

Opinion

The Grief Crisis Is Coming

For each person who dies of Covid-19, experts say there are at least nine newly bereaved. We must begin to address the toll.

By Allison Gilbert

Ms. Gilbert is an author who writes extensively about grief and resilience. Her latest book is “Passed and Present: Keeping Memories of Loved Ones Alive.”

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Sandra Dionisi

The end of the Covid-19 crisis in the United States is in sight, thanks to effective vaccines being deployed on a massive scale. But the still growing death toll will leave behind millions of bereaved people, wracked by the

suffering that the loss of a loved one can bring. This is a public health crisis with consequences that may last generations, and for which we do not currently have the policy tools or resources to address.

We first need to get a sense of the scope of our national grief. Researchers are just beginning to count the bereaved, and while current estimates suggest five million Americans have lost a loved one to Covid-19, the final tally is likely to be much larger.

Ashton Verdery, an associate professor of sociology and demography at Pennsylvania State University, recently led a study that introduced the Covid-19 Bereavement Multiplier. By his team's calculus, for every person who dies of Covid-19, nine loved ones are left behind.

To arrive at that number, the researchers included the losses of spouses, siblings, parents, children and grandparents. If other relatives — like nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, stepparents — and friends are taken into account, “you may get 10 times or more” people in grief, Mr. Verdery said.

I know, from losing my parents at a young age, that grief plays out in waves across one's life and has no clear ending. We should be prepared for another health catastrophe; while the Covid-19 vaccines can put a cap on the burden, they can't halt or alleviate the pain. A recent study found that at least 37,000 children in the United States have lost a parent to Covid-19 so far.

Experts and grief organizations are asking American leaders to address this growing crisis. Evermore, one of the nonprofits that I have collaborated with in the past, is calling for the Biden administration to establish the first White House office of bereavement care to respond to the emotional and financial needs of grieving people after tragedy.

Another coalition of national bereavement organizations and grief researchers recently wrote to President Biden urging him to fund grief intervention services, including training to educate the public and professionals such as social workers, psychologists, teachers and clergy on how to assist the grieving.

Grass-roots groups like Covid Survivors for Change and Marked by Covid have lobbied at the state and federal levels for accountability to relatives of

victims, including public and online spaces for mourning and remembrance, and compensation for families of people lost to Covid-19.

The effects of grief can be as physical as the symptoms of any disease. The short- and long-term impacts are well studied and include trouble sleeping, higher blood pressure, depression and anxiety. Studies have found that people who lose a spouse die earlier than their married peers. Children who experience loss of a parent may suffer lasting consequences, including lower grades and failing in school, as well as increased experimentation with drugs and alcohol.

The social effects can be drastic as well. Nearly 90 percent of young people in the juvenile justice system report having experienced the death of at least one loved one. And although grief is a universal experience, it can contribute to lifelong racial inequality, as Black Americans experience the loss of loved ones far more frequently and earlier in life than white Americans, contributing to differences in mental and physical health outcomes.

“Grief should be investigated the same way we examine other public health indicators like obesity, smoking and drinking,” said Dr. Toni Miles, a professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at the College of Public Health at the University of Georgia.

After conducting a statewide health survey three years ago, Dr. Miles discovered that 45 percent of Georgia residents over 18 indicated they were newly bereaved. The findings suggested that grief was far more prevalent than the other three risk factors, she said.



As the coronavirus robs us of the life we cherish, a renowned therapist has some advice.

Viewing grief as a threat to overall health could pave the way for prevention efforts — including financial assistance — that help individuals navigate life-altering changes, such as shifts in family income and housing. “We need systemic change to protect those who are left behind,” Dr. Miles told me.

A White House office of bereavement care is a necessary start, and could benefit families who have lost loved ones to other causes, such as gun violence. There are early signs that this administration could be the one to embrace bereavement care. Starting on Monday, people who paid for the funeral and burial expenses of someone who died from Covid-19 can apply for up to \$9,000 in reimbursement, the Federal Emergency Management Agency recently announced.

Mr. Biden has spoken frequently from experience about the scars that grief can leave, and what it’s like to face the “empty chair around the kitchen table.” He has the chance to reduce the toll that loss takes on its victims and on all of us.

Allison Gilbert (@agilbertwriter) is an author and speaker. Her latest book is “Passed and Present: Keeping Memories of Loved Ones Alive.”