

‘There is nowhere to place the anger’: accounts of bereavement experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Introduction The Covid-19 pandemic has been a mass bereavement event, causing major disruption to end-of-life, grieving and coping processes. Based on their Dual Process Model (DPM), Stroebe and Schut have identified pandemic-specific risk factors for poor bereavement outcomes and categorised these in terms of disruptions to loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping processes which grieving people naturally oscillate between. Loss-oriented coping involves focussing on one’s loved one and their death, while restoration-oriented coping involves continuing with daily life and distracting oneself from one’s grief.

Aims To explore and describe bereavement experiences during the pandemic, relating our findings to the constructs of the DPM.

Method Two independent online surveys were disseminated UK-wide via social media platforms and community and charitable organisations. They captured end-of-life and bereavement experiences (to all causes of death) from March 2020 to January 2021. Free-text data were analysed thematically, using the DPM as an analytic lens.

Results Six main themes were identified: troubled and traumatic deaths; disrupted mourning, memorialisation and difficulties in death-related administration; mass bereavement, media and societal responses and the ongoing threat of the virus; grieving and coping (alone and with others); workplace and employment difficulties; and accessing health and social care support. Examples of loss-oriented stressors were being unable to visit or say goodbye and restricted funeral and memorialisation practices, leading to guilt and anger. Restoration-oriented stressors included severely restricted social networks and support systems, which affected peoples’ ability to cope.

Conclusion These results highlight significant disruptions to end-of-life, death and mourning practices, as well as usual coping mechanisms and support systems, during the Covid-19 pandemic. The DPM provides a useful framework for conceptualizing the additional challenges associated with pandemic bereavement and their impact on grieving and mental health.

Impact Recommendations are made for statutory, private and third sector organisations for improving experiences of people bereaved during this and future pandemics.