**The benefits and challenges of grieving online**

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Technology and social media have started to change and reshape the way we grieve. There’s even a word to describe our digital grief: thanatechnology. [Carla Sofka](https://www.siena.edu/faculty-and-staff/person/carla-sofka/), a professor of social work at Siena College who specializes in death, grief and the internet, coined this term in the late ’90s to refer to technology that can be used to deal with death, grief and loss. This broad category can include online grief groups or memorial pages and even the use of artificial intelligence to help process grief. Digital mourning will probably become even more common now as those who grew up with social media become adults, says [Nirmala Bijraj](https://alignedself.co/team/nirmala-bijraj/), a licensed mental health counselor who specializes in grief counseling. “I feel like we’re getting into a world that is a lot more technology based. The younger generations growing up only know technology,” she explains. “In a few years, these teenagers are going to be older and they’re going to experience unfortunate life events that they may seek treatment for. They are going to turn to social media platforms, such as Instagram or TikTok, as it’s already their main source of seeking information online.” Younger generations will also use these technologies and platforms in different and innovative ways, such as finding a therapist based on their social media marketing and videos, she adds. People used to connect with others through phone calls or in-person visits, but now more people, especially younger generations, are finding their support systems online, Bijraj continues. This trend has only increased in popularity following the COVID-19 pandemic, she adds, because there was a sudden increase in digital resources when people were no longer able to access mental health services in person as easily. Because technology is integrated into our daily lives, it has also changed our perception on how we grieve publicly. This is especially true for younger generations. “Younger people in particular feel safer being more and more transparent online because there’s a certain inevitability that all of our lives are now online in some capacity,” says [Jeremy Bergen](https://www.bergencounselingcenter.com/jeremy-bergen/), a licensed clinical professional counselor who specializes in grief therapy. Public displays of grief online can have benefits. They can decrease the taboo on grief and death and allow people to discuss and share their grief with others more freely. Digital grieving can also increase people’s sense of community and support; they can use the internet and social media to find and connect with others who are experiencing loss and discover grief-related resources.

**A sense of community and support**

The terms *grieving* and *mourning* may seem synonymous, but there are subtle differences. Bijraj describes grief as “the internal process that you go through when you have a loss,” while mourning is what other people see you going through. The internet can provide a space for people to express their grief freely. People who are grieving can go online and easily access support and find community, which are two of their biggest needs, says Bijraj, the owner and clinical director of Aligned Self, a virtual counseling practice that sees clients in New York and Florida. For example, someone may see a meme about grief that expresses what they are feeling better than they are currently able to with words. A [2010 study](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/46578570_Student_Reactions_to_the_Shootings_at_Virginia_Tech_and_Northern_Illinois_University_Does_Sharing_Grief_and_Support_Over_the_Internet_Affect_Recovery) published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* found that in the aftermath of the Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University shootings, students self-reported that they found social media to provide a sense of relief and community. Social media sites honoring the deceased can also serve as a digital memory or even allow the person who is grieving space to “talk” with the person they lost. In an [article](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9411041/) published in the *Journal of Technology in Behavioral Science* in 2022, Rachel King and Pelham Carter explored the motivations people have for using social media platforms to grieve and found that creating or posting on memorial pages on social media provides people with a perceived safe and comfortable place to mourn and maintain a bond with the deceased. Jo Bell, Louis Bailey and David Kennedy also highlight the mental health benefits of using social media as a virtual memorial in their [2015 article](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26692812/) published in *Mortality.* They say memorial sites or online identities of the deceased help keep them virtually “alive” and present in the lives of the bereaved. [Terrilyn Battle](https://www.blackfemaletherapists.com/directory/listing/terrilyn-battle-lcmhc-a-lcas-r-crc/), a licensed clinical mental health counselor associate and owner of the Wright Branch Counseling and Consulting Services in North Carolina, says the internet and social media can provide clients with a sense of emotional release — a space where they can express their thoughts and feelings. “I also think it’s a space of reflection for people cause I’ve seen [times] where individuals provide a narrative where they reflect on or reminisce on memories of the person, putting up pictures or having a thoughtful moment with their words and expressing their care for the person who passed away,” she says. “It provides a sense of community for a lot of people.” Some of her clients have told her they felt they needed to process their grief online by posting pictures or memories of the deceased. “I think a lot of my clients have made meaning of [the grief or loss] by being able to say, ‘I put this picture up. … I can always go back to this. I always have this as a memorial for this person. I always have this to reference if I ever miss them,’” she says. “It offers a glimmer of hope for them in the mourning process.”

**The drawbacks of grieving online**

Grieving through online platforms also has the potential to be harmful. According to the 2021 article “[Digital mourning and memories](https://ineqe.com/2021/06/18/digital-mourning-and-memories/)” by INEQE Safeguarding Group, younger generations may feel obligated to share their feelings online when a tragedy happens even if they don’t feel comfortable doing so. The article also points out that people may be critical of how others mourn online, such as commenting that they haven’t posted enough about the deceased or saying their posts are too light-hearted or “happy,” which could push people further into isolation. Bergen, founder of Bergen Counseling Center in Chicago, says thanatechnology can also lead people to grieve more passively as well as make them feel more isolated. For example, rather than interacting with others, they may just scroll through their website feeds. Although this can feel validating, passive scrolling doesn’t help grieving people become more connected, he says. There is also the opportunity for negative, potentially traumatic comments from people with the intent to “troll” or be intentionally (or unintentionally) hurtful and judgmental. People may also come across misinformation online when searching for support, adds [Hannah Coyt](https://lakebh.com/our-team), a licensed professional clinical counselor-supervisor in Kentucky. She once had a client whose mental health was made worse by incorrect information they found online, so they spent their first few sessions debunking the information the client had internalized.

**Different types of grief**

Demographic and cultural factors (such as religion, age, race/ethnicity and gender), a person’s relationship with the deceased and the cause of death all affect how people process and experience grief. And these are important to keep in mind when working with grieving clients. How somebody handles the death of an ill grandparent, for example, is going to be different than how they might grieve the sudden loss of a friend, says Coyt, the clinical coordinator in the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University. “The two main types of grief are anticipatory grief and unexpected grief or loss,” she notes. “There are levels of [grief.] If someone is sick and you know [death] is going to happen and it finally does happen, there’s a caveat there; even though it was expected, it’s still difficult.” There is also grief that comes from non-death-related losses. People can grieve over many different things such as the end of a relationship, the loss of a job, a divorce or a major life change such as moving to a new city or the onset of a disability, explains Battle, a licensed clinical addiction specialist and certified rehabilitation counselor. It’s important counselors take time to educate clients about the types of grief, says Coyt, who has given several presentations on grief, because they often aren’t aware there are different kinds. She also suggests clinicians share resources online to help people who are already using technology to help them process their grief.

**Incorporating thanatechnology into counseling**

Counselors can incorporate thanatechnology into their work with clients who are grieving. For example, Battle, an assistant professor of counseling at Stockton University, suggests counselors research and find digital channels that focus on positivity or are designed to comfort grieving people so that they can recommend them to their clients. This way, clients can visit and interact with the resources on their own time. Bergen says blogging — either through a private document or a public platform — can be another helpful tool for some clients and can allow them to share their grief journey publicly if they want. “It’s a way to sort of declare your feelings to the world in a very instant way,” he explains. Bergen also recommends clients find online support forums or groups that allow them to share and receive feedback on their online stories or posts. Examples of these types of groups include Facebook groups or forums such as Reddit. But these groups shouldn’t be the sole source of support, he adds, because it’s “ultimately more isolating” than connecting with people the client knows in real life. Counselors should also ask the client questions to better understand the deceased and their relationship with the client. “[Clients] want to talk about the person that they lost. You don’t know them, and you don’t know their relationship and you don’t know what that person was to them. You want them to describe that to you,” Bijraj says. Coyt advises counselors to use the first few sessions to get to know the deceased and the relationship the client had with them. “Don’t talk. Just listen. And know there’s no abnormal way to grieve,” she says. “Remind your client of that as well.” At the end of the day, clients who are grieving often just want to be seen. “A big thing with grief and mourning is that it needs to be witnessed,” Coyt says. “It’s why we have funeral services. It’s why we talk about these things. Social media gives people [another] platform to be able to do that.”

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