

Later this year, BEREAVEMENT CARE will begin a detailed series which will describe how different religious and cultural groups mourn and their attitudes to the bereaved. Here, DR. VEIRA BAILEY, M.R.C. Psych.,consultant child psychiatrist, West Middlesex Hospital, explores ways in which society can benefit by looking at the wide variety of customs and rituals used by different communities, ethnic groups and religions.

One of the most helpful aspects of the development of society today has been the sensitive, caring and pragmatic work done by Cruse in helping the bereaved manage the process of mourning. The general body of theory has developed by integrating ideas from a variety of sources such as psychoanalytic, psychiatric, sociological, anthropological and so on.

Looking at the practices of other religious and cultural groups provides an enlightening and creative stimulus to the development of our thinking and practice in helping the bereaved. What is fascinating is the way all cultures develop rituals and ritual specialists, although the customs may be very different or even contradictory, as in the reaction to cremation or burial in various cultures.

In this country the traditional Christian rituals of preparing the body for burial, the funeral procession, church service and burial were all family and community activities. With urbanisation the link between the community and the new Metropolitan cemeteries was broken and the cultural and community aspects of bereavement customs withered, especially in the towns.

As a society we need to look again at the wide variety of customs and rituals used by different communities, ethnic groups and religions. We need to do this, not only to increase our sensitivity to other people's customs, but also to redevelop socially recognised rituals and etiquette that are supportive.

Jewish customs have evolved and developed over the centuries as a continuous tradition and have particularly well worked out customs graduated to cope with the gradually diminishing intensity of grief.

Caring for close relatives of the bereaved by the community in the early stages of mourning is customary in many Middle Eastern and Far Eastern countries. This gives a clear injunction to the relatives that they are free to concentrate on the mourning and also provides care for the children.

Customs and death ceremonies are helpful not only to the bereaved but to society as a whole by providing a manageable rehearsal of attitudes, feelings and behaviour around death

The process of mourning, the elements of denial, protest, despair and readjustment have to be worked at and dealt with. Many religions and cultures help the bereaved accept the reality of death by customs around viewing the body or a stark confrontation with the reality of the disposal of the body by open cremation or burial.

Some inducement such as a meal or a party for the extended family and community to attend seems to be universal. Perhaps we should consider some of the rituals of some very primitive societies in permitting the release of anger and rage at the death. Would this reduce its displacement to family feuds or litigation which seems more common here?

Final ceremonies are important because they give permission for mourning to end and life to resume.

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from different age groups and walks of life, each of them describing some of their memories and conclusions after coming through the grieving experience

Discussions are to take place about involvement of Cruse patrons who are members of Parliament and the part they might play in projecting Cruse's role in the community. Production of a 15-minute film for use in publicity and fundraising has also been mooted.