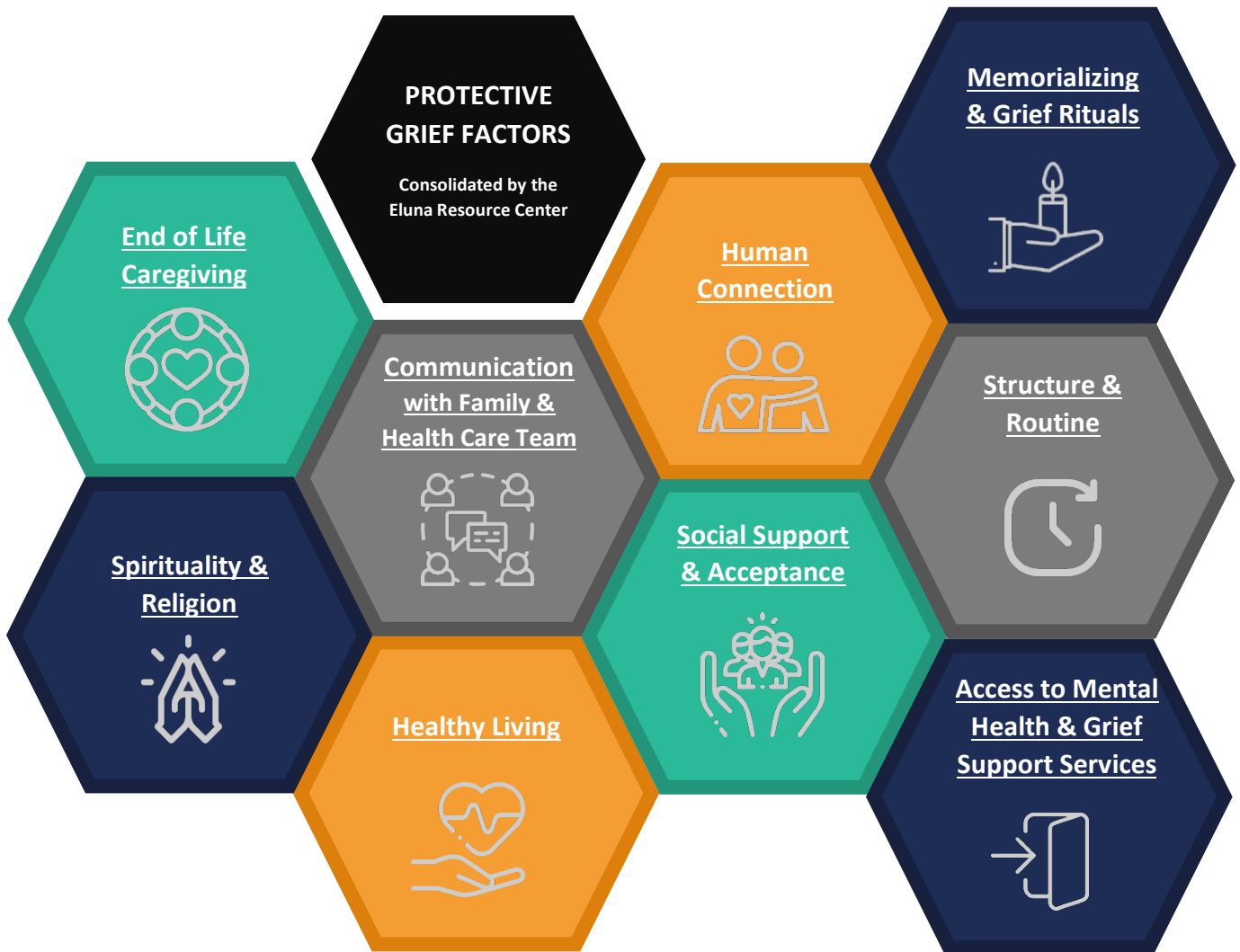




RESOURCE CENTER

COVID Grief –Protective Factors & the Impact of the Pandemic

Prior to the pandemic, the bereavement community identified a series of protective factors and coping skills that can help when grieving the death of a person in your life. **By clicking on each shield below**, you will learn more about that protective factor, how it has been impacted by the pandemic, and resiliency strategies while facing grief due to a COVID-related death.



*Special Thanks to Julia Amsterdam, Eluna Intern for supporting the development of this resource.

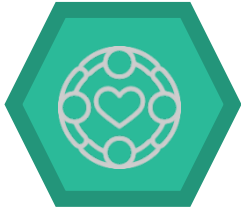


RESOURCE CENTER

Personalized Care

www.elunanetwork.org/resources

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End-of-Life Caregiving

Protective Factors: End-of-life care is defined as support and medical care during the time surrounding death. The end-of-life process varies greatly depending upon the type of death, personal needs, family dynamics, rituals and preferences. [According to this study](#), minimizing distressing physical symptoms leads to a better outcome in caregiver bereavement. Meaningful communication between the patient, family, and friends during the end-of-life process (saying ‘goodbye’) [has been associated with better outcomes](#) when measuring for depression or complicated grief.

COVID’s Impact: COVID significantly disrupted this end-of-life process as family members were often restricted from being able to visit and physically comfort their person. Even as COVID restrictions have lifted, many hospitals have maintained limitations on the number of visitors. In addition, some individuals also report a lingering sense of anxiety when visiting a friend or family member in the hospital given potential and perceived risks. And finally, after becoming accustomed to wearing masks and keeping a distance, physical comforting during end-of-life care may feel awkward or uncomfortable.

WHAT TO DO – suggestions for the bereaved:

- **Plan ahead for physical comfort.** In some cases, physical contact can be a meaningful way to connect and communicate during the end-of-life process. Prior to visiting the hospital, envision the types of physical touch that feel comfortable and bring protective gear if needed. A soft touch, even with gloves on, may bring a sense of comfort and peace. One general suggestion when visiting is to place your hand beneath the hand of the dying person, because the pressure of having something on top of their hand can sometimes be uncomfortable.
- **Foster a calming & peaceful environment.** Family and friends can work with the medical team to create a soothing environment by softening the lights and playing relaxing and meaningful music. If possible, they can bring special objects from home to make the room feel more personal and special. [The Mayo Clinic](#) provides additional tips for how to attend to emotional, spiritual, and physical needs when a person is nearing death.
- **Involve the dying person as much as possible in conversations** and when arranging calls or visits. Talking openly about the dying process and listening attentively to their needs and wishes can [lessen anxiety](#) for everyone in this conversation. Even if they are not able to communicate, you can still address your person and speak to them directly.
- **Explore anticipatory bereavement resources** for [children](#) and consider this [legacy book](#) template with prompts to record special memories and messages.



Communication with Family & Healthcare Team

Protective Factors: It is important to recognize that many individuals are often involved in the care of a dying person- family, friends, healthcare workers and, in some cases, palliative care specialists. [Open family communication](#) has been shown to lower levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress. Sharing thoughts, feelings, information, and even taking time to address unresolved family conflict can also improve the behavioral grief responses of children and teens. [Compassionate communication with the health care team](#) can positively impact the long-term grief process, in addition to reducing the survivors' fear and anxiety. For grieving siblings in particular, poor communication with family, friends, and the healthcare team places them at [an increased risk for unresolved grief](#). The ability to speak openly about thoughts and feelings is equally important for the dying person as it can [reduce stress and further prepare them for the end-of-life process](#).

COVID's Impact: Throughout the height of COVID, most facilities and families shifted to virtual communication up until the very last moments of life, in which limited visitation was permitted. [This study](#) found a decrease in end-of-life discussions during COVID in addition to significantly fewer people maintaining the ability to fully express their thoughts, needs and desires. Many patients were also placed on a ventilator, which further prohibited direct communication with the family and healthcare team. These restrictions caused a sense of isolation and distress for families and patients, therefore placing [families at risk for complicated grief](#).

WHAT TO DO – suggestions for the bereaved:

- **Schedule routine communication with health care providers.** Predictable times of communication can provide a sense of control during this stressful time. Work with the healthcare team to establish an agreed upon schedule for communication in addition to identifying a main point of contact. If visits are limited, discuss how and when to utilize video chat features and receive photos to enhance the communication experience. The same holds true with your immediate friends, family, and children. You may want to agree upon regular times to check in with one another on a group call or chat.
- **Open and honest communication.** In some cases, you may need to be upfront with the healthcare team about communication needs and prepare questions ahead of time. Children and teens are also seeking truthful information during this time. When explaining death to children, avoid euphemisms such as "gone", "passed away", or "lost" as this may cause confusion. Instead use simple and short sentences including the words "dead" and "died". [Talking to Teens and Children About Illness and Death](#) provides age-appropriate tips and examples on how to start this conversation.



Human Connection

Protective Factors: Grieving as a human experience is often rooted in our relationships, however complex, with other humans. For more affectionate people in particular, human warmth and touch can help to alleviate stress. For children, studies show that a lack of touch can be associated with delayed speech, sleep problems, low school performance, and aggression. Therefore, demonstrated affection by a trusted person or caregiver, can soften some grief responses – especially for children and teens.

COVID's Impact: Affection and physical touch were considerably impacted during COVID due to social distancing guidelines and restrictions. This disruption in human contact and healthy touch consequently caused an [increase in anxiety and loneliness](#). When compounded with the death of a close person, [loneliness can also be linked to depression and complicated grief](#). Supportive networks like clubs and teams have also been stretched thin and our bandwidth for compassionate warmth and communication has narrowed.

WHAT TO DO – suggestions for the bereaved:

- **Stay socially connected, to the extent possible.** Be intentional about staying connected during stressful events and throughout the grieving process. Communicating, even with text messages, is beneficial during stressful events. Be mindful that our society is still learning how to navigate grief, especially related to COVID and may not always know what to say or what to do to show support. Many people also continue to cope with pandemic-related stressors and have limited capacity to maintain deeper
- **Learn more about bereavement bodywork.** There are several therapeutic modalities that also specialize in grief. Consider the following bodywork methods specializing in grief: [massage](#), [aromatherapy & therapeutic sound](#), [acupressure](#), and [shiatsu](#).
- **Expand support networks.** Consider joining grief support groups like [Salt Water](#), [Option B](#), or [The Dinner Party](#). For children and teens, check out [Camp Erin](#) – the largest free bereavement program for children and teens in the U.S. and Canada. [Click here to find your camp](#).
- **Consider safe alternatives to a traditional hug.** To show love and affection, friends and families may choose to create a special hand signal with the dying person, say [‘I love you’ in sign language](#), design a handmade card, cook a favorite meal, order takeout, or send a care package. Take a look at [Eluna's care packages](#) to support a child or teen impacted by grief, addiction, or suicide. Each care package is accompanied by an Eluna Resource Center report with recommended therapeutic activities and resources.



Memorializing & Grief Rituals

Protective Factors: Mourning with funerals, wakes, or other grief rituals is a common and healthy way to process the death of a significant person in your life. [Research has found](#) that one way to prevent grief from evolving into [prolonged grief](#) or [complex bereavement disorder](#), is to participate in a passage ritual. Funerals and mourning rituals are a way to honor the person who died and acknowledge a transition. Psychologically, these ceremonies often provide a space for collective grieving while signaling the start of the grieving process. Mourning rituals can also provide a [sense of control](#) through the grieving process.

COVID's Impact: During the first year of the COVID pandemic, several countries prohibited memorializing rituals. Funerals, burials, or visiting a cemetery were put on hold for many families throughout the world. These disruptions and delays have placed several people at risk for experiencing heightened and prolonged grief.

WHAT TO DO – suggestions for the bereaved:

- **Acknowledge that grief is hard:** We live in a death denying culture that often minimizes the impact of grief and rushes the bereaved with unrealistic expectations of how and for how long a person should grieve. Losing a person can be exceptionally difficult, especially during a pandemic. Navigating these uncharted waters while grieving and taking care of everyday needs, is no easy task. Remember to rest, hydrate, take things one hour at a time. Eluna recommends one of these [grounding and relaxing exercises](#) developed by The Cove Center for Grieving Children.
- **Build a Plan:** The COVID pandemic has shed new light on the importance of grief rituals and connecting with others over death and loss. Lantern has created a [complete guide to navigating End of Life planning during COVID-19](#).
- **Connect with Others:** Accepting and asking for help can be difficult for a variety of reasons. Mourning rituals are an opportunity to seek support with the overall planning process and desired tasks. Eluna also recommends connecting through these groups and events:
 - Forefront has been developing a [series of webinars](#) for children, parents, and educators, focusing on mental wellness and suicide prevention during COVID -19
 - Meet others impacted by COVID, share stories, and advocate for a COVID Memorial Day with the [Marked by COVID](#) community.
 - For children and teens, consider [Camp Erin](#) – the largest free bereavement program for children and teens in the U.S. and Canada. [Click here to find your camp](#).



Spirituality & Religion

Protective Factors: Spirituality, religiousness, a connection with a higher power and personal rituals have been scientifically proven to reduce stress when faced with a challenging situation. [Research shows](#) that bereaved people with a spiritual life tend to have an easier time making meaning of the death, reconnecting with their social network and demonstrating overall resiliency following a death of someone close.

COVID's Impact: COVID has significantly impacted spiritual and religious dimensions of grief due to the disruption of in-person gatherings, resulting in increased social isolation and feelings of helplessness. Many people have reported a tremendous sense of loss due to the inability to be physically present with their person throughout the dying process and subsequently for after-death rituals and traditions. The inability to perform traditional ceremonies has increased feelings of denial and prohibited many from moving forward in their grief process.

WHAT TO DO – suggestions for the bereaved:

- **Recognize the possible disconnect.** Despite virtual and reinvented rituals throughout the pandemic, many people report feelings of disbelief or denial related to their grief. Without the ability to practice religious or spiritual traditions, you are not alone if feeling disconnected from your spiritual network, worship space, or religious identity.
- **Look for creative opportunities to integrate rituals.** Consider bringing your community together with a [prayer call chain](#) or virtual vigil. Smaller gatherings or larger broadcasted rituals are also an option. Performing a grief ritual, even long after a person's death, can have great benefits.
- **Honor practices and traditions to the extent possible.** It may be a customary practice to sit, visit, or wash the deceased body before burial. Work with your community to honor these practices by exploring alternatives using physical distance, personal protective equipment, or technology.
- **Take time for deep reflection.** Spirituality, religiousness, and personal rituals can help to transform your loss into personal development, also known as [post-traumatic growth](#). In the depths of grief, you may find solace by leaning into reflective and redefining moments. Spiritual or religious communities can also be a place to seek meaning and reflection.
- **Think long-term.** Bring long-lasting comfort to grieving children through programs such as [Family Lives On](#), which will work closely with families to honor all traditions while providing ongoing therapeutic support until each child turns 18.
- **Create a tradition.** Consider reading a spiritual teaching, visiting a special place, cooking a meaningful meal, or integrating poetry, spoken word, music, mindfulness, movement, or any other activity that feels meaningful.



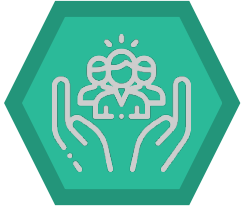
Healthy Living

Protective Factors: Grief can be physically and emotionally exhausting, often increasing inflammation, blood pressure, and lowering our immune systems. Moderate physical movement, time in nature, and nutritious eating can help to reduce this stress response and improve sleeping while grieving.

COVID's Impact: The COVID pandemic has significantly impacted many aspects of our health-eating habits, sleep routines, exercise regimens and stress levels. [According to this study](#), average daily steps declined from 10,000 to 4,600, sleep increased by approximately 20 minutes, screentime more than doubled, and depression sharply increased during the first few months of the pandemic. Several individuals were required or opted to postpone routines health & wellness checks. Many children were also found to be at risk for [nutritional deficiencies](#) during the pandemic. The additional stressors associated with grief can increase the risk of heart attack, stroke and overall aches and pains, all of which are exasperated by COVID.

WHAT TO DO – suggestions for the bereaved:

- **Take it one step at a time.** Start with very light exercise and expectations as grief can increase fatigue and risk for injury. It is important to go easy – this is time for deep healing and self-care. Some lighter forms of exercise may include yoga, tai chi, walking, hiking, dancing, or other gentle movements. Check out [Dance Church: An Online Dance Party](#) or [Yoga: Grief Practice](#).
- **Listen to your body.** It's important to be gentle and tune into what your body needs by looking for signs of overwhelm, exhaustion, or clumsiness. The [Body Scan](#) for teens and adults and the [Body Treasure Map](#) exercise for children can be a good place to start.
- **Eat healthy.** Many experts recommend healthy eating, especially by limiting caffeine and alcohol while increasing water, veggies, and protein. However, it is important to acknowledge that even having one healthy meal can take an extraordinary amount of effort while grieving. This will be a time to lean on your community to request a healthy meal or snack. Take a look at chapter one of this [WE Well-being Playbook](#) for several nutrition tips.
- **Find opportunities to sleep.** Sleeping is especially important as grief is exhausting. Grieving children may also have trouble sleeping due to possible nightmares or restlessness. For significant sleep disturbances, [this article](#) recommends therapeutic support along with a bedtime routine that is calm, cool, and technology free. Consider leaning on your support networks, if possible, to free up time for naps and sleep.
- **Maintain routine visits to health care professionals.** It is important to return to typically recommended visits to primary care physicians, dentist and other preventative care.



Social Support & Acceptance

Protective Factors: After the death of a person in our life, it is normal to look to family, friends, and community for acknowledgement and acceptance. We feel embraced and seen when society provides space to honor the death and grieving process. Having [open conversations on the topic of death](#) in addition to [social support](#) can decrease stigma while increasing the likelihood of a natural adaptation to this challenging life event.

COVID's Impact: We live in a death denying society that often minimizes the impact of grief. This lack of communal support combined with the polarization of COVID has further impacted those grieving the death of someone from COVID, and a stigma has emerged. This stigma is often expressed in the form of hurtful comments, beliefs, and theories negatively impacting grieving children and families. Many families have experienced their COVID grief invalidated publicly or treated as unworthy, isolating them from supportive networks. When a person's death is controversial or minimized, as is the case with COVID, this is also called [disenfranchised grief](#).

WHAT TO DO – suggestions for the bereaved:

- **Remember that you are not alone.** [COVID Survivors for Change](#) is a non-partisan nationwide community of people who have been directly impacted by COVID. This is a place to share stories, support one another, and advocate for a stronger pandemic response.
- **Talk openly and without judgement about death and dying.** Avoid euphemisms “loss, passed away, they are in a better place” and provide simple and honest explanations when possible. [Seven Suggestions for Explaining Death to Children](#) provides concrete examples on how to have these conversations with young individuals.
- **Work with educators, coaches, and community leaders to prevent and reduce stigma.** [This article](#) provides activities, sample scripts, and tools to respond effectively to stigmatizing comments about COVID-related deaths.
- **Recognize how this stigma has impacted your grief and reach out for help.** Visit the [National Bereavement Resource Guide \(NBRG\)](#) to find counseling and support groups in your area. The [Eluna Resource Center](#) is also here to provide personalized support and identify local resources and camps for children and families.
- **Consider a COVID Loss Camp.** Eluna's [Camp Erin Family Camps](#) as well as [Comfort Zone Camp](#) hold both in-person and virtual camp programs designed specifically for children, young adults, and parents/guardians who have experienced a death due to COVID.



Structure & Routine

Protective Factors: For people of any age, the death of a significant person is life-altering. Grief rearranges the person's relationship to everyday life. While routine and daily structure can often be the most visibly affected, they are also the most important to maintain to help someone regain a sense of control. As we know, grief is not something that goes away; rather, it is something that becomes a part of someone's life. For that reason, it is important to prioritize finding a daily routine that helps someone feel grounded in their life while also acknowledging their grief and their need for rest. Maintaining a consistent routine is important for children to feel comfortable and safe in their environments, as [research](#) shows, "it brings familiarity, enjoyment, and a sense of expectation" to their lives.

COVID's Impact: The complete shift in routine and lack of (familiar) structure during lockdown and the various stages of isolation throughout the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly impacted the general community. These inconsistencies and changes have been especially difficult for children and teens who are also grieving, as youth thrive in environments that offer stability, structure, and routine. In addition, the familiar components that once made up a person's routine (school, activities, playdates, work, events, etc.) became the very activities that were deemed unsafe during the COVID pandemic.

WHAT TO DO – suggestions for the bereaved:

- **Set a routine with a loose schedule.** In addition to the basics, like eating and sleeping, try to make room for activities that bring joy to your day. This may include time with a friend, reading a book, watching a movie, going on a walk, or listening to music.
- **Write a to-do list of chores and tasks, no matter how small.** The [Children's Bereavement Center](#) suggests that this can help someone feel like they are making progress throughout the day and lead to decreased feelings of stagnation.
- **Ask a loved one for support and accountability to accomplish daily goals.** Some find it helpful to have someone physically present when accomplishing small tasks while others may experience a sense of accomplishment to send a quick text when a task is completed. Often there are friends, neighbors or family members that want to be helpful but are unsure what to do. Consider making a list of activities/tasks that might be helpful - childcare, grocery shopping, meal deliveries. [Lotsa Helping Hands](#) is an app to coordinate meals and help for friends & family in need.
- **Go easy on yourself and your schedule.** While the COVID pandemic continues, society has resumed social gatherings in ways that resemble a post-pandemic world. The sudden shift to functioning can be daunting and scary. With this in mind, you can still work to create a daily routine for yourself and your family that feels right for you.



Access to Mental Health & Grief Support Services

Protective Factors: Each person experiences grief differently and therefore can benefit from a variety of mental health and grief support services. Some children, teens and adults find grief groups, bereavement counselors, and/or online grief support communities to be beneficial in connecting with others who have shared experiences. Grief counselors can provide guidance and expertise in exploring difficult thoughts and feelings while also validating typical grief reactions and practicing new coping strategies as the person grieving learns to live with loss. Mental health therapists can provide a deeper dive through individual, family therapy, and/or process support groups.

COVID's Impact: Access to mental health and grief support was already limited prior to the pandemic because of factors such as location, racial disparities, affordability, and stigma. The pandemic further exacerbated inequities – [in particular for Black and Latinx children having experienced more caregiver and parental loss from COVID-19 than white children.](#)

When everything moved online in response to the pandemic, new limitations presented themselves. Art, music, and play therapy, often central to mental health support for children, were significantly harder to incorporate. Access to reliable computers and internet were also out of reach for many and virtual sessions made it more difficult to have confidential and honest conversations with a mental health professional.

WHAT TO DO – suggestions for the bereaved:

- **Learn more about the diversity of cultural traditions and values that inform children's response to death and bereavement.** Eluna's Grief Through the Lens series explores grief responses and traditions among communities of color with expert panelist who specialize in understanding the impact of intergenerational trauma. Visit Grief Through the Lens of [Black Communities](#) and [Latino Communities](#) to watch and learn.
- **Contact Eluna's Resource Center to find accessible mental health and grief support in your area.** Our personalized support is free and offered in both Spanish & English. Please contact/Comuníquese con: Sarah (206) 466-3998 sarahbehm@elunanetwork.org
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