

In 2019 about half a million people died in England from a whole range of causes. Most of them would have had friends, colleagues, neighbours



and visitors in the days and weeks of a final illness, and been surrounded

Since March 23rd 2020 about 600,000 people have died in the past year. None of them have been able to have the funeral they wished – all of those funerals have happened with restricted numbers. Around 100,000 of them could have as few as six people gather: thankfully that is now raised to 30 but is so much less than many would expect. Research conducted for the Church of England in January 2021 showed that more than 7 out of 10 people felt unable to attend a funeral of someone they knew, and more than 80% think that not attending funerals is having an impact on grief.

Thanks to the use of live-streaming, it is now possible for more people to see a funeral, but that does not replace the time of sharing stories, offering hugs, weeping and laughing together. And for others that restricted funeral follows a lonely death, regardless of the cause, where there won't have been a steady stream of visitors with gifts or chat or prayers.

The impact of these limits on grief in the short term and long term will be significant. Bereavement specialist know that sudden death is often one of the hardest situations to deal with – not just the shock but the sadness that you were not able to be there with your special person. There is comfort to be found as people gather: sometimes the numbers give a life significance. I remember when my father died suddenly, somehow the presence of 100 and more people really helped. Old school friends of mine turned up with memories and some of my colleagues came to support me and my family. We turn to one another after a funeral and talk about this support, and funeral directors will often present a book with a note of all the names of those who came. This has not been possible.

Some communities have recovered older traditions, like standing in a doorway to show respect as the cortege leaves from a neighbours house, and I know from talking to those who have been bereaved this year, that this does help. But there is a need to be aware of the impact of grief and bereavement in our communities. For some, it will be part of the general sadness of this season we are living through, realising that old friends will never be seen again. For others, it will mean adjusting to a life without a life-partner and facing it without the comfort of gathering with others, sharing, finding the strength to get through the day.

The national day of reflection on March 23rd will give all of us a chance to take a moment to reflect on the past year. There will be time to think of everything that has changed – all the disappointments and difficulties. But perhaps especially we will think of all those who are on the journey of bereavement, and have found this year so very hard. But then we can take a moment to reach out and connect with someone and simply let them know we are thinking of them.

The Church of England is in every community. Some of our churches are open for people to drop in for a moment of reflection or to light a candle. Where there are churchyards, they can offer a quiet place for thought – and some have created spaces where people can place stones or prayers as they remember their special person. And church friends and church ministers are always there to say a prayer with or for people, to listen to stories and to walk alongside people as they have done for generation after generation.

It doesn't need special training, although many churches are doing a short course becoming a bereavement friendly church to help them reach out to the community. They can also be pointed to all the resources at [www.ataloss.org](http://www.ataloss.org), the UK's signposting site for bereaved people. But it also needs people to contact others, listen to them and bless with acts of kindness. As Revd Kate Bottley said in our specially recorded video: Think about what you could say, do or give to make the grieving person feel special and loved.

The Bishop of Sheffield says:

“As a bishop I am deeply committed to funeral ministry because God cares for the broken-hearted and it's a wonderful thing for us to be channels of his love. I am committed to it, because Jesus said blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted and it's a wonderful thing for us to be channels of that comfort.”

Bereavement is always tough, and is a long journey. 125,000 and more have died with Covid, but there are millions mourning the half million plus who have had restricted funerals. Lets not forget them. Include them in our prayers, and reach out to them in our communities.

For more information go to [www.ataloss.org](http://www.ataloss.org)

Or [www.lossandhope.org](http://www.lossandhope.org) for information on becoming a bereavement friendly church

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**Source URL:** <https://www.churchofengland.org/news-and-media/stories-and-features/restricted-funerals-and-their-impact-grief>