



On April 23, Michael Neel, funeral director of All Veterans Funeral and Cremation in Denver, looks at the casket of George Trefren, a 90-year-old Korean War veteran who died of the coronavirus in a nursing home. (CNS / Reuters / Rick Wilking)



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Day to day, things remain at a standstill in much of the world. And out of that standstill comes grief, says [Australian Mercy](#) Sr. Maryanne Loughry.

In [a recent blog](#), I discussed Loughry's [webinar](#) about how to deal with anxiety and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. Loughry, a trained psychologist who teaches part-time at the [Boston College School of Social Work](#), has done double duty with another webinar, providing more insight into some of the challenges the pandemic poses.

This time, in [an April 21 webinar](#), also coordinated by the Rome-based [International Union of Superiors General](#), Loughry's focus was on grief: specifically, personal and social (or collective) grief as well as "anticipatory grief" — waiting for tragedy to unfold.

As she did in the earlier webinar, Loughry made clear that we must respect others' different experiences and reactions right now, that everyone is dealing with this unsettled moment in different ways and at different paces.

That affirms an insight that New York Times opinion writer [Charlie Warzel recently made](#): "Tragedy and suffering is unevenly distributed and everyone's lived experience is unique. It feels a bit like we're living with one foot in two different worlds, or experiencing every outcome of a projection model at once."

The idea of different "projection models" is a good segue into one of Loughry's key points. Loughry praised the insights of the late Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, whose seminal 1969 book *On Death and Dying* laid out the idea of sequential stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and, finally, acceptance.

While Kübler-Ross' insights about grief are still affirmed, the field of psychology has since embraced the idea that the stages are not necessarily always in sequence.

"We grieve differently," Loughry said. "We move back and forth [between the stages]. We move around the different stages. That's what emotions are."

And emotions are very much in flux right now, given that people are experiencing both personal loss and a shared, profound collective loss in communities and societies.

"We've lost a lot in this pandemic," Loughry said. "We've not just lost people we've known and loved: family, community members, people from our own countries, routines and jobs. But our natural world has been turned upside down. So we've lost that sense of what our world is about and what we're about."

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What people have known and experienced in the past — the basic fiber and texture of life as people experienced it, the pillars "we rested on" — have "now receded," Loughry said.

"We never thought we wouldn't be able to bury our dead or visit the sick. But that's what's happening right now."

And in some regions, the situation is exacerbated by already-existing humanitarian and social challenges.

"In some countries, people don't even get to hospitals," Loughry said.

But Loughry said at both the collective and personal levels, people have experienced grief before. And that they have, perhaps more than they know, the tools to deal with the situation right now, despite its unprecedented nature.

Noting a string of natural disasters like the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the recent Australian bush fires as well as manmade tragedies like the 1994 Rwandan genocide, Loughry said that, ultimately, people rebuild their lives.

"What we know about collective grief is that we survive. We move on," Loughry said. "Our world is different, and we know [more] about ourselves and our society."

That was one affirmation and insight. There were numerous others.

### **Don't underestimate collective grief right now.**

One of the things many are mourning is "our lack of normalcy." That's a shared, collective experience, "a source of grief for us," Loughry said. But another source of grieving is what we see around us.

"We know our families and the local businesses we deal with are suffering," she said.

That sadness is accentuated by our day-to-day disconnection from others.

"We've also had a profound loss of connection. We can't physically embrace anybody." The result? "This can lead us collectively to grieve what we've lost."

### **Be aware of another kind of grief.**

That is "anticipatory grief," waiting for something to happen. People have "anticipation that this tsunami, or epidemic, is going to overwhelm us." And that means real worries about mortality, both ours and others'.

"I could be taken by this pandemic. You could be taken by this pandemic. It threatens our very being," Loughry said. And that results in a feeling of "loss of safety. A lot of us don't feel safe anymore."

### **Now is the time for "naming and claiming" grief.**

Specifically, now is the time to share and name what is being lost and what is happening in the world and to ourselves. Loughry noted that people throughout history have established commemorations and memorials for collective tragedies, like the Holocaust. At the root of those is the need for naming.

"To hold it in and not to share it is actually something that can overwhelm us," Loughry said.

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### **Ask what worked.**

At an individual level, this is perhaps the moment to ask what helped us in the past when we grieved.

"We need to go back to that again," she said. "Who did we reach out to? How did we respond? What was helpful, what wasn't helpful?"

### **Be conscious of others' vulnerabilities right now.**

That's especially important in religious communities, where such vulnerabilities may be more visible right now. Perhaps some have not grieved past losses and are doing so now.

Loughry said leaders of communities need to be aware of "what you can do and what you can't do," noting that they need to be aware that they and the members of their leadership team are "also impacted" and "are a part of the collective grief and the anticipatory grief."

### **Be aware of another dynamic.**

Some people — Loughry was speaking specifically of sisters — will be in denial, constantly saying they are fine. But that is often a barrier. Loughry advises not to raise that concern now. This is the time of affirmation, affirming "that people are moving at different stages," she said. That is especially true at a moment when "people are in confined spaces."

Loughry added: "It's a time at the moment for compassion, not for challenge."

### **At the same time, don't be afraid of emotions.**

"It's OK at the moment to be emotional" and allow raw, unfiltered feelings to rise to the surface, Loughry said. That could mean being "teary, because that's exactly what your body and your emotions need."

That may be uncomfortable, particularly in a community setting, because it shows your vulnerabilities. But there is no reason to hide such emotions because "it's not something that can be easily covered up."

### **Advice for communities.**

When asked how communities should deal with discussing grief and experiences, Loughry said that "each community is different."

She did suggest that discussion about grief might be better done in small groups "rather than a big setting, where they might be asked to say something they are nervous about saying."

Another idea is to allow people to write down thoughts and place them in a communal bowl without people being named.

Whatever is decided, it is important to affirm people's comfort, as "we don't know how much longer we'll be in lockdown and you don't want to increase their vulnerability."

Loughry also affirmed the need some will feel to remain silent and not to share.

**Faith is important.**

Sisters' religious faith is "a real resource" right now, Loughry said. First, there are the biblical and historical anchors: Church forebears experienced drought, famine and other calamities and got through them.

Sisters, who are fortunate "to have an identity, security, and we have supports," are in a position to offer compassion to those seeking it. And that can help sisters at this difficult moment with their own grief.

"We feel good when we minister to someone."

**A sense of hope.**

Loughry noted the pandemic has unfolded during Lent and Easter, with the attendant echoes of death and resurrection.

"We do know that we are going to get out of this, and that there is another side," she said. "We know this time will pass. We don't know when, but we know it will."

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