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Grief and Loss: Theories and Skills for Helping Professionals

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CHAPTER 5: Cultural and Spiritual Influences



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5

Cultural and Spiritual Influences

Topics

The Influence of Culture in Coping with Loss and Grief

The Influence of Spirituality in Coping with Loss and Grief

We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Influence of Culture in Coping with Loss and Grief

As part of the self-assessment exercise in Chapter 2, you were asked to think back to your experiences related to loss. There is a good chance that in doing this, you described ways of coping with loss that were significantly influenced by your cultural and spiritual background. When I have assigned this exercise to students in my classes, the memories that frequently stand out are those of religious or spiritual practices, such as a wake or memorial service that they attended as young children, and many of these spiritual practices are recollected in the context of culture.

For example, in a class discussion a student reflected on her experiences:

I am part Native American (Cherokee) and African. I have roots in South Carolina. Our traditions and food are southern in distinction. Typically each person visiting a family who has recently suffered a loss would bring a dish of their best effort. Religion in the south is just as fun and light as any social event up north would be. It is an inherently natural way of holding the family together. It fosters common and traditional values and mores for the community and the family. My upbringing included religion, and holidays were for bringing out the tablecloth and my mother's best effort at southern cooking. My mother can cook and make cakes from scratch like you would not believe. Our tradition

includes the return to the church for spiritual guidance and fellowship, and the typical black funeral with song and reading, with a gathering at the home afterward. Funerals and wakes were sad during the service but after the service ended it was clear that the fun and socialization at the home of the deceased was for a more lively presentation. It is not uncommon for the family to have libation and laughter, just like a party at some homes. My family usually just has good food and good stories (Butler-Jones, 2003).

Culture and spirituality are discussed together in this chapter because they are often intertwined and sometimes inseparable. Even though your own cultural and spiritual experiences may be distinct, as they may be for many of the people you find yourself assisting, it is important to understand how both culture and spirituality can influence reactions to loss.

Culture is a complex concept. For this discussion, the description used by the National Association of Social Workers is helpful. “The word culture. . . implies *the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group. Culture is often referred to as the totality of ways that are passed down from one generation to another*” (NASW, 2005). In addition, it is helpful to know that some people define their cultural group through identification communities, the members of which share common experiences. Examples are individuals who identify with deaf culture, or individuals who identify themselves with gay culture, in addition to cultural groups based on ethnicity such as Mexican-American. Awareness of the cultural group with which an individual or family identifies is very important for professionals who want to assist with grief because the beliefs, values, and behavioral norms to which they have been socialized will most likely influence their responses to loss. Culture may also influence how an individual or family regards professionals and their offers of help. For example, a French-Canadian member of our interdisciplinary hospice team acknowledged that in her family of origin self-sufficiency is highly valued and accepting help from those outside the immediate family is sometimes difficult because it is viewed as contradictory to this value. Her perspective was helpful to other members of the team in better understanding the meaning of accepting a hospice referral to a family in our community who shared her French-Canadian background.

Most professional training programs now emphasize cultural competence, or at least cultural sensitivity, in preparing professionals for practice in a multicultural society. In your professional training you have most likely already begun to study and practice within this framework. For the purposes of this discussion of grief, **cultural sensitivity** is a term used to describe *an awareness of, and appreciation for, the differences in values, beliefs, and norms of people from different cultural and spiritual backgrounds*. **Cultural competence** implies that professionals practice cultural sensitivity, but are also able to *engage and interact effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds*. Awareness of cultural norms can aid in providing assistance that demonstrates respect and understanding. Failure to understand and acknowledge cultural differences can be perceived as disrespect and may impede a therapist’s ability to be helpful.

A school counselor writes about some of the cultural differences she has encountered:

I came to the United States from Portugal when I was an elementary school student. When I first attended a funeral in the U.S. that was not for a Portuguese person, I couldn't believe the differences from my own culture, from beginning to end. For example, something as simple as attire can be viewed in extremely different ways. In my culture one always wears black out of respect for the mourners regardless of whether you are family or not. When my neighbor's son died, she wore colorful clothing to the funeral and I was shocked. Coming from my frame of reference, that symbolized disrespect and lack of feeling. At home, after the funeral, she changed into a housedress that was multicolored with very vibrant colors. I know that the color you wear outside has nothing to do with feelings of loss (or the color one may feel on the inside) yet it was culturally shocking to me.

I have also found the funerals for Americans that I have attended to be more reserved. In Portugal, in my experience, one witnesses the arrival of the casket into the church being carried by close friends or family, and you then escort the casket to the burial ground (cemetery) and witness its descent into the ground while mourners sob and scream. Here in the U.S. (at least at the funerals I have attended), the family is more likely to grieve and mourn in private; there is less public display. It is important to be aware that everyone handles death in a very different way and one cannot judge how someone else feels or infer how someone feels by looking at them or their behavior from the outside (Silva, 2002).

As this observation indicates, a lack of awareness of different cultural groups' responses to loss can lead us to:

- Misinterpret an individual's or family's reactions.
- Fail to offer support or assistance that might be perceived as helpful.
- Offend the grieving person(s) and create a barrier to their receiving care and support.

There is perhaps no better illustration of this kind of error than the situation described in Anne Fadiman's (1998) book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. Fadiman recounts how the many professionals involved in caring for a three year-old Hmong child with epilepsy did so without understanding her family's cultural beliefs and practices. Everyone suffered as a result. The parents were deprived of the understanding and support they sought, and the medical providers felt frustrated at their inability to intervene and prolong the child's life. Yet, it is reasonable to question how any individual or team can possibly expect to become knowledgeable about the literally hundreds of cultural groups whose members you may encounter in your work (Irish, 1993).

It is also important to recognize that knowledge of a particular *group* does not necessarily equip someone to adequately understand an *individual*, who may not subscribe to the beliefs or norms of the group. Even someone from a similar cultural background cannot assume that their own perspective applies to someone else. Some members of the same cultural group, for example, have different spiritual practices or subscribe to different norms based on factors such as socioeconomic status or multiple group memberships, or individual ideology.

Therefore, most experts in cross-cultural practice suggest that the best approach to working with individuals from diverse backgrounds is to ask them what values,

beliefs, and practices are important to them. Expression of sorrow for a person's loss is almost always appropriate, followed by a general statement such as, "I would like to help in any way that I can. Perhaps you can tell me what you or your family would prefer." If you are planning to attend a memorial or visit with a grieving person, it is usually helpful to find out how best to show respect or what kind of behavior is expected in mourners in their culture, but be aware that there may be other expectations that you can't anticipate. To learn as much as you can, Koenig and Gates-Williams (1995) recommend making use of available resources, including community or religious leaders, family members, and language translators. Another member of your staff who is familiar with cultural norms may also be able to give you information.

As a beginning social worker, I was fortunate to have spent the first two years of my career working in a Jewish rehabilitation hospital, even though I was raised in the Roman Catholic faith. Shabbat services were held every Friday at sundown and a kosher menu was provided for residents and their visiting family members. My first supervisor, along with the hospital's rabbi and the families I worked with, were instrumental in helping me learn about Shiva and the mourning rituals that take place for seven days following a death. During this time, family members mourn at home and visitors bring food and comfort to them. Orthodox families covered the mirrors in the home, wore black clothing, and observed other practices that were very different from those I had observed in my own childhood. Acknowledging my lack of information enabled me to learn about this and the many other rituals related to death so that I could show respect and assist grieving residents and families, despite our differences.

Over the years I have learned a great deal from colleagues with diverse backgrounds who have shared their experiences related to grief and mourning. For example, one colleague shared that when her grandfather died in their family's small village in the Philippines, the whole community came together, rubbed his body with oils, dressed his body in linens, made a crown of flowers, and paraded around the small community. Following this there was a celebration with food, singing, storytelling, dancing, and prayer.

Another colleague writes:

My experience with death has been affected by cultural attitudes. In my Latino culture the response to death is an intense one. When a person has died in the Puerto Rican culture we can expect overwhelming responses by family and the Hispanic community. The visual I have of Puerto Rican funerals is of women standing around the deceased in an emotional uproar and of ambulances on standby outside the funeral parlor. My eight-year-old daughter was so affected by the emotional responses of the Latina women in our family when her father's brother died that we made the choice not to have her participate in any of the funerary rituals. My experience also has been that the more tragic the death the more intense the response will be by family and loved ones. Intense grief reactions by individuals around me make the experience of death for me unpleasant (Elias, 2003).

A student in a class discussion shared a very different perspective after attending a funeral in which intense emotion was expressed following a tragic death.

Every aspect of this funeral was unlike any other that I have attended. There were over 1500 people in attendance. Prior to the service the family had been there to view the body and there was time after that for others to view. As the service started the family of about 150 extended members paraded down the aisle to reserved seats in the front. There was a very large choir that sang, several friends gave speeches, and there was a lot of dancing involved. I do not remember what religion the family was, but the focus of the service was on eternal life and the preacher focused on celebration rather than mourning. There were nurses present because people got so in touch with the “holy spirit” that they would pass out. I have never been to such a ceremony before. It was unreal, the spirit in the room, over someone that had died. The service lasted about four hours and following was a reception with all kinds of food sponsored by my agency. It was a beautiful commemoration (Baron, 2003).

A colleague who attended the funeral of a Mashantucket Pequot tribal elder shared her observations. The elder was buried in her full Native American tribal dress. There were pastors from various churches who each spoke about her life and the things she had done to help others. The funeral was a celebration of her life and called a “homegoing”—or a celebration of her transition from the natural life on earth to a spiritual life in heaven with God. The funeral had lively music with singing and dancing.

Yet another student informed me about Buddhist practices. She explained that in the Buddhist tradition death is seen as an inevitable part of a larger process of nature’s cycles, of which human manifestation is but a small part. Prayer is not offered to a being outside oneself, but the ritual of chanting is used as a tool for cleansing one’s consciousness. Beliefs in life after death include the teaching that one’s thoughts, words, and actions leave an imprint on one’s consciousness, and that rebirth (life after death) is a manifestation of the energies related to those imprints. Buddhists believe that the spirit hovers over the body for three days after death, so the body is not moved for three days. It is also believed that touching the body (except for cleansing) could disturb the spirit. Chanting is believed to liberate the spirit and may continue for long periods.

Learning about these different practices, and learning more about what is unfamiliar to me, has been essential in my own professional development. The Internet also now offers many excellent sources of information. Many diverse cultural groups and professional organizations provide information and guidance on their Web sites. Some of these are listed in the Internet resources at the end of this chapter. Professional organizations are also developing standards for culturally competent practice or cross-cultural practice to guide their members. The National Association of Social Workers, for example, has published Standards for Cultural Competence on their Web site. Many medical organizations publish both standards of practice and information about different cultural practices related to grief, since health care professionals interact frequently with diverse populations and grief is commonly experienced in health care settings. A universal set of standards has been developed by the U.S. government’s Office of Minority Health to guide all health professionals in cultural competence. Web sites like EthnoMed.org provide specific information about different cultural groups that include mourning practices.

Before more specifically addressing spirituality, it is important to discuss one more aspect of culture and its influence on grieving individuals. A male colleague alluded to the influence of our contemporary American culture in the perspective he offered on gender and grief. He noted that for men in America it is often difficult to grieve a loss in the same way that women do, because many men are taught from an early age not to show emotions such as sadness, loneliness, or depression. He noted that many men he has worked with, when faced with the overwhelming feelings of loss of a loved one, are unable to cope with the feelings they are experiencing and may not have healthy outlets to express their emotions. This perspective also reminds us that cultural messages are transmitted in many ways, not only through direct family communication or interaction. Many grief experts note that the mass media in the United States has a tremendous influence on our ideas about how to react in the face of loss. The way the media commonly focuses on violent death in the news, movies, and television programs, and generally omits any mention of the long-term effects on survivors or healthy longer-term mourning practices, is believed by some to contribute to a “grief denying” culture.

Many students, when reflecting on the influence of the media on their own perceptions of death and loss, acknowledge that they may have learned to avoid the topic of grief, partly as a result of their exposure to mass media. Cartoons, for example, often show characters undergoing traumatic injuries only to reappear, unscathed, in the next scene or episode. Similarly, in television programs and computer games, people are annihilated with no reference to the grief experienced by survivors. There are some movies that have depicted both realistic and positive models of grieving individuals and families with diverse backgrounds. A few of these, such as *Smoke Signals*, are included as suggestions in this chapter’s exercise.

One other very important point that has been underscored by many of my students and colleagues is that many children in the U.S. as well as in other countries grow up in a culture of violence, in which actual death and loss are a constant part of daily life. One student articulately expressed her concern that our current grief theories and textbooks, and many professionals working with children and families, do not effectively address this issue. In a class discussion, a student assertively voiced her thoughts and feelings about this topic and gave all of us in the class much food for thought. She said that there was a gap for her in the theories of grief we had been studying and that there is NOTHING she would like and appreciate more than for grief experts to explain to her the culture of poverty as it relates to the ghetto and the pain of waking up and living another day, facing an endless accumulation of losses. She asked the instructor and the class if we could help her to understand how and why there is so much news coverage about violence in a foreign country, but so little coverage about the culture of violence in our own country, cities, neighborhoods, communities, and homes. She added that it frightens her that people can ignore such pain, loss, and suffering. Who are we fooling? The pain and suffering exist but they are only addressed when they spread to more affluent communities (e.g., school shootings). She asked those of us in the class not to take her views personally, but suggested that we all need to start understanding what it is like to feel worthless, hopeless, and extremely angry about poverty and violence in our society. This student,

and many others who live and work in communities where poverty, violence, and multiple losses are prevalent, have made me increasingly aware of how little attention is given to the grief of vulnerable populations.

This is an area where much more work is needed, including needs assessments, research, and program development. For those of us working with children and families exposed to daily and often traumatic losses, we can begin by acknowledging these losses. We must also raise our voices to advocate for, and participate in, community action and change to prevent this injustice from continuing in our society.

The Influence of Spirituality in Coping with Loss and Grief

In an interview about integrating spirituality into medical interviews, Christina Puchalsky, a physician who has developed a spiritual assessment tool, explains why spirituality became important to her, as a member of the helping professions:

Well, I think I have been very fortunate to have very spiritual parents, who themselves are from Europe and experienced World War II in powerful ways, including a lot of losses. I grew up with people who have used their own spiritual beliefs to help them cope with difficult things and to find meaning in life. Although they have a religion—they are Catholic—it wasn't really the focus on the religion ever, it was a focus on a much broader concept. I was never raised with [the notion] 'There's only one God and the Catholic one is the right one.' Never. My parents have given me great role modeling on the role of spirituality and have allowed me to search extensively. I was going to convert to Judaism, so I explored that for a while. My dad and I went to Hindu temples together; we explored that faith. You know, I learned Eastern meditation by myself and with him, so I've done lots of different things. I was involved in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery throughout my 20s, so I've explored many different religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, and have throughout the course of my life been with people of many different beliefs. Some are religious, some are not, and I've just always been very interested in spirituality. So based on those experiences, as well as several major deaths of significant people in my life—all of these experiences are part of the background of my interest in integrating a spiritual history into the medical interview (Romer, 1999).

An American student's observations about the way people in Ecuador acknowledge death serves as an example of how culture and spirituality are both important in grief reactions and are often intertwined. In a class discussion, the student shared that she had spent two months in Ecuador and attended a university course for Americans about Ecuadorian culture. She learned that families in Ecuador celebrate death by having a picnic on the grave of the deceased loved one, making a plate for the deceased individual and leaving it as an offering. It was explained to the American students that through this ritual, the family members are celebrating life and feeding the soul of their loved one who has gone on to the next life. Every year, Ecuadorians celebrate The Day of the Dead where they have another picnic on the grave of their loved ones and continue the feeding of the soul. She remarked that it is

interesting how Americans think of death in very negative aspects, while Ecuadorian culture celebrates death.

It is now recognized that spirituality and religion are very important influences in peoples' lives, particularly in coping with death and loss. Rabbi Earl Grollman (1996) has written, "When unexpected crises shatter lives, people of all faiths often ask the same questions: 'Is it God's will? If God's will is for life, why did this terrible death occur?' (p. 2)." Yet, professionals and laypersons alike have difficulty defining the concepts of both spirituality and religion. Until recently, the two terms were sometimes used interchangeably and few professional training programs emphasized religion or spirituality. In the last two decades, however, both popular media and professional literature have paid a great deal more attention to the distinction between religion and the broader concept of spirituality.

While the term **spirituality** has been used in different ways, many training programs now use a broad, inclusive definition of *that which gives meaning to one's life and draws one to transcend oneself*. **Religion**, on the other hand, is defined more narrowly as a *communal or institutional expression or practice of faith*.

Highfield, Mudd, and Millson (1992) suggest that spirituality is a broader concept than religion, and that religion is one expression of spirituality. Other expressions of spirituality include prayer, meditation, interactions with others or nature, and a relationship with God or a higher power. Spirituality is considered by many to be important in helping both those who are dying and those who are grieving a loss to make meaning of life.

The Gallup Poll has been asking the American public about the role of religion in their lives since 1952. In more recent polls questions about spirituality have also been asked. In a 2001 poll, 55% of those sampled reported religion to be very important in their lives, while 30% reported fairly important, and 15% reported not very important. When asked what best described their beliefs: religious, spiritual but not religious, neither, both religious and spiritual, or no opinion, 54% of those sampled selected religious, 30% selected spiritual but not religious, only 9% selected neither, and 6% answered both. Only 1% responded no opinion. In addition, when asked if religion is outdated or whether it can answer all or most of today's problems, 63% of the respondents answered yes (Gallup Poll, 2000, retrieved May 5, 2000 from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/indicators/indreligion.asp>).

It is therefore crucial to take into consideration, and be informed about, religion and spirituality when assisting individuals, families, and communities in coping with grief and loss. A Vietnamese student writes:

I remember the first time that I experienced death more than ten years ago when I was a young teenager and one of my best friends died in an accident. I still remember the feeling of pain that I felt inside of me when I attended her funeral. I cried for many days after her death, and I asked myself what she did to deserve death? Because we were prohibited in my family from discussing the topics of death or dying, I didn't get any advice on what to do to cope with her death. After her death, I felt more appreciative of what I had in life right then, and I still do at this moment. I believe in reincarnation, and I hope that I can be reunited with my best friend in our next lives (Tran, 2003).

An African American from the southern region of the United States writes:

In our southern African American culture, a funeral service is held and is called a 'home going.' The church affiliates, the pastor, and friends provide support in many ways. They bring food, listen, and talk—whatever is needed. The ceremony is religious in nature. Within this tradition, Christians live on in spirit and it is believed that their souls go on to be with the Almighty, according to the King James Version of the Bible. The activity that takes place before the actual burial is called a processional. All immediate family members walk into the church to view the body in an open casket (this is optional, but typical). The family members walk through the church, almost as in a parade, and their grief is displayed publicly. At this service people are asked to share a few words about the deceased, and a song, usually a solo, is sung. Then the minister or pastor speaks to the family about the deceased and offers condolences. The body is then taken to the burial place and a parade of cars, with their lights on, follows closely behind. The body is placed in the ground and flowers laid over it (DeVeux, 2002).

Another student shared her experiences with a range of different spiritually based funerary ceremonies:

I have attended a range of services/ceremonies marking the rite of passage from death to life. Services have been held in the Native American, Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant traditions. The one I found most powerful and healing occurred eight months ago when a fellow supervisor died in a car crash. His family conducted a private ceremony in Utah, and my agency conducted a Native American memorial service based on his form of spirituality. It began with a native mourning song, which, though sung in native language, invoked strong feelings of sadness, putting mourners in touch with their feelings. Following the song, a Native American prayer was read which symbolized the spiritual journey, the return to Mother Earth, and the concept of acceptance. Another co-worker played a native song on his guitar, which stirred feelings of comfort and connectedness. Mourners consisting of colleagues, friends, and clients were given an opportunity to speak in his remembrance. Most powerful were the words of his clients whose lives he had so deeply touched. A final ritual was offered which involved dropping a stone into a large, round clay pot full of water, and through the rippling effect meditating on how we had each been affected by his presence, as well as our overall interconnectedness with each other (Davis, 2003).

While families within many cultural groups and spiritual communities embrace the same mourning rituals, it is not uncommon for members of a family to practice religion or express their spirituality differently. Factors other than culture and spirituality also influence individuals to respond differently than those around them. These differences can be disconcerting and even cause conflict within a grieving family. Therefore each individual may need validation for their own way of dealing with loss.

In the African American church culture that I grew up in, we celebrate the life of the person through the ritual of a funeral. In the black church, specifically the Pentecostal movement, if one dies in the faith, meaning they have accepted that Jesus Christ was born, lived, and died for the sins of the world, they have lived a life believing and hear-

ing that death is a part of living but death is not final. Death is viewed as “sleepin’” and the service is called a “home going,” for it is a celebration of the life of the deceased. Services are a wonderful way of bringing closure to death, or at least acting as a beginning of closure. When my grandmother died, her last wishes were that she be cremated. She was a Jehovah’s Witness and we did not worship or celebrate death the same way. At her service, we were made to feel by members of the Jehovah’s Witness community that we shouldn’t grieve. My family was told that we shouldn’t grieve because my grandmother wouldn’t want us to cry. This concept was foreign to me as I am used to openly grieving. I think that others who look at my culture and the ways in which we grieve may find them foreign and weird. One thing is for sure—I grieve at all funerals. Even if I didn’t know the person well, just seeing others grieve makes me cry. All in all, I believe that it is very necessary for some form of ritual to take place when death occurs (Gatling, 2002).

A colleague shares the following:

Once I went to the funeral of a mutual friend, with a friend. The deceased was a Jehovah’s Witness, and they conduct memorial services instead of funerals with a body and sermon, as is customary in some other cultures. Well after we were seated, the friend with me asked where the body was, because she had never been to a service where there was no body and people were not crying and becoming very emotional. I politely pointed towards an urn on a pedestal and explained that the body was in the vase. She almost fainted and it was all I could do to contain myself and not burst out laughing. Afterwards she too began to laugh because she now realized that there are different strokes for different people. This person is my best friend and we still laugh about the day she found out what it was like to attend a memorial service at a Kingdom Hall (Walker, 2003).

Many counselors, teachers, and rehabilitation specialists now include spirituality in their assessments and interventions. Just as individual helpers cannot be expected to be competent with all of the multitude of cultural groups found in most practice settings, not all helpers are expected to be experts in spirituality. However, it is useful to be aware of diverse religious and spiritual practices in order to better understand their significance to those we are helping (Holloway, 2002). Inclusive language that uses a variety of religious and spiritual references is important in conveying understanding and acceptance in exploring coping. For example, open-ended questions that acknowledge differences are more helpful than close-ended questions such as, “Are you planning to hold a funeral?” An example of an open-ended question is, “Is there a specific spiritual or religious practice that you or your family have found helpful in the past?” This question conveys understanding that there is wide variation in the practices or beliefs of individuals and families. Familiarity with a broad range of practices and belief systems enables a counselor to better use inclusive language. However, even more important than specific knowledge is the awareness of different cultures and the willingness to acknowledge personal limitations in the knowledge of those cultures and spiritual orientations.

It is also important to attend to verbal and non-verbal signals that might indicate the importance of religion or spirituality. The presence of religious or spiritual

articles such as clothing, medals, or books might indicate that the grieving person is drawing on spiritual resources. When concern or conflict about religion or spirituality is expressed by someone facing loss, there may be a need for further exploration or referral to a spiritual resource. There are a number of tools that are used by psychologists, social workers, and pastoral care counselors to assess spirituality.

Pulchalski (1999) has developed a user-friendly tool for assessing the importance of spirituality in people's lives. She notes that FICA is an acronym:

- F: Faith or beliefs
- I: Importance and influence
- C: Community
- A: Address

Some specific questions you can use to discuss each of these issues are:

- F: What is your faith or belief?
Do you consider yourself spiritual or religious?
What beliefs give meaning to your life?
 - I: Is faith important in your life?
What influence does your faith have on how you take care of yourself?
How have your beliefs influenced your behavior during times of illness?
What role do your beliefs play in regaining your health?
 - C: Are you part of a spiritual or religious community?
Does this community offer support to you and how?
Is there a person or group of people you love or who are especially important to you?
 - A: Would you prefer your healthcare provider to address issues of faith and belief in your healthcare?
- (Retrieved October 12, 2004 from <http://www2.edc.org/lastacts/archives/archivesNov99/assesstool.asp>)

Requests for spiritual counseling or expressions of existential doubt are verbal indications of spiritual needs. Sometimes a referral to the hospital chaplain or a resource in your community for pastoral or spiritual counseling is helpful. Many grieving people have already established relationships with pastors or a spiritual practitioner to whom they can turn in times of distress.

As with culture, it is also important when it comes to spirituality not to make assumptions but rather to listen carefully to what an individual or family is expressing, use inclusive language when inquiring about what they find helpful, and be ready to support them, even if the practice may be unfamiliar to you. Joan Ramos (2003) notes that, "There are wide variations across groups in nations of origin, but many cultural beliefs do not separate spiritual or emotional from physical causes of illness. . . . The importance of developing a respectful relationship with patients . . . cannot be overemphasized (p.10)." Additional resources and literature are included in the references and Internet Resources near the end of this chapter.

Exercise: Grief in a Cultural Context _____

Select a movie or video that depicts loss and grief within a specific cultural context. (This exercise includes a list of suggested movies, although you may know of others that are available at your local library or video store). Retail outlets also sell them and provide reviews online. Read the following questions before you watch the movie and be prepared to write your answers or discuss them with others.

1. Discuss the funeral rituals or mourning behavior you have observed.
2. What aspects of these rituals are similar to the practices of your own cultural or religious group?
3. What aspects are different?
4. Of the rituals, practices, or behaviors you have observed in the videos or your own life, which ones do you feel would be particularly helpful for those who have experienced a loss?

Suggested movies: *Soul Food*, *My Girl*, *Ordinary People*, *Smoke Signals*, *Steel Magnolias*, *To Live!*, *Garden State*

(Note: The movies on this list have been chosen for their themes of loss. However, some of the material may elicit unanticipated emotional reactions or may be objectionable to some viewers. You may want to read reviews before making a selection and remember to exercise discretion and self-care in making choices and completing this exercise.)

Self-Test _____

1. Lack of awareness of different cultural groups' responses to loss can lead to which of the following errors:
 - a. Misinterpreting an individual's or family's reactions
 - b. Failing to offer support or assistance that might be perceived as helpful
 - c. Offending the grieving person(s), creating a barrier to their receiving care and support.
 - d. All of the above
2. In the 2001 Gallop Poll regarding religion, what percentage of respondents reported that religion is very important?
 - a. 15%
 - b. 25%
 - c. 55%
 - d. 95%

Answers: 1) d 2) c

Internet Resources _____

National Association of Social Work Standards for Cultural Competence can be viewed at http://www.socialworkers.org/sections/credentials/cultural_comp.asp

Last Acts has published useful documents on diversity and spirituality in their online journal, *Innovations in End-of-Life Care* at <http://www2.edc.org/lastacts/>

Specific information on religious beliefs and practices, including those related to death, pertaining to many different ethnic groups is available at <http://www.ethnomed.org>

The American Association of Family Physicians has published several useful continuing education articles including one that describes a cultural competence continuum and strategies for improvement of one's practice. One article is available at <http://www.aafp.org/fpm/20020600/39achi.html>

The FICA spiritual assessment tool developed by Christina Puchalski is available at <http://www2.edc.org/lastacts/archives/archivesNov99/assesstool.asp>

The Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development has established a Web site for a National Center for Cultural Competence at <http://www.georgetown.edu/research/gucdc/nccc/>

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