

COVID-19: STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THOSE AFFECTED BY DEATHS DURING THE OUTBREAK

PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACTS OF CHANGING PRACTICES

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected many aspects of dying, death, burials, and funerals. Changes to the customary burial/funeral practices in a community can have long-term consequences for people's psychosocial health.



Fear of loved ones dying alone in hospital is widespread. Visiting bans can be distressing for the patients, relatives, and friends.



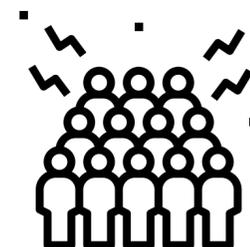
Health workers can experience intense emotional strain when working with high mortality. The impact may be heightened when they must make difficult choices about who receives life-saving treatment.



Mandatory cremation and other unfamiliar ways of handling the deceased can be disturbing for families.



Funerals are an important means by which people mark the passing of a loved one. Restrictions on usual funeral rites may be distressing and have long-term consequences for psychosocial wellbeing.



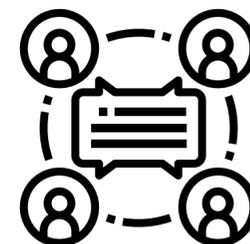
Changing established funeral practices can sometimes elicit community resistance, particularly when there is lack of trust in central authorities or government.

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SUPPORTING THE DYING AND BEREAVED



Explore ways of allowing contact between the patient and loved ones and/or spiritual advisors in a manner that is consistent with distancing guidelines.



Consult with the community (including local leaders, religious leaders and influential organisations and associations) to agree on acceptable ways to have contact with the dying.



Assure family members that healthcare workers and other care staff will provide end-of-life companionship for those who are alone, if this is possible.



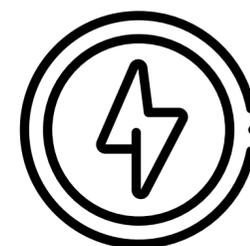
Ensure that communication between the family and those caring for the deceased is ongoing, open, and as detailed as possible to remove uncertainty and reduce the psychosocial impact on individuals.

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SUPPORTING AFTER-DEATH CARE AND SERVICES



Increase vital records capacity for death registration and local mortuary capacity, including strengthening physical, administrative and human resources.



Communicate up-to-date and accurate information regarding risks (e.g. of infection) associated with handling the deceased.



Emphasise that speed and safety in caring for the deceased must be balanced with respect for them and their families.



Establish psychosocial support systems for health and care staff involved in the COVID-19 response, particularly those who are exposed to high mortality.



Inform community, faith leaders and families about planned care for the deceased and ensure that they will be able to retrieve their loved ones' ashes or identify the burial site.

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ADAPTING MOURNING AND FUNERAL PRACTICES

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Work closely with communities to explore alternative practices if there is community resistance to changes because of physical distancing.



Timeframes for mourning can be highly culturally variable, and even open-ended. Families can be encouraged to explore additional, 'alternative' ways to mark the passing of loved ones, in-line with their own choices and values.



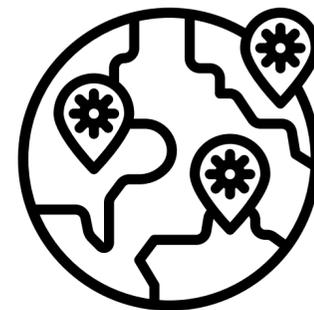
For individual cases, consult with family and other key persons about the funeral process, to preserve choice as much as possible and safely incorporate the religious, spiritual and cultural values of the person.



Recognise that people are resilient and willing to change the ways they mourn or mark the passing of a loved one, but the new practices must meet the social and emotional needs met by the original practices.

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THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE MEDIA



Press coverage of the pandemic may have a significant global impact, especially as it often includes powerful images related to death and can shape community perspectives of the outbreak.



Credible journalism and reporting are critical, even more so during a public health crisis. Increased and intense media influence can help reduce the severity of an outbreak.



Reporting on COVID-19 has focused on statistics, but each number represents someone who was loved and is mourned. Encourage responsible, accurate, and human-centred reporting.