

Funeral Directors, We Need You!

The Five Pillars of Basic Self-Care During the Coronavirus Pandemic

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

I've been privileged to work with funeral directors for more than forty years. I know and respect many of you as colleagues, and I count some of you among my closest friends.

Funeral directors are good people. You're "people people." You're good at helping others, and your empathy skills tend to be well above average. As is typical for caregivers, many of you aren't so good at taking care of yourselves, however. This puts you at risk of burnout and mental and physical health issues during normal times.

But now that's were in abnormal times, your risks are even greater. This pandemic is imperiling our world and our communities in unprecedented ways. Even if your funeral home isn't located in one of North America's "hot spots" (and especially if it is), you are likely busier than ever. At the same time, infectious-disease protocols may be making it much more difficult for you to do your job, stay safe, and support the grieving families who so desperately need your help. A lot is being asked of you.

Amidst the chaos, this article is a reminder that now more than ever, it's essential for you to prioritize good basic self-care. Whenever stress rises, self-care tends to fall. I suspect this imbalance is getting severe for some of you right now, and I'm concerned about your emotional and physical health in the coming weeks. But you can choose to safeguard your health as much as possible during this exceptionally stressful time by taking care of your basic needs. You deserve it, your families deserve, and even the grieving in your care deserve it.

Here are what I consider the five essential pillars of self-care when everything else goes to hell in a handbasket. Please note that I am not addressing the use of PPE, hygiene, and other protocols to prevent COVID-19 infection in this article because these measures are non-negotiable, and I know you are already doing everything you can to follow them scrupulously to protect yourself, your family, your colleagues, and the families you serve so admirably.

1. Get rest when possible.

I understand that for funeral directors, who must sometimes be available 24/7, getting good rest and sleep is challenging enough in the best of times. During this crisis, it may seem completely out of reach. Yet when stress goes up, your body's and mind's need for restorative rest goes up as well. As much as you can and whenever possible, please make rest a priority. If you don't, your mental and physical health will worsen, and your immune system will falter, putting you at even greater risk of disease. If you're battling insomnia

during those rare stretches in which you could be sleeping, please immediately make an appointment, in-person or telehealth, with your primary care provider. Now may seem like a time when sleep sacrifices have to be made, and that may be true. But also remember that now more than ever, you need as much rest and sleep as you can get.

2. Eat decent food, and drink enough water.

I know that it can be hard to eat well when we're busy and stressed, but I encourage you to cling to a few eating-plan rules that you know you'll be able to adhere to. For example, you might commit to eating at least two servings of fresh fruit and vegetables each day. No matter what else you eat, this alone will help ensure that you get enough fiber and vitamins to protect your health. And don't forget to drink enough water to stay well-hydrated. Dehydration can cause all kinds of unpleasant side effects, including fatigue and headaches.

3. Connect with loved ones.

No matter how busy you are right now, you need and deserve quality time with loved ones. So make those video or phone calls to friends and family, send those texts, and use any downtime you might have to relax alongside the people with whom you're sheltering in place. Mutual love and support will see you through.

4. Express yourself.

The more stressful your work life gets, the more critical it is to talk aloud about all the stresses. Sharing your internal thoughts and feelings outside yourself will help you navigate these traumatic times. Keeping everything inside, on the other hand, will likely pull you under. So open up regularly to the good listeners in your life, including other funeral directors. When something particularly challenging happens, find time to debrief about it as soon afterward as you can. If your funeral home is being inundated by deaths right now, or if you're feeling particularly stressed, I also encourage you to begin seeing a counselor, online or over the phone, right away. Even one counseling session per week can provide you with the lifeline of affirmation and support you need to be able to cope. Later on, after the crisis has abated somewhat, you and your team may also need additional traumatic grief counseling due to the unprecedentedly difficult situations you may be exposed to during the pandemic.

5. Turn to gratitude and grace.

Especially on days when you're feeling the most overwhelmed and in despair, turn to gratitude and grace. Remember everything you have to be grateful for. Intentionally place your awareness on the good people and happenings around you. Notice all the kindnesses and support. Have compassion for any mistakes or failings. Whenever you stop to take a moment to breathe, re-center yourself, and focus on gratitude, you invoke a self-fulfilling prophecy. That which you are grateful for multiplies. Months from now, you will be able to

look back at this period as a time of hardship, yes, but also an unparalleled season of empathy, heroism, and grace.

In addition to these five basic pillars, which are essential each and every day without fail, I encourage you to make room in your daily schedule whenever possible for something that gives you pleasure. Give yourself permission to spend at least a few minutes on something that brings you enjoyment and helps you decompress and relax.

You are a frontline worker of the utmost importance. Thank you so much for all the above-and-beyond work you are doing right now to care for the precious bodies of those who have died as well as the families brought to grief during such exceptionally difficult circumstances. They need you, and the world needs you. So please, for their sake as well as yours, make it a priority to care for your basic health as well as you can during the pandemic. And when we meet again, I look forward to speaking with you and hearing your pandemic stories of love and loss.

About the Author

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is an author, educator, and grief counselor. Recipient of the Association of Death Education and Counseling's Death Educator Award, he presents workshops to bereaved families, funeral home staffs and other caregivers, and teaches courses for bereavement caregivers at the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado, where he serves as director. He provides training to cemetarians and funeral directors on the "WHY" of both meaningful funerals and permanent placement. To contact Dr. Wolfelt, email him at drwolfelt@centerforloss.com or phone him at 970-217-7069. To explore additional resources related to meaningful funerals, go to his website at www.centerforloss.com