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The Muslim Faith Community Nurse Can Facilitate Healthy Grieving From an Islamic Perspective

Nancy A. Romanchek
Mosque Community Nurses of Chicagoland(MCNC)

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Cover Page Footnote

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The Muslim Faith Community Nurse can Facilitate Healthy Grieving from an Islamic Perspective

*“Every soul will taste death.
And We test you O humanity with good and evil as a trial,
then, to Us, you will all be returned.”
-Surah Al-Anbya 21:35 from the Holy Quran*

Introduction

Grief has been described as “the anguish experienced after a significant loss, usually the death of a beloved person” (American Psychological Association [APA], 2023, para. 1). Grieving is a normal process by which we come to terms with facing our feelings about the loss and coming out on the other side, able to move forward without our loved one. Although grief may remain a constant companion, a person who is grieving knows that they are healing, “when they believe that they are” (APA, 2023, p. 39). For Muslims, the universal experience of grief is framed by Islamic teachings emphasizing patience, hope, and trust in Allah. Allah is the preferred name for God in Islam because it can be applied to no other gods, and it is without gender or other human attributes. In addition, Allah has a plan for our lives and our deaths as human beings.

Islamic rituals associated with grieving may provide solace and spiritual healing. Healthy grieving opens the way for Muslims to heal from their loss and to experience spiritual growth after losing a loved one. Tailoring approaches for both religion and ethnicity are especially important in Islam, which is one of the most ethnically diverse religions in the U.S. (Blumberg, 2015, para. 1) The Muslim Faith Community Nurse (FCN) is positioned to provide whole-person, patient-centered support, integrative education, and guidance to those who are grieving.

The objectives of this article are to explore the topic of grief in Islam, to discuss the significance of addressing the whole-person dimensions of care, to present some of the rituals associated with grieving, and to address the significance of community support during times of grief. The overarching importance of balancing Islamic concepts and cultural considerations will also be discussed.

Grief in Islam

Throughout his life, the Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him (PBUH), experienced many losses including the death of six out of seven of his children, the loss of his beloved wife Khadijah, and his dear uncle Abu Talib, both in the same year. Muslims say PBUH after speaking the Prophet’s name out of love and admiration for Him. A hadith is an account of daily practice of the Prophet which along with the Quran, provides guidance for Muslims. In a hadith traced back to Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, we learn that He (PBUH) said, “Do you not hear, Allah does not

punished or bestows mercy for the utterances of this” and he pointed to his tongue (Sultan & Awad, 2023, paras. 3-5).

Whole Person Care

Islam teaches the importance of maintaining emotional well-being and mental health, and for seeking the cure. In a collection of hadith compiled by Imam Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Naysaburi, referred to as the Sahih Muslim, The Prophet (PBUH) said, “For every illness there is a cure, so if the cure strikes the illness it will heal [it] by the will of Allah” (Learn-Islam, n.d., para. 1). While grief is not an illness, but rather, a response to a loss (Willow House, n.d., para. 6), the Muslim FCN may apply the same spirit of this hadith to facilitate the emotional processing that leads to spiritual healing. Acceptance of the loss would be the positive outcome that frees the grieving Muslim to move forward in a new way. Spiritual growth is a byproduct of successfully navigating the grieving process, as the person internally deconstructs and reconstructs their life without their beloved.

An identified risk factor of grief for the Muslim FCN to keep in mind, is that publicly, a purist to the Islamic faith may put on a stoic face and declare that the death of their beloved is the will of Allah. This is both true, and a testimony of the strength of their faith. However, this declaration jumps ahead of the emotional processing that is necessary for healing, like going from A to Z without the rest of the alphabet in between. The only way to process grief is to experience grieving (Mental Health America [MHA], 2023, para. 5). Perhaps for many Muslims declaring the desired emotional outcome of accepting the will of Allah helps them to visualize and thereby bring forth their own healing, but for others who are less resilient, there is a risk that they may subvert their normal grieving process in lieu of the appearance of possessing a strong faith. One clue to the actual state of the grieving Muslim may be that while they do publicly declare that the death of their beloved is the will of Allah, their declaration is followed with another, such as: “What can I do?” Listening for nuances of despair or hopelessness denoting spiritual crisis invite trauma-informed exploration by the FCN. Reflections, such as, “It sounds like you are sad because you miss him” may open the door for the person to agree to meet with the FCN for further processing of their feelings, validation of normal grief, and referrals when complicated grief surfaces.

The consistent presence of a FCN in advance of an anticipated loss and especially in advance of an unexpected death, is an effective way to build resilience for Muslim families experiencing grief. Establishing rapport and building resiliency through ongoing whole person care which nurtures the mind, body, spiritual, and social dimensions of well-being, also builds trust. Trust is necessary for individuals struggling with grief to discreetly connect with the FCN for whole person care. Trust is about feeling safe (Litner & Matejko, 2021, para. 1). Emotional safety and the confidence in being treated with dignity and respect by a healthcare provider are elusive touchstones for many immigrants new to the U.S. (Aparicio, 2008, para. 7). Visits with the FCN may be the first safe haven they allow themselves and it may also pave the way for future health related resources to be accepted. (Cherry, 2023, para. 1)

Healing grief is easier when community connections are strong. (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023, para. 3) One significant challenge to building connections in the U.S. Mosque community setting, ironically, may be because of the strength in the international diversity of the religion. Islam embraces all races and ethnicities. (The Conversation Academic rigor, journalistic flair [The Conversation], 2020, paras. 1-2) Of note, is that in the U.S., more than half of all adult Muslims are immigrants (Pew Research Center, 2018, para. 1). In addition, nearly 6 out of 10 or 58% are first generation Americans, defined as born in another country (Pew Research Center [Pew], 2017, para. 5). Of U.S. Muslim immigrants, there is no majority ethnicity (Pew, 2017, para. 7). While mosque communities tend to emerge from the naturally occurring comfort zones of similarity in ethnicity and country of origin, walk into any mosque community and you will see international diversity. Implementing programs and support groups for populations grounded in the same religion, but with sometimes stark levels of cultural diversity can be beautiful, and it can also be challenging when cultural perspectives clash.

Building connections in the aftermath of loss from death may be easy or may be challenging depending on the mix of those affected. Opening a bereavement support group may provide a sense of shared experience and allow participants to support each other. However, depending on the ethnic mix, the cultural boundary issues for privacy and the stigma against discussing sorrow or personal pain, may or may not lend itself to a support group (Hospice Foundation of America [HFA], 2012, para. 2). Individuals may have deeply embedded cultural preferences for not sharing family concerns. Others may believe that sharing family concerns may result in a loss of protection for their family from gossip when life is going badly, or from the evil eye of jealousy when life is going well. Islam does not teach that Allah punishes people through illness or death, however some cultural beliefs to the contrary have become enmeshed over generations, and for some of the faithful, have become inseparable from their religious beliefs.

For these reasons, instead of a bereavement support group, sometimes 1:1 visits are preferable. It has been my experience that trust concerns and enmeshed cultural considerations may lead some members to welcome home visits, while others may be hesitant to share even their home address. Office visits may be challenging because of space issues, and security concerns about meeting when the mosque building is unoccupied. Scheduled phone calls are the next best alternative. Cross referrals with the Imam, being formally introduced by an executive board member, or by another well-known member of the mosque community, is helpful. An Imam is a prayer leader in the mosque community who also provides spiritual guidance to the faithful. Mosque communities are democratically managed by an executive board whose members are elected and who serve for terms designated through by-laws.

Informal social structures abound in mosque communities as extended families and members from the same or similar villages from their country of origin, remain close and interdependent. Breaching these avenues does occur over time as the Muslim FCN builds a solid base of trust, consistency, and visibility in the community.

Rituals and Practices Associated with Grieving

Anticipatory grief during end-of-life care may be mitigated by the FCN through facilitating a peaceful death. Some Muslims prefer not to talk about death even once their loved one's death has become imminent. This is based on the religious understanding from the Holy Quran 16:61, that "no one knows the time of death but Allah" (Asad, 2003, p. 449). Submission to the will of Allah and the acceptance of end-of-life may be made more peaceful with the help of the FCN by recognizing that the time has come to implement certain rituals that may bring solace. One such ritual is recitation of the Quran at the bedside, whispering the Shahada into the patient's ear. The Shahada is a profession of faith in Islam; "*Ashadu an la ilaha illa Alla wa Ashhadu anna Muhammadan Rasul Allah,*" which translates as "*I bear witness that there is no God but God, there is none worthy of worship but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah*" (Islamic-relief, 2023, paras. 1-2). This simple act validates readiness for a peaceful death and may provide a balm for the family's anticipatory grief counterbalanced with faith that Allah will show mercy towards their loved one, forgive them on the day of judgment, and ultimately bring them to Janna, heaven. Engaging the family in these rituals gives them something to do and is a way to be helpful to their loved one at this time (eCondolence The Resource for Condolences and Mourning [eCondolence], 2023, para. 2).

Upon learning of someone's death, it is traditional for a Muslim to say, "*Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*" - "Verily we belong to Allah, and truly to Him shall we return" (Noor Academy, 2022, para. 1). The belief that Allah gives us life and that to Him, we will all return, is a central belief in Islam. In the practice of Islam, death is not far from the mind of the Muslim throughout their lives. Therefore, death is not far removed from the consciousness of the observant Muslim. Grief coexists beside hope in the mercy of Allah and the infinite hereafter to come. Muslims pray often for forgiveness and mercy on the day of judgment, and for protection from the hellfire. These prayers are multiplied during the holy month of Ramadan. Observant Muslims attempt to live every day in a way that is pleasing to Allah, and in this way, to move ever closer to Him until the time of death, when the trials of this life end, and the hereafter begins.

Since it is recommended to bury the body of the deceased quickly, holding the ritual full washing of the body to dignify the body, or ghusl, in the Mosque and bringing the Funeral Director to the body rather than the opposite scenario may be preferred. Some mosque communities have the resources for an on-site body preparation room. A ghusl team of women and another ghusl team of men are trained for this privilege. After a death occurs, plans are made with the family, and the ghusl team lead sends a message to the ghusl team members matched for gender of the deceased, who respond quickly to attend the ghusl. This ritual is immediately followed by the Janaza, or Funeral prayer in community. Same-gender family members are encouraged to participate in this beautiful ritual of washing the body and performing end-of-life ablution for the deceased in preparation for burial. Ablution is washing that is higher than physical cleanliness. Strict modesty is always maintained, after death as well as during life. A dark sheet is placed over the body before it is removed from the body bag and kept in place while the body is washed following a ritualistic protocol, and then ablution is performed for the deceased. Universal precautions are always maintained. The body is patted dry in the same manner and wrapped in a traditional white shroud in designated pieces and shapes. The body is

then prayed over by the ghusl team and family. The extended family is left alone with the body of the deceased for their final goodbyes before the Communal Janaza prayer begins.

Community Support During Times of Grief.

Gathering as a community is important in the lives of Muslims all through their life cycle. Worship during communal prayers at Jummah, which are weekly Friday prayers, and during annual Muslim holiday feast days, gathering as a mosque community are foundational. However social gatherings, educational lectures, dinners, fundraisers, and student events are also integral activities that are held in Mosques. According to Pew Research, 43% of American Muslims attend their Mosque at least once a week, and another 32% attend once or twice a month (Sciupac, 2017, para. 2)

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