

that are not normally associated with Caribbean or Asian or African culture might very well be associated with these cultures on British soil. Counsellors can, however, play a creative role in helping such people of other races and cultures to live through bereavement, but they need to bear in mind that language barriers and a lack of articulateness can be a difficulty for those whose native tongue is different from the counsellor's.

Hints for counsellors

In all races and cultures, bereaved people go through a number of emotional states, eg shock, sorrow, anger, guilt, acceptance and resolution. Counsellors need to be aware of these stages. Whereas in some cultures the family members themselves will help the bereaved through the various emotional states, there is still a need for a counsellor. Colin Murray Parkes⁴ suggested that an objective outsider can be extremely helpful in the early stages:

A person from outside the family who offers help at this early stage of grief may find himself or herself occupying a role which is not open to family members. The family are seen as 'too involved', too easily hurt by each other's grief. Also, they may be in competition with each other to show a brave face or retain a position of respect in the family. All families have their own hierarchy, and elements of rivalry and competition frequently distort the natural expression of feeling. If one member cries more, or less, than another, this is noticed and conclusions are drawn about the nature of their relationship with the dead member. Several widows have told me how they felt obliged to curtail the expression of their own feelings after witnessing what they took to be insincere grief in in-laws. Others put on a bold face for the sake of children or elderly relatives who were seen as weaker than themselves. It may, therefore, be easier to talk to outsiders about problems which threaten self-esteem, and those families whose traditions provide no acceptable means of expressing grief are in particular need of an outsider who is not ruled by such inhibitions.

Colin Murray Parkes's insights will be helpful to those assisting the bereaved, whether they are trained counselling volunteers within cultures that subscribe to the value of professional counselling or are family members and close friends within, say, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh cultures. He identified some human concerns that transcend

culture, eg that one should never pity the bereaved:

While a conventional expression of sympathy can probably not be avoided, pity is the last thing the bereaved wants. Pity makes one into an object; somehow, in being pitied, the bereaved person becomes pitiful. Pity puts the bereaved person at a distance from, and in an inferior position to, the would-be comforter. So it is best to get conventional verbal expressions of sympathy over as quickly as possible and speak from the heart or not at all. This is not a situation in which there is a proper thing to say: trite formulae serve only to widen the gap between bereaved and non-bereaved.

Bereavement counsellors, whatever the cultural situation, must offer warmth and friendship. This comes about through being aware of the needs of the bereaved. One of the things that people of other cultures often admit to is their need to cry when they have lost loved ones. Crying assists greatly in the grieving process. Bereavement counsellors must therefore not yield to the temptation to prevent those whom they would help from giving true vent to their feelings. Emotional support from the counsellor through periods of difficulty does translate across the cultures, but the accepted practice of not taking over or usurping the individual's right to autonomy must be followed.

Notwithstanding the importance of conversation in a counselling relationship, the bereavement counsellor must not feel duty bound to fill every minute of his or her time with a client in talk. Silence is an equally powerful tool. Presence, more than anything else, is what communicates the care and concern of any counsellor.

Counsellors may not have to do much talking in dealing with the bereaved, but they must be good listeners with the skill to detect more than what is actually said. In normal, everyday conversation, we do imply things even without mouthing them. A common feature of African culture, for example, is that people will often use indirect methods in order to communicate truths. They may utter a proverb or tell a tale. If you are alert and sensitive enough, you will receive the message. Since the British have been credited with a similar habit of dropping hints instead of explicitly stating what is on their mind, they should not find it difficult to decode signals!

Finally, regardless of whom they

are trying to assist, counsellors must always be natural and caring so that they can function creatively in cross-cultural situations. They need to learn as much as possible about how bereavement is handled in cultures other than their own, capitalise upon the insights of those intimately connected with the counselling process and then they should be on fairly solid ground.

References

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2. Tattelbaum J. The Courage to Grieve. London: Cedar Books, 1986; p22.
3. Black J. Death and Bereavement: The Customs of Hindus, Sikhs and Moslems. *Bereavement Care* 1991; 10(1): 6-8.
4. Parkes CM. Bereavement, *Studies of Grief in Adult Life*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1986; pp181-3.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

I read with interest Dr Jenny Hockey's book *Making the Most of a Funeral** (reviewed in *Bereavement Care* 1992; 11(2): 27). This is based on a study in an English industrial town of how ministers of different Christian denominations approach funerals and how their efforts are perceived by bereaved people.

From my experience as a Church of England priest in both urban and rural areas, I would emphasise that the difference between urban and rural ministry is very marked. In urban areas I was taking up to eight funerals a week, in my country parish two a month.

In an urban parish of 15,000 people served by my curate and myself, there was hardly ever time to do a job properly, bearing in mind all the other work for which we were responsible. In my rural parish, though I had to skid round my three churches pretty smartly on a Sunday, there was time on a weekday to give proper attention to families who had been bereaved, to listen to them and to prepare more adequately for the funeral service. It is a satisfying area of ministry, an opportunity to be of real service to bereaved families. Also, in the rural setting one nearly always knows the bereaved family anyway, and has one's own recollections of the deceased person.

I am always saddened when there is criticism on the radio or in the press of my brother clergy in the area of bereavement care, but when it refers to an urban area the clergy have my utmost sympathy. I know how difficult it is and the guilt one feels from not being able to minister adequately.

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* *Making the Most of a Funeral* by Jenny Hockey, with a foreword by the Archbishop of York. Available only from Cruse—Bereavement Care, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR. £3.25 + £1 p&p.