

Long-distance Grief

It's always hard to live overseas when there's a crisis back home, but COVID-19 has created the worst kind of heartache for far too many.

BY MELINDA MURPHY

I usually love living abroad – and I especially love living in Singapore. But not now, not today. You see, my sweet father-in-law died in the United States yesterday and we couldn't go back to say goodbye. Nor can we hold a traditional funeral with everybody under lockdown.

COVID-19 didn't kill this dear family member of mine, but it has certainly changed the way we mourn him. I suspect there will be many more of these sad stories with people losing loved ones back home, many to the virus or perhaps just other natural deaths. And what if somebody dies here?

In some ways, Flying Home specialises in long-distance grief. For years now, they've worked to repatriate people who have died in Singapore so they can return home for burials and funerals with their loved ones. The world's current situation has changed this to some degree. For example, if a person here dies of COVID-19, they can only be cremated to return home at a later date, and funerals back home are often delayed.

So, how then do we honour our loved ones? The Flying Home team has some great suggestions.

#1 Don't delay Funerals help us heal, and delaying them also delays the healing. Work together to plan what will be said and what will unfold at the service, no matter how small the service will be. Working together to plan makes everybody feel a part of the mourning process. If there's a small service at a church, consider live-streaming it to family members around the globe.

#2 Mark the loss privately Have some sort of service, even if it's only a private one in your own home with immediate family. Display photos of the person who died, light a candle, say a prayer or read a text aloud that is meaningful to you. You can even play music while sharing thoughts and memories. Or perhaps you'd rather release balloons at the beach or go to a park and pray with your family. Create your own version of a small memorial.

#3 Plan a memorial service for later While it's impossible to really know when the pandemic will end, you can still talk about what a memorial service will include and where it will take place. Doing this now rather than later helps the healing process begin. When the restrictions are lifted and we can all be together again, gather with your loved ones and say a proper farewell.

#4 Use technology to connect In times of grief, it's important to connect with loved ones. Sadly, several of my friends in New York have already held virtual memorial services for family members and friends who have died of COVID-19. One of them had almost 100 attendees. It's hard for everybody to talk during these, but the chat function helps everybody share memories while one or two people say something meaningful. It may seem a bit hokey, but by all accounts, these virtual memorial services are healing.

#5 Write! As a professional writer, I find sitting down and writing about the person I've lost can help. I write about them, reminding myself what I loved and what I'll miss. Sometimes I write to them, telling them things I've left unsaid. Or, I write to the other people who are also grieving, sharing my memories and love. I was surprised when my 11-year-old daughter did the same yesterday. Writing does heal.

I've really struggled with not being able to be there for my family, not being able to say goodbye. I tried to explain to my nine-year-old son that it's okay. We can still say our own goodbye. And his grandfather will be remembered over and over in small ceremonies across the globe, each of us saying our goodbyes before we get together to say the final farewell. *ε*

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