



## It's Complicated: Complexities and Crises Amidst African American Cultural Plasticity in the Face of Death, Grief and Mourning in Communities of Color

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To be Black or African American in the United States is to be of a proud family, legacy, history and culture who's intergenerational track record of resiliency seems literally both incalculable and immeasurable. To be African American and to experience grief is complicated.

Significant to note is that in spite of the totality of post-traumatic stress slavey impact, racism, domestic terrorism, segregation, discrimination and naked aggression, grief has become a pacified pandemic in African American communities and has been so for a quite a long time. Whether organic or orchestrated, grief reactions and responses vary and remain viciously vicarious both from etic (external cross-cultural) and emic (within in the culture) lenses.

Tragically, other issues of more perceived importance and priority dominate national and local media scenes, whether its domestic or international relevance, entertainment, sports or politics, it is unequivocally clear that death, grief and mourning in communities of color remain cemented in the American landscape and African culture as a routine pastime.

And yet very little research efforts have extensively and relentlessly examined or even explored the grieving process among different ethnic groups within the United States, i.e., specifically, African American culture.

Furthermore, little or less is actually known about how or even if there is any significant difference between African Americans and Caucasians regarding grief, loss and the impact of death, culturally speaking. There are of course, similarities simply by virtue of the fact that grief in its basic or generic sense, in and of itself, is a natural response to losing someone or something that's important to you. One could easily feel a variety of emotions, like sad-

ness or loneliness. And one might even experience it for a number of different reasons. Maybe a loved one died, a relationship ended, or a job was lost, or employment racial discrimination resulted in confusion, bitterness, resentment and anger. Other life changes, like chronic illness or a loss in income, residence, or neighborhood violence give birth to non-relenting grief. The African American culture and community know such all too well.

Everyone grieves differently. Subsequently, the African American experience of grief and loss, mourning and bereavement is a peculiar institution within it's own right. Cultural plasticity is needed and necessary for sanity and stability to heal and to have hope despite the despair, death and desperation one finds themselves in. How is it done? How can it be achieved and maintained? A definitive way to address and resolve such dilemma is to understand what is happening, why it happened and what can, shall, will and must be done to chart and construct new paths of family, community and cultural strengths, strategies, sustainment and solidarity in terms of faith, familial support and a future that reinforces safety and sanity and stability.

Further, it is highly essential to take note that African Americans experience disproportionately experiences more frequent grief, loss, mourning and bereavement by homicide, premature deaths-heart attacks, strokes, diabetes, COVID 19, etc., compared to other ethnicities in America [1].

In addition, African Americans express grief in many unique ways. The desire and effort to obtain and sustain a stronger continuing bond without the deceased often psychosocially paralyzes families of color. There is discouragement, desperation, doubt and even detriment among and within the family and community from

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the death experiences. With less inter and intra-family communication among people of color, chances and choices for support, security, stability and even the essence of maintaining one's sanity seems clouded in a sea of confusion.

Overall, African Americans usually report higher levels of complicated grief symptoms than Caucasians, especially when they spend less time speaking to others about their loss experience. Implications of these findings for bereavement support services for African Americans have been occasionally observed or noted; however, it is on many fronts, a majority culturally imposed sanction for people of color to publicly and socially express grief at work and socially outside their respective communities and neighborhoods. One is simply to report to duty, do your job, hold your head, put all behind you and keep it moving with expressions of sorrow unwelcomed.

Even in its most simplistic state and elementary level or context, grief is consistently common in nature, impact and effect for many. Grief is for the most part, a normal and common reaction to what is usually an uncomfortable and inconvenient loss, sorrow, hurt or pain relative to the current time, place and event or experience. Grief is not something that is abnormal, or a mental health disorder. It is a natural or common response to any loss, or separation or devastation essentially beyond one's control and convenience. Grief is not a disease. It is the normal, human response to a significant loss [2].

A loss is a very personal and a deeply penetrating matter. Your loss seems like the worst possible thing that could have happened to you. Sometimes people ask if it is more difficult to lose a spouse than to lose a child. Others question if it is worse to lose someone after a long lingering illness or if they die suddenly and unexpectedly from a heart attack or in an accident. While these circumstances make each loss different, they are not necessarily of paramount importance to the grieving individual right now. It is literally true more than ever that the worst kind of loss is your own. When you lose a significant person from your life or a long held job, or a personal health deterioration, it hurts and nothing takes away from your right to feel the loss and grief regarding the loss or disconnect in your life.

To say that "grief is ever so painful" or "grief is just unbearable" are quintessential understatement of the year, yet the order of the day. Cultural plasticity was jarred and fractured with the loss of

George Floyd Minneapolis, 2020; Michael Brown (Ferguson, Mo) Eric Garner - New York; Timir Rice-Cleveland, 2014; Freddie Gray, Baltimore, 2015; Philando Castille, Minneapolis, 2016; and Breonna Taylor, Louisville, Ky, 2020. These traumatic death situations all echo the paranoia of any African American who has a son or daughter or relative living in urban America and the reality of encounters with law enforcement [3].

A lingering and unrelenting process of pain diffusing over time takes place. Loss is one of the most difficult human experiences. How does one bounce back? How does one re-wire and rechart a path that enables solitude, solidarity and survival? There is no easy way around it or through it. We may try to avoid the pain. We may attempt to get over it as quickly as possible. But most often it simply does not work that way.

And we must forever remind ourselves and others that every relationship and loss whether personal, professional or community at large holds a special and unique significance to most of us. To fully interpret our grief response, we need to understand what the relationship or experience or journey brought to one's own life. We may grieve the loss of a parent differently from the loss of a friend. Each made a different contribution to our lives. What we have lost is not the same and so we grieve differently. Two individuals, both experiencing the loss of a spouse, may grieve quite differently because of the differing circumstances (the duration, level of happiness, shared life experiences, etc) of the relationship.

A grief response is often referred to as "Grief-work". It requires more energy to work through than most people expect. It takes a toll on us neuropsychologically, physically and emotionally. This is why we often feel so fatigued after a loss or why we may feel very apathetic towards people and events. The problem is often compounded by our own self expectations as well as other people's expectations of us to be strong or pull ourselves together or to get on with life [4].

And the process and experience of grieving and bereavement will generally take longer than one can anticipate or even prepare for. How long will grief last? It is finished when it is finished.

For those who suffer loss, grief is treacherously unpredictable. One may experience a wide variety of feelings and reactions, not just those generally associated with grief, like sadness, crying, depression etc. In the African American community, it is very per-

sonal. The death of any individual, difficult as that may be by itself, may also precipitate many other changes in your life. For some, it may mean the loss of financial security, a home, or even their independence. For others, it may mean the loss of a key role and the associated responsibilities, influence, expectations, authority and decision making: In addition, it may be the loss of our hopes and dreams of "living happily ever after" or enjoying retirement together, or having dad walk one down the aisle. There may be many losses - environment, status, alteration of relationships - because of the death. Each one has its own impact and each loss needs to be mourned. African Americans simply either do not have the support, resources and accesses to provide consistent and congruent interventions and post-interventions.

Sometimes, at first, one do not feel the pain of grief because we are in shock and numb. Often the pain is more intense some months after the event. Even then grief is not unlike a roller coaster. One day we feel pretty good, the next we find ourselves in the depths of despair. Just when we think we are getting over it we may experience another devastating setback. This can be discouraging to those who do not know what is happening. Most have not learned that grief comes and goes and takes much longer than most people expect. One does need to realize that this is the way grief works itself out and trust that the process, difficult as it is, is helping us work towards reconciliation, sanity and stability.

Subsequently, it is urgently necessary to understand and to accept that real effective grief work is not done alone. The world offers very little and often limited condolence, sympathy and empathy. The African American culture has unrealistic expectations about mourning and often responds inappropriately. Most people do not understand what is normal in grief, expecting one to get over it quickly and expressing these expectations in a way that seems less than sensitive. Many people mistakenly believe that grief is so personal one ought to just keep it to themselves. People mean well, but they are not being helpful. African Americans are excessively bogged down with work, dealing with racism on a daily basis and merely trying to survive the normal challenges of life itself.

And yes, like any other ethnicity and culture, one could easily argue African Americans experiences the major and historical-clinically recognized stages of death and dying.

African American's efforts and approaches to address death and dying, grief, pain and loss are profoundly loud and consistently

acknowledged within the culture, but rarely beyond these parameters. Their efforts that promote denial seek to aim to defeat or at least minimize the severity of the pain or sorrow of losing someone or something in their life. What can or will African Americans do in terms of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance to insulate the severity of pain and sorrow brought on by the death or the traumatic experience of loss?

When coping with loss, it isn't unusual to feel so desperate that you are willing to do almost anything to alleviate or minimize the pain. The rates of depression among people of color can manifest itself in terms of prolonged agony with hopelessness abounding profusely [5].

Their acceptance of death and dying is usually an extensive journey over time that yields little or minimal ease and recovery. What is not in dispute is the reality that grief...simple grief is more than a reaction to loss. African Americans, like other ethnicities, experience grief in their own way and on their own terms. It is often reflected in very individualistic, and yet, collectivistic terms as well. There are no universal absolute "steps" or "stages" to grief. And furthermore, among people of color, they too have different "styles" of grieving. At the end of the day, there is no timetable to grieving even among people of color.

Among communities of color, it is highly essential to acknowledge and to understand their respective grief and to accept the inevitable finality of life's end. To be black and to be proud is to express and to enunciate a full range of feelings such as anger, guilt, sorrow, shame, resentment, bitterness, loss and feelings of emasculation. As much as counseling and therapy have been historically taboo to African American culture, communities and neighborhoods, there is still room for change, adaptability and resourcefulness for hope, help and healing. The depths of despair, uncertainty, shock and disbelief become all too often marred in the inability or unwillingness or simple difficulty for people of color to adjust to a life in which the lost person, object, or experience is absent. How does one say goodbye and transform across a timeline and bridge to find new peace? Peace that surpasses all understanding or to experience joy that is unspeakable and immeasurable becomes pre-eminent by any and all means necessary.

Panic and confusion in communities of color become all too often the status quo when death and dying, grief and mourning show up. Following the loss of someone close to us, people of color can

be left wondering how will and how can African Americans sufficiently and successfully fill the gap left in their lives?

The emotional damage of anger or hostility in the face of losing somebody is painful and can seem an unfair thing to happen. This community feels and lives traumatic lives overwhelmed and mixed with incoherent and inconsistent feelings.

Even the way, grief and mourning are displayed, manifested and expressed can become diabolical, disheartening and discouraging. For example, it's no secret that Chicago is often a risky and rough city to live in, and sadly many of our Black brothers and sisters have died as a result of the city's rising crime rate.

In 2021 alone, the city recorded it's most deadliest year since the 1990s after the Cook County medical examiner's office confirmed that 836 of the more than 1,000 homicides it handled occurred in Chi-Town. African American churches in black communities are eulogizing well over 100 gang related deaths annually. Even funeral homes, mortuaries and the black church itself are no safe havens away from violence, aggression, crime, murder and further devastation to the grieving family and supporters [6].

Consequently, a day of community reckoning is grossly needed in the face of complicated grief against the backdrop of a modern-day world of technology and the rising the tide of Covid deaths, unemployment, police brutality, political divisiveness and broken homes, dysfunctional families and marginalized neighborhoods. At best, African Americans stand on shaky ground swamped with the internal bleeding fall out from 1) Out of wedlock pregnancies-72%; 2) escalating homicide rates; and 3) the rise of inner-city youth suicide. Saying it loud is the national battle cry for a religiously convicted, obsessed and concerted population in desperate need of more practical applied corrective, accountable and responsible measures of help, hope and healing. Saying it loud is one answer to a complicated grief saturated culture and equally diverse and well as divisive communities of color The short- and long-term journey for communities of color is to start and to perpetuate the quest for rewiring and re-routing itself form a poverty mentality saturated with self- inflicted views, actions and behaviors that promote healing, growth, direction, perseverance, sanity and sustained stability. In the end and through this entire journey and process, one must ultimately acknowledge 'its complicated'.

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