

What you need to know about:

## Interviewing in times of grief



Families that have lost loved ones to COVID-19 are affected by a deep sense of loss and emotional shock. Journalists need to capture the human face of the pandemic not only through frontline workers and scientists but also through the personal experiences of families and friends.

The emotional shock that people undergo includes feelings of guilt and constant ruminations about what they should have done. When loved ones are unable to bid farewell the usual way, they may suffer intensely and have additional trauma about the changes in funeral rituals. Mass burials and burnings have come to characterise COVID-19 deaths in some settings.

And in some settings, funerals have had to become uncharacteristically small in order to observe safety protocols. Funerals can be difficult to organise and restrictive. Without the distraction of normal rituals around death and instead surrounded by misinformation and speculation about the disease that has robbed them of their loved one, stress is invariable.

Thoughts that the loved one died alone, leads to feelings of guilt, shame, anger, frustration, disbelief, hurt and a sense of injustice. But also remember also that our interviewees may be grieving in isolation or semi-isolation without the comfort of friends and family. There can be anxiety that they or other family members could die too or guilt that they may have infected their loved one and always a sense of despair that no one is safe. People also suffer intense stress because of the fear of the future such as instability in the family, lack of job security and difficult financial conditions, together with stigmatization.

### Before the interview

Make an arrangement for a phone call or video call using whatever technology you and your interviewee are most comfortable with. As the conversation unfolds, decide whether it is appropriate to encourage your source to pass the phone/device around and talk to as many loved ones as you can if there are multiple people at the home. Relatives and visitors are not allowed to congregate in homes, hospitals or funeral homes, when a person dies of COVID-19. So be sure to get as many names and numbers as you can from your initial source so that you can call other potential interviewees. A richer and fuller story emerges as you talk to more people.

Rather than texts or emails, attempt a personal connection by calling people on the phone. Doing so will help you perceive and capture their emotional state far better.

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## During the interview

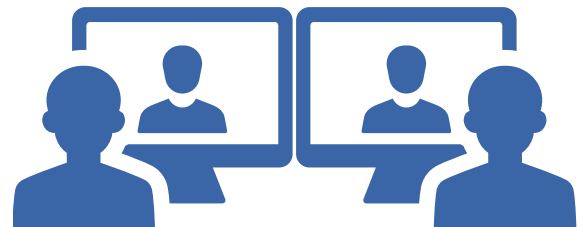


Open by asking if the interviewee feels comfortable about going ahead with the conversation. Keep sentences and questions short, simple, and open. It's important to not to make the interviewees feel guilty by going into why the death happened, but to listen to their accounts. Asking why a loved one died is to risk stirring up unnecessary feelings of self-blame and may add to trauma.

It is also advisable to avoid insensitive questions such as 'how do you feel?' Such questions may unleash emotions that we may not be equipped to deal with. Avoid insensitive statements such as 'I know how you feel'. We honestly don't.

The trauma of losing a loved one takes a physical and mental toll, causing exhaustion, and affecting concentration and recall. Be gentle and give the interviewee time to answer. The tone of our voices matters, particularly when we interview people remotely. We need to use our voices to convey that we are attentive, sensitive and respectful.

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**Plan the interview so that you can gradually move the conversation away from distressing recollections and to the present moment before you thank them and take leave. If the interviewee breaks down, give them the comfort of time to regain control. Ask if there is someone with them or someone they can call.**

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## After the interview

An important part of the work journalists do on reporting grief is how we close the loop with the interviewees and with ourselves.


Being interviewed by the media during a time of intense personal grief can leave our interviewees feeling exposed, unsure and vulnerable. Family members and friends who have shared their feelings with the media deserved to be informed about how the journalist plans to use their interviews.

Interviewees deserve to be told what the context of the story is, how much or which parts of the interview are likely to be used; who else may be quoted in the story, and where else the interview may be shared. In particular, they need to be informed whether their clips or photos may be used to promote the story or pop up on social media platforms.

Showing empathy while engaging with grieving families and loved ones of the deceased is not only about being sensitive, it is also about helping those in grief open up to the journalist.

Conclude the interview by thanking them and take leave gradually, not abruptly, as though they have been dismissed and you are now moving on to something else. It is also a good idea to get in touch with them after your story is out, share the link and later give them an opportunity to give you feedback. During periods when people are undergoing multiple kinds of stress, these conversations can make a difference to both interviewee and journalist.

The loss and stress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic make these difficult times for us all. As journalists on the frontlines, we are likely to be repeatedly exposed to intimate and traumatic moments in the lives of those we report on. When we get repeatedly exposed to the trauma of others it is the most natural thing to ourselves feel anxious, vulnerable or isolated. It might help to relieve those feelings by sharing the experience of what it was to interview someone during a time of intense grief and bereavement with a person you trust and respect, such as a colleague, friend or therapist.



**The bottom line is that we need to take care of our interviewee/s as well as ourselves.**