



# Experiences of people Who Lost Spouses due to COVID 19 Complications: Insights from Masvingo Urban

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## **Abstract**

*This study explored experiences of people who lost spouses due to Covid-19 related complications in Zimbabwe. Contemporary literature suggests that funeral rituals are fundamentally convened to mark the transience of life, to delineate a state of mourning, recognizing the value and importance of the one who has passed on and acknowledging the evolution of the life cycle. The corpus of this study was a qualitative approach utilizing a descriptive case study. A snowballing sampling strategy was used to recruit five surviving spouses (three widows and two widowers). An in-depth interview was used. Thematic analysis was used to sift data. Three themes emerged from the data: 1. Burial attendance actuates and catalyzes emotional healing. 2. Cultural intonations on burial rituals compromise acceptance and moving on. 3. Emotional support systems bring solace to the bereaved. It was recommended that surviving spouses must be given insight into professional counselling services in dealing with grief. Moreover, national authorities must decree burial restrictions coupled by complete remedial packages.*

**Keywords:** Covid-19; funeral rituals; ambiguous lose; professional counselling; cultural intonation

## **1 Introduction**

The loss of a loved one is grievous beyond compare, so much that even in the best of times, the agony can feel devastating and unbearable. Ceremonies like funerals and memorial celebrations can often facilitate lessening the anguish consistent with the passing on of a loved one as catalysts for a quick recovery and healing to those left behind. In sharp contrast, according to Silva (2020) owing to the draconian measures instigated by the Covid-19 pandemic, social distancing requirements to curb the transmission of the virus, the status quo has forced a multiplicity and a diversity of mourners to shift the way they say goodbye, complicating the grieving process, howbeit attenuating the importance. Wilson (2020) aptly posits that in the exemption of rituals, which include visiting the sick, body viewing and convening a funeral ceremony, there has been a tremendous transformation on the picture of the experience. Stomping feet in unison, Rabow et al., (2021) opines that people are diffused to mourn apart at the most opportune time they needed to be together.

Of notice, these unprecedented extenuating circumstances that many people are walloping in at the moment are identified as “ambiguous loses.” According to Fox et al., (2021) the foregoing term is ordinarily used to explain circumstances when an individual’s emotionality is not operating in synchronicity with the physical realities. For example, when a serviceman spouse goes missing and succumbs, their family members and significant others may still feel them as emotionally present howbeit the same-self will be physically absent (Cardoso et al., 2020). Viewing the other side of the coin, for instance, how much anguish families suffer the emotional absence of a dementia client who, in part, remains physically present without the sense of community (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). In the similar vein, Covid-19 strikes even healthy individuals wherein health centers policies restrict visitation, such experiences are more noticeable in a number of families. Boelen et al., (2021) contends that in circumstances when a healthy enough individual goes to the hospital, deteriorates rapidly, and the spouse doesn’t get to set their eyes on their loved one in the process, it creates the ambiguous loss concept.



The explanation is that, the spouse is physically gone because he or she is dead, but still feeling as if they are emotionally present anchored on the view that one has not acclimatised with their loss.

On one more practical level, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) decreed that the COVID-19 outbreak, precipitated by the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), was now a pandemic situation (Cabore et al, 2020). Accordingly, there was a great concern globally with the novel coronavirus' increased rate of transmissibility causing diverse and distressing effect (Strabell and Uip, 2020). The status quo compelled local governments to launch, on top of health emergencies and states of disaster, extraordinary administrative measures during the course of conducting funeral services (Chaiuk and Dunaievska, 2020). In light of the gripping crisis, conventional rituals to honour the dead and comfort mourners were abbreviated and sometimes interrupted (Cardoso et al, 2020).

Ideally, psychology has long conceptualised the emotional worthiness and structuring effect of rites and rituals in a multiplicity and a diversity of societies and cultures (Santos et al, 2018). In this view, human rituals are a natural expression for humanity and are figurative activities, repetitive, consistent, and extremely treasured behavioural standards that initiate individuals to channel emotions, and share beliefs and communicate values (Crepaldi et al, 2020).

Of notice, history has it on record that, funeral rituals are fundamentally convened to mark the transience of life, to delineate a state of mourning, recognizing the value and importance of the one who has passed on and acknowledging the evolution of the life cycle (Cardoso et al, 2020). At the risk of oversimplification, it must be considered that funeral rituals play a significant psychological maturation role, as they initiate individuals to endure concrete loss and activate a grieving process, allowing mourners to openly manifest their sorrow (Souza and Souza, 2019).

According to Seiler et al (2020) losing a spouse is the most traumatic and painful occurrence that an individual experience. To put the record straight, losing your companion is tough...really tough. Then, grieving is one of the unbearable, utmost depressing occurrences which you have to experience (Thimm et al, 2020). A loss is exclusively challenging once your spouse dies. In the similar vein, as soon as you lose your spouse, on top of losing a romantic partner, you also lose a companion, who swings out with you, an intimate whom you partake life experiences with, the main anchor, who makes you feel important, significant, and unconditionally loved every day (Boelen and Smid, 2017). Coping with this deep, and often untimely loss can feel excruciating and very lonely.

Even though, this is undeniably a very tough time for the remaining spouse, there is still hope. The old adage crystalizes that there is always a light at the end of every dark tunnel.

According to Metzl and Shamai (2021) spouses are encouraged not to rush, for instance, to take their time and understand that the intensity of the grief will subside. In other words, people will always miss their spouses, however, the sorrow of losing that person will evaporate with time.



In times like these, it is of paramount importance to seek support from significant others (Maddrell, 2020). Many a times, surviving spouses may not feel that they need to exploit the social capital immediately preceding the loss of a loved one, when in reality they really do, howbeit they may be ignorant (Stroebe and Schut, 2021). In a sense, many grieving spouses are not at liberty to discuss about their loss at the hit of the moment, which is normal and reasonable, but the significant others understand that the bereaved need what they can't see through grief.

A difficult but effective coping mechanism is to talk about the loved one you lost. Be that as it may, bereaved spouses try to relegate, their memories of the deceased, at the background (Alberti, 2019). Significant others, co-labourers and acquaintances sometimes avoid the grieving spouse's name for the fear it may upset them. Joseph and Jaswal (2020) contends that they may be sincerely right but truthfully not helping the agonizing in any way. Upon reflection however, doing something to honour the loved one will confer dignity to the transactions. For instance, convening a get-together and invite significant others to it.

Robinson and Pond (2019) claims that giving yourself permission to be happy once more, is a powerful coping mechanism to deal with the loss of a spouse. Ross et al (2021) buttresses the same notion indicating that feeling happy once more takes a bit of some time, in fact, a lot of time coupled by a great deal of patience, a robust support group and a positive mindset. After a considerable time, the grieving spouse will feel stronger again. Hanging out with acquaintances, co-workers and significant others is a smart algorithm to pick up broken pieces, tapping from the sense of community and subsequently enjoying life again (Tay et al, 2021). According to Muthangya (2019) human organisms are social beings that were born with the propensity for attention, affection and to be loved, therefore, it's a natural phenomenon for spouses to feel lonely when they lose their loved ones. According to Carr et al (2018) life is an amazing institution, and the world will remain beautiful so much that the love used to be shared with the late spouse could still be very much intact.

In an endeavour to deal with feelings of loneliness and sadness so much that the grief is too unbearable and insistent, one can join grief counselling and bereavement focus groups (Tay et al (2021). In the process, it is of paramount importance to consider that when your spouse dies you are not alone. Grieving spouses must understand that losing a loved one comes with feelings of isolation and getting lost in the pain. Upon reflection however, joining focus groups may help one to deal with fluctuating emotions, acclimatize with the loss, meet similar victims who appreciate your suffering and acquire coping skills that initiate you to relegate loneliness and despair at the background (Boelen and Smid, 2017). Anchored on the greatest crisis since time immemorial generated by Covid-19, this descriptive study was intended to appreciate with the experiences of spouses who lost their loved ones due to the pandemic related complications.

## 1.2 Objectives

- To establish the emotional challenges of losing a spouse due to Covid-19 related complications.
- To examine the effects of missing burial of a spouse who succumbs to Covid-19 complications.



- To establish coping mechanisms of dealing with loneliness after losing a spouse.

## **2 Materials and Methods**

### **2.1 Research Approach**

The study was informed by qualitative research paradigm. The qualitative research paradigm chiefly zeroed on establishing and acclimatizing with the thoughts, perspectives, feelings and thoughts of participants (Belotto, 2018). Ideally, the thrust of this approach is to appreciate with the grieving process as it happens in the context mourners who lost their loved ones in the corona virus pandemic era.

### **2.2 Research Design**

The researcher, in the process, specifically employed a descriptive case study design. It is more applicable when not much is known yet about the phenomenon in question. Upright and Forsythe (2021) opines that a descriptive case study design initiates the researcher to elicit in-depth facts about the subjective views of people who lost spouses due to Covid-19 in Masvingo urban.

### **2.3 Population**

The target population of this research were spouses who had lost their loved ones due to Covid-19 related complications.

### **2.4 Sample and sampling techniques**

The study sample was accessorized by five (5) participants, that is, three (3) widows and two (2) widowers. Participants were recruited using the snowballing sampling technique. All the participants were spouses, domiciled in Masvingo urban.

### **2.5 Data gathering instrument**

The research adopted in-depth interviews as a data collecting tool. In-depth interviewing is a qualitative study procedure that encompasses conducting exhaustive individual interviews using a small quantity of respondents to discover their perceptions on a specific notion, program, or state of affairs (Dissake, 2021). Interviews easily facilitate the establishment of rapport with participants to initiate them feel relaxed, and subsequently generating greater insightful responses, particularly in relation to sensitive issues. In the similar vein, unlike other data collection tools, it is a higher quality sampling technique. The researcher was wanted of a handful of participants to gather relevant and useful insights. Moreover, direct observation was also implemented to collect data. According to Manolchev and Foley (2021) it encompasses observing short of interacting with the participants or objects being studied in the context. Observations enhance the researcher to establish and direct associations with informants, to understand things that are important to the individuals in the social context under research, to become familiar to respondents, and to pick up what constitutes suitable questions, the manner in which to administer them, and specific questions that may best assist to address the research questions (Hamilton, 2020). Observations are useful to research and are used regularly in psychology, education, as well as other social science fields.

### **2.6 Data analysis**



Thematic analysis was employed to describe data. Thematic analysis is a technique for analysing qualitative data that involves searching across a data set to classify, analyse, and report recurring patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2019). It is a strategy for presenting data, but it also encompasses interpretation during the course of selecting codes and generating themes. Some of the themes which emerged include; burial attendance actualizes and catalyzes emotional healing, and cultural intonations on burial rituals compromise acceptance and moving on.

### 3 Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Emotional challenges.

The results of this study crystalized that the loss of a spouse due to Covid-19 related complications is unique in contrast to death due to other causes. It happens so fast that the deceased appears to be present yet they are gone. This finding is consistent with Fox et al (2021) who opines that 'ambiguous losses' are ordinarily used to explain circumstances when an individual's emotionality is not operating in synchronicity with the physical realities. Surviving spouses characteristically testified being heavily plagued by the death of the loved one, especially due to covid-19 related complications. The respondents remarked;

*...I felt like my world had come to an end. Many times, I thought it was one of those long nightmares that would come to an end..." "...I was shocked, real shock, at first, I thought, maybe I was dreaming, then I realized that it was real. I have no words to explain my feelings but ndakarwadziwa (I was so hurt) ..." "...devastated, shocked, it was so sudden...*

It was revealed that Covid-19 strikes even healthy individuals. One of the participants noted;

*...Yakaenda shamwari yangu (my friend is gone). RIP my soul mate. You gave me false hope that you were getting better izvo kwaitova kuenda (yet you were departing forever). Wandirwadzisa (you hurt my heart) Juliet {pseudo name}...*

It was quite evident that the pandemic was killing people unawares. This corroborates with Boelen et al (2021) who aptly posits that in circumstances when a healthy enough individual goes to the hospital, deteriorates rapidly, and the spouse doesn't get to set their eyes on their loved one in the process, it creates the ambiguous loss concept.

#### 3.2 Effects of missing burial of a spouse who succumbs to Covid-19 complications.

The study demonstrated that Covid-19 restrictions heavily transformed the picture of funeral rituals. In sharp contrast to cultural rudiments, the new normal burial fashion relegates Afrocentrism at the background. Some participants submitted;

*...yes I did but from a distance as you know due to COVID precautions you cannot even burry, the funeral guys do everything..." "...no I was in self-isolation, went to see the burial place after I tested negative...*

Spouses were either suffered to attend the burial or attend with limitations. This resonates with Silva (2020) who contends that owing to the draconian measures instigated by the Covid-19 pandemic, social distancing requirements to curb the transmission of the virus, the status quo has forced a multiplicity and a diversity of mourners to shift the way they say goodbye, complicating the grieving process, howbeit attenuating the importance. It also corresponds with Rabow et al (2021) who opines that people are diffused to mourn apart at the most opportune time they needed to be together.



The study revealed that attending human rituals, such as funeral services was a natural expression for humanity.

Participants testified;

*...it is very crucial as it helps in closure. Though you will not be able to do the normal bereavement procedure but at least being there helps one feel as if you have managed to play the final rites...*

It was laid bare that attending the burial of a loved one is an inextricable ingredient of life, which has a therapeutic value. This is consistent with Cardoso et al (2020) who says history has it on record that, funeral rituals are fundamentally convened to mark the transience of life, to delineate a state of mourning, recognizing the value and importance of the one who has passed on and acknowledging the evolution of the life cycle. One respondent submitted;

*...it actuates and catalyzes emotional healing. It speeds up acceptance and moving on...*

This resonates with Souza and Souza (2019) who opines that it must be considered that funeral rituals play a significant psychological maturation role, as they initiate individuals to endure concrete loss and activate a grieving process, allowing mourners to openly manifest their sorrow.

### **3.3 Coping mechanisms of dealing with loneliness after losing a spouse.**

The study also established that losing a spouse is the most traumatic and painful occurrence that individuals experience. This finding corroborates with Cardoso et al (2020) who gave an analogy of a serviceman spouse which goes missing and succumbs, their family members and significant others may still feel them as emotionally present howbeit the same-self will be physically absent. Participants stated;

*...yes, losing a long-time partner is not easy, the pain is feeling like they are around but alas they are not..." "...ever since his death most of the nights I feel like I hear him opening the door. I am still struggling with the fact that he is gone so most my mind tells me that he is there somewhere he is just playing a prank on you. Sometimes I even forget to do certain activities that he used to do like buying groceries as I will be thinking that he will come home sometime with the required items...*

*...yes, I do, several times actually especially on special days such as birthday re vana (of children) or other anniversaries...*

Pursuant to the above, it was revealed that losing a companion is tough...really tough and grieving is one of the unbearable, utmost depressing occurrences which surviving spouses have to experience. This is consistent with Boelen and Smid (2017) who notes that a loss is exclusively challenging once your spouse dies..., as soon as you lose your spouse, on top of losing a romantic partner, you also lose a companion, who swings out with you, an intimate whom you partake life experiences with, the main anchor, who makes you feel important, significant, and unconditionally loved every day.

The study revealed that surviving spouses have different emotional coping mechanisms to short circuit the bereavement pain. Respondents remarked;



*...when memories seem to overrule my reasoning I usually listen to gospel music and pray. It helps me to slowly accept his absence...*

*...I have taken it upon myself to resort Social media to release the pain, so if you noticed I usually post my pain on Facebook and WhatsApp statuses. I have also shared with you several times. I also spend time with my children more than before now...*

*...crying and suppressing the thought, praying and occupying myself with my favorite pastime twitter...*

The study also revealed that a difficult but effective coping mechanism is to displace thoughts about the loved one you lost. This corroborates with Alberti (2019) who opines that the bereaved spouses try to relegate, their memories of the deceased, at the background. It also revealed that surviving spouses use memorabilia like photographs to deal with excruciating thoughts about their late loved ones. One respondent note;

*...sometimes I just scroll up the pictures that I used to take her..." "...9 years ago coming from church I decided to shoot Mary using my Canon 1200D. Little did I know that this photo would be for her funeral portrait. Continue to rest in power dear...*

Bereaved spouses sometimes acclimatize with the loss by fixing their thoughts on pictures and this is inconsistent with Maddrell (2020) who aptly posits that it is of paramount importance to seek support from significant others.

The study demonstrated that after a considerable time, the grieving spouse may feel stronger again to fill the void left by the loved one. One participant submitted;

*...no. For now, my spouse's gap seem irreplaceable, may be with time...*

Grieving spouses were finding it difficult to replace their late romantic companion. This finding is consistent with Ross et al (2021) who aptly posits that feeling happy once more takes a bit of some time, in fact, a lot of time coupled by a great deal of patience, a robust support group and a positive mindset. It was also noted that it was difficult if not impossible to fill the gap left by the spouse. Some respondents noted;

*...not exactly, none actually, I don't think anyone will be able to fill the gap left by Juliet now or in the future...*

*...hat gap cannot be filled by anyone. He was just unique in his own way so there is no one to cover that gap...*

An emotional partner is very difficult to replace. This finding is inconsistent with Tay et al (2021) who opines that hanging out with acquaintances, co-workers and significant others is a smart algorithm to pick up broken pieces, tapping from the sense of community and subsequently enjoying life again.

The study demonstrated that bereaved spouses draw happiness from talking to relatives and significant others. Some participants submitted;

*...happy- hey that depends with the context. I can be happy with my children, relatives and friends but I will never regain the happiness I used to share with my husband...*

*...yes, I do, as I talk to you. I also talk about Mary with Churchmates, relatives and friends. I actually feel better whenever I talk about her with others....*



Human organisms are social beings who exploit the social capital in quest for healing. This is inconsistent with Stroebe and Schut (2021) who contends that many grieving spouses are not at liberty to discuss about their loss at the hit of the moment, which is normal and reasonable, but the significant others understand that the bereaved need what they can't see through grief.

The study revealed that grieved spouses do not seek professional assistance from health care providers. Some respondents remarked;

*...no, I did not when I felt overwhelmed, I sought the comfort of my friends and relatives...*

*...no, I don't know any healthcare providers who offer any support...*

People are either ignorant or not motivated to seek professional counselling during bereavement. This finding is inconsistent with Tay et al (2021) who opines that in an endeavour to deal with feelings of loneliness and sadness so much that the grief is too unbearable and insistent, one can join grief counselling and bereavement focus groups. The study also revealed that some students have insight into professional counselling services. One respondent noted;

*...a Psychologist, you of course, nothing more than that...*

Bereaved spouses realize that they professional experts can help them recover from agony. This is consistent with Boelen and Smid (2017) who posits that joining focus groups may help one to deal with fluctuating emotions, acclimatize with the loss, meet similar victims who appreciate your suffering and acquire coping skills that initiate you to relegate loneliness and despair at the background. Losing a loved one comes with feelings of isolation and getting lost in the pain.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The study concluded that the experience of losing a loved one due to Covid-19 related complications is unique and inevitably cause ambiguous loses. Cultural intonations jeopardize closure and healing. Surviving spouses ordinarily struggle to cope with this deep and often untimely loss which can feel excruciating and very lonely. Spouses exploit varied online platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, twitter and Instagram, usually to listen to gospel music, encouraging religious sermons when memories seem to overrule their reasoning. Some resort to prayer, crying, suppression thoughts, and occupying themselves with favorite pastime activities. In the similar vein, surviving spouses try to get comfort from paraphernalia and memorabilia like photographs and other stuff left by the late spouse. Upon reflection however, the sense of community generated by children, relatives, and fellowship proffered by Churchmates and friends bring joy but usually fail to resonate with the happiness spouses used to share with their loved ones. Surviving spouses have poor insight into professional counselling services.

#### **5. Recommendations**

The study recommended that;





- Surviving spouses must endeavor to put closure to the whole bereavement process.
- Mental health care providers and professional counselling practitioners are charged with the responsibility for heralding awareness to the general populace about emotional healing.
- National authorities must issue funeral rituals restrictions coupled by complete remedial packages.

## 6. Implications of the Study

The study focused on experiences of spouses but did not consider the views of other relatives who share the same plight of losing loved ones due to Covid-19 related complications. Therefore, there is need to harmonize cultural traditions and scientific measures to conduct funeral services of a person who has succumb to Covid-19 related complications. The explanation is that, contemporary burial guidelines seem not to converge with African traditional religion (ATR). Furthermore, the bereaved seem not to be fully assured by civil authorities in times of crisis, hence the need for policy generation and implementation.

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