

# How To Mourn During A Pandemic

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***Reading time: ~20 minutes***

It was 2 a.m. in Boston, an ungodly hour, that time of day when it feels impossible to be awake. As her husband and son slept, U-Meleni Mhlaba-Adebo walked to her kitchen and set up her MacBook Air on the island. The prospect of a long morning loomed ahead.

Mhlaba-Adebo logged onto Facebook Live. That's when she saw it: In the same living room in Zimbabwe where she watched movies and the news with her mother, where baby photos of her and her brother mingled with traditional Zimbabwean soapstone carvings, she saw the coffin. Her mother's coffin. Her mother's college graduation photo sat on top, and hymns sung in her native language of Shona filled the room. Family members wore masks.

And then there was Mhlaba-Adebo, sitting in her home 7,600 miles away and feeling like she was breaking in two.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Mhlaba-Adebo used to be there for her mother Helen Murapa, who once worked as an archivist and librarian for the United Nations documenting women's contributions to the world. Whenever Mhlaba-Adebo needed to, the Boston-based artist would travel to Zimbabwe to visit her mother as she battled cancer. "I would literally drop everything, get on a plane and go for a month or two, and be able to sort of breathe life back into her, if you will, by attention and love and care," she says.

COVID-19 made that impossible. Over the months, as the pandemic locked down international borders, Mhlaba-Adebo watched from WhatsApp as her mother's health slipped — from a stroke to a coma to her death in June.

The funeral was no different. For eight hours, Mhlaba-Adebo stayed on Facebook Live and watched horrified as her mother's funeral took place in Zimbabwe. She saw her body picked up for the service, the ceremony, the speeches about her mom's life muffled by masks, the prayers from pastors, the procession to the burial site, the readings — including one written by Mhlaba-Adebo — and finally her mother being lowered into the ground. Later in the morning, her husband came to the kitchen to be with her.

Being online for the entire process was taxing, but for Mhlaba-Adebo, it was necessary to be present while her family laid her mother to rest. "I felt like I needed to because that was the closest thing I could get to being there for my mom," she says. "I felt that my being uncomfortable and exhausted was something that I should do, considering the things that my mother did to support me and to give me opportunities that I've had in my life."

Finally, at 10 a.m., she logged off. Though she may have witnessed her mother's funeral, the process of mourning her death was just beginning.

Across the country, many people are experiencing grief over the loss of a loved one. This was the case prior to COVID-19 claiming the lives of over 90,000 people in May, then 177,000 in August and now more than 464,000 in the U.S. as of publication.

Funerals are often one of the ways we process our grief. The hugs and close conversations are just the start. In the days and weeks following, there are also home visits and food brought by friends and myriad other ways people connect to work through grief.

COVID-19 has made this in-person support unsafe. Funerals and other forms of mourning have increasingly gone online or been skipped altogether in order to prevent super-spreader events. How does this affect how we collectively process grief during a time when so many of us face it?

And when we've already lost a loved one, what else do we lose when we can't come together to say goodbye?

## **An Epidemic During A Pandemic**

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Our processing of grief may be more collective than ever.

Toni Miles, an epidemiologist at the University of Georgia, says there is an epidemic of bereavement stemming from an aging population. The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that by 2060, almost a quarter of all Americans will be 65 years and older and the number of Americans 85 and older will triple. Prior to COVID-19, close to 3 million people passed every year. For 2020, that number is projected to be 20% higher. That means more people becoming a part of the existing epidemic of bereavement. This has even led to a recent push to form a White House Office of Bereavement Care that would help families cope with death from tragedies including COVID-19, gun violence, opioids, and suicide.

For every person who dies, there are about five people connected to them who are bereaved, Miles says. This has a ripple effect. Depending on the deceased person's role, people might have lost financial support, a connection to health insurance, a caregiver. Older people tend to have larger social networks and families, so even more people can be affected when they die. All of this has contributed to the bereavement epidemic.

And there are consequences. Miles has found that bereavement makes us less likely to care for ourselves. Bereaved people are more likely to have insomnia, which can lead to hypertension or diabetes. Pregnant people who are bereaved over the death of a family member have significant signs of oxidative stress in their urine, she adds. Oxidative stress is associated with several diseases and pregnancy-related complications.

All other factors being equal bereaved people are more likely to die. "It adds a layer of risk to anything else you got going on," Miles says.

She has endeavored to quantify bereavement and successfully urged the state of Georgia to add a question to the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, a health-related phone survey done in every state. The 2019 survey asked Georgians: Are you newly bereaved in the past two years?

The answer surprised even Miles. She found that 45% of people were newly bereaved, triple what she estimated.

## Touch-Free Mourning

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John Wilson was a man who collected people. A musician in southwestern Virginia's Floyd County, he had many fans, friends, and family members. So when he died in February of 2020, his daughter Cassie Wilson planned to have a large potluck with musical tributes for the people who were close to her father.

COVID-19 changed those plans. Floyd County is rural, nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains, and a friend pointed out to Wilson that a large gathering — like a funeral that would have attendees from all over the world — could turn into a super-spreader event.

Wilson agreed. On a gray March day, John was sent off with 14 people in attendance. Her family held a Quaker ceremony with a coffin built out of local wood by her husband. Wearing jackets to guard against the cool spring air, the mourners said goodbye to John and buried him on a mountain ridge near pine trees.

The shortened guest list limited who could comfort his family in person. Like any funeral, John's was mostly for those he left behind.

“[A funeral] gives living people a chance to see the level of injury of, say, the family, the most intimately connected people, that they may not express,” epidemiologist Toni Miles says.

People bring food to the grieving family members so they don't need to forage when they're most unable. During these visits, people can also see if there are unexpressed financial or other needs and sense mourners' emotional state, perhaps helping them work through it, Miles says. That doesn't happen when friends can't visit the family.

Wilson's cousins in England send regular WhatsApp messages saying they're thinking about her father. The family wants to have a physical event at some point but doesn't know when. Though the cousins attended the abridged funeral over Zoom, Wilson says it feels incomplete without a physical connection.

“I think in a weird way not having had the funeral makes it harder,” she says. “The big hugs and the crying and the conversations are kind of incomplete by not being there together, not having the public, shared experience. It's kind of harder to talk about it online or virtually with them in some ways.”

A feeling of something unfinished can linger when the comforts of an in-person funeral, such as family visiting from afar, go missing. Grief can waver between being emotional and physical, sometimes both at the same time.

It takes a toll on our bodies. Heather Servaty-Seib, a professor of counseling psychology at Purdue University, explains that grief affects people's lung capacity as well as their immune and heart functions. Their muscles grow sore from the tension and the stress.

“[Grief] is cognitive; it is physical; it's spiritual. People are affected in all domains of their life,” says Servaty-Seib, who leads Purdue's grief and loss research team. It's possible to fulfill emotional needs online, but that still leaves out others. “You're not able to be there physically in the way that grief and loss is so physical,” she says.

That's why physical contact with others — a hug, a touch on the shoulder — is so soothing, she says. COVID-19 has robbed us of this.

## Searching For Closure

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To have a funeral for her grandfather in COVID-19 times, Laura Hensley and her family would have had to follow a series of measures: A limited guest list, submitted in advance. Shifts of maximum 20 people at a time. Cleaning between each shift.

“It felt like a lot of money and a lot of stress for not really much of a payoff,” Hensley says. She and her sister were with their grandfather John Hlavach as he died in September 2020 at 94 years old from cancer. As a child, he immigrated to Canada from a rural town in Slovakia with only one road. He was like a father to Hensley growing up.

So instead of a full funeral, the Toronto-based family opted for a small memorial at the cemetery with five members of the immediate family in attendance. People said their own words with no clergy present. At his urn, they placed white roses and baby's breath, the color white symbolizing life for Hensley.

To her, it felt like they just said a few words and left. She came away longing for the opportunity to properly acknowledge her grandfather's life.

“I think a funeral would have afforded me that,” she says. “People now, especially during COVID, they're just making things up as they go along. We just had to make it up as we went along because we've never lived through a pandemic. We've never mourned through a pandemic.”

This is unprecedented for Hensley's grandmother too. After almost 72 years of marriage and without the closure of a traditional funeral, she has looked for other ways to mourn. She was adamant about printing memorial cards with Hlavach's obituary and a smiling photo of him. That way, people could have a physical token in lieu of signing a guestbook or attending a funeral.

She also dried out some of the roses that people sent and made them into potpourri, so she could hold onto them for a little longer.



“I said to her, ‘Wow, that’s really beautiful, nana,’” Hensley says. “I’m like, ‘You’re keeping part of grandpa’s memory with you this whole time,’ and I think that’s why she did it. She didn’t want to say goodbye to some of the flowers that people had sent.”

Since then, Hensley has run an online obituary where people have left comments and memories of her grandfather. For now, it’s as close to closure as they can get.

“Especially when you’re sad and you’re mourning and you’re going through a hard time, you underestimate the power of touch and a hug and physically being able to have a meal with someone and physically being able to laugh with someone,” she says. “Virtually, that’s not really possible. So virtually celebrating my grandfather’s life is better than nothing, and I’m so grateful that we have technology because without it, it would be even worse. But I think that what’s lacking for all of us and my family is the sense of physical community that I know we would have had.”

Through ritual, funerals create an opportunity for the closure we crave. People come together to acknowledge that someone is really gone. Cassie Wilson thinks about this a lot as she contemplates the many people, including her family in England, who would have come to her father’s funeral in Virginia — and the incomplete feeling that lingers because they never did.

“What is it about a funeral that was drawing people?” she asks. After all, her father wouldn’t be there. She thinks of a wedding: You don’t get to spend time with the marrying couple and you often sit at a table full of acquaintances or even strangers, but being there for the experience means a lot.

It’s similar for a funeral, Wilson says.

“People are coming from afar whom I would maybe see for five minutes that day, but it meant a lot to them to be there for that. Whether or not they were going to go to the gravesite, sitting in meditation with the family meant something.”

Funerals, however, are not the only ritual we have to bereave.

Servaty-Seib says people who haven’t been able to attend funerals can still do something physical to mourn like going to an important place or doing an activity that is meaningful to them and their relationship to the deceased person.

In September of 2020, seven months after her dad died, Wilson landed on another way to mourn him besides a funeral: a mediumship led by a friend to try to communicate with her dad. She had done the same when her brother died in 2019.

Wilson sat on her bed at home and ended up video chatting with her friend for 2.5 hours. Before her father died, she had been working with him on Kenkashi, a business harvesting microbes for compost. She wanted to talk with her dad about running the business he left to her keeping. The mediumship was a way for Wilson to move forward.

“Having this mediumship kind of both solidified his involvement, if that’s really true, in that I can trust that we’re being kind of watched over or I can think that, which feels nice,” she says. “And it kind of gave me permission to just figure out how I needed to go about it.”

## Who Has Access To Mourning

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As we trade in-person funerals for virtual substitutes, we collide with another problem that plagued us even before COVID-19: Low-income people and those who live in rural areas are less likely to have internet access. A quarter of American adults in general don’t have home broadband. Meanwhile, 37% of rural Americans lack it, [according to a Pew Research Center survey in 2019](#). Among adults with household incomes below \$30,000 a year, 44% don’t have home broadband.

Without quality internet, mourning options during the pandemic are limited.

“We cannot talk about sort of grief in COVID without talking about the inequity of the situations as well in terms of how different cultures, different races are able to grieve and have access to the virtual platforms,” U-Meleni Mhlaba-Adebo says. “I do, but not everyone has the access to WiFi, for example, whether it’s by location or by cost. All of those things are factors that can impact one’s grief.”

Age is another. Laura Hensley has managed her grandfather’s online obituary where people leave comments. But because his friends are older, there are many who don’t have a computer. Hensley’s own grandmother can’t access these comments, so Hensley’s sister has printed them out for her. Younger friends and family have pitched into this effort by reading or printing out the obituary for older people who don’t go online.

People without internet access could miss more than an online funeral. It limits opportunities to grieve and find unexpected sources of solace online.

Hensley has found comfort through her grandfather’s obituary.

“I can’t control the funeral stuff. I can’t control his death. I can’t control the pandemic. I can’t control anything in my life, essentially it feels like right now,” she says. But writing and moderating the obituary has given her a sense of control in a world where it seems to be slipping.

Grieving online grants power in other ways too. Because Mhlaba-Adebo’s family is scattered all over the world, communication has been through WhatsApp or Facebook. She gets to choose what to do when receiving a message. Does she want to have this conversation now? Or is there a different, better time to talk about the life-altering event that is losing a parent?

She can also relive some memories. Mhlaba-Adebo can use videos, photos, texts, and emails to remember the little things that she talked about with her mother, whether it was what her mother was growing in the garden or who she was meeting for tea.

She says it's "a record of the pain and the joy at the same time." Though she's able to relive the happy memories, she's also able to rewatch the more painful ones, like the funeral she never got to attend.

"I can, at any point, see my mom's funeral again and again, if I want to, and further traumatize myself," she says. "Not that I would do that, but I'm saying the fact that it is recorded for all time means that I can play back moments and things of that nature. And depending on how one is dealing on a particular day, that can be very hard to witness."

In August, Mhlaba-Adebo founded a consulting company guided by the indigenous practices her mother taught from her tribe. She named it the Maoko Project. (Maoko means "hands" in Shona.) The company seeks to elevate the immigrant experience by consulting on performances, workshops, and artistic programs.

Mhlaba-Adebo did not get to be there in person for the funeral. But with this work, she mourns and honors her mother and carries on her inspiration.

"Bringing a lot more of my indigenous practices into the work that I do without hesitation and apology I think is definitely one way that I plan to move forward and have been doing so," she says. The racism and injustice happening in the world have made it imperative for her to elevate not only her own voice but the voices of others as well, she adds. "For me, that would be a testament to my mother's legacy."

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## Resources If You're Grieving

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If you're working through grief, you don't need to do so alone. Here is a list of organizations where you can find support groups, articles, research, and other forms of help.

- [GriefShare](#): A network of grief support groups that meet online and in-person throughout the U.S., Canada, and many other countries
- [Open to Hope](#): A nonprofit with the mission of helping people find hope after loss. People can read, listen to, and contribute stories of loss and compassion
- [Modern Loss](#): Personal essays about loss, articles about exploring your grief, and resources to do everything from probating a will to removing your loved one from social media
- [The MISS Foundation](#): A nonprofit providing counseling, advocacy, research, and education services to families experiencing the death of a child
- [Centering](#): A nonprofit grief center with education resources for people who are grieving, in addition to a quarterly magazine