

Psychotherapy with Islamic Clients Facing Loss and Grief

Author

Nooria Mehraby

First published in:

Psychotherapy in Australia, Vol 9, Issue No. 2 February 2003

In the context of a secular Western society, work with grief stricken Muslim clients demands an intimate knowledge of the clients' religious and cultural background, in particular with client's whose distress stems from, or is exacerbated by, their relationship with God. Nooria Mehbari demonstrates an approach to cross-cultural counselling that creates a therapeutic context sensitive to the client's frame of reference, but also applies Western psychological tools, such as cognitive restructuring, to the religious values and beliefs of clients to facilitate recovery from the impact of great loss and dislocation.

The enormous trauma, shock and suffering experienced through recent acts of terrorism, such as September 11th and the Bali bombing, also had a great impact on Muslims throughout the world. However, the situation for Muslims living in Australia and other Western cultures, has become further complicated through the association of terrorism with the words *Is/am* and *Muslim*. It has become common to hear reports of the stigmatization, fear, rejection, harassment and discrimination that has been shown towards Muslims since this time. Mosques have, been burnt and vandalised, women have had their headscarves pulled off and Muslim children have been rejected by their peers in school settings.

In western society, the common perception of Islam is of radicalism and anti-modernism, where there is no room for tolerance of other religions and cultures. However, Islam, historically has been very tolerant of other religions, especially those of monotheistic faiths, and Islamic scholars have contributed enormously to modernization, socio-political liberation, and the scientific world (Safi, 2002). While much attention has been paid to the recovery process of individuals within the context of Western cultural values, this article reflects on the ways in which grief and loss are dealt with within the context of counselling Islamic clients.

Muslims account for up to 1.6 billion of the world population, and over two percent of Australians follow Islam. The word 'Islam' means peace and submission to God's will, and a Muslim is one who is safe and sound, at peace in this world and the next (Farid, 1996). Embedded in Islam are compassionate traditions and practices to support the inevitable grief and loss that accompany death.

Islamic burial and death customs

The Islamic rules about facing death (Lapidus, 1996) vary from country to country, and also with different branches of Islam such as Sunni and Shiite. Some are derived from variations in national, ethnic, tribal and folk cultures. Generally, upon a Muslim's death, they are always buried. This, in Islam, represents the human being's return to the most elemental state, since the Creator formed

human s from earthly materials. Therefore, cremation, preservation interment in aboveground mausoleums, or other methods are not permitted in Islam. Also it is advisable to bury the dead body as soon as possible after death. The body of the deceased person is ritually washed and wrapped in plain white linen and placed in a simple wooden coffin (if one is necessary), which faces Mecca. Prior to the burial a special congregational worship service is offered, and prayers are made for Allah's mercy upon the de ad person. The affairs of the deceased may be handled via a will or testament and in the Qur'an there are specific means for distributing the inheritance to the spouse, children and relatives. (see www.cie.org)

Maqsood (2002) states that funerals are very important; this is an opportunity to grieve, pay respect to the deceased and express faith in God. However, the practices of expensive funerals, gravestones, or making a shrine of grief are disapproved of in Islam. Such shrines can often generate feelings of guilt, of financial burden for the bereaved if they cannot offer this. In some countries Muslim women are not permitted to attend the burial, mainly due to the belief that women are of 'faint heart' and will break down easily (Gatrad, 1994), but this is not the case for many Muslim women in Australia who do attend funerals and burials.

Islamic beliefs when dealing with loss

Muslims are advised to comfort the bereaved person by visiting them, strengthening their faith, offering them food, and reciting the Qur'an. Although grieving may never fully end, the period of outward mourning lasts no more than three days.

Muslims believe that all suffering, life, death, joy and happiness are derived from *Allah* and that *Allah* is the one who gives us strength to survive. These beliefs are usually sources of comfort and strength that aid the healing process. For example, in accepting grief and loss, the relatives of the deceased person are urged to be patient (*sabr*) and accept *Allah*'s decree. *'Be sure we shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods, lives and the fruits of your toil, but give glad tiding to those who patiently persevere. Who say, when afflicted with calamity: To Allah we belong, and to Him is our return'* (Qur'an: 62). People who have patience in accepting Allah's decree will be given a reward from Him.

'f have no reward other than paradise for my believing servant who is patient when f take away one of his beloved from among his companions of the world', or 'Whatever trouble, illness, anxiety, grief, pain and sorrow afflicts a Muslim, even if it is the pricking of a thorn - Allah removes some of his sins because of it' (Quran: 63 and 58).

This doesn't mean that Muslims should not grieve when they lose some one close to them. Maqsood (2002) states that bereavement is an upsetting and traumatic experience and it might comfort the mourner to know that such reactions and feelings are almost universal responses to loss, and that they are not sinful. Shock, disbelief, denial anger, guilt, bargaining, depression, and acceptance are common human reactions to the loss of a loved one. Maqsood advises that not only are Muslims allowed to express these feelings, it will be damaging for them to suppress them since the loss has to be acknowledged, the different emotions of grief have to be freed, new skills may need to be developed, and emotional energy channelled into new life.

It is permissible to cry and express grief over the death of a loved one, however, extreme

lamentation is discouraged. Khattab (1998) states that in Islam it is permitted to weep softly, before someone had died, at the time of death, and after. A number of respected Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) describe that on several occasions the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) cried when one of his loved ones died. For example, when the Prophet re-visited the grave of his mother he cried, and encouraged others to weep - this was many years after her death (the Prophet's mother died when he was at the age of six). Likewise, after the Uhud battle, when burying one of his companions, 'Uthman ibn Madh'um', the prophet Muhammad also shed tears. Again, when giving the news of the death of Ja'far and his companions in the battle against the Romans, he spoke with tears streaming down his face.

Although, wailing, eulogizing and tearing one's clothes are still common among some Muslims, such conduct is discouraged in Islam (Khattab 1998). A few words are allowed to be said when crying over a deceased person, but words should be true and not accompanied by wailing and expressions of dissatisfaction with the decree of God.

For instance, when the Prophet's son, Ibrahim, died, the prophet said' *We are very sad for your death, O Ibrahim*', This is not an indication of discontent with the decree of God or complaining against Him (ibid.).

Individuals are encouraged to talk about and remember their loved one and recall the good deeds of their life. Prophet Muhammad himself never forgot his love for his beloved wife, Khadijah, even years after her death (Maqsood 2002).

Muslims also believe that *Allah* appoints a time for each person to pass from this existence into the next and that death is inevitable and will take place when the time is right and there is after death life. Maqsood (2002) says that the tragedy of a person's death is not the end of the story. Hence to the majority of Muslims, it is illogical to grieve the loss of some who have simply left this world and gone to other life. Although it is an unquestionable and held belief that the next life will come, it is still unhealthy to skip over the tragedy and feeling of loss too rapidly (ibid.).

Muslims are advised to turn to Allah in their time of distress and grief. The use of religious parables, the life story of the prophet Muhammad and the multiple losses of his loved ones, are all beneficial when dealing with grief, as are Hadith and '*surah*' from the Qur'an such as:

'He guides to Himself those who turn to Him in penitence, those who believe and whose heart has rest in the remembrance of Allah. Verily in remembrance of Allah, do hearts find rest.' (Qur'an 13:27-28)

Counselling and Psychotherapy with Islamic Clients

An understanding of Islamic beliefs and the teachings of Islam can provide invaluable resources for the treatment of Muslim clients who are experiencing depression, anxiety, stress, loss and grief, and posttraumatic stress symptoms. In such a model it is essential to support clients in their religious beliefs, to strengthen their faith, correct their thoughts and beliefs (cognitive re-structuring) and change their behaviours. Badri (2002) state s that 'counselling' and 'psychotherapy' within Islamic belief has an ancient tradition of changing the behaviour and manner of clients, sinners, evil doers and patients by cognitive and behavioural psycho-spiritual methods that extensively rely on

the righteous and exalted personality of the therapist, sheikh or spiritual leader. Counselling, as an Islamic endeavour, is not an activity for a few specialized professionals, but is the responsibility of each Muslim and a main duty of Islamic studies.

Athar (islam-usa.com) says that a person's religious belief has a significant bearing on his personality and his viewpoint in life. When a Muslim puts trust in God he minimizes the stress on himself by reducing his responsibility and power to control his failure.

It is therefore important to take into account all religious matters and traditional values in the treatment of Muslim clients, notwithstanding that a person's religious beliefs are also a dynamic part of their personality, and at different stages in their lives they may be more reliant on their "Spirituality and religious faith.

Types of loss

Different kinds of loss such as the loss of a child, a spouse, sudden infant death, miscarriage, stillbirth, abortion or suicide, lead to different kinds of grief and mourning, and require different responses. The hardship of losing a child is acknowledged in particular in Islam. Abdullah (1999) states that when parents experience the death of a child, fellow Muslims should offer help, comfort, and support during the grief-stricken time and advise them in the best Islamic manner. There are special rewards from Allah for parents who lose their children. Maqsood (2002, 85) states that *'The Prophet always insisted that children who died before their parents, went as forerunners for their parents in the life Hereafter, and would serve as 'protection' against Hell-fire'*. In the case of sudden infant death, parents should be allowed full opportunity of grieving over the death, and be assured that their innocent soul is safe with Allah. The grieving over a miscarriage or a stillbirth baby should not be minimized. In fact, it is important to recognise that the parents have sustained a real death. Abortion is not permitted in Islam unless the mother's life is at risk, therefore cases of abortion are highly sensitive and feelings of guilt are very real for the mother. She may be unable to forgive herself and may feel God will never forgive her. Women who do not mourn the loss might experience great-unresolved grief (ibid).

Badri (1996) states that most of the guilt experienced by Muslim clients is in regard to their relationship with Allah. The majority of them have committed, or thought that they have committed some serious sin which elicits feelings of guilt and regret. This is accompanied with anxiety and fear of Allah's punishment, both in this present world and the Hereafter. Most of these clients come from families raised with a strong faith in Allah, but with an exaggerated sense of His punishment; God's love and mercy are diminished in their relationship with Him. In therapy these clients may improve with interventions, such as cognitive restructuring, that focus on these thoughts and beliefs.

Like abortion, suicide is strictly forbidden in Islam (*'Don't commit suicide as GOD is merciful to you'*; Surah 4, verse 29). Muslims believe that Allah creates every soul and life and no one has the right to take their own or any one else's life. Maqsood (2002) states that many Muslims consider a person who committed suicide as someone who has turned their back on Islam. Therefore suicide is the most difficult bereavement crisis for any family to face because shame, guilt and anger predominate. In these circumstances, along with the usual bereavement therapy, the bereaved need generous sympathy and empathy to support the congruence of their thinking and beliefs. It is

crucial that the bereaved person accepts that the suicide was not preventable, and the bereaved family is not at fault or held responsible.

It is also incorrect to assume that all suicides cannot be forgiven. People who commit suicide usually have severe clinical depression and prolonged distress. Hence, their mind was probably disturbed at the time of the suicide. The Hadith states that the actions of a person in a disturbed mind cannot be held against them. Maqsood also says that Allah can forgive, and that it is important to remember the promise given by Allah to the Prophet: *'If a person has in their heart goodness to the weight of one barley corn, and has said [that] there is no God but Me, he or she shall come out of Hell-fire,'* (Maqsood, 2002, 79). Allah is the one who can judge and decide what is wrong or right to forgive or punish, not his servants.

According to Islamic law, when a Muslim woman loses her husband, she must not remarry until four months and ten days have passed, during which time she is supposed to mourn for the death of her husband (this is more than the three days of the grieving process for other loved ones). This period is termed as *'iddah'* that allows a woman to determine whether she might be pregnant with her deceased husband's child, as this will affect issues of inheritance and related matters. Although modern DNA technology can ascertain the identity of the parents, the waiting period serves to honour the late husband and maintain the dignity of the marriage bond. (see www.cie.org)

The case of Mr A

Mr. A, a fifty-two-year-old Afghan refugee, lost sixty one close relatives including his mother, fiancée, brothers, sisters, uncles, cousins and other members of his family during the war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union. His father also died when he was five years old. He was referred to the Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) because of his chronic and complicated grief reaction, survival guilt depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress symptoms.

In counselling Mr A was distressed and agitated and cried" throughout the sessions. In addition to his predominant survival guilt, (he was the only survivor of the family) he was carrying the burden of guilt associated with his relationship with God. He believed he would be punished by God for not accepting God's decree and because he was impatient. He was still grieving for the loved ones even though many years have passed.

A safe and trusting environment was provided for Mr A where his reactions were normalized and his feelings were validated. The example of the life story of the Prophet Muhammad, the enormous number of family members that he lost during his life, his remembrance of his mother and his wife Khadijah years after their deaths, was narrated to him. The mercy and forgiveness of God in this narrative was re-emphasized.

Mr A processed his massive losses, developing his beliefs about God's love and forgiveness and disputing his beliefs about punishment and revenge. He was supported in adaptive beliefs and encouraged to increase the remembrances of God in the times of distress. In the meantime, he was encouraged gently towards the acceptance of God's decree and the reward he will get from Allah because of his depth of suffering and multiple losses. He was informed of the reward that his relatives will receive as *'shahid'* or (martyrs) and that their resting place was in paradise. He was

provided with the opportunity to grieve, his symptoms were validated and normalized, and his acceptance of God's will - both accepting his losses and his gifts (his life and his survival), as well as the hope that God would reward his suffering in the next life - were encouraged. It was also emphasized that it was not only appropriate, but it was important for him not to forget those he loved, even forever. Over four years of therapeutic contact, Mr A gradually began to change.

The case of Mrs B

Mrs B, a 49-year-old Kurdish-Iraqi refugee, lost two children during the Iran and Iraq war. Two years later she lost another child in a car accident. She was referred to STARTTS because of her intense grief reaction, depression and anxiety. On assessment it became clear that her anxiety was mainly associated with prospect of punishment for not accepting God's decree. Her fears that God would take her two remaining children to punish her created considerable anxiety. She would feel extreme worry if her child was late, sick or away from home, and constantly felt that some calamity might befall her children. Her sleeping pattern was often disturbed with graphic nightmares of losing her children.

Mrs B was very distressed and agitated in sessions, expressing her extreme grief for her deceased children and her anxiety about losing her living children. Safety was provided for her where she could remember her children and express her grief. The normality and commonality of her reaction was strongly emphasized. Then the issue of her anxiety about losing her other children was explored.

It became evident that Mrs B feared God's punishment, fearing that losing a third child was a punishment from Allah for not accepting His decree when she lost her first two children and had grieved impatiently over their losses. Again her beliefs about God's punishment, rather than his mercy and forgiveness, were explored, and consistent with the teachings of Islam, she was encouraged to remember that God rewards those who have suffered great loss. In particular, when parents lose their children.

After two years in therapy Mrs B gradually began to improve. Then she decided to make a pilgrimage to the Holy City of Mecca to help overcome her losses. When she returned from Mecca, she told me that God gave her Patience (*sabr*). She said she prayed in God's House and told Him *'Allah, you are the creator. You possessed them, you gave them to me and you took them away from me, please give me 'sabr'. Forgive me if I was impatient in accepting your decree and save my other children, and take them when the time is right.'* In this way Mrs B came to terms with her loss.

Conclusion

Islamic beliefs and traditions, like Christian and Judaic, can provide essential frameworks of meaning for the individual who faces loss and grief, in particular, when the client's unresolved grief stems from or is exacerbated by their relationship with God. Exploration of these beliefs and traditions within the therapeutic setting can facilitate access to territory within the client's world of meaning that is responsive to the application of Western psychological interventions such as cognitive restructuring.

'Whatever we are given is a gift from Allah. We are not its owner. Everything belongs to Allah and returns To Him' (Qur'an: 62). Amin.

Acknowledgments

To the memory of my father A. Raziq Siddiqi who taught me about myths and facts in Islam. He is my soul mate whose loss took me years to overcome but whose love, memories and thoughts remain with me forever. Thanks also to Hanan Dover and Mariano Coello for reviewing the final version of the article and for their helpful comments on it. Thanks to David Findlay for his assistance in research and reviewing this article.

References

Abdullah, R. (1999) *Overcoming Trials and Tribulations' Advice from the Qur'an & The Sunnah*. 2nd edition, Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd, London.

Athar, S. 'Islamic perspectives on stress management'. II islam-usa.com.

Bedri, M.B., (1996) 'Counselling and psychotherapy from an Islamic perspective in AL-SHAJARAH, Journal of the *International Institute of Islamic thought and civilization* (ISTAC) Val. 1 N. (182), 159-191.

Badri, M.B., (2002) 'Are the contributions of early Muslim scholars relevant to Modern Muslim psychotherapy?' Paper present at the Islamic Psychology conference Sydney Sep 30-5th Oct.

Farid A. (1996) *The Purification of The Soul*. Fourth edition. Al-Firdous Ltd, London.

Haque, A. 'Contributions of Early Muslim scholars to psychology and the role of present-day Muslim psychologists.' Paper presented at Islamic psychology conference, Sydney 30 Sep-5-Oct 2002.

<http://www.cie.org>

<http://www-usa.com>

The Noble Qur'an. English Transition of the meaning and commentary, by M, T., Al-Hailali and M.M., Khan, Madinah Munawwarah, Saudi Arabia.

Lapidus. I.M. (1996) The meaning of Death in Islam.' In: *Facing Death*. Edited by Spiro.H.M, Curnen, M.G.M, & Wandal, L.P. Yale University Press. New Haven and London.

Khattab, N. (1998) *From Islamic psychology: Patience and Gratitude*. Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd. London, U.K.

Maqsood, R.W., (2002) *After Death Life! Thoughts to alleviate the grief of all Muslims facing death and bereavement*. Fourth edition. Good Word Books Ltd. New Delhi.

Sati, L.M., (2002) 'Overcoming the Polemics of Intolerance.' In *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 19 (2), Fall.

Nooria Mehraby, MD (Kabul), MM (Pathology) (Kabul), M. Couns (UWS), is an Afghan, Counsel/or and Project Officer for the Middle Eastern Communities with the Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS). She graduated as a medical doctor from Kabul University in 1983 and worked as a lecturer there and also as a General Practitioner until she and her family were forced to flee in 1987.