

# Chapter 13

## Support Sisters: Life After COVID-19, Cancer, and Caregiving

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### ABSTRACT

*Those who lost loved ones to illness other than COVID-19 during the pandemic may have experienced feelings of confusion, isolation, and loneliness. Losing a spouse during the COVID-19 pandemic was a phenomenon. As society feared the coronavirus, some individuals fought deadly cancer diseases. Victims of cancer may not have received the proper and due medical care during the pandemic due to limited hospital beds, priority of care given to COVID-19 patients, or there may have been reduced medical staff. The author shares her personal story about her connection to group of women who met each other after the loss of their husbands to cancer during the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter reviews the benefits of creating support groups after the COVID-19 pandemic, and counseling implications of how grief support counseling groups are proven to be compassionate, encouraging, resourceful, comforting, and life changing.*

### INTRODUCTION

From 2019 to 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the entire world with an infection running rampant causing not only alarm and fear, but frustration with those who were fighting terminal illnesses. Some patients and their families had to compete with COVID-19 patients to obtain treatment or medical visits. Not only were there over 7 million deaths related to the deadly virus (Worldometer, 2024),

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but many patients also died of cancer during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, in 2020 over 10 million people died of cancer globally, according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022). My husband, Sammy, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in July 2020. It was the worst time to receive a cancer diagnosis. Due to COVID-19 restrictions on access to health services, including visits to the family doctor, cancer screening tests and visits to specialists, cancer patients were diagnosed at a more advanced stage during the pandemic (Rucinska & Nawrocki, 2022). My husband was a healthy man. He grew produce to avoid pesticides and exercised regularly, so we were in disbelief after receiving the cancer diagnosis, and in the middle of a worldwide pandemic.

I became the caregiver to my husband for the following 4 months after receiving his diagnosis. I felt as if I was in a whirlwind and didn't have the opportunity to process the cancer diagnosis. During those four months, we experienced challenges of receiving treatment for my husband due to competing attention with COVID-19 infected patients. After four months, my husband died from pancreatic cancer. The lack of attention given to non-COVID-19 infected patients added to my grief.

The purpose of this chapter is to share details of my own personal experience of loss during the COVID-19 pandemic while bringing awareness to the challenges experienced by caregivers, and share the value of grief support counseling groups in healing. Counseling implications to address issues experienced by caregiving clients who lost their loved ones to terminal illness during the COVID-19 pandemic are also presented.

## **THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Receiving a diagnosis of cancer during, or prior to, the COVID-19 pandemic required support not only from an experienced medical team, but also family members, particularly those who were caregivers. Hiring professional caregivers may not have been financially feasible for families, so was typical that caregivers were family members such as spouses or children.

Family physical presence is necessary to mitigate severe harms of isolation for patients who are suffering from terminal illnesses. However, COVID-19 caused a panic that changed how healthcare was provided which likely led to emotional harm of not just the patients, but also their family and caregivers. Hospital patients were isolated to protect them from infection by separating infectious people from uninfected people (Voo et al., 2020), but there were consequences to these restrictions. Caregiving was particularly challenging for those of us who were spouses, and who had to postpone grief of our significant loved ones as we cared for them through

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