

Coping with loss: We need a national strategy to address grief beyond the coronavirus pandemic

17 February 2021, by Susan Cadell



Grief is inevitable, and its effects on individuals, communities and populations need to be recognized and addressed. Credit: Shutterstock

The new president of the United States has been referred to as having [grief as a superpower](#). U.S. citizens have expectations about their president as "[comforter-in-chief](#)," something at which [President Biden's predecessor failed miserably](#).

As we surpass the grim milestone of [20,000 deaths in Canada to COVID-19](#), I am left wondering who is demonstrating leadership around grief in Canada.

Leadership around grief is not just recounting numbers. Neither is it small gestures alone, such as [flying flags at half mast](#). Public education is needed to better equip all of us at dealing with grief: [to recognize it in ourselves and therefore be better able to support one another](#).

Research in [Australia on support services for those who are grieving](#) has demonstrated that fewer than 10 percent accessed or needed professional services after a [death](#). However, people can benefit from the support of those around them: their neighbors, colleagues, members of their faith communities and other communities to which they

belong.

The inevitability of grief

That [old saying, "nothing is certain but death and taxes,"](#) should be amended to include grief. Grief is the [psychological, emotional, physical and social reaction to loss](#). Grief occurs after any kind of loss, [not just the death of a person](#).

As a social work researcher who studies grief, I am concerned that we are not very good at the [compassion toward ourselves](#) and others that is required in grief. [In my current research in grief](#), I have heard time and time again that those who are grieving tend to feel isolated and avoided.

Since the beginning of the global pandemic, [there has been a surge of articles about grief](#). We are experiencing [so many losses that may be causing us grief](#): jobs, freedom, security, housing, human touch, ceremony (funerals, graduations), as well as deaths. [Our rituals around death and grief have changed](#), for which there may be [long-term consequences](#).

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is no stranger to loss—he is a bereaved son and brother. He spoke eloquently and very publicly at his father's funeral. His brother Michel died at age 23 in 1998. Justin [honors him on his birthday, for special milestones, publicly in his social media](#).

Each one of us should be able to make decisions about how public or private we are with our own grief. I respect our [prime minister's](#) right to privacy about his personal losses; however, I am saddened he does not take leadership in terms of grief for the rest of us. He is not our comforter-in-chief. No one has ever described him as having grief as a superpower.

Counting death

No one counts how many people are grieving. Deaths are counted: per day, per year, per location. Deaths from COVID-19 are being [counted every day](#). People continue to die of other causes in the midst of the pandemic. Those deaths are overshadowed by the media's coverage of COVID-19 deaths. But those people count to those who care about them.

It is estimated that for every one person who dies, [there are five who grieve](#). With the increase in deaths due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, it has been estimated that there are [nine grievers for each death](#).

None of these numbers account for Black, Indigenous or people of color populations, who are disproportionately affected.

Nor do the numbers account for those who have been [traumatized by colonialism](#) or [racial violence as those traumas affect their grief](#).

2020 by [Canadian Virtual Hospice](#), which has been providing web-based support about palliative and end-of-life care for two decades. Since then, the CGA has called for the government to fund a national grief strategy that includes public awareness campaigns, educational initiatives and increased funding for grief-related research.

And yet, many months later, there is no national strategy.

In contrast to the [feelings of hope](#) in the [grief community](#) in the U.S. with the election of President Biden, this is disappointing. It is up to our [political leaders](#) to change this.

While I would like to live in a society where we all support one another in grief, and no superpowers are needed, we are not yet there. It is time for our leaders, especially our prime minister, to show that [grief](#) can be their superpower.

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Grief can be complicated for members of marginalized communities. A man crying after hearing the names of the victims of the Québec mosque attack during a rally in Toronto, Ont. on Feb. 4, 2017. Credit: Shutterstock

Addressing national grief

The [Canadian Grief Alliance \(CGA\)](#) was formed in

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