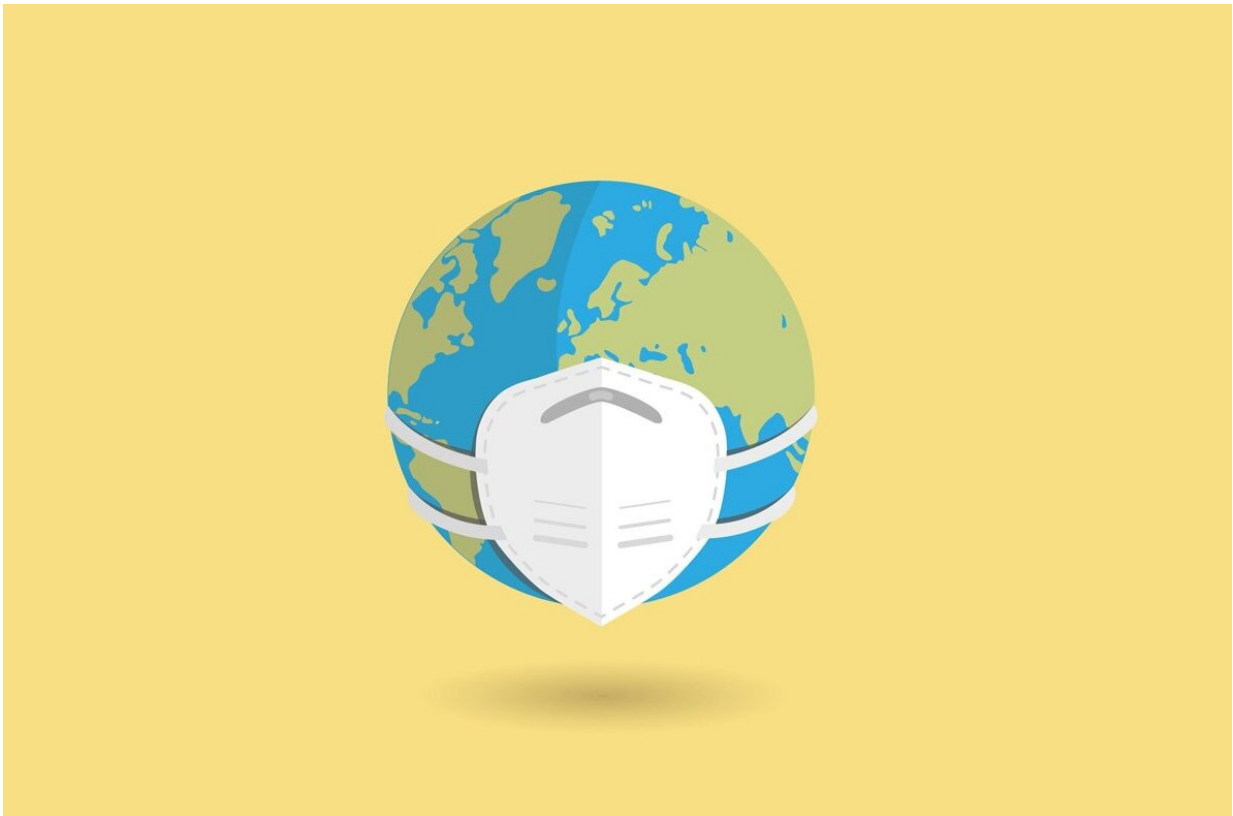


Pandemic anniversary highlights need for expanded bereavement support services

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The COVID-19 pandemic, which killed millions across the world, had a dire impact on the ability of their loved ones to grieve. A study by Simon Fraser University researchers published in the journal *Illness, Crisis &*

Loss, calls for expanding pandemic grief support programs and increasing public awareness of the existing supports available to help lessen the emotional toll.

The research, which reflects personal experiences of loss and challenge as we strive to build back better from the difficult pandemic years, is being shared as the world prepares to mark the third anniversary of the WHO declaring COVID-19 a global pandemic (March 11).

The researchers surveyed nearly 100 individuals who were mourning the deaths of loved ones during the first eight months of 2021. Their responses were collected through an anonymous survey distributed to Canadian online bereavement forums, [grief](#) support services and medical centers.

The majority of respondents were women and half of those surveyed live in B.C. Nearly 25 percent had lost two or more people. Not all deaths were from COVID-19 but the deaths occurred during a time when mourning practices were disrupted by pandemic restrictions.

Pandemic increased likelihood of developing Prolonged Grief Disorder

Researchers identified several themes from the respondents, including a greater risk of developing Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) or [complicated grief](#). PGD involves intense grief that lingers long after the loss, impacting a person's [daily life](#).

"The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the worst public health crises in a century; it has changed how we live and how we grieve, in ways that people may have never expected," says study lead author Soraya Janus, a researcher at SFU's Center for Forensic Research. "Our study aims to

highlight the layers associated with complicated grief. We hope this research will instigate dialogue to better understand the current state of bereavement and address challenges associated with complicated grief."

Participants said physical distancing and [travel restrictions](#) prevented them from visiting the dying or supporting each other after a death of a loved one. These restrictions played a role in incomplete grieving and contributed to feelings of anger, guilt, depression and isolation. Feelings of guilt from being unable to say goodbye to a loved one has been shown to be an [independent risk factor](#) for complicated grief.

Survey respondents were divided in their opinions on the public health restrictions. Half believed the public health restrictions were warranted to protect the health of others while others said restrictions should have been lifted temporarily to visit the dying or to attend funerals.

Experiencing [internal conflict](#) with the health orders and restrictions created an ongoing cycle of blame that continued to add stress and create conflict with family, friends and the community, the researchers found. Respondents also reported difficulty gaining access to standard support services due to location, awareness or financial reasons.

Recommendations for bereavement support & healing communities

"Pandemic recovery initiatives have mostly focused on future death prevention and strengthening [disaster preparedness](#), but processing grief plays an important role in healing our communities and is not often discussed," says study co-author Vienna C. Lam, a researcher at SFU's Center for Forensic Research. "Our research shows that more needs to be done to support the bereaved."

Researchers recommend that federal and [provincial governments](#) expand grief support services in Canada including more specific [pandemic](#) grief support. This includes improved access to standard services and awareness of local programs available to relieve stress on families looking for these resources, while also balancing other worries involved with the death of a love one.

"This research by Soraya and colleagues adds to the literature, is timely, and raises public awareness of why we need to urgently improve and expand grief and bereavement supports in B.C. and across Canada," says Dr. Eman Hassan, executive director at the BC Center for Palliative Care. She notes the findings are aligned with the Action Plan on Bereavement recommended by stakeholders who participated in a provincial roundtable hosted by the center last fall.

Researchers hope the findings may help to mitigate grief during future health crises while maintaining adherence to public health orders. They say studies have shown that complicated grief is more likely to develop out of an inability of families to talk with one another rather than being unable to be present at the time of death.

More information: Soraya A. Janus et al, Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Bereaved, *Illness, Crisis & Loss* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/10541373221151105](#)

Provided by Simon Fraser University

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