

A National Response to Pandemic-related Grief

Canadian Grief Alliance
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 CANADIAN
VirtualHospice



► *Proposal*

To proactively anticipate, mitigate and address the health and social impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic for grieving Canadians. The two-phased approach will immediately implement initiatives to increase access to grief supports for the public; support frontline healthcare providers with their COVID-related work trauma and grief; and increase public understanding of grief, healthy coping strategies and resources. The second phase will develop and implement a consultation-driven national strategy to encompass policy, programs, research and education initiatives.



► *Rationale*

The pandemic has brought to the forefront the urgent need to respond to and support the healing of grieving Canadians. The scholarly literature anticipates the dire social, physical and psychological consequences of deaths and other losses (jobs, business failure, life as we know it, financial security) incurred during the unique circumstances of the pandemic for the public, healthcare workers, first responders and others delivering essential services. In some cases, this can lead to increased instances of complicated and prolonged grief, depression, and the risk of suicide. A recent article in *The Globe and Mail* noted, “restrictive policies meant to reduce disease transmission are causing traumatic death experiences for many residents, family members and staff.” Robbed of final goodbyes, tormented by reports of poor conditions in some facilities, unable to undertake grief rituals, and forced separation from the critical support of family, friends and community, Canadians grieving COVID and non-COVID deaths are at elevated risk of unresolved, complicated and prolonged grief. This grief will affect their health, ability to work and maintain relationships; encourage unhealthy coping; and create additional pressure on health systems. Canada’s fragmented, under resourced and inadequate grief services will be quickly overwhelmed by the volume of grieving Canadians whose common form of support – personal connection – has been severed. Lack of tailored services for underserved populations including Indigenous Peoples, seniors, those living in rural

and remote areas, immigrants and refugees, children and youth, Francophones, the precariously housed and those in the corrections system will compound social, health and economic impacts. It is important to note that grief is outside the mandate of the Canadian Mental Health Commission and mental health associations. In many provinces and territories, publicly funded grief support is minimally-available with long waiting lists or entirely absent. Job losses and financial insecurity created by the pandemic is creating a significant barrier to accessing private grief counselling. The level of distress and complexities of their needs will warrant immediate access to publicly funded programs.

Canada’s 2019 death rate of 7.8/1000 population equates to 293,280 deaths annually before the pandemic. This pandemic will not only increase the rate of deaths in Canada but will also negatively impact the grief of those who lose family members to deaths of any kind during this time of physical distancing and social isolation. Conservatively it is estimated that each death directly impacts 5 people – or 1,466,400 million Canadians. This doesn’t include impacts on extended families, friends, workplaces, schools, communities. Nor does it account for people grieving other pandemic-related losses nor those grieving pre-pandemic deaths, whose grief has been prolonged by physical distancing and social isolation. Now is the time for governments across Canada to work together to support a National Response to Pandemic related grief.

The Four Pillars of a National Response to Pandemic-related Grief are outlined on the following pages and encompass immediate, medium- and long- term action at this unprecedented time.

► *Four Pillars of a National Response to Pandemic-related Grief*

PHASE 1: MAY 2020 – SEPTEMBER 2020

PHASE 2: OCTOBER 2020 – DECEMBER 2023

Pillar 1

National Strategy to guide investment in expansion of grief services.

Priority

Develop a National Grief Response and Research Strategy that builds on existing programs, identifies priorities and outlines an implementation plan.

Timeline	Actions
May – Sept 2020	<p>The consultation-driven plan will be chaired by Paul Adams, former journalism professor, Carleton University and formerly of the CBC and <i>The Globe and Mail</i>, supported by an Advisory Committee of grief experts and others. The consultation will engage individuals and organizations delivering grief supports, provincial, territorial and federal governments.</p> <p>The strategy will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify innovative programs to scale and spread;• Leverage technology to develop and deliver services to meet requirements of physical distancing and geography;• Ensure adequate supports are in place for seniors who are disproportionately affected;• Address the specific needs of underserved populations including but not limited to those living in rural and remote areas, Indigenous People, immigrants and refugees, children and youth, Francophones, those living in correctional facilities;• Build capacity within individuals and communities to enhance resilience and support healthy grieving;• Expand bereavement leave;• Ensure that new and existing grief programs are adequately resourced.

Pillar 2

Invest in and expand existing services and resources to better support Canadians.

Goal

To leverage technology and best practice to build capacity to meet the burgeoning needs of grieving Canadians. To develop and expand services to support the retention of highly qualified healthcare personnel by proactively attending to work-related grief and trauma.

Timeline	Actions
May – Sept 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Curate, develop and make available a suite of grief services for frontline health providers for their grief-related trauma, available at no charge;<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Launch evidence-informed online learning modules to support healthcare provider grief by June 30, 2020.• Commence tailored online support groups and one-on-one counselling for health providers and first responders free of charge.• Curate novel practices adopted by health facilities to create connection between patients and family separated by visiting restrictions, geography or other barriers.• Provide webinars for health care providers, first responders and the public on topics related to grief and wellbeing.• Provide culturally safe resources and webinars specifically for Indigenous Peoples acknowledging the history of human experimentation related to Residential Schools, colonization, intergenerational trauma and SARS/H1N1 issues.• Identify and develop accessible tools in other formats that can immediately support target audiences.• Curate and aggregate key resources for the public on an online platform.
Oct 2020 – Dec 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Implement recommendations of the National Strategy.• Invest \$100 million for operational funding for community-based, provincial and/or regional grief and bereavement programs to support innovation, best/leading edge practices, capacity building initiatives, and identification and scale and spread of innovative programming.

Pillar 3

Awareness and education for accessing services and resources and building resilience.

Goal

To increase grief education & grief literacy in Canada to support healthy grieving, resilience and knowledge of programs and services.

Timeline	Actions
May – Sept 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop and implement a national public awareness campaign to inform and educate the public on grief, healthy coping strategies and community resources with tailored campaigns for Indigenous Peoples and immigrants and refugees that meet their unique histories, needs and experiences.• Develop online learning modules to educate social workers, nurses, physicians and first responders to support patients and families forced to physically distance and socially isolate in their grief before and after the death. The modules will reflect Indigenous cultural practices and historical context to support culturally safe care.
Oct 2020 – Dec 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prioritize and implement recommendations of the National Strategy to expand and improve grief services.

Pillar 4

Research to guide response to COVID-related grief.

Goal

Rapidly scale up research capacity to better equip our health providers, communities and our country to better respond to the evolving, long-term grief/bereavement needs resulting from the pandemic.

Timeline	Action
May – Sept 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create a \$10 million SSHRC/CIHR funding stream over five years specific to grief and bereavement, prioritizing the needs of underserved grieving populations and responding to increased demand for services.

► Who We Are

The Canadian Grief Alliance (CGA) is a group of national leaders in grief and bereavement, including academics, frontline providers (including psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, counsellors, and therapists for adults and children), and organizations providing grief services, who have come together to provide recommendations to the Government of Canada for addressing what will be an overwhelming national need for grief support. The CGA is convened by The Canadian Virtual Hospice, a charitable organization with a proven track record for delivering innovative programming in cost efficient ways to support more than 2.1 million visitors annually.

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