



Culture and Grieving in a Pandemic Context: The Role of Women, A Personal Experience and Food for thought

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Abstract

Death is a universal, persistent, inescapable, unavoidable and undeniable fact of life. The meaning of death and what happens after death though, varies from culture to culture. The Shona and many African cultures believe that life does not end with death, but continues in another realm. What role do women play in dealing with death and loss.

Death has been identified as a uniting event in the African culture as relatives travel, irrespective of distance, to pay their last respects and provide emotional support to the family. Grieving is a process. It starts best with collective grieving. A collective acknowledgement that we have lost someone precious, that we are connected in our loss and in our pain. The relief that is achieved through this collective grieving, carries through into the individual grieving phase. COVID-19 has indeed changed burial rituals world-wide. The authorities and the communities need to join hands and find legal, safe and amicable ways as the pandemic lingers and other pandemics threaten.

Keywords: Death; Grieving; Collective; Individual; Culture; Benefits

Background

A personal loss of a sister to breast cancer, shook me to the core. I recall receiving a devotional message on that same day, talking about the butterfly and chrysalis. On my way to the airport, there on the railway pavement lay a dead butterfly, with all its beautiful colours still vivid, wings spread out, but lifeless. A symbol of my sister? The church in our home town, filled to the brim. There was no space in the church. Many people stood outside under the trees for the two-hour ceremonial service. Even the mentally ill, that used to get food at my sister's place, seemed sober enough to realize that the woman who used to feed them, had passed away. They too, came to pay their last respects. How they found out that my sister had passed away and that the memorial service was to be held in the Anglican Church, evades my mind to this day. The fact is they were there, they attended the funeral and were quiet to the end. Death has been identified as a uniting event in the African

culture as relatives travel, irrespective of distance, to pay their last respects and provide emotional support to the family [1]. What role do women play?

Death is a universal, persistent, unavoidable and undeniable fact of life

In the Shona culture, no-one is allowed to say anything bad about the deceased. They say, afa anaka-do not speak ill of the dead. We do not speak ill of the dead in most cultures and some say the reason is to show compassion, rather than compound the pain of the grieving [2]. Death is a universal, persistent, inescapable, unavoidable and undeniable fact of life [3]. The meaning of death and what happens after death though, varies from culture to culture. The Shona and many African cultures believe that life does not end with death, but continues in another realm [3].

Loss of a loved one

The topic is tough and yet real. I lost my dad in 2000 and I thought I would never laugh again. Time is indeed a healer. Over time, I began to smile and started to enjoy life again, despite the void. We all know the ones left behind should move on, and the belief is that this too also pleases the departed. Yet, the way forward can be long and sometimes treacherous.

The therapeutic role of burial rites and grieving

The therapeutic role of Shona burial rituals have been documented [4]. Some have viewed the Shona funeral rites negatively as the fear of the dead [4]. The Shona have also been criticized for taking leave (a week or so) to attend a funeral. This practice is often criticized in settings where the economy and productivity are the main focus, so time taken to grieve is considered as lost productive time.

I must admit I had paid little thought to that. Life seems to make sense backwards, particularly if the traditions are oral. Today, I now call and see funeral attendance as collective grieving. The loss of my own sister brought a renewed reality. I had prayed, I had done what I thought should be done and yet we lost her. She had a three-year-old, now left behind, to look after. She wanted to live with all she had, she said that several times and yet, she passed on.

What is life?

What is life? I do not know. To date I do not know. What I know is that life comes in different packages, joy, losses and hurts. Deep and painful and yet despite them all, we have to find meaning in the loss so as to move on.

The role of women (aunts)

After the burial of my sister, one of my aunts came to us and said, "Girls come to the side. Come here. We have grieved collectively, now we are going separate ways. The grieving will continue, the individual grieving. You have to learn to console yourselves. You will grieve, it is painful but you have to learn to console yourselves".

Oral wisdom

What wisdom? At the time I did not understand. I did not get it. Why should they tell us these things? It was during the days and months that followed when all those words made sense. Each day



Figure a: Aunts' post-funeral consoling us and my mum. The aunts, surrounded by mum and the other aunts and told us to learn to console ourselves now that the funeral has come to an end and we are dispersing. We have grieved collectively, grieving will continue, albeit individually, you can still reach out to others but you have to learn to console yourselves. In the centre the three-year-old left behind by my sister.

was a struggle, getting up was a mammoth task and at times I found myself sobbing and crying. Those words of advice rang through my ears.

Grieving is a process

Grieving is a process. It starts best with collective grieving. A collective acknowledgement that we have lost someone precious, that we are connected in our loss, in our pain [4]. This bond brings

about a sense of a shared burden and shared loss. I am not alone in my pain and I am not alone in my loss. That in itself is healing and makes the burden and loss lighter.

The relief that is achieved through this collective grieving, carries through into the individual grieving phase. I now understand why it is important for certain cultures like the Shona, to attend funerals and pay last respects. I now understand why the elderly say, we have to attend funerals [4]. The collective grieving seems difficult to replace with something else. Missing the collective grieving phase could potentially make the individual grieving more cumbersome and difficult. Is it not worth the one week or so compassionate leave?

I am writing this for three reasons

- First, to thank the aunts, I just want them and other aunts to know this has helped me and my other sisters enormously
- Secondly, the Shona tradition like many is an oral one. Please aunts (women) carry on doing these duties. To our aunts out there, do not give in to modernism, grieving seems to have its place and we seem to move from collective to individual grieving. We seem to need them both - a personal experience
- Thirdly, culture and tradition have sense and purpose. The truth is that we hold our cultures, in this case the Shona culture, against the western way of life and start adapting to western norms. Could it be that we need to stop and rethink? Could it be that collective grieving and that sense of belonging and togetherness serve a greater purpose? Does it make sense that the west despite the high standards of living, has some of the highest suicidal rates [5]? Loneliness, hopelessness and isolation? The current measures to contain COVID-19, quarantine and self-isolation have further revealed mental health issues associated with loneliness [6-8].

The importance of our psychosocial wellness has been revealed during this SARS-CoV-2 pandemic [9]. The psychological well-being, dealing with fear and loss have been acknowledged as important attributes in the well-being of human beings [6,7].

In the meantime, the benefits of collective grieving have become real to me and the effects this has on individual grieving [4]. This subjective experience of mine, though confirmed by my other siblings, warrants further research [10,11].

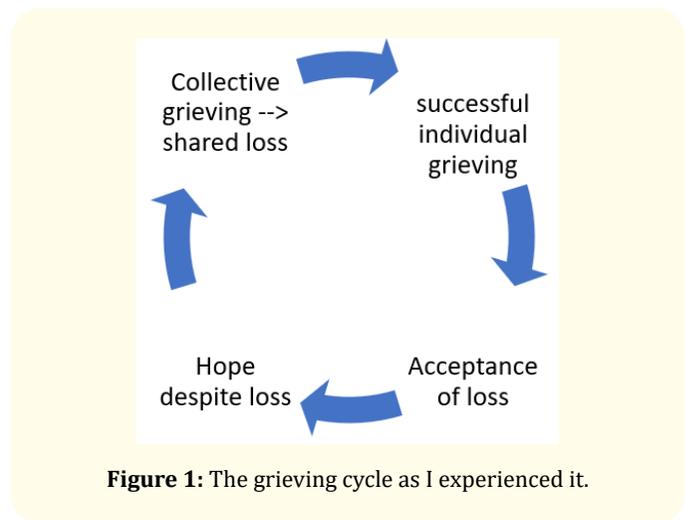


Figure 1: The grieving cycle as I experienced it.

Collective grieving seems to pave the way to successful individual grieving. Missing funerals might make the individual grieving process longer and more difficult.

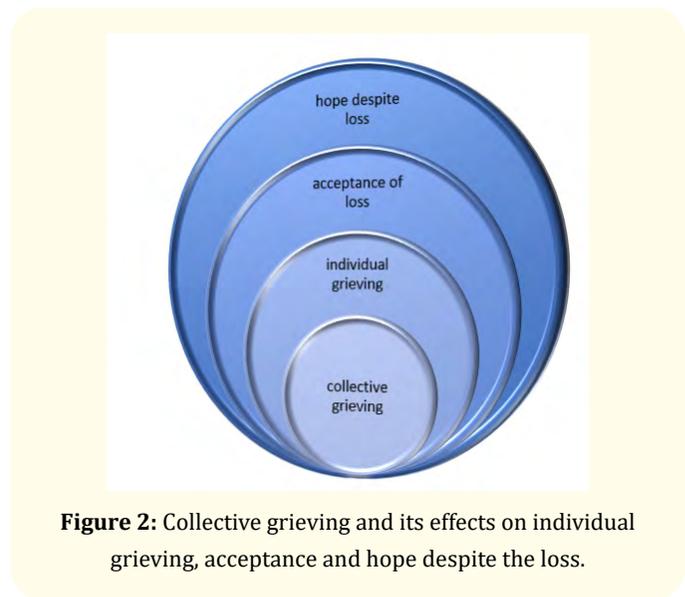


Figure 2: Collective grieving and its effects on individual grieving, acceptance and hope despite the loss.

COVID-19 restrictions, burial rites and grieving

A ritual is defined as a highly symbolic act that confers transcendental meaning and significance to life events and experiences [4]. Death is one such life event. There are several funeral rites in the Shona culture 1) kupeta (folding the body) burial, ritual of purification, bringing back the spirits, ritual of inheritance, ritual of honor and ritual of appeasement [4].

As of 11 January 2021, bodies of people that succumb to COVID-19 were not be transported home for burial with ancestors according to the Shona tradition in Zimbabwe. Instead, burials were be done in the area, town where death occurred. The steps have been taken to curb the spread of COVID-19 [12], a responsible thing to do. Body viewing , a ritual to say good bye, is not allowed either [12]. People usually attend a funeral to, among other things, kubata maoko-shaking someone`s hand and convey condolences. How is this being done in the COVID-19 context? The collective grieving process that makes the individual grieving more bearable is also currently being put to the test. People usually hug and cry together. With social distancing requirements, this too seems off the table for now. COVID-19 is indeed changing burial rituals world-wide [13].

Food for thought: the strain of the pandemic is going beyond social, economic, psychological, physical, mental and spiritual domains.

The society and cultures are being put to the test by the pandemic. How are societies responding to these necessary precautions that happen to interfere with cultural practices? Do the dead have rights? If one expresses the wish to be laid to rest next to her father and mother, on ancestral grounds as usually done in the Shona culture, is that a violation of the dead`s wishes and rights if this is not done?

In South Africa, some families were reported to have exhumed bodies of relatives that died of COVID-19 and had been buried without the performance of burial rites [10].

The strain of the pandemic is evidently going beyond social, economic, psychological, physical, mental and spiritual domains. Culture and the dead are not being spared either. Cooperation and dialogue between governments and communities seem paramount in pandemic contexts. Dialogue and cooperation, bearing in mind the role of women and culture, if we are to preserve lives and emerge stronger [10]. The task is undoubtedly not an easy one.

Conclusion

The Shona culture like other cultures insists on attending funerals and burials of loved ones. This serves to pay our last respects but also to grieve collectively and share the burden of loss with others. Traditions seem to have their role and place in the society. Women (aunts) have and are playing roles in dealing with

loss and dying. The benefits of these cultural roles however, need to be acknowledged. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to threaten some of these traditional values and rituals. As psychosocial effects like depression, anxiety, loneliness and isolation make their way into the top ten causes of death in the west, the benefits of values like these, ought to be explored and acknowledged. The pandemic, on the other hand is real. The authorities and the communities need to join hands and find legal, safe and amicable ways to interact as the pandemic lingers and more are forecasted [11].

Declarations

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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