

Funerals and Covid-19 - How the virus is robbing us of our grief

By [Mahlatse Mahlase](#), issued by [Primedia Broadcasting](#)

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This past weekend, my Facebook timeline was flooded with notifications of watch parties. For those not on the social media platform, the Live feature allows someone to stream an event on Facebook in real time for all their friends or a selected group of people to see.

Sadly, these were not the watch parties we've come to know over the last three months - of a friend spinning the decks from home to keep busy and entertain us or government press conferences keeping us on tenterhooks. These live streams were of burials.

With government limiting the number of people attending funerals to just 50 as part of Covid-19 lockdown regulations, live streaming is now one of the few ways many people can say goodbye to a beloved friend, colleague, mentor - or worse - a close relative.



Mahlase Mahlase

Losing a loved one currently must be the most heart-wrenching experience. Because of nationwide restrictions, people are dying alone, and one doesn't have the chance to say a last goodbye, or to hold the hand of a dear one departing the world. There isn't even a moment to mourn.

On the face of it, a funeral attended by 50 people is economical. It slashes tens of thousands of rands from the usual cost. Funerals in the time of coronavirus have removed the flashy display of opulence. There is no point to hiring limousines or luxury cars to transport bereaved families because really, who will be there to see it?

Some are relieved they don't have to spend money on travelling costs to bury a teacher who had a meaningful impact on their life, a neighbour who helped raise them while mom was working in suburbia, or that first boss who gave them their first break to climb the ladder.

However, the funeral of 50 takes a greater emotional toll on the family. For many black people in the country, no one is invited to a funeral, and these gatherings are not just for a few. People attend of their own volition. The larger they are, the greater the testimony to the character of the deceased person.

Immediately after a death is announced, the news spreads. Family and neighbours begin to gather at the household. If you are a woman and it is your child or husband who has died, one usually sits literally "on the mattress".

Everyone lines up to pay their condolences with the bereaved, retelling the circumstances surrounding the death repeatedly, reliving the happy memories and understanding the impact of the life now lost.

Sitting there, a friend once told me, is a far cheaper way of healing. You relate your loss and memories many times to people who come to share in your grief.

She said she found this had a greater impact than sitting on a couch for R600 per hour talking to a stranger, and that it marked the beginning of her lifelong healing process.

Funerals, tombstone unveilings and weddings also give us a sense of community that is not shared by western culture. On the eve of the funeral, women and men gather to slaughter the cow, to peel the vegetables, to help clean the house and help with other chores.

Daily night vigils are usually held to celebrate the life of the deceased with song and prayer. These play a huge part in the sending off a loved one in black culture.

But now, these grieving rituals that have comforted us for decades, have been snatched away because they could now be deadly due to the virus. While trying to prepare a dignified send off, mourning families now have to worry about the funeral sparking cluster infections that can go into the hundreds and spike the national tally and have to make decisions based on strict rules and regulations.

They become immersed in administration of the funeral instead of mourning. Families are fighting over who should make up the 50 people allowed to attend. We now must issue invitations to relatives to manage the numbers.

Just before the Covid-19 outbreak, our family held an event dubbed “Are tsebaneng.” The English direct translation is “let’s get to know each other”. It brings together my mother’s cousins and their children’s children and cements the extended family in African tradition.

At that gathering, we housed way over 50 people. Now I wonder who would have been included if the event took place with a cap on attendees, and more especially what the exclusion criteria would be. The latter can cause acrimony.

I feel for all those who have lost their loved ones during this awful time. Their pain is not only magnified by government admin, but also having to do it without traditional and familiar comforts.

The luxury cars can go, the over the top coffins and tombstones can be replaced, but I pray it does not take away our ubuntu, that our children don’t grow up believing family is only mother, father and siblings. We live in the faith that we will soon overcome the corona-virus, but I hope it doesn’t take away the essence of our being - our sense of community - when it leaves.

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