

Role of religion and spirituality in bereavement and counselling



Nothing is more certain to human beings in this world than death. We all have to die at one moment in time only that we cannot tell for certain when that would happen, but it will surely happen. In spite of such certainty of death, it is always a heart wrenching ordeal to watch other people die or to lose a close family member or friend. Death is as old as history itself but it is interesting to note that no one has come up with a foolproof strategy of overcome grief instantaneously. It is always a process that starts with denial followed by uncontrollable rage. It is important that we be able to cope with our loss and grief in the understanding that our lives cannot be put on hold. Life has to go on. The earlier we know how to deal with a loss the better for our health and well being. The most baffling question is how to do this. How do we overcome the intense feeling of great loss and the saddening knowledge that we will never see our beloved ones again? Timothy Shriver in his article Religion from the Heart, notes that it is no easy fete, " it is really hard to get grief right and few of us do" People have different ways of coping with grief. Some will yell, scream, and lock themselves in their rooms while others will remain in a state of stupor for a couple of days before finally accepting that it has happened.

While there is no any perfect method or strategy of coping with death and grief, there are those that are obviously discouraged and being in seclusion is one of them. I remember when I lost my aunt to cancer three years ago, how devastated I was. She had been suffering for long but always put up a brave face when I was around hiding the pain with a sweet smile. She was my favorite aunt and we had grown to like each other. She was always

coming to stay with us whenever she was around and during any major occasion.

She always stood by me and would defend me against the wrath of my mother whenever I crossed her path. We were quite close and I would always accompany her during her shopping sprees where she could get me a lot of gifts. After she died, I locked my self inside my room not comprehending what had happened and the magnanimity of such a loss. I would always sit by the phone expecting her to call and affirm that it was a bad joke and that she was okay. She never called and it took a lot of counseling from my mother to understand that she was happy wherever she was and she did not want me grieving. She was in heaven with the angels looking upon us.

That is how I coped with her death and also it was not the best as it eased my suffering. This analogy brings out an important aspect of grieving. There is always that connection with the spiritual side. This is one way that people survive grief and is widely emphasized by counselors. Sandy fox, in her book *I have no Intentions of Saying Goodbye. Surviving Grief: Death of a Child* (2001, 17), says that in her interaction with parents grieving their children's death, she found out that they sought answers and solace in religion.

This is where spiritual bereavement in the US stems from. Such counseling intends to help friends and families of the bereaved learn to reclaim their former self. Coming back to the old joyous self through interactive sessions that allows such a person to express his or her feeling towards the bereaved. To overcome grief requires a multifaceted approach that tends to tackle both the emotional and the spiritual side of an individual, if a holistic recovery is

to be achieved. To Sandy Fox, the process of grieving is eased when people pay attention to the contacts with the loved ones that have died. Such contacts maybe in form of dreams music or visions.

Though this might sound mystical in a way it is still a point to be noted. By bringing in a sense of religion and spirituality in the process of coping with death, bereavement counselors tend to emphasize a fact that though death may have abruptly ended our physical interaction with the dead, that clearly does not sever our relationship with him or her. We still cherish the memories of the good and the bad moments we have had together. Those that have lost their loved ones understand clearly that our thoughts and memories of our interactions live on; despite the obvious physical absence. This is what has prompted many to say that they still receive contacts from their long gone loved ones. This is a common feeling and should not be disturbing to anyone.

Though it cannot be disputed or confirmed, it is always good that we be able to share these thoughts with people who we are comfortable with. Sharing it with people who have coped with grief in the past is the right thing to do (Tschudin, V, 190). Losing a loved one can throw someone into an identity crisis that may result in spiritual weakness. It can also bring in a sense of guilt or anger. A child losing his or her mother, the only person she knows and cares for in this world can be quite devastated. The same case would be for Parents to lose their children considering all the hopes and the love they had for them.

This is bound to result to disillusionment. It is in the understanding of this pain and loss that there are various bereavement counseling centers set up in the United States. Most of these are interdenominational, always providing religion inspiration in the counseling. Studies that have been conducted on bereavement and grief have alluded to the fact that spiritual people who stand firm in their spiritual convictions are better placed to cope with grief. Bereavement counselors insist and emphasize on the need for an individual to seek spiritual guidance from a rabbi or a pastor to be given the religious views on death. Such views are more plausible and comforting than the secular ones.

However, it is to be noted that people are at their weakest during grief. It is at this time that they can succumb to false spiritualists. It is not prudent to seek such help when one is overly distressed (Clements, P. T.

, Vigil, G. J. , Manno, M. S, 20). One spiritual bereavement counseling centre in the United States is the Prayer Wave for after Death Communication.

It is a group of individuals that have come together to help people to deal with loss and pain that comes with the death of a loved one. Majority of such groups in the United States offer phone sessions to the affected and have a wide reach across the nation. They emphasize on spirituality urging people to get closer to their God as it helps understand the process better. Religion offers great comfort to distressed souls. Grief brings with it a feeling of self pity that can only be eased through spiritual strengthening.

Psychiatrists for example have noted the role that funerals pray in assisting the affected to cope with the debilitating effects of grief, erasing the
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desolate feeling that creeps in during this period (Delzoppo, P. M, 46). The spiritual rituals that take place during funerals have some sort of therapeutic value that can ease grief. Hearing the pastor for example talk of the bereaved being in heaven is always comforting. At least it was to me when during my aunt's funeral. Discerning from what the pastor and other religious leaders were saying of death and heaven, it changed the perspective of how I viewed my aunt.

She was somewhere safe and happy and I believed would see her one day. Easterling, L. W discusses how widow at an advanced age cope with death and the sorrow that comes with it. They note that the aspect of conjugal loss for example is devastating to many women and most of them resort to strengthening their religious and spiritual convictions to ensure a positive attitude in life immediately after the loss of a spouse (Easterling, L. W, 265). One fact noted by most psychiatrists and counselors is how religion helps individuals interact with the rest of the members.

There is always a risk that the loss of a loved one may prompt one to go into seclusion which complicates the situation more and may lead to depression. Religion and spirituality brings an aspect of bonding with other members sharing the same religious views. Such bonding and interactions are important as they give spiritual guidance and encouragement to an individual who has lost a loved one. That is the essence of the religious and spiritual counseling groups in the United States. They assist people cope with grief after the loss of a loved one either through group or individual therapy.

Such a therapy may take place through the phone and is meant to help a grieving person get in touch with his or her spiritual side and understand the loss and why deaths occur from the religious perspective. It also encourages one by creating a feeling that he or she is not alone; God watching over us.