

Condolences in the Time of COVID-19

Guidance for Conveying Your Love and Support

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

When someone dies—of COVID-19 or any cause—during this pandemic, their loved ones are being left to grieve in especially harrowing circumstances. They may not have been able to be by the dying person's side in the hospital or long-term care facility. They may have been prevented from spending time with the body, which we know helps mourners say hello on the path to goodbye. And due to social distancing mandates, they have probably been unable to gather with friends and family to provide each other essential mutual support.

For these and other reasons, it's a terrible time for loss. It's a terrible time to be grieving.

If you would like to support a grieving person during this time, you might feel unsure about what to say or do. After all, many of the time-honored methods of demonstrating your care and concern—such as attending the funeral, or stopping by the family's home to offer an embrace and your presence—aren't options. Yet you can still be a light in this dark time. The five principles that follow will guide you.

1. Get in touch, and stay in touch.

To convey your love and support, video calls are the best substitute for face-to-face conversations. Voice calls come second. After that, emails, texting, and social media work too. And don't forget the power of the handwritten note! Depending on how close you are to the family, I recommend reaching out to the grieving person at least once a week in the coming months—and even more often than that in the beginning.

2. Be an exemplary listener.

On video calls or the phone, try to listen most of the time. When you do talk, validate what the grieving person has said to you. In their isolation, they still need their experience witnessed and affirmed. They still need to feel heard and understood. By actively and attentively listening, you will be giving them this gift.

3. Say what's on your heart.

Especially in challenging death circumstances, it can be difficult to know what to say to the grieving family. It's always OK to say, "I'm so sorry," "You've had to endure so much," and "My heart is breaking for you." Keep in mind that the word "condolence" comes from the Latin *condolens*, meaning "to suffer with another."

Be genuine, but please refrain from advice-giving, judging, and sharing your own loss stories and religious viewpoints unless you are asked. What I've learned from my work as a grief counselor and educator for more than forty years is that what you say is often less important than how you say it. As long as you are genuine and focused on the grieving person's experience and worldview, your empathy will come across.

4. Listen to and share memories.

In the early days after a death, grieving people are usually consumed by shock, attending to tasks related to the death, and integrating the reality of the circumstances of the death. But after some time has passed, they are often ready to start thinking about the life of the person who died. You can be someone who listens to the stories they want to tell and, if you have your own memories of the person who died, shares them with the grieving person. Remember that the love lives on, and the memories live on. You can support the grieving person by honoring this.

5. Consider the love languages.

In his landmark 1995 book *The Five Love Languages*, author Dr. Gary Chapman introduced us to the idea that human beings feel cared for by others in five primary ways:

- receiving gifts
- spending quality time together
- hearing words of affirmation
- being the beneficiary of acts of service
- experiencing physical touch

With the exception of physical touch, whose lack is indeed a great hardship right now, all of these remain ways you can support your grieving friend or family member in the weeks to come. For example, you can send a gift of flowers, food, or self-care items, such as books or a candle. You can still spend quality time together, online or on the phone. By mailing cards and sending texts, you can share words of affirmation. And you may be able carry out or arrange acts of service, such as dropping off a home-cooked meal, mowing the lawn, or running errands.

I hope you will use some of the ideas in this article to reach out to your grieving friend or family member—as well as healthcare workers, emergency services personnel, funeral home employees, and others you may know who are confronting overwhelming illness and death during the pandemic. Most of all, I hope you will keep in mind that it matters less what you specifically say or do and more that you simply make efforts to get and stay in touch. If you genuinely care and you find active ways to express your empathy, the grieving

person will feel your support, even from a distance. Remember that the death of someone loved is a shattering experience. Lead with your heart and be gentle, loving and compassionate in all of your helping efforts.

About the author

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., is an author, educator, and grief counselor. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty of the University of Colorado Medical School's Department of Family Medicine. Dr. Wolfelt has written many bestselling books on coping with grief, including *Grief One Day at a Time* and *First Aid for Broken Hearts*. Visit www.centerforloss.com to learn more about grief and loss.