

The Canadian Grief Alliance

presentation to

House of Commons Standing Committee on Health

concerning

**The Emergency Situation Facing Canadians in Light
of the Second Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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Presented by: Paul Adams and Maxxine Rattner

Mr. Chairman, Honourable Members

Mr. Paul Adams: Thank you for inviting the Canadian Grief Alliance to speak to you today. We are a coalition of grief experts and 150 leading health organizations, including the Canadian Medical Association, the Canadian Nurses Association and the Canadian Psychiatric Association. We came together last spring to ask all levels of government to turn their minds to this issue urgently in the context of Covid-19 and in anticipation of the deadly toll we have seen since.

Almost every one of us has suffered grief in our lives—the loss of a mother or father, a spouse or partner, a child or perhaps a close friend. As profound as our grief may have been, for most of us what we suffered was the usual response of human beings to profound loss. For most of us, with the help of family and friends, and the passage of time, we rejoined the trajectory of our lives, even if the ache of loss never entirely disappeared.

But what the research tells us is that when grief is complicated--if circumstances prevent us from having the space or support to grieve, it can transform: into depression or anxiety, dependence or addiction, self-harm or the thoughts of it.

Today, we are suffering a pandemic of grief. Nearly 20,000 Canadians have died of Covid-19. The image of a nurse holding up an iPad for a final goodbye is now a familiar one. Robbed of the chance to be with their loved one at their deathbed, the grieving may have a funeral replaced with a Zoom call. Instead of a house filled up with friends and family, the grieving may get a frozen lasagna dropped socially distanced at the door. No hug, no touch, no lingering visits.

Nowadays, much of this is also true of those who grieve for the 25,000 people who die in an ordinary month in Canada, whether from cancer or heart disease or anything else. More than two million Canadians are estimated to have been touched directly by death in their circle in this pandemic, and their experience is anything but normal. It is the complicated grief we know may lead to enduring issues of mental health.

And specific communities are especially affected. Health workers exposed to a scale of suffering even they are unaccustomed to. The CGA also recognizes the generations of grief that Indigenous Peoples carry as a result of colonization and structural violence which is often overlooked in public health policy.

Our existing system is not well equipped to deal with grief, in part because it is rightly not regarded as a form of mental illness. Indeed, mental health advice that is sound for those confronting anxiety or depression may actually make matters worse for the grieving. The grieving need dedicated support that understands the nature of their grief and how to guide them.

That is why we, at the Canadian Grief Alliance, believe it is time for a Canadian Grief Strategy, whose aim would be to help Canadians avoid succumbing to enduring mental health challenges that will diminish their lives and take a toll on our society and our health care system.

My colleague, Maxxine Rattner, will give the specifics.

Specifically, we are proposing a three-part, emergency-based response as the first steps of a Canadian Grief Strategy:

1. First, Canadians need expanded access to grief services where they live. Grief services that were largely under-resourced before the pandemic are now bursting at the seams, trying to meet skyrocketing demands. In many parts of the country, there are long wait lists or a complete absence of grief services. Without sufficient grief services, the risks for mental health issues to develop will increase. Communities disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, including racialized and Indigenous communities, are also being disproportionately impacted by grief. Grief support services and programs led by and for these communities are essential. Like the social determinants of health, we invite you to consider the social determinants of grief, and the urgent need for an infusion of emergency funding to support a health-equity-informed, community-based response to pandemic-related and affected grief for Canadians.

2. Second, we propose a national public awareness campaign to increase Canadians' understanding of grief and provide education and strategies to help Canadians grieving in isolation to cope. Such a campaign would also acknowledge our collective grief as a country.

3. And third, Canadians have never experienced the depth and breadth of grief and loss like this before. We propose a rapid, national consultation in the immediate term, and dedicated research funding in the months to come, that would allow us to better understand pandemic-related and affected grief. We have a model that would allow us to complete the consultation within two months, as we are connected to all organizations doing this work and engaged with diverse communities across the country.

The emergency measures outlined are necessary but not sufficient to quell the rising tide of grief, and its anticipated medium and long-term social, economic and mental health impacts on Canadian society. We urge you to implement a Canadian Grief Strategy that brings together federal government departments, provincial and territorial partners and NGOs to build a coordinated, sustained and evidence-based response to the growing needs of grieving Canadians. Grief cuts across the government's work in health and public health — from dementia to substance use, Indigenous communities and children — we envision this Strategy as having a lasting place within the framework of government. A Canadian Grief Strategy will help to prevent significant mental health outcomes for individuals, families and communities across the country now, and in the months and years to come. Canada has the opportunity to be a true leader by being the first country worldwide to commit to a Grief Strategy in the wake of Covid-19. On behalf of an ever-growing number of grieving Canadians, we urge you not to miss this opportunity.

Thank you.