

Grief & Mourning Across Cultures

**Building Strong Families Conference
Messiah College**

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Grief & Mourning Across Cultures

- **Introductory Comments**
 - Brief overview of cultural factors in grief and mourning
- **Learning Objectives:**
 - Examine and build awareness of how culture influences the ritual and/or practices associated with death and dying.
 - Consider implications for psycho-educational and/or therapeutic interventions.

Presentation Outline

- 1. Defining grief and mourning**
- 2. Grief and mourning in**
 - Latino families
 - Asian families
 - Caribbean families
 - Amish families
- 3. Therapeutic interventions**

Defining Grief & Mourning

- **Grief**
 - Grief is a multi-faceted response to loss. Although conventionally focused on the emotional response to loss, it also has physical, cognitive, behavioral, social and philosophical dimensions.
- **Mourning**
 - A cultural complex of behaviors in which the bereaved participate or are expected to participate.

Grief & Mourning Latino Cultural Values

- **Familism and the Protection of Individual Family Members**
- **What is Familism? (or familialism)**
 - Individuals experience a "strong identification with and attachment to their nuclear and extended families and strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among members of the same family."

Grief & Mourning Latino Cultural Values

- **Three predominant value orientations which develop out of familism**
 - A perceived obligation to provide material or emotional support to their extended family.
 - The reliance on relatives for help and support.
 - The perception of relatives as behavioral and attitudinal referents.

element of
protection
(infantilism)

Grief & Mourning
Rituals & Practices among LATINO Families

Nov. 2nd
 (All Hallows Eve, All Saints Day)

- **Examples:** Mexican Culture & the Day of the Dead
- **Examples:** Immigration and Ambiguous Loss
 - The concept of ambiguous loss proposed by Pauline Boss (1991, 1999) describes situations in which loss is unclear, incomplete or partial (*two types of ambiguous loss*).

① - Physically absent but psychologically present
 ② - Physically present but psychologically absent

altar (spirits)
 food for them to taste
 candles for light

emotionally unavailable
 ① Soldier MIA
 immigration
 ② physical stress AKA
 Alzheimers drugs?

Grief & Mourning
Rituals & Practices among ASIAN Families

- Variations among Asian cultures
- Tendency to somaticize the grief, i.e. express the pain in physiological ways
- May express grief and mourning in private and quiet manner
- Complex rituals are performed. E.g. In Chinese culture, paper money, paper houses, and other material goods are often burned in order to give the deceased a good "send off" and to ensure that they will not live in poverty

Grief & Mourning
Rituals & Practices among CARIBBEAN Families

- Variations among the ethnic groups
- In African families, there are more outward expressions of emotions, such as loud crying and wailing
- In Indian families, mourning is done in private and some family members (e.g. mothers) may not go to the cemetery
- Most funerals occur in cemeteries *or cremated*
- Sometimes Hindus are cremated

**Grief & Mourning
the Amish Community**

- Grief is very private
- Public displays of grief are rare
 - This does not mean that they are grieving any less than those who make strong emotional outbursts
- The funeral service is simple with no eulogy or flowers; hymns are read , not sung
- Mourners will wear black; the immediate family will mourn for a year ↗
- Strong community support

• ~~strong~~ forgiveness

Therapeutic Interventions

- Explore how the client perceives the cause of death
- Discuss how the client followed the burial and mourning rituals at the time of the death
- Examine the client's beliefs about life after death
- Look at communication with the dead person
- Explore family changes that followed a death (McGoldrick et al., 1991, p. 203)

5 Questions for Clinicians to Consider

1. What are the prescribed rituals for handling dying, the dead body, the disposal of the body, and rituals to commemorate the loss?
2. What are the group's beliefs about what happens after death?
3. What do they believe about appropriate emotional expression and integration of a loss experience?

5 Questions for Clinicians to Consider

4. What are the gender rules for handling the death?

5. Are certain deaths particularly stigmatized (e.g. suicide), or traumatic for the group (e.g. the death of a child in Puerto Rican culture)?

(McGoldrick et al., 1991,p. 179)

Case Study: Latino (Puerto Rican) Family

A 25-year-old Puerto Rican woman was referred to me by one of her professors in graduate school. She was depressed and having difficulty concentrating. She told me that her mother had died suddenly and unexpectedly three months earlier. A month later she herself had been diagnosed as having rheumatoid arthritis. She felt as if her whole world was falling apart.

She had first heard of her mother's illness when her brother called to say her mother was in the hospital. During the four-hour drive to the hospital she had hoped and prayed to see her mother alive. Upon arrival she found that her mother had, in fact, died of heart failure prior to the call, but because her siblings' were afraid of her emotional reaction they waited to tell her in person. She was furious, feeling excluded and infantilized by her siblings' decision to handle things this way. She was also angry about not having had a chance to say goodbye to her mother; at the same time she felt guilty for not having been there. At the funeral she had kept her emotions under control in an effort to show her family that she could handle herself.

Intervention:

In therapy, I asked her to bring pictures of her mother and other family members and to describe how she heard of her mother's death and what the funeral was like. All this precipitated very strong emotions. I also asked her to write a letter to her mother telling her everything she wanted to say, and then to visit the grave and read it aloud. She described this experience as emotional and very helpful. Later, a session with her sister and one of her brothers was very helpful in promoting emotional support among them. They talked about their loss and my client's struggle with her own illness. Feeling more at peace with herself, she made plans to move closer to her family but to live independently. In this way she expressed the importance of her family and cultural connectedness, while at the same time she made efforts to help her siblings modify their cultural based view of her as fragile and needing to be "handled" and protected.

Reference

- McGoldrick, M., Almeida, R., Hines, P. M., Rosen, E., Garcia-Preto, N. & Lee, E. (1991). Mourning in Different Cultures. In F. Walsh & M. McGoldrick, M. (Eds.), *Living Beyond Loss* (pp. 193-194). New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co.