

Connection Matters

The use of Digital Technologies during the COVID-19 Pandemic to support end-of-life care and bereavement.

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What is already known about this topic:

- Digital technology has reshaped how we experience death, dying and bereavement.
- Carla Sofka, in 1997, first coined the word Thanatechnology, to describe the use of digital technology in this field.
- The digital divide is influenced by lack of access (digital poverty) and digital literacy.
- Healthcare professionals have been cautious in adopting digital technologies.



Ref: <https://eecs.uq.edu.au/research/human-centred-computing/digital-health>

The pandemic forced connection through digital technology when social distancing stopped physical connection with family and friends. It also created a 'silent epidemic' of grief, affecting everyone, not just the bereaved.

The aim of the Narrative Literature Review is to answer:

- ❖ How were digital technologies being provided for mourners and by bereavement service providers (including pre-bereavement) during the pandemic?
- ❖ How are digital technologies changing old and creating new death-related practices?
- ❖ What are the impacts of digital technologies for the bereaved in managing socially-distanced grief and bereavement?

Methods:

Literature searches 2023 and 2024 based on papers published since 2020. Key search terms used to identify papers from peer reviewed journals.

13 / 152 papers in academic journals literature search specifically addressed the aims of the research. 35 papers came from the citation chaining and online evidence.

What this study adds:

- COVID-19 intensified digital adoption in life, death, dying, and bereavement, widening the digital divide and creating digital scars.
- COVID-19 brought a new dimension to death, with very symptomatic deaths shared through digital technology, everywhere, in a way that was difficult to avoid.
- Dying during the pandemic was difficult for the bereaved, regardless of the cause of death.
- Connection for those dying and their families in the time of COVID-19 mattered.
- The experience of using digital technologies to provide virtual connection was mixed.
- The experience in the time just before death was the most impactful on bereavement.
- Social isolation for the bereaved was mitigated in part by digital technology.
- Virtual (or hybrid) funerals provided a digital connection, allowing people to say goodbye.
- Rituals around dying and death evolved to incorporate digital elements.
- Digital tools improved the death registration process and fostered the public conversation around death, empowering people to speak up.

"I think the biggest impact would have been people not being able to visit their loved one during their last illness, or indeed the last hours. I think that deprivation was the most profound; feeling distant at a critical moment and time that you will never get back." Funeral staff member

<https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/overhaul-bereavement-support-wake-pandemic>



Jean Wong for nbc news/Getty Images -
<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/hospitals-move-allow-family-visits-people-dying-coronavirus-n1202896>

Clinicians described some of those dying in the pandemic as barely rousable by the time you had family members on tablets to say goodbye. 'You put your hand on her arm and hope that she will think it is her son's hand, when she hears his voice on the line, behind her shuttered eyes and shutting down consciousness.'

Dr Roopa Farooki *Everything is True: A Junior Doctor's Story of Life, Death and Grief in a Time of Pandemic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022)

Implications for research, practice, or policy:

- ❑ Virtual/hybrid funerals have remained, while other digital technologies related to death, dying, and bereavement have not. Research is needed to understand why and if they mitigate the negative effects of death in a pandemic. Guidelines for virtual funerals could inform best practice.
- ❑ The extending digital divide should be a priority for policymakers to foster inclusive transformation.
- ❑ Further exploration is needed on how digital technologies enable 'connection', especially in the moments before death.
- ❑ Psychological models related to dual process and meaning-making (Stroebe and Schut, and Neimeyer) could be explored to bring theory and practice closer together.
- ❑ The community-based approach to supporting grief, public health palliative care including the use of digital technologies could support communities in future pandemics.