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**Interruption of the Grieving Process Due to  
COVID-19 Pandemic: A Research Commentary  
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**Introduction**

As of May 22, 2020, the coronavirus infection (COVID-19) caused an estimated 1,577,147 confirmed cases and 94,702 deaths in the United States (Mortality Analyses, 2020). Among the increasing death toll, a new and growing phenomenon is emerging that involves individuals who contract the virus, receive hospitalization, and end up dying alone away from family members. According to Orr (2020), due to the high risk of infection from the virus, family members cannot visit their loved ones in the hospital, thereby leading to most COVID-19 patients dying alone without the presence of a single-family member.

This recent trend may interrupt the grieving process. "Grieving is a multifaceted response to loss, particularly to the loss of someone or something that has died, to which a bond or affection was formed" (Cerdan, 2017). David Kessler writing about grief stated, "The rituals around death are so important for healthy grief. Grief is a time of connection. We have always been able to be with their bodies, to gather for a funeral. All that is gone" (LaMotte, 2020).

The purpose of this research commentary is to bring attention to a recent development resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. State governments have implemented orders designed to protect public health and prevent the further spread of the COVID-19 virus. These orders have good intentions, but may impede the ability of a large number of individuals from grieving and getting closure regarding the death of a loved one. Individuals who fail grieving the loss of a loved one may likely experience unresolved or complicated grief. According to Gupta (2015), complicated grief negatively affects a person's mental, emotional, and physical health. This

growing trend of people having their grieving process disrupted is of particular concern for urban communities where currently most COVID-19 deaths are occurring (Bean, 2020).

### Traditional Grieving Process

Grieving the loss of a loved one due to death can be a complicated process under normal circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated that process. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, a large number of individuals who have lost a family member since the start of the pandemic cannot view the bodies of their loved ones. Many people need to see the body of their family member. The experience of seeing the loved one makes the loss real. One of the first steps in the grief process is denial. Until an individual accepts the death of their family member, no grieving can begin.

Psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, a pioneer in near death studies, authored the book *On Death and Dying* (1969) in which she discussed her theory of the five stages of grief known as the “Kubler-Ross Model”. The five stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Kubler-Ross theorized that when a loved one dies, a surviving family member might first experience denial about what has occurred. This process buffers the family member from the reality and shock of death and helps them to cope with the event (Gregory, 2019). After a period of time, individuals then experience anger when the notion of a loved one’s death sets in. Next is the bargaining stage in which the individual bargains with thoughts like “I will stop working long hours if I could only have my wife back.” The next stage of grief is depression. In this stage, the individual experiences feelings of deep sadness as the full meaning of the loss and resulting consequences sets in. Acceptance, the last stage of grief, results in a realization that the loved one is gone and will not be coming back. The individual develops a willingness to move on with life, and begins to make the necessary adjustments to live in the absence of the deceased loved one.

### Grieving and the Pandemic

The pandemic has created elements of pain and fear. As described by LaMotte, “What’s uniquely painful today is that after a loved one dies, families are trapped in quarantine, unable to touch and comfort each other, living in dread that another family member could fall ill. So we are not only robbed of our loved one, but we are also robbed of our ability to gather to honor

them. On a national level, this is really unprecedented" (LaMotte, 2020). I agree with this sentiment expressed by LaMotte. In a matter of two months, social distancing and quarantine recommendations have created a feeling of being isolated in American society that was not present before the pandemic. These recommendations have significantly reduced funerals from a memorial service to a brief ceremony, with few in attendance and limited opportunity for family members and friends to express their thoughts and feelings publicly. We have not experienced this as a nation. I believe social distancing will help reduce the spread of the coronavirus and protect public health. However, I also believe the long-term impact threatens some traditions that make us human, and will possibly result in the failure of many Americans grieving the loss of a loved one.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also influenced the nature of memorial services. Orr (2020) stated, "Funeral services are also affected, with restrictions placed on who can attend private ceremonies and burials. In most cases, only immediate family members are allowed to attend funeral services, and gatherings are limited to 10 or fewer people." Andrew Cuomo, Governor of New York said . . . "This is going to be one of those moments they're going to write and talk about for generations. This is a moment that is going to change this nation" (Orr, 2020). I agree with Governor Cuomo. The COVID-19 pandemic is a pivotal event that will affect future generations regarding how they view grieving and the grieving process. I believe some grieving rituals and behaviors we once commonly practiced will end never to return.

Due to the large number of individuals who have died because of the COVID-19 virus, and the accompanying shelter-in-place orders that have increased anxiety among thousands of citizens, mental health issues are taking center stage for the general public. First responders and medical professionals reeling under the shock of COVID-19 death are now in need of counseling and mental health treatment. At present, thousands of individuals cannot adequately grieve their loss due to COVID-19 restrictions. In my opinion, this failure to grieve will result in unresolved grief among many individuals and family members, and has potentially negative implications for family systems and social networks that normally help individuals manage their grief.

## Closing Thoughts

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of life in this nation. Due to the virus, on a very basic human level, our desire to support a hospitalized family member, or to be present at the bedside of a loved one in the last moments of life, has been cut off. Our cultural practices of embracing and consoling one another is now discouraged due to mandates for social distancing. The opportunity to freely gather in large numbers to memorialize and honor the memory of those we love now seems almost forbidden. According to Burke (2020), these are all rituals that support and aid the process of grieving which is crucial to our mental health and emotional stability. While the de-emphasizing, and in some cases prohibiting, of these practices help preserve life, health, and safety, one can only wonder if our society will ever be the same again. Will our “new normal” permanently limit the bereavement rituals we have practiced for decades? As a society, are we prepared to address the potential physical, mental, and cultural fallout resulting from such a shift? Answers to such questions will help determine if the grieving process will continue to be a source of comfort, or become a source that leads to more anger, pain, and discouragement. I hope we will regain the opportunity to make that choice for ourselves and loved ones.

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