Culture, Social Support, and Coping With Bereavement for Asians and Asian Americans

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Asians and Asian Americans seek and perhaps benefit from social support less than European Americans in coping with stressful life events. In this article, we review research findings that support this statement. We apply these findings to broaden the understanding of how people from different cultures might respond to and cope with the life stressor of losing a close relationship. Grief is a human emotion found in all cultures, and bereavement is a human condition that is intuitively understood by most to be a consequence of loss and a reaction to the death of a close relationship. Although bereavement may be universal and inescapable, the cultural diversity of human life presents some obstacles to understanding and providing the most helpful services to those experiencing grief. We believe that cultural understanding is of vital importance to end-of-life clinicians, educators, and mental health professionals who seek to provide comfort and assistance to culturally diverse populations.

Working With Grief

Grief counseling varies widely and incorporates such techniques as life review, forging a new relationship with the deceased, finding meaning from the loss, and active work on expressing deep feelings concerning the loss. One active grief work model, quite prominently employed, considers unresolved grief to be almost always about undelivered communications of an emotional nature, and holds that bereaved people should learn to communicate their feelings and then say goodbye to the relationship that has ended (Friedman & James, 2002). Grief counseling generally involves the interaction of a bereaved person with a trained professional who, using psychotherapeutic techniques, aids the bereaved in understanding and coming to terms with their loss in individual, family or group counseling formats. In 2007, hospice organizations alone provided bereavement services to an estimated 2.8 million individuals, including phone calls, visits, mailings, and grief counseling (National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, 2008).

Although the active grief work model can be an effective coping strategy, an unintended consequence of its popularity may be the mistaken belief that it is appropriate for all bereaved people. However, recent research has demonstrated that while almost all bereaved individuals experience intense initial grief reactions to a significant loss, the bereavement trajectory differs markedly between individuals. Some people experience severe reactions, or "complicated" grief, marked by a sense of disbelief about the death, intense longing for the deceased, and the presence of bitterness and anger more than six months after the death (Prigerson et al., 1995). Yet, research by Bonanno, Folkman, Moskowitz, & Papa (2005) demonstrates that as many as half of all bereaved people do not experience depressive symptoms or significant loss of functioning even when dealing with the loss of a spouse or a child. Furthermore, a minority of bereaved individuals who were suffering depressive symptoms prior to their loss actually experienced psychological improvement after their loss.

Findings demonstrating diversity in the bereavement experience call for re-examining the grief work assumption in terms of one important source of psychological diversity, culture. Is the popular grief work model, used extensively in the U.S., the best coping model for people from other cultural backgrounds? We propose an alternative approach based on research we have conducted on culture and the use of social support.

Culture and Social Support

Social support is one of the most effective strategies that people use to cope with stressful events in their daily lives (Cohen & Wills, 1985). In examining the use of social support, researchers typically focus on specific support transactions involving the seeking and receiving of help through tangible assistance, informational support, or emotional support.

While many studies rely on this definition of social support, a review of studies on culture and social support (Kim, Sherman & Taylor, 2008) points out some potential limitations to focusing on explicit transactions as the sole form of social support typically sought in a culturally diverse population. For example, Asians and Asian Americans, who are from more collectivistic cultures than European Americans, are more reluctant to explicitly ask for support from close others, because they are more concerned about potentially straining relationships, losing face, or making others overly concerned about their problems. That is, Asians and Asian Americans are more concerned about the potentially negative relational consequences of seeking overt social support and consequently, are less likely to pursue it (Kim et al., 2008).

To understand social support use among Asians and Asian Americans, we expand the concept to include more implicit processes. Implicit social support is defined as the emotional comfort one can obtain from social networks without disclosing or discussing one's problems vis à vis specific stressful events. Implicit support can take the form of reminding oneself of close others or being in the company of close others without discussing one's problems. The conceptualization of implicit support particularly emphasizes the absence of explicit disclosure and sharing of stressful events. Thus, in relying on it, people do not have to risk disturbing relationships. Empirical examinations show that Asians and Asian Americans rely on implicit support as much as on explicit support, unlike European Americans who rely predominantly on explicit support. Moreover, among Asians and Asian Americans, implicit support is equally or even more effective in reducing psychological and biological stress responses, and is associated with increased daily well-being (Kim et al., 2008).

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Bereavement Experiences and Practices in Different Cultures

The concept of implicit social support is a useful one to keep in mind for clinicians who work in bereavement services, especially with Asian and Asian American populations. Although our research on culture and social support has not specifically focused on grief work, there is substantial indirect evidence to show the relevance of this framework in the area.

Being with family and friends, attending church and social clubs, keeping to work schedules and responsibilities, and maintaining contact with close others all involve the use of implicit social support, and are coping mechanisms just as valid and powerful as more overt coping styles. The relative importance of explicit versus implicit support can even be seen in bereavement rituals from different cultures. For instance, in an Irish-American Catholic wake, the social support used can be seen to be explicit as both family and community gather to weep, remember, eat and drink in honor of the deceased, with more emphasis on openly expressing the loss of the loved one. By contrast, certain Chinese customs call for elaborate ceremonies with paper money burned to assuage the deities of the afterlife and to ensure a secure place for the deceased in the realm of the ancestors. Here, the practices of the group focus more on the journey and well-being of the deceased, and focus less on the emotional experience of the bereaved. Hence, the social support gained by participating in this ritual is more implicit in nature.

For people from Asian cultures restraint in expressing negative feelings or complaints is valuable both in maintaining self-esteem and group harmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). A study of Asian Americans who had lost a loved one in the World Trade Center attacks on 9/11 found that the bereaved family members coped by seeking the comfort and company of other relatives, but that they avoided talking about the deceased as they did not want to burden others with their feelings or problems relating to their loss (Yeh, Inman, Kim & Okubo, 2006). This notion of spending time with others without explicit emotional disclosure is consistent with the notion of implicit social support, and this study provides more direct evidence for the relevance of the findings regarding cultural differences in the way social support is used during bereavement.

Implications

While we suggest the consideration of cultural differences in social coping in grief work, we would also like to emphasize the complexity of understanding cultural influence in human psychology. We do not suggest that this cultural difference explains and predicts behavioral and psychological responses to bereavement from every member of a certain ethnic group. Nonetheless, some sources of the diversity within cultural groups can be understood. For example, acculturation adds layers of complexity to how social support is utilized. With successive generations, the behavior and psychological tendencies in immigrant families can shift towards that of the dominant culture. Thus, in the same family, different generations may view and utilize social support and, by extension, bereavement services differently.

The main goal of this article is to underscore the cultural diversity that exists in the ways in which people respond to the experience of bereavement. The research we described focused primarily on cultural differences between Asian and Asian Americans and European Americans. Other ethnic and cultural groups are likely to vary significantly in how they cope with loss as well. There may also be significantly different patterns of coping that are equally effective between men and women, or old and young. Clinicians, educators, and service providers who work with diverse populations should be aware of the importance of implicit social support. With this article, we hope to encourage further consideration of different potential ways by which individuals cope with their grief.

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