

Psychological Healing process of Grief Resolution: Nepali (Hindu) Cultural Perspective

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Abstract: Grief is a natural reaction to the loss; mainly due to the death of a loved one. Sometimes, such reactions may be problematic or complicated. Culture serves as a buffer to deal with such losses, and supports the mature way of coping. Nepali cultural practices or the death rituals favor the restoration-oriented grieving process and are prophylactic approach in order to prevent any form of grief-related psychological reactions. This paper provides a narrative approach in which the writer shares his experiences as a Psychiatrist in dealing with grief-related problems of the clients in his own clinical practice. In addition, he also shares his own personal experience of losing his father and illustrates how the traditional practices followed by himself and his family during that time facilitated the grief-resolution process. He is very much convinced that the Nepali cultural approach during death rituals is very much scientific and psychotherapeutic.

Keywords: Coping, Culture, Experiences, Grief resolution, Restoration-oriented process, Rituals.

Case-Scenario (Experiences as a Therapist)

1. *Mrs. S, a 25 year lady, was witnessed talking all alone in a closed room. Her talk seemed as if she was speaking to a small baby, but no one (not a baby, not even a doll) was there. She*

was brought to the Psychiatry Out-patient Department (OPD) as her behavior for the last few days was observed to be a bit 'abnormal' by her relatives. On detailed interview, it was found that the lady had lost her 2 year old son in an accident a couple of months ago.

2. Ms. A, a 16 year girl had repeated episodes of panic attacks for the last ten days. She had been frequently brought to the Emergency Department. Repeated evaluations and investigations revealed no obvious organic (physical) cause for those panic attacks. Later, she was referred to the Psychiatry department. On reviewing her history, it was noted that the episodes had started 15 days after her best friend had died of suicide by hanging.
3. We evaluated Mr. P, a 70 year old male who would frequently visit the Cardiac OPD with complaints of chest pain. No heart-related cause was found for his chest pain in all the physical examinations and relevant investigations. Later, he was sent to the Psychiatry OPD. It was then revealed that this symptom had started 2 years ago when his brother had expired of Heart Attack.

Introduction

Case stories, as mentioned above, illustrate the reaction of an individual to the loss of their loved ones. The first case describes the typical grief symptoms: 'sense of presence' and psychotic responses. The second and the third cases resemble the somatic and neurotic symptoms due to over-identification with the deceased; best friend and the brother, respectively (Shear, 2008).

As a Psychiatrist, I am a bit fortunate for being exposed to such narratives of human sufferings in my professional life which direct my conscience to deeply explore for their hidden meanings and possible aetiopathology.

On the other hand, I am always bounded by the society and culture. Hence, exploring the cultural and traditional underpinnings

in the above-mentioned scenario always fascinates me.

Grief is a natural and subjective response to the loss; mainly due to the death of loved ones. However, sometimes, it may also become 'complicated' and 'pathological' (Shear, 2008).

'Death of close people' is not easier to bear for anyone but some may be very much affected by the loss. Adolescent boy losing his parent at a very young age may turn out as a delinquent and antisocial youth; while, a girl, in such a scenario, may suffer from *Depression*. Similarly, death of spouse or a child can become a source of a lifelong loss to the survivors (spouse or parents). Furthermore, demise of a supporting figure (usually spouse) can bring an intolerable stress to the surviving elderly (Bowlby, 1980).

Normal grief reaction needs to be resolved adequately for existing relatives or friends to 'live along with' themselves forming a new relationship, regaining interests in their usual activities, so that they will be able to think about the past with pleasure. Not only the unresolved grief but also the inhibited and retarded grieving process becomes problematic and pathological in future.

Sudden and unexpected death of loved ones may leave the survivor with a bitter experience of traumatic grief (Boelen, 2015). Sometimes, necessity of making difficult medical decisions while being involved in the care of the loved ones (e.g., resuscitation or terminating life support), may also result in traumatic grieving experiences. Not accepting or pretending non-existence of grief may have negative mental health consequences: persistence or increase of trauma symptoms, rumination, flashbacks, nightmares, hypervigilance, anxiety, and depression. It may lead to stress-related mental health disorders like adjustment disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder. People may develop faulty or unhealthy coping mechanisms and develop substance use disorders (O'Connor, 2019)

Grieving is necessary and natural up to a limit but no one can pinpoint the time till which the grieving would be normal. It is entirely a personal and subjective phenomenon. There is a popular notion: *Time alone heals*. It is somewhat true for a life to move ahead making natural adaptation possible in the future.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (Thanatologist and Psychiatrist) has very rightly divided the process of death and dying (grief) into five stages: *Denial, Anger, Bargain, Depression* and *Acceptance* (Ross, 1969; Ross, 2014). A sixth stage *Finding a meaning of the loss* has recently been added (Kessler, 2019).

A grieving individual (or a caregiver of a chronically ill ventilated patient in *anticipatory grief*) first comes up with a natural defense of *denial* and *anger*, later starts *bargain* with the deceased (or a god), followed by a period of *depression*, and ultimately *acceptance* of the truth. However, until and unless, we are able to *find a meaning of the loss*, the grief remains unresolved or hidden, and may become complicated, pathological, or problematic, any time in the future. For this purpose, to find out the meaning of the loss, our Nepali culture can be of help. This cultural perspective sparkled into my insight when I personally experienced the loss of my parent (father) four years ago. I have explained my personal experience in this aspect in the last part of this paper.

The role of society and culture cannot be forgotten with regards to the grief resolution process. Nepali culture has well-arranged rituals for mourning and bereavement so that society itself facilitates the process of resolving grief (Risal, 2013). Our society is fundamentally made up of several households organized in the form of '*guthi*' (Scott, 2019). *Guthi* members (one from each household) are responsible to come up when any member of any household from the same *guthi* dies in order to look after mainly the financial aspect of the final ritual (funeral process) of the deceased. The kins of the deceased who are in a grief are thus supported at the time of their extreme necessity.

The process of cremation (practiced among the Hindus) is itself a method through which the *denial* and *anger* stages are resolved without any problem. After funeral, the kins stay together in a separate room for 11 days when they get ample opportunity to talk among them, make arrangements to carry on the roles and responsibilities, and fulfill the duties left behind by the deceased. The religious rituals make them understand that the late one is no more in his/her physical form but will remain as '*pitree*' forever. The priests recite *mantras* and *slokas* of religious books (usually *Shreemad-Bhagwad-Geeta* and *Garuda Purana*) to the bereaved family which operate as a group therapy to solace them as per their level of understanding. The scholarly ones get supported learning about the immortality of the departed soul; while the common people are reassured by the themes of heaven and paradise. Relatives and friends keep company day and night supporting the mourning folks. Avoidance approach; *i.e.*, *Not talking about the deceased*, is not a mature way of grief resolution. Among the dual models of coping (Stroebe and Schut, 1999), restoration-oriented process enables adjustment to the various consequences of the loss in a mature manner (Neimeyer et al, 2002). Our cultural practices facilitate this mature mechanism of coping. Similar cultural practices are observed in Japan which was found to be facilitative for smooth adaptation to loss (Yamamoto et al, 1969).

Western researchers have also outlined the significance of exposure or "facing the grieving situation". '*Reliving, Revising and Revisiting*', is one such time-guided imagery technique, in order to unbind the obstacles inhibiting the grieving process that may keep the grief reactions unresolved averting the survivors from being able to reconstruct their personal future (Melges, 1980).

Our Eastern or the *Sanaatana* Nepali culture does not allow the grief to remain unresolved or problematic. It ensures that the kins (mainly spouse and children) remember the deceased one every

day, name them, and give them symbolic water (*tarpan*) and food (*pinda*). In order to facilitate the *pretas* (dead one's soul) reaching heaven, their sons give away symbolic light, sandals, clothes, beds etc, throughout the 13 days' ritual. Subsequently, *maasik shraddha* is performed every month, till one full year, remembering the deceased as *pitree*. In this way, the one year long mourning period is accomplished during which *depression* has already been resolved and the survivors are prepared to *accept* the ultimate truth.

Even after the ritual mourning period of one year, *shraddha* is carried out yearly on the same day the deceased had died (according to the lunar calendar); when all the relatives gather in the form of feast, talk about the life of the dead person and remember him/her. Such a mature system to tackle the possibility of any anniversary reaction among the kins!

This is a short description of our cultural rite and ritual after death. It actually encompasses each and every stage for healthy coping (Fisher et al, 2020):

1. Naming the dead relative in the form of *preta* (for 11 days) and then *pitree*,
2. Validating the grief through the symbolic 13 days *kriya-karma*, monthly *maasik shraddha* and annual *shraddha* after a year,
3. Routinely following the religious grieving process,
4. Facilitating self-care,
5. Seeking support from the relatives, friends, and families, and,
6. Celebration in a traditional manner.

Our culture does not prevent grieving; it actually simplifies the mourning process. It says:

1. Accept the reality of loss,
2. Experience the process or the pain of grief,
3. Try to adjust to the world without the deceased or with the loss as it is, and,

4. Ultimately find the ways to maintain a connection to the deceased.

How much therapeutic is the process?

The role of kins, other family members, relatives, friends and society has been set by the society and tradition so that grief resolution takes place automatically and unknowingly without any hindrances. Our culture is well placed to clarify that, *As life is a truth, so is the death*. What more do we want from the society when it is ever ready to help us in our extreme state of suffering? Every aspect of our age-old tradition has some scientific and psychosocial underpinning within it.

My own personal experience of the grief

The last fortnight of the 2076 BS (Chaitra 15-30); March-April 2020 AD; was an unexpected misfortune for me and my family. Loss of father is a big tragedy which befell upon us suddenly. Early in the morning, my 80 year old 'Ba' left his body and this world, without a chance of a formal 'goodbye'.

Then, the cultural self-quarantine process started. I had to live separately, wear white-loin cloth (*kaupin*, *dhoti* and *mekhala*), cook my own food, wash dishes and clothes, take bath in a separate *dhunge-dhara*, sleep on the floor with few *radi-pakhis* and white cover on the bed, head, and all over the body. I was not allowed to touch anyone; everybody would rather run-away from me.

It was really a bitter experience at the time of my unrecoverable loss- loss of a parent (a father).

Being a Psychiatrist and a mental health student, I had always felt our culture in general; the final rite function (*antyeshti kriya*) in particular, was an indirect method for grief-resolution. Yes, the person who has lost his loved one (nears and dears), will remain in grief. As the Psychological theory explains, death-grieving

process follows certain emotional defense reactions- denial, anger, bargain, depression, acceptance, and, finding a meaning of the loss (Ross, 2014; Kessler, 2019). Our cultural practices (*antyeshti kriya*) facilitate the ways to overcome these grieving emotional or defense reactions. We say, after a person dies, his 'soul' leaves the body, so the body is not 'ours' now. The body built up of the five elements of the nature- earth, water, fire, air, and ether-has to be released to the atmosphere. So, as soon as a person dies, we hurry in initiating this process, we cremate the body at a river-bank, and release the ashes left over-or remainder, to the river. Hence, all the five elements of the dead body are liberated to their respective destinations.

Then, we treat the 'soul' which has gone to the atmosphere as '*preta*'; i.e., the floating body-less soul. This floating thing does not have its own body and it cannot touch the ground, and may be a nuisance to the family, if not treated properly. It remains as such in the atmosphere unless its nearest relative (mostly the son) provides some ingredients (water, milk, rice ball-*pinda* etc.) to prepare its miniature body. Such body-building process is completed in a ten days' time when the son does the departed soul's *aurhadaihik kriya*. These ten days, the son will be in self-quarantine as devised by the culture, as explained above.

Yes, the last 15 days of the bygone year (2076/ 2020), I had to practice those cultural rites for my late father. When the 10th day function is over, the '*preta*' gets its miniscule body and it is now able to receive our offerings (water and '*pinda*'). On the 11th day, we provide food (rice-balls) and other necessary things (bed, clothes, sandals, umbrella, utensils etc.) for the '*preta*' for its divine journey. On 12th day, we do *sapindikaran shraddha* so that the '*preta*' will join its ancestors in heaven being a '*peetri*'. Now, the departed 'soul' is no more a trouble-making nuisance ('*preta*'), rather he is our respectable '*peetri*', who will bless us for our peace and prosperity. On the 13th day, we do purification ceremony, purifying our body,

our home, and we are accepted by other members of our family and society as touchable.

Yes, those 10-13 days (almost 2 weeks) seem to be very troublesome. Being untouched, separated, alone, makes a person terrifying and stigmatizing indeed. For me, cooking my own food, washing utensils and clothes, eating once a day (that too dry rice and ghee), were extra burdensome, really; as I was never used to these cooking-washing business. But, I feel, it is our culture's treatment to resolve our grief. The processes of 'denial, anger, bargain and depression' will not much effect our mind when we are actively engaged in these processes, and we are able to accept the universal reality of 'death' easily; i.e., find out the meaning of the loss. Our loved ones are not dead; rather they have just changed their clothing, left the old clothes (body) to get the newer ones, as *Garuda Purana* and *Shreemad-Bhagwad-geeta* explains. If we do these final rites faithfully and hopefully, the '*preta*' becomes '*peetri*', and guide us throughout our life; bless us and our children with peace, prosperity, and wisdom.

May be these are just our fantasy thinking; based on the hope, faith or belief system, but, I don't think these are mere superstitions or myths. These death rites will definitely help us overcome our psychological pain and sorrow, and guide us to our life journey. This will heal our stress-related psychiatric reactions, adjustment issues and protect us from the potential post-traumatic disorders.

We know 'exposure', 'releasing, relieving, and revisiting' are the only ways to deal with the traumatic-stress associated with the loss (or death in particular) (Melges, 1980). Our culture facilitates these processes. We are exposed to the dead bodies as early as possible; we carry them, worship them and cremate them as soon as possible. Our faith-based theories on re-birth and re-incarnation, *preta-peetri*, are the psychological dogmas that enable us accept whatever has happened. Our scriptures have well-explained these:

‘death is not an end’, ‘birth and death is a cycle’, ‘death of anybody who has taken birth is the universal truth’.

Experiencing self-practice of quarantine during those two weeks of 2076 (2020) further strengthened my belief and trust. Being a mental-health personnel and having self-experienced those practices, I do believe our culture enabled soothing my pain and sorrow, and have healed my grief, and I am able to fully recover from this anguish. The culture has empowered me accept the truth as it is.

Apart from these, the process of self-quarantine as I practiced then, and as it is being followed in our culture for so long, is very much scientific system, I believe. The ‘quarantine’, as the term is in widespread use after the COVID-19 era, has been culturally advised in our part of the world for time immemorial. Why can’t we see its positive aspect? It might have made us disinfected indirectly. The nearest and the dearest of the dead person (who might have died following a grave infection, we don’t know) are ultimately quarantined for 2 weeks during the process of the *aurdhadaihk kriya*, making sure that the community transmission is curtailed. What a scientific culture? Isn’t it? (Risal, 2020)

Conclusion

Nepali cultural practices at the time of death of a loved one really facilitate the restoration-oriented grief-resolution process. In my own personal experience as a therapist, and as well as a client, death rituals practiced in our tradition favors *finding a meaning of the loss*, reaching the Sixth stage of Grief. Nepali culture goes hand in hand with the psychotherapeutic approach in grief resolution.

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