



Grief & Bereavement Literacy Series

Session 23: “*Grief and Bereavement: A South Asian Perspective*”

Presenter: Jas Cheema, MA

October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2025: 12:00pm-1:15pm PST

Agenda Item	Discussion
Introduction & Objectives	<div><div>Introduction</div><div><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>The presenter became involved with hospice work through volunteering at Delta Hospice and discovered gaps in culturally sensitive grief supports for South Asian communities.</li><li>Through personal experiences of multiple losses (including suicide, murder, and spousal death), this deepened her understanding of grief.</li><li>These experiences inspired the creation of “Healing with Ancient Teachings,” a resiliency program grounded in Sikh, Hindu, and Buddhist philosophical teachings on loss and change.</li><li>The program uses ancient wisdom to promote acceptance, compassion, and emotional healing, and is currently being evaluated through PhD research on its impact on resilience and mental wellbeing.</li></ul></div></div> <div><div>Objectives</div><div><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Increase awareness of grief and loss in South Asian especially Punjabi communities.</li><li>Examine cultural, religious, and societal influences on bereavement.</li><li>Explore client-centered approaches to supporting people from diverse cultural backgrounds.</li></ul></div></div>
Presentation Key points	<div><div>Context: South Asian Population in Canada</div><div><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Largest visible minority in Canada: 2.57 million people (7% of Canada’s population, 2021 Census).</li><li>BC ranks 2nd nationally (after Ontario); Metro Vancouver houses approximately 474,000 South Asians (9% of BC’s population).</li><li>Surrey alone has around 212,000 South Asians, nearly 40% of its residents.</li><li>South Asians community include Punjabi, Bengali, Tamil, Gujarati, Sinhalese, Goan, Kashmiri, etc., practicing Sikhism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Jainism.</li><li>Community now includes five generations and diverse migration pathways (India, UK, Australia, etc.), producing bicultural and globally connected identities.</li><li>Immigration patterns have shifted from early economic migrants with limited English to highly educated professionals and students.</li></ul></div></div> <div><div>Layers of Culture (Hofstede’s Model)</div><div><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Universal layer:</b> Shared human needs (safety, belonging, values).</li><li><b>Cultural layer:</b> Family, faith, and social teachings.</li><li><b>Individual layer:</b> Personality and personal experiences.</li><li>Practitioners must engage with people as individuals first, using curiosity, openness, and active listening to understand what faith, culture, and values mean personally to each client.</li></ul></div></div> <div><div>Understanding Grief and Bereavement</div><div><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Universal yet deeply personal emotional response to loss—extends beyond death (e.g., loss of dreams, identity, relationships).</li><li>Influenced by worldview:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Individualistic cultures (Western):</b> Emphasize self-expression and emotional articulation.</li></ul></li></ul></div></div>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Collectivist cultures (Eastern/South Asian):</b> Emphasize family honor, tradition, and social harmony.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Key influences on grieving:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Spiritual/religious beliefs and level of understanding.</li> <li>○ Face-saving and social judgment—how others perceive one’s grief, funeral spending, or loss circumstances.</li> <li>○ Balancing personal wishes with family/elders’ expectations.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b><u>Cultural Nuances in Grief Expression</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Emotional expression:</b> Anger, crying, or open displays of emotion may be discouraged in some South Asian families.</li> <li>• <b>Faith-based coping:</b> Reliance on prayer and acceptance (“His will” or <i>Hukam</i> in Sikhism).</li> <li>• <b>Complicated grief:</b> Internalized emotions may manifest as physical symptoms (e.g., heart pain interpreted as medical issue).</li> <li>• <b>Acceptance vs ritual:</b> Those who deeply understand their faith’s teachings experience greater peace; others following rituals superficially may feel more distress.</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Rituals and Traditions</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Before the funeral:</b> Family members bathe and dress the body; cutting hair discouraged; faith in divine will emphasized.</li> <li>• <b>Funeral rites:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Sikh &amp; Hindu:</b> Cremation, prayers, white/black attire, head coverings.</li> <li>○ <b>Muslim:</b> Burial with specific prayers.</li> <li>○ <b>Christian South Asians:</b> Church-based services.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Post-funeral:</b> Continued prayers, ashes scattered in flowing water (locally or in India).</li> <li>• <b>Modern adaptations:</b> Some funerals now resemble celebrations of life with themes, slideshows, and personalization.</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Religious Teachings on Pain and Acceptance (Guru Nanak)</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pain and grief are universal; no household untouched by them.</li> <li>• Grief stems from attachment and the mind’s perception of permanence.</li> <li>• Key Teachings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “Conquer your mind”: shift perspective from ownership and permanence to acceptance and transience.</li> <li>○ Recognize the divine essence within oneself (<i>Oh my mind, you are the embodiment of the Creator</i>).</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Healing practices: Meditation, mantra, prayer, <i>kirtan</i> (devotional singing), and seva (service/volunteering) to transform pain through compassion and gratitude. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “You cannot be in gratitude and pain at the same time.”</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b><u>Social Supports and Family Dynamics</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key supports include Gurdwara (place of worship), family, and community networks (e.g., meals, shared mourning).</li> <li>• <b>Challenges:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Modern families are smaller; not all have large support systems.</li> <li>○ Stigma and judgment around “controversial losses” (e.g., suicide, murder) can lead to isolation.</li> <li>○ Family conflicts or generational differences (Western vs traditional expectations) can complicate grieving.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Practitioners must respect individual boundaries, recognizing that large family networks can be both supportive and stressful.</li> </ul>
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	<p><b>Key Takeaways for Practitioners</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• South Asian grief practices are shaped by faith, family, and community norms, requiring nuanced, non-assumptive engagement.</li><li>• Cultural humility is essential. Avoid stereotyping; seek to understand each person’s worldview and context.</li><li>• Provide safe, client-centered spaces for emotional expression, acknowledging both collective values and individual experiences.</li><li>• Recognize that rituals and traditions can offer structure, meaning, and belonging, but may also cause stress if family or community expectations conflict with personal needs.</li><li>• Grief and loss are universal, yet their expression and processing are deeply influenced by culture, spirituality, and personal experience. Practitioners must balance empathy with cultural understanding, supporting individuals to navigate both inner emotions and external expectations in ways that honor their beliefs, relationships, and resilience.</li></ul>
<b>Lived Experience</b>	<p>Sarb (hospice social worker and a bereaved daughter).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The presenter noted the significance of Sarb’s story in understanding how cultural expectations, community norms, and generational values intersect in grief and end-of-life care among South Asian families.</li></ul> <p><b><u>Sarb’s Story and Background</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sarb’s mother, Juginder Basra, passed away in December 2023 at White Rock Hospice after living with advanced Parkinson’s disease.</li><li>• Sarb described navigating her mother’s illness and death while balancing professional and personal roles:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ As a daughter, primary caregiver, and eldest sibling supporting her family.</li><li>○ As a social worker, advocating for compassionate and culturally sensitive care.</li></ul></li></ul> <p><b><u>Care Experience and Hospice Stay</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Her mother’s condition worsened following a medication change that led to hospitalization and the need for a feeding tube (NG tube).</li><li>• Her mother refused further intervention, clearly indicating her wish not to continue the tube, a decision the family respected.</li><li>• During hospice care (approx. one week):<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Sarb decorated her mother’s room for Christmas, played her favorite Punjabi and Hindi music, and created a comforting environment.</li><li>○ She guided family members to express gratitude and say goodbye including her father, siblings, and niece (via iPad).</li><li>○ Sarb was present at her mother’s passing, providing both emotional and practical support.</li></ul></li></ul> <p><b><u>Grief and Cultural Expectations</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sarb experienced deep exhaustion and grief following her mother’s death.</li><li>• She chose to limit visitors immediately after the passing to preserve privacy and rest; an uncommon choice within traditional South Asian mourning customs, which usually involve open homes and frequent visitors.</li><li>• Managed rituals differently:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Created a self-serve setup for guests rather than hosting formally.</li><li>○ Delayed the witness cremation by three weeks (due to holidays and logistics), leading to guilt influenced by cultural expectations.</li><li>○ Selected a funeral home that allowed more control and dignity, diverging from common community preferences.</li><li>○ She and her sister wore pastel floral suits to honor their mother, symbolizing peace and celebration of life rather than mourning in black.</li></ul></li></ul>

	<p><b><u>Navigating Family and Cultural Pressures</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Faced significant pressure from extended family and community elders to follow conventional timelines and rituals.</li><li>• Managed conflicts around decisions such as:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Prayer timing at the gurdwara.</li><li>○ Which family members could choose or pay for the final clothing for the deceased.</li></ul></li><li>• These tensions reflected clashes between tradition and personal boundaries, particularly among younger generations raised in Canada.</li><li>• Sarb noted the emotional toll of balancing respect for elders with asserting autonomy over grief practices.</li></ul> <p><b><u>Continuing Grief and Reflection</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sarb shared ongoing grief: her mother’s belongings remain untouched; she and her sister support each other and her niece in processing loss.</li><li>• Highlighted intergenerational differences in understanding respect, dignity, and expressions of mourning.</li><li>• Discussed witness cremations as both a valued and potentially traumatizing tradition in South Asian funerals.</li><li>• Her mother’s ashes remain at home; dispersal will occur later when the family feels ready.</li></ul> <p><b><u>Cultural and Religious Insights</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explored how religious teachings such as “accepting God’s will” can sometimes silence emotional expression or seeking help.</li><li>• Emphasized the need to normalize grief conversations and counseling within South Asian communities.</li><li>• Discussed how beliefs in the soul’s continuity (rooted in Hindu and Sikh philosophy) may comfort some but are not universally internalized.</li><li>• Younger generations increasingly question and reinterpret teachings- focusing on personal meaning and lived spirituality rather than rigid ritual.</li></ul> <p><b><u>Family Dynamics and Father’s Grief</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sarb’s father grieves in his own way; their relationship remains complex but improving.</li><li>• He has begun planning his own end-of-life arrangements, showing evolving openness around death planning.</li><li>• Despite Sarb’s professional background, she notes that family members often resist her guidance, a common experience among healthcare professionals navigating personal loss.</li></ul> <p><b><u>Community Education and Change</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Both Sarb and Jas agreed that the South Asian community needs more education around grief, emotional wellbeing, and evolving cultural practices.</li><li>• There remains hesitancy to discuss grief publicly due to religious framing of destiny and will, but change is emerging among younger generations.</li><li>• Sarb and Jas emphasized that education should:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Come from trusted individuals within the community who are culturally fluent and respected.</li><li>○ Be delivered through familiar media (e.g., local radio, community TV, social media).</li><li>○ Respect traditions while gently opening space for new ways of expressing and processing grief.</li></ul></li></ul> <p><b><u>Key Takeaways</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Grief in immigrant South Asian families is shaped by cultural duty, intergenerational tension, and evolving identity.</li><li>• There is a strong need to balance tradition with self-care and privacy.</li></ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Professionals supporting these communities should approach grief with:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Cultural humility, understanding collective context.</li><li>○ Flexibility for individual preferences.</li><li>○ Recognition of how gender, generation, and migration shape grief expressions.</li></ul></li><li>• Sarb’s story underscores how authentic, lived experiences can help normalize conversations about death, loss, and emotional wellbeing in culturally diverse settings.</li></ul>
Closing, Future Sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ <a href="#">Video recording</a></li><li>❖ <b>Upcoming Session:</b> <b>Nov 25<sup>th</sup> session: <i>Waking Experiences of the Deceased: From Bereavement to End of Life</i></b> <a href="#">Register</a></li><li>❖ Past sessions: <a href="https://www.bc-cpc.ca/echo-project-new-home/echo-project-past-series-and-resources/#1694021429157-e9440b18-3da4">https://www.bc-cpc.ca/echo-project-new-home/echo-project-past-series-and-resources/#1694021429157-e9440b18-3da4</a></li><li>❖ Action Plan: <a href="https://www.bc-cpc.ca/about-us/activities/new-projects/bereavement-study/grief-and-bereavement-support-in-bc-a-collaborative-improvement-action-plan/">https://www.bc-cpc.ca/about-us/activities/new-projects/bereavement-study/grief-and-bereavement-support-in-bc-a-collaborative-improvement-action-plan/</a></li><li>❖ <b>Other Links:</b> <b>Joshua’s podcast link:</b> <a href="https://www.griefdreams.ca/">https://www.griefdreams.ca/</a></li></ul>