

## Absence of Death Rituals and Its Impact on Grieving Process in Covid 19: A Retrospective Study

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### ABSTRACT

Covid 19 has been a major adversity that we all faced and are still struggling with. A huge amount of lives have been lost due to the same. Due to health protocols, social distancing and lockdown were the immediate precautions taken to curb the effect of the virus. There were no death rituals that were performed as a result. The present qualitative study aims to explore the impact of not having to perform rituals on grieving. It is a retrospective study for which data has been collected through an interview of 5 participants who lost an immediate family member in the first two waves of Covid. Through thematic analysis two themes of deprivation of goodbye and subjectivity of grief have been found. Additionally, the study helped in understanding impact of grieving in isolation.

**Keywords:** Covid 19, Social Distancing, Lockdown, Death Rituals, Isolation

Death is defined as the end of life. It is an agnostic experience to bear the loss of the deceased or loved one due to any circumstance. Death may be natural, that is when one ages successfully and reaches human longevity. However in other and most common cases today, death is unnatural or untimely such as by chronic illness, heart conditions, strokes, mental health conditions, accidents, self-harm and epidemics. The most recent pandemic Covid 19 has been fatal for millions of lives and the families left behind.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines Covid 19 as an infectious disease that is said to be caused by SARS-CoV-2-Virus. Covid is a communicable disease which is why a lot of protocols had to be followed to prevent the spread further. These protocols included social distancing, mandatory wearing of masks, repeated use of sanitizer, avoidance of public gatherings and no bodily contact whatsoever. The whole nation along with many other countries, had been in complete lockdown in the initial or the first wave. The repercussions of it are multifold in terms of economic or financial meltdown, lack of medical and healthcare facilities, access to basic sanitization and living conditions and the impact on emotional well-being as a result of deprivation of touch and restrictions on movement outside homes. Covid 19 has seen 3 waves so far. The most destructive wave was the second wave with Delta Variant.

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Death and grieving have been the most common difficult yet transforming reality that each individual experiences at some point in their lives. These experiences are subjective in terms of acceptance and moving on, however at the same time they are culturally determined. Humans do not exist in isolation. Being a part of the society we are inherently exposed to various cultural and religious groups which dictate most of our living and lifestyle. Since our childhood, these institutions or communities have played a vital role in deciding the values, morals and actions to perform in accordance with peace and harmony. As death is an inseparable reality, culture and religious groups dictate bereavement and grief processes for the same.

Death rituals, simply defined are such cultural customs which are expected to be done followed by loss of a loved one. They help express the emotions and feelings in the form of grief. They are distinct as per the religion, culture or even region of the world. Each ritual has a pattern and significance. These funeral rites help the families to bereave the loss, find a meaning to their experience and reaffirm their loss. This also helps in reaching out to the community to help the family adjust to the transition with social support. Thus death rituals carry healing properties within them which help in coping and deal with the experience healthily and effectively.

In Hinduism, the dead bodies are cremated after being burnt on pyre. The ashes are then scattered into holy rivers of Ganga or the place important for the deceased. The reason behind such a practice is the belief that the physical body serves no purpose and hence should not be preserved. In Christianity, there is a strong belief and concept of heaven, hell and purgatory. Based on one's deed in his/her lifetime, the journey of afterlife is determined. Those with righteousness will be a part of heaven, those who have sinned will go to hell and those with unforgivable sins will be sent to purgatory which is a step before entering heaven. Sometimes, if the deceased is cremated instead of being buried, the ashes are not scattered as in Hindus. In Christianity too, the bereavement period is observed for 14 days.

In Sikhism, the ideology is similar to Hinduism where the belief is about reincarnation and Karma. They believe that good deeds will help the individual to move closer to their God-Waheguru. The principle remains that liberation is attained through reincarnation which is possible through right Karma or deeds. As in Hinduism, they too cremate the body and the ashes are scattered in holy water. Prayers or 'Ardas' are recited in the crematorium and followed by that the family goes to Gurudwara. They do not believe in grieving publicly and like to keep it a personal affair. There is no such mourning or bereavement period that is observed since the followers are encouraged to accept the fate that has been decided by God.

The present study focuses on the importance of death rituals in the grieving process. Grieving is an accepted form of mourning for the deceased culturally. Various religions, communities have time and again set their funeral rites and rituals for the soul to depart peacefully alongside supporting the families left behind. Emotional and social support is extremely important for the bereaved for healing and performing funeral customs and ceremonies have reinstated that for society. Once duties are performed, it gives an inner sense of peace to having been able to bid farewell to the body in a celebrated and deserved manner. Due to covid 19, there were obstacles with regards to health protocol and funeral ceremonies were not or performed at a very small scale with limited people to mourn with. This study tried to gauge the experience of the exact phenomenon as in how the absence of these rituals and not being able to perform funeral rites and duties or death rituals have

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impacted the grieving process in the families of bereaved. There have been studies which have established the impact, however no study has been done so far in the Indian context. It is well known that there is a stark difference between the Western and Eastern cultures. The study will serve as a ground work or base for future studies related to the concept of death and grieving in other unprecedented events. Keeping Covid 19 as the frame of reference, the research will reinstate the importance of death rituals and ceremonial rites.

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

There have been a huge number of studies that have talked about death or dying and the grief experienced thereafter. Being a sensitive and vulnerable ordeal, it is challenging to talk about the grieving process. The present study focuses on the grieving process in Covid 19 and in the light of absence of death rituals. By death rituals, the researcher specifically means the mourning period observed, ceremonies and rites performed in different religious communities.

As per a study conducted in Spain, it was reported that due to lockdown, funeral rites have been restricted. The faith followed majorly is Roman Catholic and for them the ceremonies are unquestionable. Thus, grief in solitude due to social distancing has been a huge stressor for them. Additionally, it is also creating personal and social conflicts amongst the people (Fernández & González, 2020). In a phenomenological study in Iran, the researchers have extracted 5 major themes from participants' responses to semi structured interviews. The first one was ambiguity and desperation. Due to uncertainty, the feelings felt were despair and hope at the same time. Having no control over the situation made them feel desperate. The next theme was the incoherent narrative of mourning. Due to health protocols, funeral rituals and customs were not held which resulted in interrupted mourning of the deceased. All of this leads to not believing the loss that occurred to them. The third theme was feeling lonely. Due to lack of emotional support from relatives, limited people at funerals and no performance of rituals, the bereaved felt lonely. They took help of virtual platforms to help themselves mourn. The fourth theme was fear and wanting for others. As we know that coronavirus is communicable, there was a constant conflict that they faced for the need of physical presence of others and the fear of spread of covid or being infected. The last theme reported was alternatives for relief. The families used virtual platforms such as Instagram for holding funerals, group phone calls etc. Some turned to religion for comfort and mourning (Mortazavi, Shahbazi, Taban, et.al., 2021). In another phenomenological study of 56 mental health care professionals, the researchers have tried to understand the individual experiences of people in pandemic and the consequences of socially isolated bereavement. It has been found that due to loss of public gathering, communal grieving and not performing death rituals, there has been an increase in mental health disorders, stress and discomfort. This research has also predicted and hypothesized that because of these circumstances of quarantine and the obstacles faced in mourning consequentially, there will be prolonged, delayed and stalled mourning and emergence of "Complicated Grief" which is earlier known as Persistent Complex Bereavement. Persistent complex bereavement is a recognised disorder in DSM 5 (Masur., Werthiemer.,2021). They have also predicted that due to various losses and deprivations, there will be a mental health pandemic. In Madrid, an in-depth interview of 48 informants has reported that not being able to say a proper goodbye to the loved one before and after death has been associated with disbelief, denial and lack of acceptance. Not only that it has also given us the impetus to understand and re-define the significance of death rituals and how it attends to the psychological and social needs of the families of bereaved (Fernandez., Falcon., 2021).

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Adreinne Harris (2003), in her work “Relational Mourning” has given that acceptance of loss of a loved one requires deep psychic work which depends on the emotional capacities of the mourner and also on the surrounding or the environment he or she is placed in. Peskin (2019) re-emphasised on the relational component of grief. He suggested that grief processing depends upon other’s acknowledgement and validation. Castle and Phillips (2011) have also established in their study with 50 adults that performing bereavement rituals help in adjustment to bereavement and have a positive outcome.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### *Sample*

The participants were 20-55 years old males or females. The inclusion criteria was those who have lost any close family members or loved ones in the first two waves of Covid 19. The reason behind choosing the first two waves is because of stricter rules and protocols that were followed as compared to the subsequent waves.

**Inclusion Criteria:** The participants relevant for this study were those who are in -the age range of 20-55 males and females; lost an immediate and close family member in the first two waves of pandemic.

**Exclusion Criteria:** Anyone who is below 20 or above 55 years of age; has lost extended family members or friends; lost immediate family members in the third wave.

#### *Data Collection*

The data was collected by the method of in depth semi-structured interviewing. An interview schedule was prepared by the researcher. The schedule was sent for review and only after validation, it was used for collecting data. The researcher interviewed a few people until data reached the saturation point.

#### *Process*

The study has been carried out from Ghaziabad, UP. However, the data was collected across India. Firstly, the participants were briefed about the intent of the study. Following this, they were sent a consent form to fill. Once the consent form was received, the researcher carried out the interview. The interview was conducted through hybrid mode. Before closing the interview, a few minutes will be given to carry out a mindfulness exercise to contain their emotions. They were also asked for feedback for the interview to express their in the moment feelings and thoughts.

#### *Data Analysis*

The data had been collected through interviews and was analyzed thematically. As per the participant’s responses, 2 major themes have been identified- 1) Deprecating of last goodbye and; 2) Subjectiveness of grief

#### **Theme 1) Deprivation of last goodbye**

Having to say a last goodbye to your loved one is essential to come to terms with their death. Not being able to perform death rituals or bidding farewell as normally one would, created a sense of vacuum in individuals. This theme can be explained by two sub themes- *lack of closure and yearning*.

*Lack of closure* as conceptualized in the study means unprocessed grief which delays the process of acceptance. The unprocessed feelings may be coupled or a mix of regret, guilt,

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anger or just plain denial. The participants reported to have been feeling “no closure” or “no conclusion” for the loss they have experienced. They mention that even though life has moved on and it has been a passage of time, yet they haven’t been able to make peace with it.

*"honestly, I don't think I got closure, but that is because I wasn't there to spend time with him in his last days"*

*"I never caught a closure of actually looking at her one last time, that really hurts"*

The participant here talks about her grandmother who she didn’t get a chance to see the last time which still hurts her even though it has been almost 2 years post her loss now.

*"Because there is some sense that touches our hearts at that at that time, why we weren't able to go into the hospital why hospital people didn't tell us that our father was struggling."*

The participant here expresses his regret of not being able to touch his father’s feet, which is a part of his culture. This again represents not being able to have closure for his father’s death.

*Yearning* as defined in the study refers to longing to bid a proper farewell to the loved one which could not be done due to the circumstances. Since there were restrictions and complete shutdown, families were not able to perform death rituals which would have been done otherwise. The participants in their narratives have talked about their wish to perform those rituals to be able to bid a peaceful farewell to the deceased.

*"My father had COVID So I was not also allowed to touch my father's feet or see the last time so that was a very shocking experience for us"*

*"Ritual for me was to actually go and see her for one last time to actually accept what has happened because even right now like, for my internship, I had gone to Mumbai, I stayed at my grandmother's place only so like, I felt a sense of vacuum"*

*"When we are not given the chance to have a final goodbye. There is a it's a whole complex set of emotions. But apart from the complexity, it's just the pure, simple fact of not getting used to their death."*

From the participant’s response it is evident that not being able to say final goodbye makes it difficult to accept the death and one would still yearn for the same.

### **Theme 2) Subjectiveness of Grief**

Grief even though it is universal it is still private to the individual experiencing it. People may be grieving for the same loss and share the same pain, yet grief remains subjective. Subjectivity of grief can be explained through certain narratives of the participants. There is no timeline for grief to be “removed” from us.

*"Rites and then just the funeral that happen there generally. People put in everything, they don't hold back; mass cremation it just removes all of that, And if it's not personal, and it's not closing"*

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Here the participant while talking about mass cremation mentions about grief being a personal feeling and how if that's not the case, it's not a "closing".

*"I don't believe in the thought of mourning for 13 long days, I think that the mourning is personal, like the person who faces the death of a person. And like, if that person is really close to you, you are going to have that lacuna in your heart for the entire life that you will live"*

This participant mentions how there can be no timeline to grief. Culturally, she may be required to grieve only for 13 days however, that does not go on to say that after that one cannot grieve or should not grieve.

Additionally, a sub theme which can be identified from the responses is about the *value of death rituals*. The participants when asked about how they perceive death rituals, they mentioned how rituals may not be enough to find peace and closure. This talks about the significance of death rituals and how individuals attach meaning to it. Traditionally, rituals have helped in bereavement to cope and heal collectively. It was interesting to find out that few participants who were not religious or had faith in such rituals, had a newer perspective to look at them and it started to make sense to them as well. Hence the value of rituals has been reinforced.

*"they're sending off rituals, right. So lighting, the fire also, sort of like know, helping them move along. And calling people for a feast is like saying thank you for all of their efforts for helping us through the process. So, a lot of these things. It's a final goodbye"*

This participant's response throws light on the fact how rituals help bring people closer to reality and express gratitude to all those who have shared the grief with them.

*"I feel like it plays a very important part in acceptance, like, we are, like I told you and our culture, the ritual goes on for like 11 to 13 days. So, the fact that we're doing something or the other out of the ordinary for that, for those 13 days, it really makes you come in terms with the fact that this actually has happened, that person is actually not anymore, and we are actually trying to do something to accept that"*

*"It brought them even closer to reality that they had papa's bones in their hands and so like this something which is actually happening so there is no way that he is coming back so I guess these rituals are important for us to be able to face the reality"*

This participant lost her father. Her elder sister and her, both are not religious per say, yet the statement made by her has deeper implications.

## DISCUSSIONS

The interviews and the responses analyzed have given 2 global themes. Absence of death rituals during the time of pandemic has had consequences in bereavement in the families. Participant's in their responses have talked about the feeling of incompleteness they felt along with regret and helplessness for not being able to bid a farewell to their loved ones. They were not able to see or talk to them for the last time properly. A few of them were not even aware of the loss and got to know about it from the hospital after hours. Thus, this delay in communication has also added to their grief. Thus, this all led up to not having the closure they needed to accept the loss. This understanding also aligns with Kubler-Ross's

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work on stages of grief wherein there are 5 stages which may or may not be in a cycle. The stages are denial, anger, bargain, depression and acceptance. While looking at the first theme of deprivation of goodbye, it has been seen that not having to perform the rituals has moved the individual away from reality. Not being able to see or touch or talk to them had the participants in disbelief which also coincides with the grief stage of denial and anger and to some extent even bargain. There has been denial of the loss, followed by anger due to not being able to say goodbye or perform death rituals and ultimately bargain about having to see them for the last time to attain closure. This has been found in other similar studies too.

In Madrid, an in-depth interview of 48 informants has reported that not being able to say a proper goodbye to the loved one before and after death has been associated with disbelief, denial and lack of acceptance. Not only that it has also given us the impetus to understand and re-define the significance of death rituals and how it attends to the psychological and social needs of the families of bereaved (Fernandez., Falcon., 2021).

The memories of their loved ones create a feeling of yearning and belongingness for participants. However, there were some factors again attached to such as degree of attachment and physical proximity to the person. For example, a person may be emotionally attached to the deceased however, not living with them adds as a factor as to understanding the intensity to impact. Hence, they may be grieving however, their daily routine might not be impacted as such. Bowlby along with his work with Parkins has given 4 phases of grief in which the second phase specifically talks about yearning and protest (Bowlby, 1970). In a phenomenological study in Iran, the researchers have extracted 5 major themes from participants' responses to semi structured interviews. The first one was ambiguity and desperation. Due to uncertainty, the feelings felt were despair and hope at the same time. Having no control over the situation made them feel desperate. (Mortazavi, Shahbazi, Taban, et.al., 2021)

Kubler and Ross also talk about acceptance as the last stage of the grief cycle. Death rituals as has been seen above enable one to do that. The meaning and value of death rituals has been reinforced ever since lockdown. Families were not able to perform rituals. Rituals are significant not only for the deceased but also for the ones who have been left behind is a common statement that has come up in the interviews. The participants mention how performing rituals bring one closer to reality and make it easier to grieve and accept the loss. The absence of it made it difficult to bring one to terms with it. It has been found that due to loss of public gathering, communal grieving and not performing death rituals, there has been an increase in mental health disorders, stress and discomfort (Masur., Werthierner.,2021). Castle and Phillips (2011) have also established in their study with 50 adults that performing bereavement rituals help in adjustment to bereavement and have a positive outcome.

### ***Implications***

Covid 19 is a recent and an on going experience. No study has been done so far in India therefore there is no supporting literature in our culture. The following study will help understand and explore in depth experiences which will be applicable to our cultural context.

Additionally, it will reinstate the values of death rituals and funeral rites which were traditionally upheld with integrity. The study has showed the reinforcement for the same.

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This study will also determine if there is any other factor that influences the grieving process. Through this study various elements will be identified which play a role in bereavement apart from the loss itself.

### CONCLUSION

To summarize what has been stated so far, the research has helped in understanding the change in grieving. Due to the pandemic, a lot of changes have taken place in our lives at a personal and professional level in terms of everyday functioning. One of the most important aspects that has taken a hit was also grieving and it was also the most shared experience during the pandemic. This study was done to understand that change as a result of changes like not having to perform the death rituals and its impact.

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### Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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