common to experience anger after the loss of a loved one.
- \* We are trying to adjust to a new reality and we are likely experiencing extreme emotional discomfort.
- \* There is so much to process that anger may feel like it allows us an emotional outlet.



# The Stages of Grief

## 2. Anger

- \* Unfortunately, anger tends to be the first thing we feel when we start to release emotions related to loss.
- \* This can leave you feeling isolated in your experience and perceived as unapproachable by others in moments when we could benefit from comfort, connection, and reassurance.



# The Stages of Grief

## 3. Bargaining

- \* When coping with loss, it isn't unusual to feel so desperate that you are willing to do almost anything to alleviate or minimize the pain.
- \* Losing a loved one can cause us to consider any way we can avoid the current pain or the pain we are anticipating from loss.
- \* There are many ways we may try to bargain.



# The Stages of Grief

## 3. Bargaining

- \* Bargaining can come in a variety of promises including:
  - ✓ "God, if you can heal this person I will turn my life around."
  - ✓ "I promise to be better if you will let this person live."
  - ✓ "I'll never get angry again if you can stop him/her from dying or leaving me."



# The Stages of Grief

## 3. Bargaining

- \* When bargaining starts to take place, we are often directing our requests to a higher power, or something bigger than we are that may be able to influence a different outcome.
- \* There is an acute awareness of our humanness in these moments when we realize there is nothing we can do to influence change or a better end result.



# The Stages of Grief

## 3. Bargaining

- \* This feeling of helplessness can cause us to react in protest by bargaining, which gives us a perceived sense of control over something that feels so out of control.
- \* While bargaining we also tend to focus on our personal faults or regrets.
- \* We might look back at our interactions with the person we are losing and note all of the times we felt disconnected or may have caused them pain.



# The Stages of Grief

## 3. Bargaining

- \* It is common to recall times when we may have said things we did not mean, and wish we could go back and behave differently.
- \* We also tend to make the drastic assumption that if things had played out differently, we would not be in such an emotionally painful place in our lives.



# The Stages of Grief

## 4. Depression

- \* During our experience of processing grief, there comes a time when our imaginations calm down and we slowly start to look at the reality of our present situation.
- \* Bargaining no longer feels like an option and we are faced with what is happening.



# The Stages of Grief

## 4. Depression

- \* We start to feel the loss of our loved one more abundantly.
- \* As our panic begins to subside, the emotional fog begins to clear and the loss feels more present and unavoidable.



# The Stages of Grief

## 4. Depression

- \* In those moments, we tend to pull inward as the sadness grows.
- \* We might find ourselves retreating, being less sociable, and reaching out less to others about what we are going through.
- \* Although this is a very natural stage of grief, dealing with depression after the loss of a loved one can be extremely isolating.



# The Stages of Grief

## 5. Acceptance

- \* When we come to a place of acceptance, it is not that we no longer feel the pain of loss.
- \* However, we are no longer resisting the reality of our situation, and we are not struggling to make it something different.



# The Stages of Grief

## 5. Acceptance

- \* Sadness and regret can still be present in this phase, but the emotional survival tactics of denial, bargaining, and anger are less likely to be present.



## Common Reactions to Grief

- ❖ Profound sadness, loneliness, emptiness
- \* Crying over seemingly nothing
- \* Despair about unrealized dreams



## Common Reactions to Grief

- ❖ Fear about getting sick (yourself or loved ones)
- ❖ Anger that the death occurred, that your loved one “abandoned” you, at healthcare institution/practitioner, at a deity or faith institution
- ❖ Short temper, irritability, or annoyance at others





## Common Reactions to Grief

- ❖ Guilt (e.g., feeling responsible for the death or suffering, regretting things that did/did not happen in the relationship, feeling guilty you survived)
- ❖ Insomnia or excessive sleeping

## Common Reactions to Grief

- ❖ Change in eating behaviors (eating less or more)
- ❖ Difficulty being with others
- ❖ Difficulty concentrating and retaining information; forgetfulness
- ❖ Re-living or re-experiencing prior losses

## Common Reactions to Grief

- ❖ In times of crisis, however, key factors and reactions can intensify your grief and hinder your ability to heal and recover from it. These include:
  - \* **Heightened anxiety**, linked to uncertainty about the future, the loss of familiar routines, and concerns about your own or your loved ones' health/well being

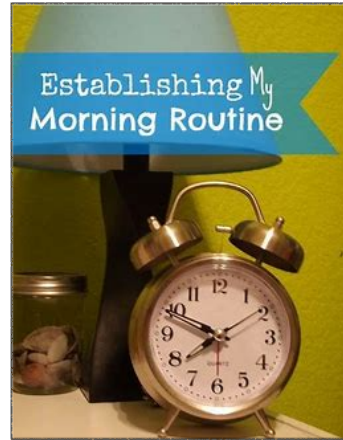


## Common Reactions to Grief

- ❖ **Heightened sense of loss**, linked to the death of a loved one or pandemic-related losses that leave you feeling overwhelmed, wondering how to put life's pieces back together
- ❖ **Increased isolation and intensified grief**, whether from stay-at-home orders or social distancing measures that have compromised the critical, valuable support provided by funerals, memorials, and religious services

# Create a Daily Routine

- ❖ When grief is new as it provides a structure to your day. Routine is even more important during a pandemic. When someone you love dies, it is common to experience a range of emotions. These emotions may include sadness, anxiety, loneliness, regret, anger and guilt. You might find that some of these emotions are even more intense right now.
- \* Try to get out of bed at the same time each day.
- \* Try to eat at regular meal times.



# Create a Daily Routine

- \* Plan your day in "chunks" of time for meals, exercise, tasks related to your loved one's estate or death, work and connecting online with family and friends.
- \* Write a daily to-do list and check off items as you complete them, such as attending to administrative tasks or sorting through your loved one's belongings.
- \* Carve out time to grieve. Being sad is normal when you are grieving, and it's important to give yourself permission to be sad and to acknowledge the other emotions you might be feeling.



# Focus on Your Self-Care

- ❖ This is something grief experts always recommend because of how stressful grieving can be.
- \* Practice increased hygiene, especially hand-washing with soap.
- \* Try to eat even if you don't feel like it.
- \* Where possible, avoid processed foods.
- \* Limit your alcohol intake.



# Focus on Your Self-Care

- ❖ Exercise as part of your daily routine.
- ❖ Consider an online exercise or yoga class.
- ❖ Try an online meditation app.
- ❖ Keep a journal of your thoughts and feelings and list any questions you have.
- ❖ Limit your media exposure at this time.
- ❖ Please seek medical advice if you think you may have COVID-19 or have been exposed and are at risk.



## Check Your Thinking

- ❖ This is important because how we think affects how we feel and what we do.
- In very stressful situations where we don't have a lot of control, our thinking can often make us feel more distressed and upset.
- If you're aware that you're feeling increasingly strong emotions related to your loved one's death, such as guilt, anger or distress, ask yourself: *What am I thinking?* or *What am I telling myself about what happened?*

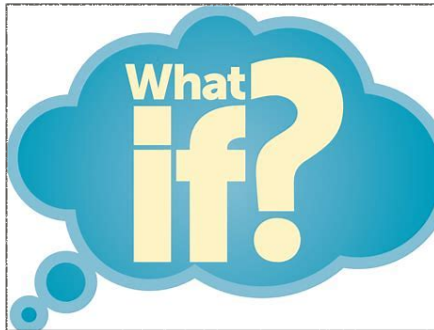


## Check Your Thinking

- ❖ It can be easy to blame ourselves even when there is no evidence for doing so.
- ❖ To check your thinking, ask yourself: How would I advise a friend in the same situation? or What would my loved one say if they were here now?
- ❖ It often helps to write down your thoughts and your answers to the questions above and try to stick to the facts.
- ❖ It can be helpful to remind ourselves and others: We are in a pandemic that has caught the entire world by surprise. Difficult decisions had to be made for the health of our society as a whole, which were beyond the control of any individual.

## Check Your Thinking

- ❖ Be careful with “what if” thoughts. Manage your worst-case scenario thinking.
- ❖ Stay in the present. Take one day at a time.
- ❖ Utilize spiritual faith resources.
- ❖ Engage in personal self-care activities that bring joy (e.g., phone/virtual communication with friends and family, reading, listening to podcasts, watching comedy).



## Reach Out For Support

- ❖ Staying connected to your family and friends is especially important.
- Keep in touch daily using technology with your family and friends even if you don't feel like it.
- Call your doctor's office and schedule a virtual visit.





## Check Your Thinking

- ❖ Arrange a call with someone from your spiritual or religious group.
- ❖ Consider joining an online support group.
- ❖ Make a virtual appointment with a grief counselor, especially if you feel overwhelmed or have little support.
- ❖ Call a national hotline.



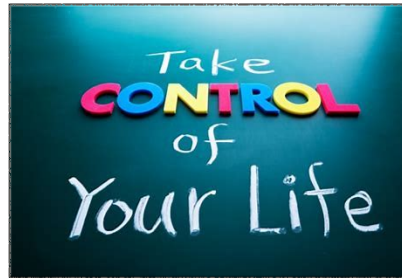
## Adapt Rituals

- ❖ You can still honor your loved one in different ways during this time.
  - Plan a "virtual celebration of life" where friends and family members can come together, to share pictures and reminisce.
  - Consider writing your loved one a letter or leaving them a voicemail. You can tell them how you feel, especially if you were unable to say a proper goodbye.
  - Make a playlist of their favorite music and share it with others in their memory.



## Plan for Post-COVID-19

- ❖ Making plans helps us feel more in control.
  - Make a 'to-do' list of tasks that you will need to complete when the restrictions ease.
  - Plan a memorial event or service for your loved one if you weren't able to during the pandemic.
  - Consider attending a support group for bereaved families who were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.
  - If you have unanswered questions for your loved one's medical team, you might want to write them down and consider contacting the team at a later date to arrange a meeting.



## Grief in the Nursing Home



- ❖ First, know that you are not alone!
- ❖ Daily, you have put your own health at risk and returned to stressful working conditions in nursing homes.
- ❖ You have faced scenarios unlike nearly anything in modern healthcare history. Despite your best intentions and efforts, many of your residents, and even your coworkers have died.

# Grief in the Nursing Home

- ❖ Perhaps you've stood as a surrogate or substitute family member at a patient's or resident's deathbed.
- ❖ Maybe you now question your abilities and skills as a healthcare professional.
- ❖ You might be worried, anxious, and exhausted.
- ❖ Like the rest of the country, you are likely fearful or unsettled about what the future holds.

# Grief in the Nursing Home

- ❖ Look for Common Behaviors and Symptoms of Grief, Stress, and Anxiety
  - \* If you're a healthcare worker in any role, look for symptoms, emotions, and behaviors that indicate the time is right to initiate self-care, talk to someone, or reach out for help.

## Physical Reactions

- ❖ Tightness in the chest or a sensation of not being able to breathe
- ❖ Muscle tension, aches, pains
- ❖ Headaches
- ❖ Restlessness, inability to relax, difficulty sleeping
- ❖ Heart palpitations
- ❖ Digestive issues



## Emotional/Behavioral Reactions

- ❖ Anxiety, worry, and fear about getting sick/infected or infecting others
- ❖ Anger and frustration (at the virus, sheltering in place, disconnection with loved ones/routines, unemployment, loss of income, etc.)
- ❖ Sadness or crying more than usual



# Emotional/Behavioral Reactions

- ❖ Insomnia, strange dreams
- ❖ Exhaustion
- ❖ Change in eating behaviors (eating more or less)
- ❖ Trouble staying focused
- ❖ Aggravation of pre-existing medical or psychological conditions



# Ways of Support

- ❖ Take time—even if only a few minutes a day—to care for yourself.
  - \* Stay updated about the pandemic from trusted sources and in increments that do not add to your anxiety or distress.
  - \* Identify and share COVID-19 facts so you understand actual risks to yourself and the people you care about.
  - \* Talk to others to decrease your isolation/loneliness and to establish sources of support. Keep in touch with loved ones, family, and friends via phone, text, and virtual platforms.



# Ways of Support



- ❖ Remind yourself that you are resilient. Rely on coping strategies that have worked in the past to calm and address your concerns, including faith, positive self-talk, exercise, friends, support groups, hobbies, yoga, mindful meditation, good nutrition, etc.
- ❖ Stay in the present and take one day at a time.
- ❖ Avoid “what-if” thoughts, mental worst-case scenarios, alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs.

# Ways of Support



- ❖ Monitor yourself for symptoms of depression or extreme anxiety: prolonged sadness, difficulty sleeping or over-sleeping, intrusive thoughts or memories, hopelessness, inability to function.
- ❖ Talk to a peer or supervisor, or seek professional help if needed. Focus equally on solutions and frustrations.
- ❖ Give compliments and share successes and heartwarming stories. Every crisis has them!

## For you...

- ❖ Several COVID-19-related resources have emerged to help healthcare workers and others care for themselves or connect with others. Here are a few:
- \* **PeerRXMD**, [www.peerrxmed.com](http://www.peerrxmed.com) is a free, peer-to-peer (buddy system) program for physicians and healthcare workers that offers support, connection, encouragement, and skill-building resource.
- \* **Death over Dinner's Healthcare Edition**, <https://deathoverdinnerhealthcare.org>, enables healthcare professionals to share their feelings and experiences surrounding end-of-life care.

## For you...

- ❖ Several COVID-19-related resources have emerged to help healthcare workers and others care for themselves or connect with others. Here are a few:
- \* US Department of Health and Human Services offers a **Disaster Distress Helpline**, <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline>, to help anyone dealing with distress related to natural or human disasters.
- \* Reiki practitioner and author Sundar Kadayam offers two, free, 15-minute weekday **"Peace Practice"** sessions (7 am and 10 am Eastern) via Zoom to help attendees calm their minds, meditate, and embrace peace. <https://www.thepeacepractice.net/the-peace-practice>

## Grief and Loss in the Workplace

- ❖ Our staff are likely hearing about or directly experiencing the death of someone they know, including coworkers and loved ones, during the coronavirus disease COVID-19 outbreak.
- ❖ Coworkers can become a significant part of your life and these losses can impact you and everyone in the workplace.
- ❖ Recovery takes time and can be even more difficult with the realities of physical distancing policies.



## Grief and Loss in the Workplace

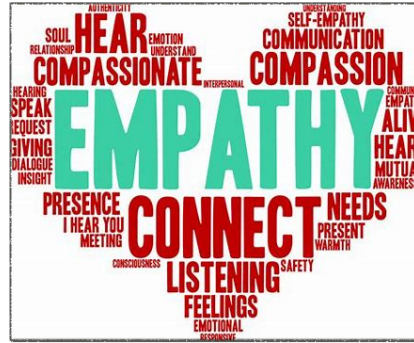
- ❖ Staff may not be able to experience and cope with grief in ways you would otherwise, such as physically spending time with colleagues, friends and family; visiting a place of worship; or attending a funeral in person.
- ❖ These changes can be traumatic and may impact grieving.
- ❖ You can support colleagues who have lost loved ones and cope with the loss of a coworker by gaining an understanding of grief, loss, and how to interact with coworkers after a death.



## What to say to a grieving coworker

❖ **Show empathy.** Simply stating that you are aware of their loss, how difficult this may be for them, and that you are there to support and help as needed, is often the most we can or need to do. You might also send a brief email or direct message such as:

- \* “Even as we maintain physical distancing, I’m here for you.”
- \* “If there is anything I can do to make your life easier, please let me know.”



## What to say to a grieving coworker

❖ **Acknowledge that grief is a process.** Grieving is a process.

- \* As one comes to terms with their loss, they can experience days when coping and grieving seem more challenging than others.
- \* Try to check in with them regularly.
- \* When you ask them “How are you today?” invite them to talk more freely, beyond just responding, “I’m fine.”

## What to say to a grieving coworker

❖ **Offer your support.**

- \* Offer your help and assistance in a way that will not add to any difficulties they might be experiencing by making them feel pressured to accept.
- \* You can say, “I will be here for the next four hours anyway, so if you feel like talking to someone, just call. I am available.”
- \* Or you can say, “Making funeral arrangements at a time like this can be extra hard. If you need help figuring things out, let me know.”



## What to say to a grieving coworker

❖ **Take your cues from the griever.**

- \* Depending on how close you are with them, they may or may not want to discuss their loss.
- \* Even if you are close, they may not be ready to share their grief.
- \* Just listen and be ready, if and when they want to talk, but never pressure them to share. You can say, “I’d love to hear more about your loved one whenever you are ready, but I also respect your privacy.”

## What **NOT** to say to a grieving coworker

❖ As part of healthy grieving, the grieving person needs to face the magnitude of their loss, so phrases aiming to minimize their loss, no matter how well-intended, will not help. Phrases to avoid when talking with a colleague who has just lost a loved one:

- “You’re going to be fine.”
- “You’re still young, so you can still have a great life.”
- “They are in a better place.”
- “Everything happens for a reason.”
- “Time heals everything.”
- “It’s God’s will.”



## Coping with a Death of a Coworker

- ❖ Depending on the nature of your relationship, you may or may not go through a grieving process following a coworker’s death.
- ❖ Grief is a natural and normal response to losing someone important to you.
- ❖ It is how we process and heal from an important loss.
- ❖ It can be a painful experience.
- ❖ Understanding the grieving experience and how best to cope with it can help you recover from grief of any kind.

## Coping with a Death of a Coworker

❖ As you grieve you can experience a variety of symptoms and reactions, which may include:

- Feeling empty, numb, angry or guilty
- Wondering if there is something that could or should have been done differently
- Trembling, nausea, exhaustion and weakness
- Experiencing nightmares
- Being distracted and behaving absentmindedly
- Struggling to return to usual activities



## Coping as a Team

### ❖ **Acknowledge the loss.**

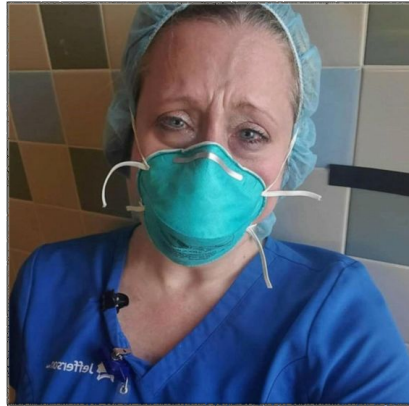
- Create the space and time for coworkers to talk about what has happened, rather than go on as if nothing has happened.
- It may be helpful to set aside time at virtual staff meetings to check in on how everyone is doing.
- Send an email to your team about the loss, the impact of this, and include resources for them like the ones listed in the section “Where to Get Help” on a later slide.



## Coping as a Team

### ❖ Acknowledge individual reactions.

- When a coworker dies, it can affect each person in the workplace in different ways.
- Some may be deeply affected by the loss, while others may not.
- Some people might want to talk about their feelings, while others might want to deal with them in private.
- Some may take much longer than others to adjust to the loss.
- Be aware of the different ways that people react to the loss and respect those differences.



## Coping as a Team

### ❖ Avoid rescuing or fixing.

- Remember, the person who is grieving does not need to be fixed.
- In an attempt to be helpful, we may offer uplifting, hopeful comments, or even humor, to try to ease their pain.
- Although the intention is good, this approach can leave people feeling as if their pain is not seen, heard, or valid.



## Coping as a Team

### ❖ Don't force it.

- We may want so badly to help and for the person to feel better, so we believe that nudging them to talk and process their emotions before they're truly ready will help them faster.
- This is not necessarily true, and it can actually be an obstacle to their healing.



## Coping as a Team

### ❖ Make yourself accessible.

- Offer space for people to grieve.
- This lets the person know we're available when they're ready.
- We can invite them to talk with us but remember to provide understanding and validation if they are not ready just yet.
- Remind them that you're there and not to hesitate to come to you.



## Coping as a Team

### ❖ Be kind to each other.

- This is not an easy time for the work unit and many adjustments may have to be made.
- People may not be at their best.
- Be patient, gentle and understanding with one another during this time.
- Find ways to cooperate and share any additional workload.
- Consciously perform acts of kindness toward your friends and colleagues and try to connect with them about topics other than COVID-19.



## Coping as a Team

### ❖ Practice self-care.

- Grief can be emotionally and physically exhausting.
- You may need to give yourself extra amounts of things that nourish and replenish you, such as rest, relaxation, exercise and diversions.
- Express your thoughts and feelings to trusted people, because that can be the most helpful.
- For some people, it helps to write things down.
- Remind and encourage colleagues to prioritize their self-care needs.



## Coping as a Team

### ❖ Give yourself and others time.

- In U.S. culture, there is a tendency to deny the effects of loss and expect ourselves and others to quickly "get over" a loss.
- Allow yourself and others the time they need to process the loss, and be aware that there is not a predicted amount of time this can take.



## Coping as a Team

### ❖ Funerals and memorial events.

- Provide information for everyone on arrangements that have been made and, when feasible, provide time to attend virtually for those who are interested, if available.
- However, check-in with the family before broadcasting this information – be mindful that each family is different and may choose not to publicize funeral or memorial event information.





## Coping as a Team

### ❖ **Honor the lost coworker.**

- \* Consider honoring the lost coworker in an appropriate way, such as collecting money for a charity, creating an online commemoration, or sending a letter to the deceased's loved ones.



## Coping as an Individual

- ❖ We may grieve as a team for our lost coworker, but we will each have to process their loss on a personal and individual level as well. This can be traumatic, especially if we knew them for many years and became close friends. Here are a few tips we can use to help us grieve:

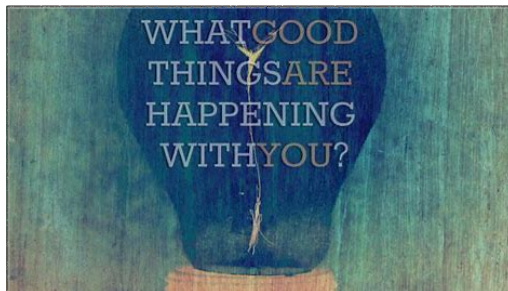
- \* **Accept your feelings.** Recover at your own pace and in your own way. Be patient with yourself.
- \* **Talk about your loss.** You may find this comforting and feel less alone. Connect with friends and family through phone, text and other digital platforms.



## Coping as an Individual

- ❖ Here are a few tips we can use to help us grieve:

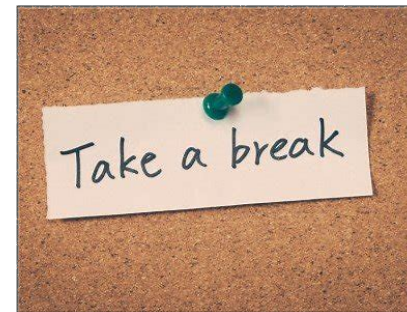
- \* **Take stock of what is going well.** Write down your strengths and bright moments from the day or share with others.
- \* **Limit your exposure to media coverage** related to COVID-19. Turn off the TV, shut down the computer, skip COVID-19 related social media posts, and put down the papers.



## Coping as an Individual

- ❖ Here are a few tips we can use to help us grieve:

- \* **Take a break.** Do something relaxing, energizing or an activity that will lift your spirits.
- \* **Be part of the community.** Community can offer you a network of support. Stay connected through digital platforms.
- \* **Ask for help if you feel overwhelmed.**



There is no right or  
wrong way to grieve.  
Everyone experiences  
grief differently and  
each loss is unique.

## **Contact Information**

**Cat Selman, BS**

**[www.catselman.com](http://www.catselman.com)**

**[thecatselman@gmail.com](mailto:thecatselman@gmail.com)**

**601.497.9837**

**Please like and follow...**



**@TheCatSelmanCompany**



**@catselman**



**thecatselman**



**The Cat Selman Company**