

Grieving from a Distance
Samantha Silverman, LCSW

My practice specializes in working with older adults who are amongst one of the most vulnerable populations affected by COVID. Grief and loss are normally rampant with this population during times of normalcy. However, during COVID, older adults have been hit the hardest as many of them struggle with utilizing new technology, lack access to transportation, and are dependent on caregivers for Instrumental Activities of Daily Living.

Additionally, this population is already near their end stage in life and are grappling with health issues, other recent losses, recently being placed on hospice, or caring for another family member who is already on hospice. How is this population--already isolated and vulnerable--expected to grieve from afar?

I have one patient in her 80s whose husband has been on Hospice for the past twelve months. Her spouse was placed into a SNF (Skilled Nursing Home) before the pandemic. SNF and other long term care facilities immediately enforced a lock down procedure, in which they refused to let family members inside their facilities. My client, already experiencing anticipatory grief and battling with COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), struggled to emotionally support her spouse without actually being present. This measure exacerbated her depression and anxiety, causing her to seek counseling. She was only permitted to facetime her husband upon the nurse's availability. Additionally, she could sit outside her husband's window but oftentimes he was vaguely even aware of her presence. She struggled with not being able to touch him, hold his hand, or sit next to his bedside.

I have another client who recently lost her husband in January and was working through her Grief in our weekly counseling sessions. She was processing this was the first time in thirty years that she had been alone and was struggling with the new normal when COVID struck. Diagnosed with multiple chronic medical conditions, she was confined to her home and unable to see her family members. Like most mental health practitioners, we had to switch to teletherapy and I was unable to sit in the room with her during our sessions. Her unresolved grief quickly morphed into fear and depression as she struggled to grapple with an entirely new loss. She felt challenged by modern day technology and already isolated. How was she to grieve her spouse completely and utterly alone?

Another longtime client was recently placed on hospice and is battling with processing her own pending death. Until recently, she was surrounded by loved ones as they visited often. Ever since the pandemic began, she has had very few visitors--lest the occasional healthcare worker. During our weekly sessions, she frequently mentions how she used to take the simple act of touch for granted. She craves to have her hand held, to be hugged, to feel the warmth emanating out of another human being. Tearful during the majority of our sessions, she expresses to me that she feels powerless and hopeless. She is not yet ready to die and does not want to die in a world where she feels tremendously alone.

As this pandemic evolves, most of us have experienced grief, a loss of some significance, and fear for the unknown. However, older adults are doubly affected as many have been experiencing these symptoms prior to COVID.

Already working with traditional grief and loss, I have outlined some additional interventions below that may be helpful for working with older adults who are now faced with Grieving from a Distance. Please keep in mind that the following interventions are suggestions that have worked with some of my clients. These interventions may not be helpful for every client and may be used when appropriate. Oftentimes people just want acknowledgement that their situation is real, that their fear is real, that their life still has meaning. Sometimes all that we can do as mental health providers is serve as a sounding board and to prevent thoughts and feelings from falling into a black abyss.

Interventions when Separated from a Loved One:

- *Deliver a personal item with a familiar scent*

I suggested that my client do this after she described a favorite afghan blanket that her husband frequently used in when he was home. She had hand knitted the afghan and reminisced about his compliments. I suggested she spritz on a familiar scent as the olfactory sense is most tied to memories.

- *Create a photo collage*

As part of our counseling, my client was going through old photographs and talked about the pleasant memories that the photos evoked. We strategized for her to create a photo collage for her husband to gaze at on his wall. We thought this would be helpful both in the exercise of creation plus would serve as a visual cue for her husband to remember their times together.

- *Record an audio recording of your voice*

Hearing a loved one's voice can lower stress levels and foster a sense of intimacy. Depending on the technology available, this option may or may not be useful. In my client's case, her spouse does not have a smart phone. I suggested that his nurse save an audio recording of my client's voice on her phone that she can play daily. You can also sing a familiar song or retell a treasured story.

- *Create a memento box*

Are there items around your home that your loved one used daily? Maybe a favorite key chain, ring, washcloth? When you look at those items do you think about the person they belonged to and that they are now missing a purpose? Take an old shoebox or any box for that matter and collect those items and bring to your loved one. Even if

they have a cognitive impairment, having their treasured items may spark familiarity in a time of uncertainty.

- *Offer to write their life story*

My almost 95-year old grandmother is in quarantine at her ALF. My nine-year old son is finished with homeschool every day at 11am. Voila-an activity for both of them! He calls her almost daily and writes a short story that she narrates about one of her life experiences. Not only does this connect their diverse generations, but my son is learning about what life was like for a young Jewish girl growing up in Brooklyn. While my grandmother has her life documented by her great-grandson. Narrative therapy is a helpful tool utilized by mental health practitioners to make sense of one's life.

Interventions when Grieving a Loved One:

- *Categorize old photographs*

The simple act of organizing, creating a scrapbook, or cataloging events can be therapeutic due to feeling productive and utilizing creativity. You can either tell a story or create your own narrative. The act of looking through photographs will help you reminisce about sacred moments and serve as a holding space for your memories. Plus, when quarantine ends, you can show your family your memory book

- *Redecorate or reorganize a room or a space in the house*

Although not every client may be physically or mentally prepared for this suggestion, this could be useful for someone with an over-abundance of anxious energy. Light physical exertion could decrease feelings of anxiety or ruminating thoughts. Maybe there is a chair that a loved one used to sit in that serves as a sad and empty reminder. Or, a wall that could use a fresh coat of cheery paint. Even a small reorganization (ex a spice cabinet or drawer) could feel fresh and productive.

- *Schedule a recurring weekly appointment to speak with family members*

Zoom meetings with multiple family members may be overwhelming for someone grieving. Not to mention having to navigate technology. Find an old or new calendar and schedule a recurring weekly meeting with your family. Try to spread out as many meetings over the course of a week as you can. This way, you can ensure that you are never far away from connecting with someone over the phone. You can have something to look forward to while your loved ones can keep close tabs on you.

- *Journal, write a story about your life together, or just WRITE*

Writing is another exercise that can be therapeutic when grieving the loss of a loved one. You can also choose to write a story depicting your life together and present it to your friends and family members. If you are having writers block, I oftentimes suggest my clients purchase *Angel Catcher* (can be purchased on Amazon) to help prompt clients. One of my friends suggested this book to me when my father passed away.

Interventions when Experiencing your own Grief:

- *Plan your Own Funeral*

While this can be depicted as quite morbid, some individuals feel as though planning their own funeral gives them a sense of purpose. Although not appropriate for those who may be in denial or those with cognitive impairments, this can be useful for certain individuals. My client and I speak regularly about what kind of memorial she wishes to have after she passes. We have even made arrangements for a candlelight vigil via zoom in the event that the world is still on lockdown.

- *Pet Therapy*

Having a companion to snuggle with can be comforting when experiencing anticipatory grief. Plus, research has demonstrated that animals have a sixth sense when it comes to detecting human emotion, namely sadness. If you don't have a dog or cat available to snuggle with, now may be a good time to adopt.

- *Leave Your Legacy*

Are there things unsaid to loved ones? What are some of the most important things you have learned in your life? What do you want others to learn or know about you? Over the course of the pandemic, my client began writing letters on old cardstock and even addressing and stamping the envelopes. She has them banded together with instructions for her son to mail upon her death. Write letters, notes, and other anecdotes of advice for loved ones.

- *Have a Conversation about your afterlife or lack thereof*

Whatever your religious or spiritual beliefs, make it known before you go. Talk to your friends and family members about your beliefs. This can be helpful for others to know where you envision yourself going, if anywhere at all. This way, you will always have a place either where others can imagine you being. When my father died, one of the best pieces of advice someone gave me was: "Your father will always be alive inside you". Most people are not afraid of death itself, but the idea of what happens to us when we die. If you envision your own place beforehand, you are in essence, creating a new home.

- *Utilize the Hospice Social Worker*

Most hospice organizations have a trained social worker on staff. Social workers are both excellent therapists and case managers. Take advantage of your hospice's social worker by scheduling regular telephonic meetings with him/her. Address your fears about death, your wishes, and the uncertainty of having a funeral during quarantine. Brainstorm how you can say goodbye to others while respecting social distance.

To reiterate, the above suggestions are merely suggestions. Some may be too sensitive for some individuals while others may be a minor help. During this time, we have all been detached from our extended family and have missed crucial moments. When doubting how to be helpful, it's always a good rule of thumb to simply ask: *"What Can I Do?"*. Sometimes the answer will be nothing, other times it may be enacting a small favor. Early in the quarantine, I had an elderly client ask me to bring her toilet paper, salt, and pepper. I happily delivered all three items with an extra Toblerone bar as I knew her to be a chocoholic.

When considering your own fear, consider those who are sicker, frailer, and more vulnerable than you. A month ago, my son drew pictures and we mailed them to a local nursing home. Some residents probably eyed the pictures with stoic stares but hopefully we made at least one resident smile with his silly images. Do small gestures, acts of kindness, and don't forget that there are always people in worse situations than your own. *Be kind and always respect your elders.*