

# Strategies & Resources to Cope with Grief & Loss in Faith Communities

Faith leaders serve as trusted sources of spiritual and emotional strength for their communities, providing guidance and solace in uncertain times. That's why, for centuries, people have turned to their faith leaders following the loss of a loved one — an especially vulnerable time of significant emotional distress.

As a faith leader, you may find the strategies and resources in this guide helpful as you continue this important work to support members of your community in a time of widespread loss.

## KEY DEFINITIONS

There are different ways to understand terms used frequently in this guide. Here is what we mean when we use certain terms:

**Grief**<sup>1</sup> is an emotional response to loss after a tragic event, which can disrupt our sense of routine and stability. If we usually expect a loved one's presence in our day-to-day lives, their loss can feel especially destabilizing. Some common reactions to grief include:

- Shock, disbelief, or denial
- Anxiety
- Distress
- Anger
- Periods of sadness
- Loss of sleep and loss of appetite

**Bereavement**<sup>2</sup> literally means “to be deprived by death.” It can be understood as the period of grief following the loss of a loved one.

**Mourning** is understood as the outward expression of grief.<sup>3</sup>

## COMMON REACTIONS TO GRIEF & LOSS

While individuals experiencing emotional hardship following the loss of a loved one may have entirely different reactions, common signs and symptoms of grief include<sup>4</sup>:

- Crying
- Having dreams, illusions, and even hallucinations of the deceased
- Seeking out things or places associated with the deceased
- Anger and denial
- Sadness or despair
- Fatigue or insomnia
- Eating disorders
- Feelings of guilt
- Loss of interest in activities or people
- Disorganization in daily routines

Sometimes, older people may not have obvious symptoms of depression. Instead, they may:

- Feel tired
- Have trouble sleeping
- Be grumpy or irritable
- Feel confused
- Struggle to pay attention
- Not enjoy activities they used to
- Move more slowly
- Have a change in weight or appetite
- Feel hopeless, worthless, or guilty
- Endure aches and pains
- Have suicidal thoughts

# 4 WAYS TO HELP CONGREGANTS COPE WITH THEIR GRIEF

As you have seen in your work, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing grief. Below are varied strategies that may help individuals heal and find support after a loss:

## 1 Create shared spaces for healing

Coming together with friends, family, and community members to share and process a loss can be a powerful strategy for healing from grief.<sup>5</sup>

- Create healing spaces by setting up recurring support groups led by a trained facilitator; support groups typically bring together individuals with shared experiences and can reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation, and of emotional distress.<sup>6</sup>
- Display posters and flyers about bereavement support that is available in-house and locally. Consider connecting with other houses of worship that have established bereavement groups and collaborate to bring new offerings for the bereaved.
- Establish a Day of Remembrance for all who have died during the previous year to offer congregants and their families a time in which to remember loved ones.

## 2 Foster dialogue about mental health and bereavement

- As a faith leader, you likely already speak one-on-one with congregants about their life concerns, but creating dedicated time to address their loss and invite them to share how they are feeling may be helpful in starting a conversation about mental health services.
- Additionally, as a faith leader, you can use sermons to normalize the emotional distress that may result from loss, and encourage congregants to seek help from professionals.

### 3 Set up wellness checks in the community one-on-one or through a dedicated group of people

- Encourage trusted community members to check-in regularly on bereaved congregants to show support, offer companionship, and inquire about their needs. In this case, we suggest making sure that these community members are aware of resources that are available to support congregants who may benefit from additional support.
- Start a dedicated bereavement team, made up of congregants from your community who have a background in behavioral health, and who can offer hope and healing to anyone who is mourning the death of a loved one.

### 4 Make connections to behavioral health support

If you know someone experiencing prolonged emotional distress following a loss, consider referring them to a behavioral health professional. Here is how to get started:

- Observe the person and get a sense of their needs and experiences
- Let the person know that you care and that additional support may be helpful in helping them cope
- Assure them that free and confidential mental health support exists
- With their consent, offer to help identify a behavioral health professional and make the preliminary call, so they feel supported and guided through the initial steps
- Consider inviting behavioral health experts from the community to address your congregation, or offer a community-based organization space to run support groups at your place of worship

If an older person chooses to seek care from a behavioral health professional, “Medicare provides some mental health coverage:

- Medicare Part A helps cover care if someone is hospitalized for mental health treatment
- Medicare Part B helps cover outpatient mental health care
- A Medicare Part D Prescription Drug Plan helps pay the costs of outpatient prescription drugs
- Medicare Advantage, Medicare Cost, and Medicare Supplement plans often have more coverage with set copays for doctor or specialist visits.”<sup>7</sup>

For more information on accessing mental health benefits through Medicare, view [this guide](#) from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

## MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE

New Yorkers can access a range of free mental health services by phone or online, regardless of insurance coverage or immigration status. If you or someone in your congregation needs support, we encourage you to reach out:

**1 Contact NYC Well**, a confidential helpline for mental health and substance misuse services. Trained counselors can provide you with support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, in over 200 languages. **CALL:** 1-888-NYC-Well (1-888-692-9355), **TEXT:** “Well” to 65173, or **CHAT ONLINE** at [nyc.gov/nycwell](https://nyc.gov/nycwell) to receive short-term and crisis counseling, immediate peer support, mobile crisis teams, or a connection to ongoing mental health and substance misuse services.

**2** Review our [How to Help Guide](#), where can you find the right kind of help.

**3** Call [NY Project Hope’s COVID-19 Emotional Support Helpline](#) at 1-844-863-9314 for free, confidential and anonymous support and connection to services near you. Support is available from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week.

**4** Find a free **Geriatric Mental Health Clinic** in your community to make a referral:

Borough	Mental Health Provider	Contact
Queens	CAPE Commonpoint Queens	718-224-0566
Manhattan	SPOP	212-787-7120 x 521
Staten Island	Weill Cornell Institute of Geriatric Psychiatry - Weill Cornell Medicine	844-999-8746
Bronx	JASA	718-365-4044
Brooklyn	Weill Cornell Institute of Geriatric Psychiatry - Weill Cornell Medicine	844-999-8746

**5** Call **Aging Connect** for referrals to resources, services, and opportunities for older adults and their families. Call 212-Aging-NYC (1-212-244-6469).

**6** Contact [A Caring Hand](#) to find resources and support for bereaved families and children, by calling 212-229-CARE (2273) or emailing [info@acaringhand.org](mailto:info@acaringhand.org).

**7** Reach out to [Jewish Board Bereavement Services](#) to find bereavement support for individuals and families at 888-523-2769 or [src@jbfcs.org](mailto:src@jbfcs.org).

**8** Find a Grief Support Center using a one-click online search tool for loss and grief resources: [live-evermore.org/grief-support-directory](https://live-evermore.org/grief-support-directory).

## 9 Additional mental health clinics in Queens:

<b>Facility</b>	<b>Services</b>
<b>NewYork-Presbyterian Queens Geriatric Psychiatry</b> Address: 56-45 Main Street, Flushing, NY 11355	Inpatient and outpatient programs are run by highly skilled psychiatrists and psychologists. To learn more about outpatient services or to find a psychiatrist, please call 877-NYP-WELL.
<b>The Zucker Hillside Geriatric Center - Mental Health Outpatient Program for Older Adults (Geriatric)</b> Address: 75-59 263rd Street, Glen Oaks, NY, 11004 Telephone: (718) 470-8100	The Hillside Geriatric Center provides comprehensive psychiatric evaluation and treatment to older adults. The Center primarily serves patients 65 years of age and over, but also accommodates younger patients with diagnoses/problems that are consonant with older adulthood, e.g., presenile dementia.
<b>Service Program for Older People (SPOP)</b> Tele-health services are available citywide. Telephone: (212) 787-7120 Fax: (212) 580-0533	Comprehensive behavioral health care is available for adults age 55 and older, with appointments in person and by telehealth.

To continue learning about how you can promote mental health as a faith leader, visit [the Mayor's Office of Community Mental Health's website](#) to find additional resources and training on a variety of topics:

- Mental Health Toolkit for Faith and Community Leaders
- Trauma Support in Communities (resource guide and webinar series)
- Role of faith communities in promoting mental health following a disaster (toolkit and virtual conversations)

## Endnotes

- 1 “Grief and Loss.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 22 July 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/stress-coping/grief-loss/index.html>.
- 2 “Bereavement and Grief for Military Families and Communities.” Mental Health America, <https://www.mhanational.org/bereavement-and-grief-military-families-and-communities>.
- 3 “Grief, Bereavement, and Coping with Loss (PDQ®).” PDQ Cancer Information Summaries [Internet], U.S. National Library of Medicine, 3 Dec. 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK66052/>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Institute of Medicine (US) Committee for the Study of Health Consequences of the Stress of Bereavement. “Bereavement Intervention Programs.” Bereavement: Reactions, Consequences, and Care., U.S. National Library of Medicine, 1 Jan. 1984, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK217843/>.
- 6 “Support Groups: Make Connections, Get Help.” *Mayo Clinic*, Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 29 Aug. 2020, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/patient-visitor-guide/support-groups/finding-support-group>.
- 7 <https://medicarehelp.healthpartners.com/blog/healing-tips-for-older-adults-who-are-grieving/>