

Coping with loss and bereavement: An Islamic perspective

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The aim of the present commentary is to inform mental and allied health professionals about Islamic perspectives on life and death in the context of recent events. Further, religious and cultural factors that may help bereaved Muslims cope with their grief and make meaning of their loss are discussed. The tragic deaths of 50 Muslim worshippers at the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre, Christchurch has not only shaken the World, it has triggered immense debate and reflection at an international level. New Zealand is a multicultural society. Muslims from all over the world call New Zealand home and live amongst other ethnic communities. At this difficult time New Zealand mental and allied health professionals, experienced in dealing with emotional responses of people, are keen to support the families of the deceased. However, these health professionals may have varying levels of information about Islamic perspectives associated with death and coping, therefore, it is expected that this commentary would assist the professional in their endeavors to assist Muslims in a culturally appropriate and safe manner.

Key Words: Coping; Death; Grief; Healing; Islam; Life; Loss; Muslims.

The terror attack on 15 March, 2019, on Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre at Christchurch, has shaken this peaceful nation and shocked the international community. On this day the Muslim community of Christchurch gathered to offer their Friday (Jummah) prayers. However, 50 innocent Muslim people lost their lives at the hands of a terrorist gunman with right wing extremist views (BBC, 2019). This islamophobic attack, the horrific massacre of innocent Muslims, in a place of worship, has left Christchurch and the international community distraught and mourning the loss of their Muslim brothers and sisters. The general population and the Muslim community in Christchurch is trying to come to terms with this event. Though all stakeholders are in the midst of trying to understand and make sense the cause of this tragedy in order to prevent such events, mental and allied health professionals are trying to assist the grieving individuals and families. Thus, it is paramount to understand Muslims' religious and cultural beliefs about bereavement and healing.

New Zealand is a diverse country with people from various ethnic and religious backgrounds. Although New Zealand has a population of 4.3 million people, it is estimated that one in four individuals identify as culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) (Victoria University of Wellington, 2011). With a substantial amount of the population born overseas, there is an increase of multiculturalism and religious diversity. Further, this

diversity is expected to rise in the future due to an increasing indigenous population and increased uptake of people from refugee and migrant backgrounds across the globe (Berry & Sam, 2014; Ward & Masgoret, 2008). Many of these relocated individuals and families are Muslims. Islam, which originated in Arabia in 570 AD, rapidly spread to all neighbouring regions. The mass movement of people, across centuries, has taken Muslims to all corners of the globe including New Zealand.

The number of Muslim people in New Zealand has increased significantly over the last three decades (Victoria University of Wellington, 2011). Muslim people make up approximately one percent of the total population. Most Muslims living in New Zealand were born overseas (Victoria University of Wellington, 2011). New Zealand Muslims come from a range of ethnic backgrounds. The most prominent ethnicities are Indian and Middle Eastern including Arab, Iranian and Iraqi (Victoria University of Wellington, 2011). It is important to note that although Muslims have different ethnic origins, they are connected through one common thread that is their Islamic faith. Despite subtle differences among their cultures, most of the Muslim communities share collectivistic features. Members of the collectivistic cultures lead interdependent lives, where group membership is prioritised over one's self (Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995). In collectivistic cultures,

members of a family and extended community interact regularly with each other. Families and communities are intertwined and act as each other's support network and system. Holistic approaches, which may involve multiple family and community members are often adopted to resolve psycho-social, financial and personal matters (Gregg, 2007).

The term Muslims is used for those who follow the religion of Islam. Islam, the second largest religion in the World shares beliefs with Judaism and Christianity. It is based on Abraham's beliefs of one God (Esposito, 2009). Its followers respect and believe in all prophets and regard Mohammad (peace be upon him) as the last of the prophets sent by the God. In order to understand the Islamic perspective on death, it is important to first understand the importance of life, followed by death and then the afterlife. Muslims believe that all people and all living organisms originate from God, belong to God and will return to God at the time of death (Rubin & Yasien-Esmael, 2004). A person's life is considered to be sacred. The birth and death of a person is considered very precious in Islam as God bestowed life and only God has the ability to take it away (Rubin & Yasien-Esmael, 2004). Islam encourages Muslim people to lead a decent and fulfilling life undertaking good deeds.

A Muslim can live a decent life and accomplish good deeds throughout his/her life by following the foundations of Islam known as the 'five pillars of

Islam' (Hitchcock, 2005). These basic beliefs are the building blocks of Islam: faith, prayer, charity, fasting and pilgrimage (Hitchcock, 2005). Faith refers to Muslims' belief in one God and his messenger the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him). Prayer refers to the act of praying five times in a day. Charity refers to the act of making a contribution to the underprivileged and impoverished. Fasting refers to the act of fasting during the month of Ramadan, one of the holiest months in the Islamic calendar. Pilgrimage refers to the act of going to Mecca for hajj. Mecca is the holiest city as it is the origin of Islam.

Being a good Muslim and living a life fulfilled with good deeds is considered to bring an individual closer to God (Yasien-Esmael, Eshel, & Rubin, 2018). Prayer is considered one of the most important pillars of Islam as Muslims are encouraged to pray five times a day. Engaging in prayers is considered sacred; it is a way of connecting and getting closer to God on a spiritual level (Yucel, 2010). It becomes even more significant if prayer is offered in a mosque, the house of God. A prayer offered at the mosque is considered more important and rewarding (Gilliat-Ray, 2005). Further, prayers offered on a Friday, the Sabbath day in Islam, are the most rewarding as this day is considered the holiest day of the week. It is a day to be celebrated as God took rest after creating the Universe. It is an important custom and blessing to pray at the mosque on a Friday (Haeri, 2013; Möller, 2005). Friday midday prayer is an important occasion for communities to gather at the mosque and pray together. As women may often be busy with domestic duties, it is a common tradition for men to attend this prayer with their sons to teach them this important ritual (Sayeed, 2001). This was a feature observed at the massacre at Christchurch.

In Islam, death is considered an inevitable part of life. In order words, death is a normal part of an individual's life (Rubin & Yasien-Esmael, 2004; Yasien-Esmael & Rubin, 2005). Muslims believe that death is a result of God's will (Rubin & Yasien-Esmael, 2004; Sarhill, LeGrand, Islambouli, Davis, & Walsh, 2001). The time and manner of an individual's death has already been determined by God (not

including an act of suicide). Therefore, believers accept the actions of God and believe that God has his reasons for taking the life of a person. Further, Muslims believe in life after death (Hedayat, 2006; Sarhill et al., 2001). It is believed that the spirit of a deceased individual leaves the physical body at death. Although an individual may be physically deceased, their spirit lives on. Additionally, another important Islamic belief is associated with the concept of heaven and hell (Khalil, 2013). What happens to a person after death depends on how they have lived their life (Rubin & Yasien-Esmael, 2004). The Islamic faith promotes individuals to take responsibility for their actions throughout their lives (Rubin & Yasien-Esmael, 2004). It is believed this decision will be made by God on the day of Judgement (Hedayat, 2006; Sarhill et al., 2001).

It is believed that the Muslims' actions will be assessed by God after death on the Day of Judgement. This evaluation by God will determine whether a Muslim will go to heaven or hell (Hedayat, 2006; Sarhill et al., 2001). It is believed that Muslims, who have undertaken more good deeds than bad, will be rewarded by God by acquiring a place in heaven. While those individuals, who have lived an immoral or evil life, would be required to face the negative consequences after death, being placed in hell by God. The religious beliefs promote that notion of engaging in good deeds as these actions will please God and translate into a place in heaven after death.

Coming to terms with the death of a family member or friend is a very painful and emotional process for a grieving individual (Mayers-Elder, 2008; Romaniuk, 2014). Further, there is a bulk of literature that indicates the importance of meaning making (Pritchard & Buckle, 2018). Meaning making has emerged as a very important way of processing and dealing with grief (Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis, 2014). It is particularly critical after a traumatic death. It is possible that at the time of hardship, bereaved individuals may turn to their religious and cultural views as a support system and a way of making sense of the ordeal.

Bereaved Muslims may use religious principles to help cope with the loss of

loved ones (Mohamed Hussin, Guàrdia-Olmos, & Liisa Aho, 2018). The belief that Muslims return to God after death can bring comfort to grieving family members or friends. The thought that death is God's will, may help them externalise the painful loss (Rubin & Yasien-Esmael, 2004). They may interpret it as a sign that their deceased family member is in a safe place (Yasien-Esmael, & Rubin, 2005). In the same way it is possible that the idea that the spirit of the deceased lives on; beliefs in an afterlife may be reassuring for the family members (Chapple et al., 2011; Hedayat, 2006). In the case of the Christchurch mosque attack, the belief that death occurred on a Friday in the midst of prayers can bring some relief to the families. Families may interpret the tragedy as a sign that their loved ones may become close to God as they lost their life while worshipping (Yucel, 2010). They may also feel some comfort in the idea that their loved one may be granted a place in heaven. Cultural values and rituals also play an important role at the time of grief. Generally, grief and loss can become a communal affair.

Driven by collectivism the wider community takes the responsibility of offering emotional, social and instrumental support to the grieving individuals and families (Suhail, Jamil, Oyeboode, & Ajmal, 2011). Prayers are offered and Quran is recited to comfort the soul of the departed. These events provide an opportunity to further reiterate and reinforce the religious beliefs. Further they also provide a closure and a chance to move on with one's life, a notion strongly supported by Islamic principles (Esposito, 2009).

Compared to any other loss, death provokes the most significant emotional response. Further, traumatic deaths, like those witnessed in Christchurch, are no doubt intense and complex. However, we hope that the religious beliefs may assist the bereaved in their meaning making process. Further, we hope that this commentary assists mental and allied health professionals, who may like to enhance their capacity to understand and assist traumatised individuals from different faiths. Finally, we hope that irrespective of our religious backgrounds we can all reflect and learn about the beliefs that help human beings in making sense of the grief and loss.

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