

## Cultures vary little in grief reactions

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Wednesday, 10 June 2009

The diversity of human behaviour is astounding indeed and some comment that alternative cultures can vary considerably in how they deal with grief. This view gets support from the DSM-III. It states about bereavement, "The duration of normal bereavement varies considerably among different subcultural groups" (End quote).

Unfortunately, it is simply wrong.



Cultures can look very different from the outside

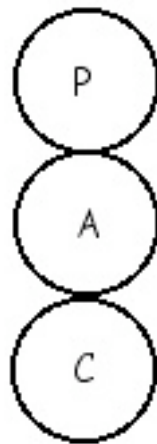
In fairness to the DSM it is probably politically correct to say such things. To be very aware and tolerant of different cultural groups is so much the 'thing' these days, it is definitely proper to express such views.

To understand this correctly one needs to distinguish between grief reactions and grief rituals. Without a doubt there are very wide differences between cultural grief rituals. Some groups cannibalise their dead compared to christian grief rituals where eating the dead would be somewhat frowned upon. Many such

western christian rituals don't even allow the bereaved to view the body let alone eat it! Grief rituals and their duration vary considerably between cultures.

These rituals have very little to do with the actual feelings of grief, loss and bereavement that each individual feels when a loved one passes away. Over the years I have studied many different theories of personality. I have never come across one article or book that has described a particular cultural group that has a significantly different personality structure compared to the rest of us on this planet. I can not recall one ever being described.

The theory of personality from a transactional analysis perspective is as such:



The point at hand is that every person on the planet has the same basic structure of personality, they all have a Parent, Adult and Child ego states. If they live in a large western city or in the Amazon jungle they basically have the same structure of personality, go through the same developmental stages and have the same basic childhood issues and so forth. Yes different cultures will emphasise different things and do child rearing a bit differently and so forth, but the same basic developmental stages have to be mastered by all humans on the planet. I have never seen any theory that has suggested otherwise.

One of the main developmental tasks that every young child has to master is how to form an attachment with mother. This then influences the types of attachments that you have throughout life. Weather they are harmonious, conflictual and so forth, but we all have to form an attachment of some kind to mother or we eventually die.

When we form an attachment with mother this means the bond becomes an integral part of who we are. It forms part of our basic identity and how we understand who we are. This is why they are so difficult to break down when the attachment figure dies or goes away. We have to alter our basic understanding or

sense of ourselves when we detach. We have to change our basic identity to some degree.

A society can have a short grief ritual like many western christian societies do. The funeral and wake occur a week after the death and that is about it. Of course the grief reactions go on for much longer than one week and thus we have the difference between grief rituals and grief reactions.

For a person to be able break down or dissolve a significant attachment in a few weeks means they can change their basic understanding of self in a very short space of time. I have never heard of such a society being described and never heard of such a psychological process described in the literature. If it is possible I would be very interested to know it is done. If I could counsel people such that their strong grief reactions lasted but a few weeks then I am going to be a very rich man.

No matter who you are and in what culture you live, the same 'stages' of grief are going to be there even if a society approves of them or not and thus the DSM-III statement: "The duration of normal bereavement varies considerably among different subcultural groups", I am afraid is flawed.

#### A further question

My friend, the Queen of Dysfunction asks the following question of this topic:

"I am curious; if you accept that humans only vary slightly in their psychological makeup and subsequent attachments, is the culture in which they grieve meaningless?

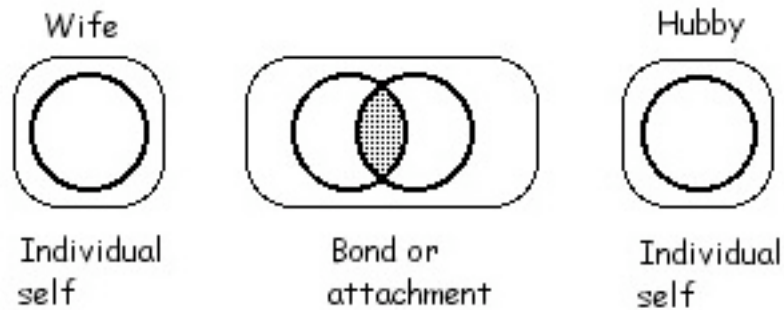
For example: is it not feasible that an individual who lives within a culture that embraces a concept of the afterlife and some deeper meaning to existence might be better suited to coping with grief than an individual who lives within a more solipsistic culture?"

(end quote)

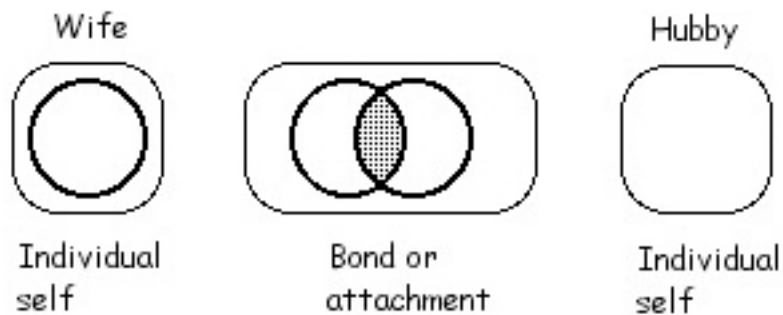
It seems my bias is showing. When I wrote the post "Cultures vary very little in grief reactions", I attempted to be aware of the biases that I was carrying into writing such a thing. For example I am male, white and from a western culture who has a scientific view of death. That is when you die you are dead and that is the end of it. I understand the idea that the spirit of a person does not die, and I do keep an open mind about such matters.

The diagram below shows what happens with the sudden death of a close loved one. In the second part of the diagram one is left in a position of having an attachment to someone who no longer physically exists alive. This I can safely

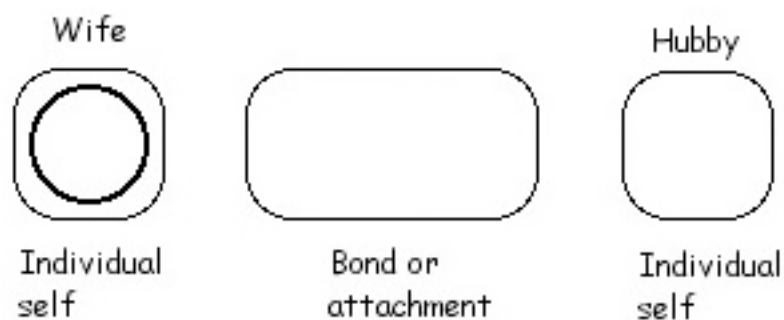
say will happen with everyone, no matter what culture they come from. Any human who has a significant attachment to another will be in this state when the person dies. That attachment then takes time to disappear as this is the way humans are psychologically constructed.



**Death results in this**



**Grieving results in this**



If one has a conviction that there is an after life and that a person does not die in some way then the psychological consequences of that would depend what they do with that belief in their psyche. If a loved one physically dies and one has the view that they are not spiritually deceased then it may be possible to avoid such grief reactions as described above. However I doubt if that happens.

If one has an attachment to a person who has died and does not grieve then there

is a two fold psychological fallout.

1. The person stops living in the here and now. They are living in the past.
2. The attachment is not freed up so that subsequent relationships are disrupted.

In a society of such people there would a multitude of relationship difficulties because psychologically one has not let the deceased go and thus their subsequent relationships deteriorate. Psychologically they would be operating like the person is still alive and thus their day to day psychological functioning would be confused. After the third or fourth death of a loved one the individual would be in quite bad emotional shape.

## **RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD**

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<b>TAOISM:</b>	Shit Happens
<b>HINDUISM:</b>	This Shit Happened Before
<b>ISLAM:</b>	If Shit Happens, Take A Hostage
<b>BUDDHISM:</b>	When Shit Happens Is It Really Shit ?
<b>7th DAY ADVENTIST:</b>	Shit Happens On Saturday
<b>PROTESTANTISM:</b>	Shit Won't Happen If I Work Harder
<b>CATHOLICISM:</b>	If Shit Happens, I Deserve It
<b>JEHOVAH'S WITNESS:</b>	Knock, Knock, "Shit Happens"
<b>JUDAISM:</b>	Why Does Shit Always Happen To Me ?
<b>HARE KRISHNA:</b>	Shit Happens Rama Rama Ding Dong
<b>ATHEISM:</b>	No Shit
<b>T. V. EVANGELISM:</b>	Send More Shit
<b>RASTAFARIANISM:</b>	Let's Smoke This Shit

If it is possible to dramatically shorten the grief period by having some kind of philosophical view of life and death then I would very much like to know what that is. There would be many, many people who would then be seeking my psychological services to do grief work if it can be shortened and thus one can avoid the considerable pain that grief entails.

However I suspect that those who do have after life beliefs do go through the same pain and grief as others. If they did not, one is side-stepping much of the intense pain that can go along with grieving. If this were possible people would have discovered that long ago and they would be lining up in their thousands to adopt such beliefs. To my knowledge that has not happened with any particular philosophy of life and death.

In conclusion I would suggest that one fact remains. With all humans when they form a significant attachment or bond to another human then that is a difficult thing to dissolve. It takes time and pain no matter who you are, where you live and what your beliefs about life and death are. The cultural ritual for dealing with death will have little or no effect on the ability to detach or dissolve the bond. That is a psychological event that is the same for all humans.

