



When a Coworker Is Diagnosed With or Dies From COVID-19



Do you remember when you first heard or read about the death of a professional in your field from the current coronavirus pandemic? Perhaps it was an Italian nurse or physician. You may have felt a sense of alarm when a newscaster gave an ominous warning that this virus, new to our lexicons, was filling hospital beds across the globe; thousands—individuals and a shocking number of professionals caring for them—were sick and dying.

Your reality may be one or more of the following:

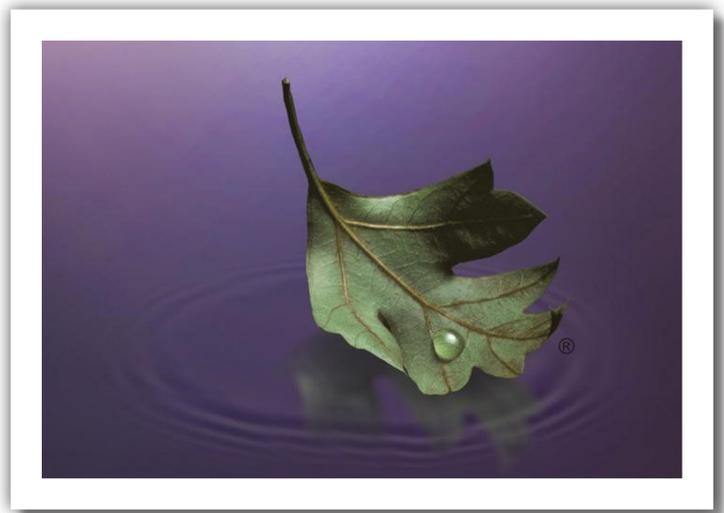
- You began experiencing unease before the virus made its way to your state, community, or hospital. You worry that soon you and your colleagues will be fighting the silent predator.
- You know the virus is in your area, and you wonder if you, your loved ones, and your coworkers will get sick.
- Professionals on the frontlines (i.e., healthcare professionals, emergency responders, and other essential workers) in your community or organization have been diagnosed with COVID-19.
- Somebody within one of your circles has died from the virus.

This resource is written primarily to help you take in the awful realization that a coworker, quite possibly a nurse, physician, paramedic, or respiratory therapist, may die or has died from COVID-19. Your response to this person's illness or death is partly dependent on the relationship you have with them. In this situation, uncertainty and fear of death are understandable responses. There is no way of knowing what is going to happen to an individual who contracts the disease. Because there is no vaccine, treatment, or cure, we all live in fear—fear for our lives, fear for our family and friends, and fear for those in our larger communities.

Relationship

When you think of the impact a severe illness or unexpected death may have on colleagues, a picture can be helpful. In this context, the image of the leaf and teardrop represents a coworker who has symptoms or dies. When the leaf touches the surface of the pond, it creates ripples—both close to and extending far from the initial point of contact with the water. In this way, we understand the far-reaching effects of this pandemic, from our closest communities to countries around the world.

The immediate ripple issuing from the leaf's contact with the water represents those coworkers closest to a colleague who is sick or has died. Perhaps they have worked side-by-side for 25 years and are friends outside of work; their families know each other. Even when the bond is based exclusively on professional encounters, these colleagues have formed a deep and lasting relationship. They have come together countless times saving lives, caring for families whose babies died, or riding as partners in an ambulance. In any case, the devastation is tremendous, because this very close relationship may be, or has been, suddenly taken by something completely unknown. The news of a coworker's illness brings fears that mild symptoms may progress rapidly to severe symptoms or death. If the news is that they've died, sadness can lead to wondering how goodbyes will be said.



The next circle represents a slightly different level of relationship. Individuals within this circle are not incredibly close to the person who is represented by the leaf but are still well-acquainted with them. For example, they have shared numerous patient care experiences and likely highly respect one another. When one is suddenly taken from the professional team, a gap may be left, impossible to fill by anyone else. Anxiety can cause an inability to focus and function at full capacity. Worry about a future of practicing without this strong partnership may feel all-consuming. These uncertainties bring a real sense of loss when a much-valued colleague tests positive for COVID-19 or dies.

People in the outer ripple, or circle, are yet further removed from the person who is sick or who has died. For example, they have only heard of the person or know them somewhat. The situation still brings sadness, increased fear, and feelings of empathy for that person's department and closest colleagues. A COVID-19 illness or death within a hospital or ambulance service affects everyone. With a diagnosis—whether symptoms are mild or severe—one may sense penetration in the wall of protection they hoped had existed. When a death results, some may feel triggered by it and be reminded of their own mortality. They may worry about the possible loss of others in their work environment.

Finally, your emotions extend to healthcare workers with reported symptoms or those who have died within your state, within your country, and around the world. Although you may not actually be grieving, feelings of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure are heightened. You experience vulnerability.

Emotions

Vulnerability

The concept of vulnerability may take on new meaning during the COVID-19 pandemic. As you witness the diagnosis or death of coworkers or those under your care, you lend yourself to greater uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. At these times, you may be overwhelmed by feelings of vulnerability. You may think, "I don't want to experience these things; they're painful." Yes, they are, and they can temporarily, at least, cause one to suffer. Social work researcher and renowned speaker Dr. Brené Brown has studied, written about, and presented on the concept of vulnerability. According to her, it is not a weakness but a strength. That may surprise you. You may wonder, "How can feeling vulnerable be a good thing?" According to Dr. Brown (2010), the value that comes from embracing vulnerability lies in its being a pathway to courage. Courage gives one the ability to get through hard things.

As you witness the suffering of those under your care, you must summon courage to attend them amidst the spread of COVID-19. You feel uncertain how it may affect you or your family, uncertain if a close colleague will die as they get sicker and sicker, uncertain what guidelines and protocols will be different today from those established yesterday. Frontline workers take risks each time they go to work, exposing themselves to the virus and the possibility of bringing it home (e.g., lacking PPE and other supplies, assisting a COVID-positive patient as she gives birth, performing CPR in the field). Emotional exposure is a constant companion: feeling overwhelmed, not knowing how to manage fear, feeling helpless as people die alone, feeling the warmth of tears while bearing witness to the birth of a baby at 20 weeks' gestation. Courage helps you go to work each shift. It helps you live with and even embrace grief.

Grief

Grief does not happen without love. You may find yourself in this situation now because you are part of the first ripple, or circle. You are intensely grieving for a coworker. Above all, know that you should feel comfortable with your grief.

Connection can exist with those you have never met. Whether your relationship with the person lies within the inner circle or an outer one, you can make the most of moments for remembering, feeling, sharing, and honoring. Though you experience critical needs all around you, you are not required to move forward without looking back.

You are wondering how to do that using a moment in time. Here are some ideas:

- You are apt to think of your colleague on your way to and from work. Whether on public transportation, in your car, or walking, if your mind goes to remembering, let the thoughts come. Take note of memories that come to mind. Sink into them. Feel grateful about the shared experiences.
- Look for ways of remembering in community. One way to do this when a colleague dies is to bring flowers to the break room or post photos on a centrally-located bulletin board. Social media platforms also allow for communal sharing of grief (be sure to follow your organization's guidelines).
- During a busy shift, you may be involved in complex care of patients and suddenly think of your coworker. Pause and consider: What brought them to mind? What is special about this moment?
- If you are used to journaling, include this fresh grief in your daily writing. If journaling is something you do sporadically or not at all, make use of your phone. Capture memories in your phone, or add notes to reflect on later.
- Look online for stories about the death of a colleague. Social media platforms are good places to start. You may find comfort in the comments of others.
- You may find insights, reassurance, and strength from the writings of grief experts around the world. As an example, in her book *Bearing the Unbearable: Love, Loss, and the Heartbreaking Path of Grief*, Dr. Joanne Cacciatore writes that "We do not experience grief without love, and we cannot experience the love without feeling grief" (p. 69).

Ritual

The moments of remembering, feeling, sharing, and honoring flow into ritual. In this section, we share simple acts that you can expand on when honoring a coworker who dies. We have learned these from experiences through the years with those who grieve.

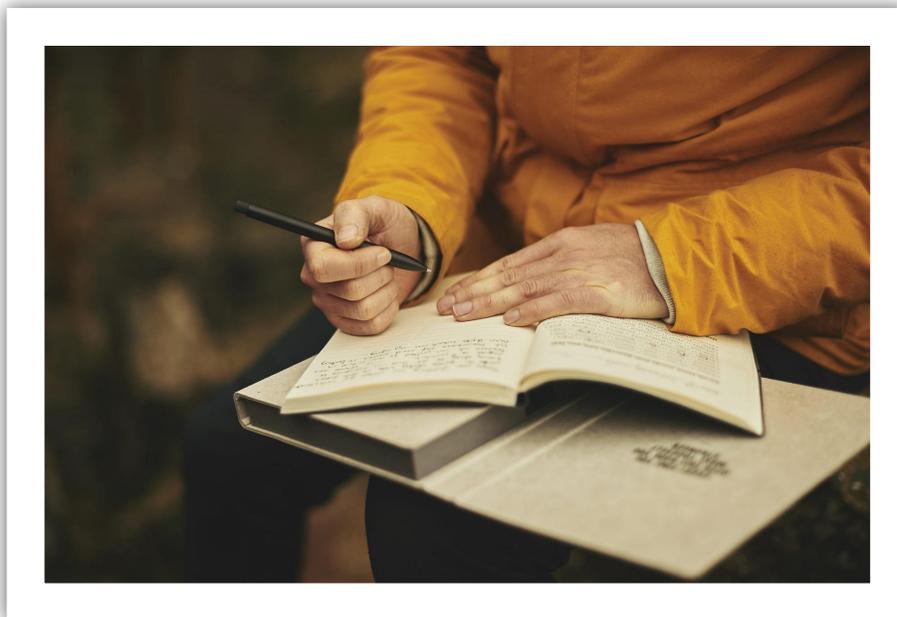
Though ritual can often take place on a larger scale (e.g., arranging a recognition of career or service for a coworker who has died at your organization), in *Bearing the Unbearable: Love, Loss, and the Heartbreaking Path of Grief*, Dr. Cacciatore describes microrituals as purposeful, private acts that, for years to come, connect one to the person who has died. Even the smallest items of remembrance or connection can be incorporated into microritual (e.g., the deceased's name badge, their coffee cup, their pen, their favorite song or joke).

*"Ritual flows from relationship.
Relationship forms the bridge from
suffering to hope.
Hope transforms" (Limbo and
Kobler, 2013, p. x).*

Examples of group and personal rituals reflect the relationship shared by those in any one of the circles previously described and the colleague who died. Here are several ideas of ritual. One or more may resonate with you:

- During your work commute, reserve specific time for reflecting on your special bond with your colleague. Honor them by listening to music that reminds you of them. Select one special memory to reflect on each day. Do this as long and as often as it feels right.
- Post a photo of the coworker who died on a bulletin board in the break room. Encourage individual team members to write notes to the coworker or special memories, and tack them up around the photo.
- When you get home, find a quiet place and reflect upon or write down the thoughts of your colleague that came to you during your busy day.
- On special occasions (e.g., birthday, anniversary, new year), tag the person who died in a photo or message on social media that reflects your personal relationship (be sure to follow your organization's guidelines).
- Choose or design a tattoo that represents an aspect of your connection to the person who died.
- Keep a photo of your colleague who died in a place where you can say "good morning" or "good night" each day.
- For a special occasion, wear an existing accessory or choose a new one with a color or design that serves as a meaningful reminder of your friend. Find circles—symbols that reflect unending or forever—in art, photos, or jewelry, and incorporate them into fashion or interior design.
- Save text messages or voice messages from the special person who died to read or listen to when you feel the need to be close to them.

We hope that your courage will allow you to overcome your fear so that you are able to welcome grief for what it is: the gift we give to ourselves and others that symbolizes how much we loved. Grief represents what seems like the loss of human relationship and connection, but it is simply, in reality, a heartfelt symbol of it. Regardless of which circle we find ourselves in, remembering and honoring are ways we continue bonds with those who touched our lives personally and professionally.



Resolve Through Sharing has created this resource in honor of the many healthcare workers around the world who became infected with COVID-19 as they bravely cared for sick patients.

*Read the names of those professionals who lost their personal battle with the vicious disease:
www.medscape.com/viewarticle/927976#vp_1.*

We remember them with gratitude and grieve with their loved ones left behind.

References

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RTS 6140 When a Coworker Is Diagnosed With or Dies From COVID-19 V.4.20
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