Cultural Perspectives of
DEATH, GRIEF, AND BEREAVEMENT
ABSTRACT
The cultural makeup of the United States continues to change rapidly, and as minority groups continue to grow, these groups’ beliefs and customs must be taken into account when examining death, grief, and bereavement. This article discusses the beliefs, customs, and rituals of Latino, African American, Navajo, Jewish, and Hindu groups to raise awareness of the differences health care professionals may encounter among their grieving clients. Discussion of this small sample of minority groups in the United States is not intended to cover all of the degrees of acculturation within each group. Cultural groups are not homogeneous, and individual variation must always be considered in situations of death, grief, and bereavement. However, because the customs, rituals, and beliefs of the groups to which they belong affect individuals’ experiences of death, grief, and bereavement, health care professionals need to be open to learning about them to better understand and help.

PAUL T. CLEMENTS, PhD, APRN, BC, DF-IAFN,
GLORIA J. VIGIL, LMSW,
MARTIN S. MANNO, MSN, RN, CNS, C,
GLORIA C. HENRY,
JONATHAN WILKS, LISW,
SARTHAK DAS, MPH,
ROSIE KELLYWOOD,
AND WIL FOSTER
Although death is a certainty for members of all cultures, what people experience, believe, or feel after death varies significantly. The duration, frequency, and intensity of the grief process varies based on the manner of death and individual, family, and cultural beliefs (Clements & Weisser, 2003; DeSpelder & Strickland, 2001; Vigil & Clements, 2003). It has been suggested that fear of death leads many people to look for support in religious rituals and customs, native healers, and the family system (Parry & Ryan, 1996).

Grief felt for the loss of a loved one can occur across all ages and cultures (Doka, 1996). However, the role of cultural heritage in individuals’ experience of grief and mourning is not well understood and requires ongoing exploration. Individuals’ attitudes, beliefs, and practices regarding death must be described according to the customs and rituals inherent in their cultures (Clements, Reid, & DeRanieri, 2003; DeSpelder & Strickland, 2001).

No one is spared death. It is a life event that may result from a natural process, an act of violence or war, or an unexpected traumatic event (Clements & Weisser, in press; DeRanieri, Clements, & Henry, 2002; Fillion, Clements, Averill, & Vigil, 2002). All cultures have developed methods for adaptive coping, grief, and mourning. Subsequently, a lack of sensitivity to these practices by health care professionals may interfere with the necessary grieving processes.

- Are certain types of death less acceptable (e.g., suicide), or are certain types of death especially difficult to handle for the family’s culture (e.g., the death of an infant or child)?

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

The following examples of cultural considerations related to death and grieving were gleaned from the scholarly literature, clinical encounters, anecdotal reports, and culturally based clinical interviews. This small sample of groups provides the opportunity to explore the importance of assessing cultural customs and practices. It is not intended to cover the degrees of acculturation within each group. It is hoped these overviews will highlight the significance of cultural sensitivity and promote health care professionals’ understanding of the importance of exploring the implications for cultural assessment as it relates to death, grief, and bereavement.

Latino

Although the religious beliefs and preferences of their countries of origin determine the rituals involved in the grief and bereavement process for Latino individuals, the rituals also vary within the Latino culture, depending on the level of acculturation into the mainstream society. First-generation Latino immigrants tend to be much more traditional than successive generations. The customs described in this article are very traditional.

When working with grieving Latino families, health care professionals must understand the concept of respeto (i.e., rules that guide social relationships) (Shaefer, 1999). In traditional families, a strict hierarchy exists
and must be honored. Status typically is ordered from oldest to youngest and from men to women. Health care professionals should greet Latino family members with a handshake and address them formally, using Mr. and Mrs. (or if Spanish speaking, Señor y Señora) with the last name.

Usually, Latino individuals express their grief by crying openly, which is considered a healthy and appropriate emotional response (Perry & Ryan, 1996; Shaefer, 1999). People who were emotionally closest to the deceased are expected to grieve openly and are offered the comfort and support of family and friends. Although it is not unusual to hear women wailing loudly, calling out the name of the deceased, and fainting, machismo (i.e., male dominance and male role) plays a significant part in the lack of emotional response of adult Latino men. Latino men are expected to “be strong” for the family and usually do not grieve openly.

Religion and spirituality are very important for Latino individuals who practice Catholicism, the dominant religion for this group (Perry & Ryan, 1996; Shaefer, 1999). Many Latino families believe in spiritual and psychological continuity between the living and the dead and usually continue a relationship with the deceased through prayer and visits to the grave.

Formal mourning begins with an open-casket service, during which a Rosary is said, using beads. Group prayers for the soul of the deceased are recited for 1 or 2 evenings prior to the day of the funeral. This is also a time for family members and friends to pay their respects to the body of the deceased and offer condolences to the immediate family members. A funeral mass usually is held at a church, followed by a procession to the burial site. There a graveside service is recited, and the grave is blessed before burial with holy water by a priest or deacon.

Latino families are most likely to turn to their extended families, friends, and churches for practical and emotional support, but major support comes from their immediate nuclear families. Extended family (i.e., cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, godparents) typically travel great distances to attend the funeral and comfort the immediate family (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993). The church, family, and friends often contribute toward the burial and funeral expenses (Shaefer, 1999).

Wearing black or dark colors is a common way to display mourning and is a sign of respect for the deceased. During the mourning process, the deceased’s parents and immediate family members usually do not play the radio, watch television, or attend social events. Middle-aged and elderly Latino adults may observe a longer period of mourning, which lasts from months to years (Shaefer, 1999).

In general, for Latino individuals, hugging or touching a grieving family member’s arm or back would be considered supportive, not offensive or invasive. Human touch demonstrates respect for grieving Latino individuals and is an important gesture for health care professionals to include in their support of the family (Shaefer, 1999).

**African American**

The term African American often is used as a brushstroke description for many groups, subcultures, and countries of origin for the large community who have original ties to the African continent. This section explores one subculture of this large group—non-Catholic African American individuals, who combine both traditional Western Christian practices and traditional African beliefs surrounding death. For these individuals, death and mourning heralds a time for commemoration of the deceased through observation, ceremony, and the calling of others to remembrance and celebration (Holloway, 2002).

According to Kagawa-Singer (1994), Christianity is unique in its extremely short formalized period of mourning and public
acknowledgement of death. The memorial service and funeral, which may be one and the same, usually occur within 1 week of the death and are the only religious ceremonies to acknowledge the death. However, African heritage and traditions extend beyond the simple confines of Christianity’s view of death. According to Henry-Jenkins (1994):

Western culture teaches us that we live and die, but they only refer to the physical body. In traditional African culture, death is certainly not the end. In fact, in African culture, death is called “transition,” it signals the end of one existence and the beginning of another. (p. 1)

In addition, African American individuals have a number of distinctive religious and secular ceremonies and traditions (Holloway, 2002).

When a death occurs, African American families, both immediate and extended, gather in one location...to provide support to the grieving family. The extended family (i.e., aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, godparents) traditionally will travel great distances to be with the immediate family. The family unit is very important to the grieving family, especially as a sign of being there to help them through such a difficult time.

The “church family” offers spiritual support as well. For Christian African American individuals, death is not the end of life. Death is only the means whereby an individual’s current earthly existence is exchanged for another. After death, individuals pass into a life beyond, which is more important than the present, regardless of how prosperous the individual was. According to Henry-Jenkins (1994):

The Western or “White” model of death is linear. It begins with birth, progresses through life, and ends with death. The Traditional African Model sets forth that birth, life, and death are a circular and continuous cycle. (p. 1)

Therefore, for Christian African American families, the loss of a loved one is only a temporary loss. They are reassured that the deceased will be reunited with family and friends in the next realm of life, typically described as heaven.

Native American
Native Americans are not one people or culture, which is a common stereotype. Beliefs, traditions, rituals, and ceremonies among Native American groups vary widely. The culture of each group reflects the influences of assimilation and acculturation; the results of relocation and education at boarding schools; and competing missionary efforts. Many Native American children grew up without the traditions of their ancestors. In addition, many Native American people currently practice several Christian religions, such as Catholicism, Presbyterian, and Jehovah Witness (Shaefer, 1999).

Personal beliefs, the extent and nature of family support, and the status of the deceased in the community affect Native American mourning practices. Tribes may be matriarchal, bilinear, or patriarchal, but in all tribes, the wisdom and experience of elders are honored and respected. In each family or clan, one elder may be designated as the final decision maker (Shaefer, 1999).

This section focuses on the Navajo customs and rituals surrounding death. Navajo is the second largest Native American population in the United States. The tribe is divided into more than 50 clans, and descent is traced through the female line. Traditional Navajo religion includes worship of the winds and watercourses and a number of gods who are believed to intervene occasionally in human affairs. These gods frequently are invoked. Offerings are made to these gods, and ceremonial dances are performed in which painted and masked men represent them. Songs, chants, prayers, and sand paintings also form part of the intricate religious rituals.

The Navajo people have strict traditional customs surrounding death. They believe death is another step in an individual’s life and that the traditional procedures for burial and mourning must be honored carefully to ensure the deceased completes his or her journey to the next world. Any deviation from the defined practices is believed to affect the well-being of the surviving relatives and the spirit of the deceased. The deceased’s relatives and friends have 4 days after the death to
resolve all aspects of the deceased, including cleansing and preparation of the body, burial, mourning, and disposing of the deceased’s belongings by giving them away to others or by destroying them (often by burning).

Cleansing the body is the first step in preparing the deceased for the journey. The body is washed, and then the face is painted with chei (i.e., a war paint made of a soft red rock, crushed and mixed with sheep fat) and white corn to protect the deceased on the journey. The deceased is clothed in his or her best clothing and blessed with corn pollen. The deceased’s hair is tied with an eagle feather to symbolize a return home.

Traditionally, the deceased was buried in the family’s hogan, a sacred home, and then the hogan was abandoned. Every Navajo family, even if they live most of the time in a newer home, must have a traditional hogan for ceremonies. Although these forms are all recognizable as Jewish, their interpretation of Jewish law and practice often diverge greatly. In addition, Jewish families, like all other families, have their own idiosyncratic relationship to their religion, and this relationship may differ from the beliefs and practices most commonly associated with the Jewish group to which they belong.

Jewish death practices can be understood most easily by dividing them into two categories—rituals intended for the care of the mourners and rituals enacted for the care of the deceased’s body (Reimer, 1995). Although some families may describe these practices in English, it is more common, even for English-speaking families, to use Hebrew words to refer to both the practices for the living and the dead.

According to Jewish law and tradition, the funeral and burial of the deceased should occur as soon after death as possible, preferably before sundown on the day of death. Because Jewish individuals believe the soul begins its return to God immediately after death, they believe the body should be returned to the earth as soon as possible so it can complete its return to the dust from which it was made.

It is important to understand that the body is accorded a high level of respect in Judaism because it is the holy repository of the soul and, as such, is a sign of God’s love for his creation (Dosick, 1995). Care of the deceased’s body is given over to the chevrah kadisha, or holy society. The chevrah kadisha perform a tahrach, which is the traditional washing and then dressing of the body in linen shrouds called tahrichin. The body is placed in a simple all-wood coffin (i.e., aron) that has no metal parts (i.e., hinges, screws, or handles). The aron facilitates the natural decomposition process and symbolizes that in death all people are equal, regardless of their standing in life.
According to Jewish tradition, a member of the chevrah kadisha or a friend of the family will perform shemirah (i.e., watching over the body from the time of death until burial). Most funeral homes are willing to work with the chevrah kadisha and are familiar with Jewish customs. The more orthodox groups use their own funeral homes. The Jewish funeral often is simple, conducted at the graveside. It is important to note that embalming and cremation are not customary practices because they are not part of the natural process of death and decomposition.

During the time of mourning, Jewish families are offered a great deal of care by the religious community. It is not customary for Jewish individuals to view the deceased during this time. Prior to the funeral, the deceased’s immediate family is in a state of aninut, a deep and sensitive period of grief. Each family member will tear an article of clothing that is being worn or a black ribbon that is affixed to the clothing as a symbol of their grief in an act called keriah. Unlike Christian custom, sending cut flowers for the funeral is not part of the Jewish tradition because their withering and dying may be a painful reminder to the family of their loss. Instead, a donation usually is made in the name of the deceased to a charity of the family’s choosing (Kolatch, 1993).

After the funeral, the family returns home and begins the 7-day process of sitting shivah. A small meal is prepared for the family by members of the religious community to serve as a life-affirming action. Shivah is the time when the mourning family members contemplate their loss, while under the care of the extended religious community who will see to their daily needs. During shivah, mourners often sit on a low bench or stool as a physical enactment of being laid low by their loss. The mirrors in the home are covered to prevent vanity, and mourners perform only a minimal amount of grooming and bathing.

After the period of shivah, another mourning period begins. This is the period of shloshim, which continues for 30 days. During this time, mourners continue to grieve. They may return to work but will not attend celebrations and may not visit the grave of the deceased. In the United States, Jewish families usually do not place a headstone at the grave until the first year anniversary of the death. This coincides with the end of the traditional year of mourning, which includes the daily recitation of the kaddish (i.e., a life-affirming mourning prayer) by mourners.

It is important to realize that people’s relationship to their religious beliefs often changes at transitional times in the life cycle. For example, an otherwise non-observant Jewish family may gravitate toward a more observant practice of Judaism when a death occurs and have a traditional Jewish funeral and time of mourning. In contrast, an otherwise observant Jewish family may wish to break with tradition and view the deceased’s body.

Hinduism

Hinduism is unique among the world’s faiths because its roots do not spring from a single scripture, founder, or sacred place. In fact, to define Hinduism as a religion in the same sense as Islam, Christianity, or Judaism is somewhat misleading. Hinduism is more an umbrella term to describe a set of philosophies, cultures, and way of life. However, within the myriad forms and means of worship in the Hindu tradition, there is uniformity in one area—the approach to death.

Because Hindu individuals believe in the laws of Karma and reincarnation, each birth on the physical plane is considered to be inextricably linked to actions undertaken in previous births. Birth and death are part of a cycle that Hindu people seek to transcend through the accumulation of good Karmas (i.e., actions), ultimately leading to jivanmukta, or liberation of the soul.

When a Hindu individual dies, the body is bathed, massaged in oils, and dressed in new clothes. Then it is essential the body be cremated before the next sunrise. The reason is based on logic that a person retains
both a physical body and an astral body (i.e., a subtle non-physical body), which houses the soul. Death of the physical body does not mean death of the soul.

From the Hindu perspective, embalming and autopsy are not performed because they believe it is painful for the astral body to have the physical body cut or disturbed. These processes are only performed when legally necessary, such as in homicide or other sudden traumatic death (Australasian Police Multicultural Advisory Bureau, 2003).

Immediate cremation is important to facilitate the soul’s transition from this world to the next. It is believed that burying the body only encourages the soul to remain confused and “earthbound.”

At the time of cremation, the eldest son places flowers around the body and lights the funeral pyre. If there are no male children, this responsibility falls to the Brahman (i.e., priest) (H. Mirchandani, personal communication, April 21, 2003; Selected Independent Funeral Homes, 2003). Several rituals are observed for the next 10 days, which are considered a time for intimate prayer and meditation to facilitate the departed soul’s journey to the next world. An oil lamp is lit and kept in the home. Family members eat only once a day, and the food should be cooked at home.

On the 10th day, the deceased’s immediate family members journey to a river for a ritual bath, shaving of the head, and floating of the oil lamp on the water on a leaf or flower. It is believed that for these 10 days, the soul remains watching over the house and finally releases its attachment to the former life on the 11th day. Only on the 12th day does the family gather with friends and community members to honor and remember the deceased (Selected Independent Funeral Homes, 2003). Although the physical body is gone, the deceased’s astral body will remain as close to them as ever.

**SUMMARY**

Health care professionals can glean significant information from the families with whom they work by inquiring about their customs and rituals surrounding death and grief. The family is the best source of information for culturally sensitive assessment. By asking and listening to surviving family members, health care professionals can obtain information and assess and integrate that information into a care plan that is culturally sensitive and family specific.

Death, grief, and bereavement are very personal experiences. By assessing and facilitating culturally appropriate grieving practices, health care professionals can promote integration of the loss and reinvestment in life for surviving family members.

Birth and death are part of a cycle that Hindu people seek to transcend through the accumulation of good Karmas..., ultimately leading to jivanmukta, or liberation of the soul.

**REFERENCES**

KEY POINTS

1. Grief, bereavement, and mourning related to death are concepts common to all cultures.

2. Health care professionals can glean significant information by inquiring about clients' cultural customs and rituals surrounding death and grief.

3. By assessing and facilitating culturally appropriate grieving practices, health care professionals can promote integration of the death and reinvestment in life for surviving family members.

Do you agree with this article? Disagree? Have a comment or questions? Send an e-mail to Karen Stanwood, Managing Editor, at kstanwood@slackinc.com.

We're waiting to hear from you!


Dr. Clements is Assistant Professor, University of New Mexico, Ms. Vigil is Trauma Consultant, and Mr. Wilks is Grief Intervention Consultant, Office of the Medical Investigator, Albuquerque, Mr. Das is Project Director, New Mexico Alliance for Childhood Traumatic Stress, Santa Fe, and Ms. Kellywood and Mr. Foster are members of the advisory board, New Mexico Survivors of Homicide, Inc., Waterflow, New Mexico. Mr. Manno is Nurse Manager, University of Pennsylvania Medical Center, and Ms. Henry is Bereavement Specialist, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Address correspondence to Paul T. Clements, PhD, APRN, BC, DF-IAN, Assistant Professor, College of Nursing, MSC09 5350, 1 University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131-0001; e-mail: pclements@salud.unm.edu.