


# Cultural Scripts for Sorrow: A Review of Cross-Cultural Variations in Coping Mechanisms for Grief and Loss

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## Abstract

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**Background:** Grief is a psychobiological universal, yet its expression and management are culturally prescribed. The dominance of Western, individualistic grief models in theory and clinical practice risks pathologizing normative cross-cultural variations in bereavement.

**Objective:** To systematically review and synthesize contemporary empirical and theoretical literature on the influence of culture on coping mechanisms for grief and loss.

**Methods:** A narrative review methodology was employed. Electronic databases (PsycINFO, PubMed, Scopus, AnthroSource) were searched for peer-reviewed articles and key texts published between 2000-2024. Search terms included combinations of "grief," "mourning," "culture," "coping," "ritual," and "bereavement." Included works explicitly addressed cultural dimensions, comparative frameworks, or non-Western models of grief.

**Results:** Analysis of the literature reveals that culture shapes grief through primary dimensions: individualism-collectivism, spiritual/religious worldviews, and communication norms. Key coping mechanisms are culturally structured through: (1) Ritualized practices (funerary rites, mourning periods), which provide somatic and social scripts for behavior; (2) Social support systems with formalized communal roles; (3) Varied expressions of emotionality, from high-expressivity to restrained, somatized presentations; and (4) The normative status of "continuing bonds" with the deceased, which is therapeutic in many cultural contexts.

**Conclusion:** Grief coping is not acultural but is fundamentally organized by cultural narratives, values, and social structures. Effective bereavement support requires cultural humility—moving beyond a checklist approach to engage with the bereaved individual's specific cultural, familial, and spiritual framework. Culturally adaptive models of grief therapy are an urgent need in pluralistic societies.

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## Introduction: Deconstructing the Universal Grief Narrative

The profound human experience of loss following death has long captivated philosophers, artists, and scientists, prompting a search for both its existential meaning and its predictable psychological trajectory.<sup>1</sup>

For decades, the field of thanatology was largely dominated by stage-based theoretical frameworks, most notably Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's model of five sequential stages (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance), which, while initially developed to describe the dying process, were ubiquitously applied to

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bereavement.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, task-based models, such as Worden's four tasks of mourning, posited a series of psychological achievements necessary for "successful" grief resolution.<sup>3</sup> These frameworks, emerging from a predominantly Euro-American, individualistic, and psychologically oriented context, were often presented as universal prescriptions for healthy adaptation. They implicitly pathologized deviations from an expected emotional arc centered on intrapsychic processing, emotional catharsis, and eventual "letting go" or decathexis from the deceased.<sup>4</sup>

This universalist paradigm, however, has been rigorously challenged by a robust and interdisciplinary body of research spanning cultural psychology, medical anthropology, and sociology. Scholars now assert that grief is not merely an internal, biologically driven emotional state but a profoundly cultural performance—a set of practices, expressions, and meanings that are scripted, sanctioned, and shaped by the collective values, beliefs, and social structures of a given community.<sup>5</sup> Culture operates as the primary architect of the bereavement process, determining not only what is grieved (e.g., the loss of a person, a social role, ancestral connection) but also who can grieve, for how long, in what manner (verbally, somatically, ritually), and toward what ultimate purpose (personal closure, social realignment, spiritual transition).<sup>6</sup> The failure to recognize this cultural construction has significant consequences, leading to the potential misdiagnosis of culturally normative grief responses as pathological disorders such as Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) in diagnostic manuals like the DSM-5-TR and ICD-11.<sup>7</sup>

This review, therefore, seeks to systematically synthesize the contemporary literature on the cultural shaping of grief coping mechanisms. It moves beyond critiquing Western models to actively map the diverse global landscape of bereavement. We will examine the foundational cultural dimensions—such as the individualism-collectivism continuum, spiritual worldviews, and communication norms—that serve as the bedrock for variation. Subsequently, we will detail how these dimensions manifest in tangible coping practices: ritualized behaviors, structured social support systems, idioms of distress, and the maintenance of ongoing relationships with the deceased. Finally, this review aims to translate these anthropological and psychological insights into practical imperatives for clinicians, counselors, and policymakers operating in increasingly multicultural societies, advocating for a paradigm shift from cultural competence to sustained cultural humility.<sup>8</sup>

## Methods

This paper employs a narrative synthesis review methodology, designed to integrate findings from diverse disciplinary perspectives (psychology, anthropology, sociology, thanatology) where a strict meta-analysis is not feasible due to heterogeneous study designs.<sup>9</sup> The objective was to map the conceptual territory of culture and grief coping, identifying key themes and theoretical frameworks.

**2.1 Search Strategy and Selection Criteria**  
Electronic database searches were conducted in PsycINFO, PubMed, Scopus, and AnthroSource for literature published from 2000 to 2024. Search strings combined key terms: ("grief" OR "mourning" OR "bereavement") AND ("culture" OR "cross-cultural" OR "ethnicity") AND ("coping" OR "adaptation" OR "ritual" OR "expression"). Reference lists of key review articles and seminal books were hand-searched for additional sources.

### *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Included were: (1) English-language, peer-reviewed empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods) and theoretical reviews; (2) Works explicitly focusing on cultural, ethnic, or religious influences on the grief process; (3) Literature critiquing or expanding Western-centric grief models. Excluded were: (1) Articles focusing solely on neurobiological correlates of grief without cultural context; (2) General population studies without sub-group cultural analysis; (3) Non-peer-reviewed commentaries.

### *Data Extraction and Synthesis*

Key information from selected articles was extracted into a thematic matrix, including study design, cultural group examined, key findings related to coping, and theoretical contributions. An iterative process of thematic analysis was used to identify, compare, and synthesize recurring concepts across the literature into coherent overarching themes.<sup>10</sup>

## Results: Key Themes in Cultural Coping Mechanisms

### *Foundational Cultural Dimensions Shaping Grief*

The literature consistently identifies several core dimensions that structure the grief response.

- **Individualism-Collectivism:** This remains the most influential framework. Grief in individualist cultures (e.g., Anglo-American, Western European) is predominantly framed as an intrapersonal, psychological journey toward autonomous recovery.<sup>11,12</sup> In stark contrast, collectivist cultures (e.g., East Asian, Latin American, African, Indigenous)

foreground the communal nature of loss. Grief is a shared social obligation, and coping is embedded in family and community rituals that aim to restore social harmony.<sup>13,14</sup> For instance, in many Sub-Saharan African communities, grief is not privately contained but is expressed through collective wailing and dancing, reinforcing kinship ties.<sup>15</sup>

- **Spiritual and Religious Worldviews:** Belief systems provide the meta-narrative for loss. Beliefs in an afterlife, reincarnation (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism), or ancestral presence directly inform coping practices.<sup>16</sup> Cultures with strong ancestor veneration (e.g., China, Korea, Vietnam, Ghana) institutionalize continuing bonds through rituals like the Korean Jesa or Mexican Día de los Muertos, where ongoing interaction with the deceased is a normative and therapeutic component of coping, not an indicator of pathology.<sup>17,18</sup> Conversely, in secular Western contexts, persistent attachment can be more readily medicalized.<sup>19</sup>
- **Communication Style (High-Context vs. Low-Context):** Norms of emotional expression are culturally coded. Low-context cultures (e.g., USA, Australia) often valorize verbal, direct expression of sadness as "healthy grieving."<sup>20</sup> High-context cultures (e.g., Japan, China, Nordic nations) may emphasize emotional restraint (gaman in Japan, sisu in Finland) to maintain social order and avoid burdening others.<sup>21,22</sup> Coping here may involve somatic complaints, private meditation, or ritual action rather than verbal disclosure.<sup>23</sup>

### *Manifestations in Coping Mechanisms and Rituals*

- **Rituals as Somatic and Social Scripts:** Rituals are not merely symbolic; they are active coping technologies. They provide a predictable structure during chaos, facilitate the transition of social status for the bereaved and the deceased, and allow for the safe, contained expression of powerful emotions.<sup>24</sup> The structure of a Hindu antyesti (funeral rites), the 40-day mourning cycle in Islam and Eastern Orthodoxy, or the Irish wake each prescribe specific actions that guide the bereaved through the initial shock of loss.<sup>25,26</sup>
- **Formalized Social Support Systems:** Culture dictates who provides support and how. This ranges from the formal role of the Jewish chevra kadisha (burial society) to the collective responsibility of a Māori whānau (extended family) during a tangihanga, where the community assumes all practical duties.<sup>27,28</sup> In Greek tradition, the close-knit community provides sustained philotimo-driven support, while in some East Asian contexts, hierarchical family roles dictate specific support obligations.<sup>29,30</sup>

- **Expression and Somatization:** The locus of distress—psychological or physical—is culturally influenced. While Western biomedicine psychologizes grief, many cultures express distress somatically. Studies among Chinese and Latino populations frequently report grief manifesting as bodily pain, fatigue, or "heartache" (dolor de corazón), which are legitimate expressions of loss within those frameworks.<sup>31,32</sup>
- **Continuing Bonds as Normative Coping:** Klass et al.'s concept of "continuing bonds" has found robust cross-cultural validation.<sup>33</sup> In cultures where the dead remain part of the social world, maintaining a relationship is a primary coping strategy. This is seen in talking to ancestors, making offerings, or seeking their guidance, practices documented in cultures from Nepal to Nigeria to Native American communities.<sup>34,35,36</sup>

### **Discussion: Toward an Integrated, Culturally Humble Paradigm of Bereavement Care**

#### *Theoretical Implications: The End of Universal Models*

The synthesized evidence necessitates a fundamental re-evaluation of grief theory. The review confirms that mainstream stage and task models are, at best, culturally specific archetypes reflecting a post-industrial, Protestant-informed, psychologically introspective worldview.<sup>37</sup> Their application as universal benchmarks is not only scientifically untenable but also ethically problematic, as it elevates one cultural narrative of suffering to a gold standard, thereby marginalizing others.<sup>38</sup> A more robust theoretical framework must be relational, contextual, and pluralistic. The Dual Process Model (DPM) of Stroebe and Schut, with its emphasis on oscillation between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping, offers greater flexibility and has demonstrated wider cross-cultural applicability.<sup>39</sup> However, even the DPM requires critical adaptation; what constitutes "restoration" is itself culturally defined. For a Japanese bereaved spouse, restoration may involve fulfilling familial duties to honor the deceased, while for an American, it may involve pursuing personal growth and new relationships.<sup>40</sup> Future theoretical development must embrace this complexity, creating meta-models that account for cultural positioning rather than prescribing a single pathway.

#### *Clinical Imperatives: From Misdiagnosis to Co-Constructed Healing*

The practical consequences of ignoring cultural context are significant. Applying Western diagnostic

criteria for complicated or prolonged grief cross-culturally can lead to systematic misdiagnosis.<sup>41</sup> A Bhutanese Buddhist who experiences a sense of the deceased's peaceful presence may be pathologized for hallucinations; a Chinese son who performs ancestor rituals decades after a parent's death may be incorrectly labeled as having "prolonged" grief; a Somali refugee expressing distress through chronic back pain may have their somatic complaints dismissed as unrelated to bereavement.<sup>42, 43, 44</sup> This underscores the critical need for culturally humble assessment, utilizing tools like the Cultural Formulation Interview (CFI) from the DSM-5-TR to explore the patient's explanatory model of loss, culturally sanctioned idioms of distress, and perceived social supports.<sup>45</sup>

Effective intervention must then follow suit. Culturally congruent therapy may look radically different from standard Western grief counseling. It might involve:

- Collaborating with traditional healers, religious leaders, or elders who hold sanctioned authority in the healing process.<sup>46</sup>
- Facilitating or accommodating ritual participation, such as creating space for altar-building or discussing the significance of ceremonial foods.<sup>47</sup>
- Legitimizing somatic expressions of grief and exploring their meaning within the client's cultural framework, rather than immediately redirecting to emotional processing.<sup>48</sup>
- Actively supporting continuing bonds by inviting narratives about the deceased, exploring the ongoing role they play in the family, and reframing this connection as a strength.<sup>49</sup>

The therapist's role shifts from expert to facilitator of culturally meaningful coping, co-constructing a healing process that resonates with the client's worldview.<sup>50</sup>

### **Limitations, Future Directions, and Global Relevance**

This review has limitations, primarily its reliance on English-language literature and the risk of presenting cultures as monolithic. Future research must prioritize intracultural diversity, examining how variables like gender, age, socio-economic status, urbanization, and acculturation level create variation within cultural groups.<sup>51</sup> A critical area for study is the

experience of diasporic and refugee populations who navigate layered losses—of people, homeland, and culture—while often contending with conflicting grief scripts from their heritage culture and host society.<sup>52</sup> Methodologically, there is an urgent need to develop and validate culturally-specific assessment tools for complicated grief, rather than merely translating Western instruments.<sup>53</sup> Finally, outcome research on manualized, culturally adapted grief interventions is scarce and must be expanded to establish evidence-based practices for diverse populations.<sup>54</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Grief, in its raw essence, may be a universal wound, but the balms applied to it are uniquely crafted by culture. This review has delineated how cultural scripts dictate the performance of sorrow through ritual, social structure, and expression. In an era of globalization, migration, and cultural intersection, the imperative for culturally informed bereavement care is paramount. Clinicians, researchers, and community leaders must move beyond simplistic checklists of "cultural traits" and cultivate a stance of cultural humility: a lifelong commitment to self-reflection, client-oriented curiosity, and the recognition of power dynamics in the therapeutic relationship.<sup>55</sup> By honoring the vast and varied repertoire of human responses to loss, we not only provide more effective support but also affirm the fundamental dignity of all ways of grieving. The ultimate goal is not to find a single truth about grief, but to create spaces where every story of loss, told in its own cultural tongue, can be heard and held.

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The authors contributed to the data analysis. Drafting, revising and approving the article, responsible for all aspects of this work.

### **Conflict of Interest**

None

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