

How to provide pastoral care for complicated grief

March 24, 2021

Grief is a part of life for every person and, therefore, is a natural part of life for every church community.

Two of the most foundational duties of those in ministry are to walk alongside those who are grieving and to conduct funerals for the deceased and their loved ones. While the church is no stranger to grief, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented new challenges in how the church approaches and supports those grieving the loss of loved ones.

Complicated grief defined

A study reported in "[Complicated Grief: What to Expect After the Coronavirus Pandemic](#)" estimates every person who dies leaves an average of five grieving people behind. Of those grieving, normally 10 to 20 percent will experience something commonly called "complicated grief."

Complicated grief is different from our general understanding of grief in that it often is marked by an abnormally prolonged sense of grief and a disbelief or inability to accept loss. This prevents the individual from processing the death of a loved one, finding closure and engaging in daily life in a healthy way.

William Worden argues there are four tasks of grief: accepting the reality of the loss, processing the pain of grief, adjusting to a world without the deceased, and finding an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life. Complicated grief represents an inability to move through these tasks in a standard amount of time or in a healthy

way.

The study mentioned above states that one of the determining factors of whether a person will develop complicated grief is how their loved one died. Those grieving during the pandemic may be more susceptible to developing complicated grief because many of their loved ones pass away while isolated in hospitals or care facilities.

Not only are the bereaved often unable to see their loved ones as they pass, but many have been prohibited from carrying out rituals such as funerals and family gatherings that help them process their loved ones' death and their own grief.

Christian hope during grief

As the church, we hold a unique and hopeful place for those who are grieving. We are called to weep with those who weep and proclaim God is with us in our suffering. We serve a God who suffered and died on a cross, and we proclaim our hope of his resurrection. This is a necessary and hopeful message we proclaim for Christians who have passed and those who grieve them.

Thomas G. Long writes in *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* that a Christian view of death and mourning tells two stories. The first is "the sad story of the severing of earthly bonds between the deceased brother or sister in the community." The second is "the hope-filled story of Christ's resurrection that allows the deceased brother or sister to be carried 'to the arms of God.'"

During the pandemic, pastoral caregivers must continue to proclaim these theological truths, while also recognizing more and more congregants may be experiencing complicated grief that might entail the need for additional services for those members.

Ways to minister to the grieving

When it comes to [congregant members suffering from complicated grief](#), the church can help in multiple ways. It can take actions intentionally in its pastoral ministry and liturgy that help acknowledge and remember a congregant's passing. This helps those grieving to have a concrete way to process and mourn their loved ones.

The first thing pastoral caregivers can do for those experiencing complicated grief is already to be discussing death and grieving theologically in sermons and discipleship classes.

Additionally, pastoral caregivers can educate themselves on the [nature and signs](#) of complicated grief. Being knowledgeable about complicated grief can help pastoral caregivers to identify when a congregant develops such grief and needs special care.

Pastoral caregivers also can build relationships with trained grief counselors, therapists and professionally facilitated support groups. Caregivers can help congregants recognize complicated grief and invite them to appropriate support groups.

Gordon H. Cook Jr. states in "[A Pastoral Response to Complicated Grief](#)" that when a congregant is not able to proceed through a healthy grieving process, to the point that grief inhibits normal functioning or activities, ministers need to recognize the congregant may need more help than the minister can give, and they need to refer the congregant to a professional who can provide the needed care.

Taking some of these steps can help the church during this pandemic to continue its ministry to those who are dying and to those who grieve the loss of loved ones. In doing so, we continue to proclaim our participation in Christ's suffering and the present and future hope of his resurrection, while

also seeking new ways we can help congregants in need of more specific care.

Paige Shellhorse is a licensed social worker and graduate of Baylor University's Diana R. Garland School of Social Work. She is pursuing a Master of Divinity degree at Baylor's Truett Theological Seminary and serves as a missions associate at First Baptist Church in Woodway.