

# SOCIAL AND HEALTH IMPLICATIONS THAT AFFECT PEOPLE BEREAVED BY THE DEATH OF FAMILY MEMBERS BY COVID-19

## IMPLICAÇÕES SOCIAIS E DE SAÚDE QUE ACOMETEM PESSOAS ENLUTADAS PELA MORTE DE FAMILIARES POR COVID-19

## IMPLICACIONES SOCIALES Y DE SALUD QUE AFECTAN LAS PERSONAS EN LUTO POR LA MUERTE DE FAMILIARES POR LA COVID-19

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**Objective:** to know the social and health implications that affect people bereaved by the death of relatives who were victims of COVID-19. **Method:** this is a narrative review carried out on the PubCovid-19 platform. **Results:** a chart was developed presenting the characteristics of the ten publications by title, authorship, year of publication, country and journal. **Conclusion:** the social and health implications that affect people bereaved by the death of family members by COVID-19 derive from the social distancing that generates the impossibility of performing farewell rituals, damaging the normal experience of mourning, leading to complicated mourning and possible psychic illness.

**Descriptors:** Death. Mourning. Covid-19. Mental Health. Isolation.

*Objetivo:* conhecer as implicações sociais e para a saúde que acometem pessoas enlutadas pela morte de familiares vítimas da COVID-19. *Método:* trata-se de revisão narrativa realizada na plataforma PubCovid-19. *Resultados:* foi desenvolvido um quadro apresentando as características das dez publicações segundo título, autoria, ano de publicação, país e periódico. *Conclusão:* as implicações sociais e de saúde que acometem pessoas enlutadas pela morte de familiares por COVID-19 decorrem do distanciamento social que gera a impossibilidade da realização de

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*rituais de despedida prejudicando a vivência normal do luto, levando ao luto complicado e ao possível adoecimento psíquico.*

*Descritores: Morte. Luto. Covid-19. Saúde Mental. Isolamento.*

*Objetivo: conocer las implicaciones sociales y para la salud que afectan a las personas en luto por la muerte de familiares víctimas de COVID-19. Método: esta es una revisión narrativa realizada en la plataforma PubCovid-19. Resultados: se elaboró un cuadro que presenta las características de las diez publicaciones por título, autoría, año de publicación, país y periódico. Conclusión: las implicaciones sociales y para la salud que afectan a las personas en luto por la muerte de familiares por la COVID-19 se derivan del distanciamiento social que genera la imposibilidad de realizar los rituales de despedida, perjudicando la vivencia normal del luto, provocando el complicado luto y la posible enfermedad psíquica.*

*Descriptores: La muerte. Luto. Covid-19. Salud Mental. Aislamiento.*

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by SARS-CoV-2, has been spreading in a devastating way, causing several impacts in society related to the high transmissibility of the virus and high mortality rates. Thus, the Ministry of Health (MH) published a body management guide in the context of the new coronavirus<sup>(1)</sup>, with recommendations about not holding funerals, which reverberated in the process of grieving without dismissal, causing social and health repercussions in the lives of grieving relatives.

The first cases of the disease in the world were reported in a Chinese province on December 31, 2019 and were declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020. International and national studies reveal that by May 22, 2020 there were 330,000 deaths from complications of the disease<sup>(2)</sup>. In Brazil, the number of deaths is over 21,000, placing the country in 3rd place in deaths, with 6.4% of lethality<sup>(3)</sup>.

Due to the rapid increase in the number of deaths, the health authorities have instituted changes in the formats of wakes and burials during the pandemic, determining the prohibition of wake for the confirmed cases of COVID-19, so that the urn should leave the funeral car straight to the grave<sup>(1)</sup>. The farewell rituals adopted in the face of the death of a relative facilitate the process of elaboration, even if relatively, of the feelings that emerge in this context, facilitating the adoption of strategies to confront this process<sup>(4-5)</sup>.

The pandemic context required that family members bereaved by COVID-19 victims had to adapt to the impossibility of saying goodbye to their dear ones, which could have repercussions on the social context and health of that population. In view of this, we raise the following research question: What are the social implications for these family members bereaved by COVID-19?

This study has the objective of knowing the social and health implications that affect people bereaved by the death of family members victims of COVID-19.

## Method

This study is characterized as a narrative review of the literature, so that the *corpus* of analysis is formed by the theoretical reference of the articles raised, and its results allow highlighting new reflections and expanding the knowledge about the mourning of family members victimized by COVID-19<sup>(6)</sup>. It should be noted that the selection of studies can be subject to the author's subjectivity.

The search for the articles took place in May 2020 on the PubCovid-19 platform, which is indexed in the United States National Library of Medicine (PUBMED) and the Excerpta Medica Database (EMBASE). The PubCovid-19 platform was created with the objective of gathering the publications related to the pandemic by COVID-19

and organizing the articles by thematic areas in order to provide access to the researchers. The following descriptors were used for the search: “Death”; “Bereavement”; “Grief” and “Mourning”, aiming the thematic delimitation.

Scientific articles were included that reflected on COVID-19 and interface with the themes: deaths by COVID-19, bereavement, social and health implications of bereaved people.

Initially 84 articles were selected. After reading the titles and abstracts, 74 were excluded for not addressing the delimited topic, leaving 10 articles for full reading. For better cataloguing, an instrument created by the researchers was used to compile the publications, containing the following information: title, authorship, year of publication, country, journal, methodology

adopted in the study and the social and health implications affecting bereaved people facing the death of family members by COVID-19.

The studies were exhaustively read, categorized and analyzed in view of seeking the implications. After the exploration of the selected material, the discussion was developed considering the pre-defined categories: Social Implications and Health Implications.

## Results

Based on the ten selected publications, a table was developed with the characteristics of these publications, according to title, authorship, year of publication, journal, country, type of study and social and health implications (Chart 1).

**Chart 1** – Synthesis of selected studies in the PubCovid-19 database, by title, author, year, publication, country, type of study and implications (continued)

Nº	Title	Author, Year, Publication, Country	Type of study	Social and health implications
1	Pursuing a Good Death in the Time of COVID-19	Wang SSY, Teo WZY, Yee CW, Chai YW (2020) <sup>7</sup> Journal of Palliative Medicine Singapore	Reflection	Social: no wakes, no affection and hugs. For health: feelings of anxiety and anguish.
2	Death in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic	Ingravallo, F (2020) <sup>8</sup> The Lancet Public Health United States of America	Reflection	Social: change in the way funeral rituals are conducted.
3	COVID-19 and Unfinished Mourning	Farahmandnia B, Hamdanieh L, Aghababaeian H (2020) <sup>9</sup> Prehospital and Disaster Medicine Iran	Reflection	For health: mental illness.
4	Mourning our dead in the covid-19 pandemic	O'Mahony, S (2020) <sup>10</sup> British Medical Journals England	Reflection	For health: pathological suffering and depression.
5	Loss and grief amidst COVID-19: A path to adaptation and resilience	Zhai Y, Du X (2020) <sup>11</sup> Brain, Behavior, and Immunity United States of America	Reflection	Social: breaking of affective and parental bonds. For Health: Psychic suffering associated with the loss.
6	Grief During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Considerations for Palliative Care Providers	Wallace CL, Wladkowski SP, Gibson A, White P (2020) <sup>12</sup> Journal of Pain and Symptom Management United States of America	Reflection	Social: breaking of affective and parental bonds. For Health: Psychic suffering associated with the loss.

**Chart 1** – Synthesis of selected studies in the PubCovid-19 database, by title, author, year, publication, country, type of study and implications (conclusion)

Nº	Title	Author, Year, Publication, Country	Type of study	Social and health implications
7	Addressing mental health care for the bereaved during the COVID-19 pandemic	Sun Y, Bao Y, Lu L (2020) <sup>13</sup> Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences China	Reflection	Social: separation of family members. For health: pathological state of mourning (sadness, anguish, guilt, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder.
8	Supporting adults bereaved through COVID-19: a rapid review of the impact of previous pandemics on grief and bereavement	Mayland CR, Harding AJ, Preston N, Payne S (2020) <sup>14</sup> Journal of Pain and Symptom Management United Kingdom	Review	Social: change in social norms and rituals of mourning. For health: risk of pathological mourning.
9	Bereavement in the Time of Coronavirus: Unprecedented Challenges Demand Novel Interventions	Carr D, Boerner K, Moorman S (2020) <sup>15</sup> Journal of Aging & Social Policy United States of America	Reflection	For health: sadness, anguish, pain, guilt and anger.
10	Supporting families in end-of-life care and bereavement in the COVID-19	Moore K, Sampson EL, Kupeli N, Davies N (2020) <sup>16</sup> International Psycho Geriatrics United Kingdom	Reflection	Social: restriction of visits from family and friends. For health: deep sadness and depression.

Source: Create by the authors.

## Discussion

### *Social implications*

According to the scientific literature researched, the impossibility of performing farewell rituals of relatives killed by COVID-19 has triggered important social implications, among them, stands out the frustration for not being able to provide a funeral considered dignified for the deceased dear one<sup>(6)</sup>. Concerning the meanings present in these rituals, it is considered that they represent the opportunity for the bereaved to express their feelings and emotions about their lost ones<sup>(8)</sup>, enabling the public manifestation of

grief and the creation of a moment of communion, complicity and compassion<sup>(17)</sup>.

Ways of mourning and saying goodbye to the dead vary according to culture. In Brazil, for example, funerals are usually held within an average period of two days, while in Germany and the United States they can last up to a week<sup>(18)</sup>. With the spread of COVID-19, these manifestations have been abruptly disrupted, causing family members to seek ways to deal alone with the phenomenon of death and the emotional overload generated by this event<sup>(6)</sup>.

From this viewpoint, the studies analyzed demonstrate that deaths related to COVID-19 have been socially understood as devoid of dignity and as a “bad death”. This perception is

linked to feelings of pain for the lonely suffering of the family member, of guilt for not being able to protect them, and of injustice, for believing that the treatments were ineffective.

It is worth highlighting that the vision about death has been undergoing transformations throughout history, going from an experience that was handled naturally, as it happened in the Middle Ages, to become something with which everyone seeks to withdraw, causing anguish, pain and affliction<sup>(19)</sup>. In the midst of this painful process of loss, grief manifests itself as a set of emotional, physical, cognitive and behavioral reactions expressed, among other forms, by sadness, loneliness, guilt, anxiety and concern<sup>(17)</sup>. All these reactions are manifested as an experience of grief.

In some cases, when a context of terminal illnesses with a high probability of death occurs, relatives, in order to deal with the announced loss, begin to work to face the loss in an anticipated manner – the so-called anticipatory mourning, which manifests itself even before the patient evolves with serious complications of the disease<sup>(5)</sup>.

Also, it is worth highlighting that in the cases of COVID-19 there is a stigma that permeates the sick person's life, due to the uncertainties generated by the virus and the huge increase in deaths.

The support network formed by family members and friends represents an essential support in facing this phenomenon, since bereaved people tend to feel relieved when receiving a hug, having a shoulder to cry on or sharing their feelings with someone<sup>(19)</sup>. In the context of the social distancing imposed by the pandemic, however, people have been deprived of this embracing, which has reverberated in the intensification and prolongation of clinical manifestations, making grief no longer a natural experience but a complicated or even pathological one<sup>(8,11-12)</sup>.

### *Health implications*

Referring to the process of illness, the studies evidence that people who lost relatives by COVID-19, who could not receive the comfort

of relatives or did not have the chance to say goodbye to deceased relatives, are more likely to experience the complicated and even pathological mourning, besides presenting other psychological commitments, among them the depressive mood, the post-traumatic stress disorder, the exaggerated concern, the anguish, the difficulty in accepting death and the disinterest for life<sup>(9-10,12-13)</sup>.

Experts even predict a late bereavement epidemic after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, given the alarming death statistics and the absence of care strategies, and the need to include intersectoral care providing rehabilitation, programs and expert counseling to the family and relatives of the deceased and ensuring a continuous monitoring<sup>(9-10,14-16)</sup>. All these commitments to the lives and health of people who have lost family members to COVID-19 demonstrate the urgency of measures to help them respond adequately to grief, in an attempt to minimize the immediate and late impacts of the pandemic.

### **Conclusion**

The studies analyzed evidenced that the social and health implications that affect people bereaved by the death of family members by COVID-19 are due to the impossibility of performing farewell rituals, because of social distancing, factors that impair the experience of mourning, leading to psychic illness manifested, among other forms, by depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, excessive concern, anguish and disinterest for life.

Given the tendency for these effects to persist post-pandemic, it is urgent the need to expand the psychosocial care network to act with emotional support strategies, not only in an immediate way, but also in the long term.

Among the strategies of emotional support, it is suggested: adoption of remote techniques of farewell, such as video calls; strengthening of religious and/or spiritual networks; besides the humanization in the process of death communication. It is emphasized the need to

deepen studies related to the care of people bereaved by the death of family members by COVID-19, considering that the researches are mostly focused on the epidemiological aspects of the disease.

### Collaborations:

1 – conception, project, analysis and interpretation of data: Julia Renata Fernandes de Magalhães, Caroline Fernandes Soares e Soares, Thaís Moreira Peixoto, Fernanda Matheus Estrela, Ana Carla Barbosa de Oliveira and Andrey Ferreira da Silva;

2 – writing of the article and relevant critical review of the intellectual content: Julia Renata Fernandes de Magalhães, Caroline Fernandes Soares e Soares, Thaís Moreira Peixoto, Fernanda Matheus Estrela, Ana Carla Barbosa de Oliveira, Andrey Ferreira da Silva and Nadirlene Pereira Gomes;

3 – final approval of the version to be published: Julia Renata Fernandes de Magalhães, Caroline Fernandes Soares e Soares, Thaís Moreira Peixoto, Fernanda Matheus Estrela, Ana Carla Barbosa de Oliveira, Andrey Ferreira da Silva and Nadirlene Pereira Gomes.

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