

Families and practitioners adapting to virtual funerals during the COVID-19 pandemic

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The growing use of virtual funerals during the COVID-19 pandemic is having a profound impact on grieving processes and the funeral industry, according to a new scoping review from the University of Toronto published online in *OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying*.

The scoping review was conducted by a team of six Master of Social Work students at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work Program at the University of Toronto as a capstone project in their gerontology program. The team examined 62 academic and grey literature articles that examined the use of virtual funeral practices during COVID-19.

"COVID-19 is greatly impacting the ways in which we grieve," says lead author and recent graduate Andie MacNeil. "Rituals and other mourning practices are such an integral component of the dying process, and they are being interrupted at a time when we are experiencing tremendous loss of life due to COVID-19."

The review highlighted some of the concerns that many individuals have with replacing in-person funeral practices with virtual alternatives.

"The large recent uptake of virtual funerals due to [pandemic](#) restrictions has shone light on many challenges of this practice," says co-author Rennie Bimman, now a [social worker](#) in [palliative care services](#) at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario and Roger Neilson House hospice in Ottawa, Ontario. "There are concerns about the authenticity of using virtual platforms for mourning rituals that are meant to take place in person, and there are also significant barriers regarding access to technology."

Although the review highlights the challenges associated with virtual funerals, it also draws attention to resilience and resourcefulness as people find new ways to grieve despite pandemic restrictions.

"It is imperative to highlight the ways in which individuals and families have adapted in order to continue traditional ways of grieving that are familiar and comforting," says co-author Jacqueline Ho. "Practices such as virtual shiva and live-streamed funerals emphasize how people create meaningful experiences, despite the inability to be together in person."

Ho now works for the Mon Sheong Long Term Care Centre in Toronto, Ontario.

The review also emphasizes the important role of healthcare professionals and funeral service professionals in supporting the complicated grieving process during COVID-19.

"Our findings have demonstrated significant resilience, not only among individuals who have experienced loss, but also among [mental health](#) and funeral [service](#) professionals who are finding new ways to support those who are grieving," says co-author Tali Barclay, a social worker and psychotherapist at the Breakwater Institute for Occupational Stress and Trauma.

As the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and virtual [funeral](#) practices continue to unfold, it is important for mental health professionals to be attuned to how the COVID-19 pandemic may impact long-term grief outcomes.

"Mental health professionals must consider the strengths of those who have lost loved ones during the pandemic and also be cognizant of how these disruptions and changes to grieving may have lasting impacts," said co-author Blythe Findlay, a counsellor with the David Kelley Services program at Family Service Toronto.

Although virtual funerals have proliferated during COVID-19, the scoping review expects virtual services to continue beyond the pandemic.

"The shift to virtual mourning practices may be the way of the future," says co-author Taylor Hocking, program manager for the Toronto HomeShare Program at the National Initiative for the Care of the Elderly. "The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how easy it can be to

open this once very private event to family and friends around the world. The shift to virtual services can increase accessibility and provide opportunities to connect with distant loved ones, allowing many to grieve in ways not experienced before."

More information: Andie MacNeil et al, Exploring the Use of Virtual Funerals during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Scoping Review, *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/00302228211045288](https://doi.org/10.1177/00302228211045288)

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