

Cultural Expressions of Bereavement and the Role of Group Psychotherapy in Collectivistic Communities

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ABSTRACT

Grief is a universal human experience; however, its expression, meaning, and healing processes are deeply shaped by cultural contexts. In collectivistic cultures, bereavement is often experienced and managed communally through shared rituals, spiritual practices, and collective meaning-making, yet many existing grief interventions remain grounded in Western individualistic models. The objective of this article is to examine how bereavement grief is expressed within collectivistic communities and to explore the relevance and effectiveness of group psychotherapy as a culturally responsive intervention. Using a narrative literature review methodology, recent empirical studies and theoretical frameworks on grief, culture, and group psychotherapy were systematically examined and synthesized. Findings from the reviewed literature indicate that culturally adapted group psychotherapy interventions are effective in reducing grief-related distress, enhancing emotional regulation, and promoting communal healing through shared narratives, rituals, and emotional co-regulation. Based on these findings, the article proposes a culturally sensitive bereavement group psychotherapy framework integrating Narrative Therapy, Emotion-Focused Therapy, and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy. The paper also highlights key implications for practice in collectivistic cultures and breaks down some limitations, challenges and critical considerations when using group psychotherapy for bereavement. The article concludes that group psychotherapy offers a culturally congruent and effective approach to bereavement care in collectivistic cultures by honoring relational bonds, spiritual traditions, and collective healing processes.

Keywords: collectivistic culture, bereavement, group psychotherapy

INTRODUCTION

Grief, the emotional and psychological response to the loss of a significant person or entity, is a universal human experience that goes beyond cultural and individual boundaries (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2018). In a blog gathering individuals' experiences of grief, Jessie shared:

My brother died just under a month ago and it was only when he was gone that I realised I had never had to live without him. [...] Every day throws in a new challenge. Something different to feel from the day before. Some days, I wake up and I can get on with my work and everything is okay, others it feels like the world is caving in and I don't know what to do anymore. Wherever I am he is with me though. His picture is up next to my bed so I can have the same discussion that we had every morning and every evening. I can wake up and say 'good morning, William'. (Hope Again, n.d.)

Jessie's vulnerability highlights various concepts and understandings of grief. Although often viewed as a linear process, grief involves various emotional, cognitive, and physical reactions that vary significantly between cultures, communities, and individuals. Early theories, such as Kubler-Ross's (Tyrrell et al., 2023) model of the five stages of grief, have provided a framework for understanding how emotional responses to loss evolve, particularly regarding terminal illnesses. However, more recent research has shown the multifaceted nature of grief, not only deviating from a linear progression but also deviating from the idea that grief is experienced the same way. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), for example, explains that grief is deeply influenced by the nature of the relationship between the deceased and the bereaved, where mourning is viewed as a process of re-establishing emotional proximity to the lost attachment. figure.

Additionally, models like Stroeve and Schuts's (1999) dual process offer an alternative perspective and suggest that grief involves a continuing balance between confronting the loss and continuing with everyday life, where movement between the two phases is crucial for healing. These concepts of grief are extended by Klass et al.'s (2014) theory of continuing bonds, which suggests that many bereaved find healing in maintaining a transformed but ongoing relationship with the deceased, like in Jessie's narrative, rather than letting go of them. Beyond individual experiences, cultural contexts also play a significant role in shaping grief responses, with social and communal practices influencing how individuals make sense of their loss and integrate it into their lives (Neimeyer, 2019). For example, American Jews have provided specific mourning practices framed in structured and timely rituals, to maintain continuing bonds with the deceased and provide rest to the bereaved (Silverman 2020). Illustrating the complexity of grief sheds light on the need for a culturally sensitive model of bereavement; as current ones tend to be founded on individualistic values that promote autonomy and self-reliance. This falls short when working with clients from diverse backgrounds. As much as the standard interventions for grief have been helpful, they miss critical aspects that only treatments tailored to clients' collectivistic cultures can tackle. In this article, collectivistic cultures are understood as communities that promote the needs of the group over individual ones; this manifests as interdependence, emphasis on loyalty, and cooperation but also conflict avoidance or lower differentiation levels.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

This article explores how bereavement grief is uniquely experienced and expressed in collectivistic societies; that emphasize interdependence, group cohesion and communal healing. Traditional models of grief predominantly shaped by Western individualistic values focus on autonomy, self-reliance and psychological closure within the individual. However, these frameworks often do not reflect the communal, relational and ritualistic dimensions of grief observed in collectivistic cultures. As such the absence of culturally tailored interventions risks pathologizing culturally normative grief responses or offering insufficient support. This gap in care highlights the urgent need for inclusive, culturally sensitive models of grief therapy. This paper had three objectives:

1. To examine cultural expressions of bereavement and grief in collectivistic communities
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of group psychotherapy in culturally diverse contexts
3. To propose a culturally sensitive bereavement group psychotherapy framework for collectivistic cultures.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Narrative Therapy, developed by Michael White and David Epston in the late 1980s, is grounded in the postmodern and social constructionist view that our identities are shaped through the stories we tell about our lives. It posits that problems do not reside within people but within the narratives constructed around their experiences (White & Epston, 1990). In the context of bereavement, Narrative Therapy emphasizes the re-authoring of grief stories, allowing individuals to integrate the loss into a coherent identity and find meaning in the ongoing relationship with the deceased.

Narrative Therapy aligns particularly well with collectivistic cultures, which value communal storytelling, intergenerational memory, and shared meaning-making. Within these communities, the grieving process is not isolated but unfolds within social systems i.e. the family, religious institutions, and larger community. Narrative Therapy provides space for these relational voices to be acknowledged and honored. Instead of focusing on detachment or closure, the narrative approach supports continuing bonds with the deceased (Klass et al., 2014), often through rituals, storytelling, or symbolic practices that resonate deeply within collectivistic traditions.

Therapeutically, the process involves helping clients externalize grief as something separate from their identity; explore culturally-rooted meanings of loss, and co-create alternative stories that honor their resilience and relational ties (Neimeyer et al., 2014). This is especially relevant in bereavement contexts where grief may be shaped by ancestral practices, spiritual beliefs, and community expectations. Therapists using a narrative lens

often facilitate group therapy that centers around communal storytelling, ritual enactment, and identity reconstruction through collective support (Denborough, 2014).

Narrative practices such as "re-membering conversations" (White, 2007) where the deceased is brought into the present through shared stories and therapeutic letter writing are particularly effective in helping individuals reframe their grief and retain meaningful connections. These practices not only reduce isolation but strengthen communal ties, reinforcing the collectivistic value of healing through shared experience.

Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT), developed by Leslie Greenberg and his colleagues, is grounded in humanistic and experiential psychology, focusing on the primacy of emotions in effecting therapeutic change. EFT posits that emotional processing especially; accessing, expressing, and transforming primary adaptive emotions is central to healing (Greenberg & Watson, 2022). In grief work, EFT helps clients process painful emotional experiences such as sadness, guilt, anger, or abandonment that arise after loss.

EFT provides a strong foundation for group psychotherapy in collectivistic cultures, where emotions may be regulated communally and expressions of vulnerability are often shaped by cultural expectations. In these contexts, EFT's emphasis on empathy, relational safety, and compassionate attunement offers an ideal container for emotional expression and healing (Johnson, 2002). It helps group members differentiate between primary emotions (e.g., deep sorrow) and secondary or maladaptive ones (e.g., suppressed anger due to social stigma), while promoting healthy expression through shared group dynamics.

In EFT-informed bereavement groups, clients are guided to access their core emotions, often through techniques such as the empty-chair dialogue with the deceased or emotionally evocative storytelling. These interventions encourage members to "move through" grief rather than avoid it, fostering emotional transformation, mutual understanding, and inner integration. Research shows that such emotionally attuned environments are essential for grief resolution, especially in cultures where individual expression is often interwoven with family and community identity (Sharbanee & Greenberg, 2022).

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), developed by Segal, Williams, and Teasdale (2013), combines principles of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) with mindfulness practices rooted in Buddhist psychology. MBCT helps clients cultivate nonjudgmental awareness of their thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations, reducing emotional reactivity and promoting acceptance (Segal et al., 2013).

In the context of bereavement, MBCT supports clients in observing grief-related thoughts (e.g., "I should be over this by now") without over-identifying with them. These decentering fosters emotional regulation and reduces ruminative thinking, which is often heightened after loss (Huang et al., 2021). For collectivistic cultures, where grief may be deeply spiritual and ritualized, MBCT offers techniques (e.g., breath awareness, body scans, loving-kindness meditations) that can be easily harmonized with communal healing practices such as prayer, silence, and ancestral honoring.

MBCT in bereavement groups enhances participants' ability to stay present with their emotions while engaging in rituals of remembrance and community reflection. It aligns with the collectivistic values of inner harmony, interdependence, and resilience through communal support. As shown in Huang et al.'s (2021) neuroimaging study in Taiwan, MBCT improved grief symptoms by enhancing emotional regulation and brain connectivity, suggesting its cultural flexibility and neurological grounding.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural expressions of bereavement and grief in collectivistic communities

Bereavement in collectivistic cultures is not solely a private experience but a shared communal journey. The mourning process is governed by social rituals, spiritual beliefs, and culturally embedded expectations that define how grief is expressed, processed, and healed. These expressions differ significantly from Western models that emphasize individual coping, psychological closure, and emotional independence.

In African contexts, Nwoye and Nwoye (2012) offer a compelling case study of a woman grieving her mother's suicide. The authors highlight that conventional Western interventions did not resonate with the client's cultural experience. Instead, healing emerged through culturally grounded interventions such as narrative healing, ritual theory, and communal storytelling. The study emphasized the importance of re-anchoring grief in cultural and relational contexts, underscoring the failure of standard models to acknowledge indigenous African grief practices.

Similarly, Adinkrah (2016) examined grief rituals in the Akan society of Ghana, focusing particularly on the stigma and communal sanctions surrounding suicide. The study found that suicide victims are denied full burial rites, subjected to ritual punishment, and erased from communal memory. Mourning is communal but conditional, where grief is allowed only when it upholds societal values. These practices illustrate how communal grief is intertwined with moral codes and social harmony, reinforcing the collectivistic emphasis on shared identity and legacy.

In Togo, Kokou-Kpolou et al. (2017) conducted a cross-sectional study with 162 widowed spouses from mutual support groups. They found that religious coping mechanisms such as collective prayer, scripture readings, and funeral gatherings played a protective role in expected deaths but could exacerbate grief when death was sudden. This reinforces the centrality of spirituality and community in shaping bereavement experiences and emotional responses.

The ethnographic work of Haram (2020) in Northern Tanzania presents the grief practices of Meru women who mourned vocally and physically for lost loved ones. These expressive rituals clashed with Christian religious expectations of silent mourning. This tension revealed a deeper cultural conflict: while the Meru tradition views outward grief as honoring the dead and expressing collective loss, the imposed religious norms pathologized such displays. The study illustrated how collectivistic cultures often use grief as a language of resistance and identity affirmation.

A powerful example from East Asia is found in Zhao et al. (2021)'s study of Shidu parents in rural China who had lost their only child. Among 228 participants, 87% exhibited symptoms of depression, largely driven by stigma, social exclusion, and cultural beliefs about failure in lineage continuity. However, the strong perceived social support helped buffer depressive symptoms. In these communities, grief is communal not only in expression but also in consequence; bereavement affects the family's social role, ancestral duty, and future legacy.

These studies together emphasize that in collectivistic cultures, bereavement is rarely an individual journey. It is an experience regulated by cultural scripts, communal rituals, and spiritual practices that serve to both express and contain the intensity of grief. These systems create culturally sanctioned avenues for mourning, facilitating a sense of belonging, meaning-making, and intergenerational continuity elements often absent in Western grief paradigms.

Effectiveness of group psychotherapy in culturally diverse contexts

Group psychotherapy has emerged as a powerful modality for addressing bereavement, especially in collectivistic and culturally diverse contexts. Unlike individual therapy, group settings naturally mirror the communal structures found in many non-Western cultures, offering spaces where shared experiences, empathy, and collective meaning-making, enhance therapeutic outcomes. The shared nature of grief in collectivistic societies aligns seamlessly with the interpersonal and communal dynamics of group therapy.

A meta-analysis by Maass et al. (2022) reviewed 14 randomized controlled trials (RCTs) involving 1,519 bereaved participants. Most interventions used structured group therapy formats such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and supportive-expressive groups. The findings indicated that group interventions were more effective than control conditions in reducing grief and depressive symptoms in the short term. Tertiary interventions particularly targeting those with complicated grief showed stronger outcomes. While the long-term effectiveness remained uncertain, the review concluded that group psychotherapy holds promise, especially when contextualized to meet the cultural and relational needs of participants.

In an RCT conducted in Hong Kong, Chow et al. (2019) explored two culturally adapted bereavement group interventions for older adults: the Dual-Process Bereavement Group Intervention-Chinese (DPBGI-C) and the Loss-Oriented Bereavement Group Intervention-Chinese (LOBGI-C). The DPBGI-C incorporated both emotion-oriented and restoration-oriented coping strategies, consistent with Chinese cultural values of balance and harmony. Participants in this group experienced greater reductions in anxiety, depression, and loneliness than those in the loss-oriented group. The communal and ritual elements embedded in the DPBGI-C appeared to resonate more deeply with collectivistic values, reinforcing the significance of cultural fit in group therapy design.

Moss (2002) examined bereavement groups for Israeli parents who lost children in terror attacks, using dream analysis and narrative techniques within a Foulkesian group-analytic model. The study highlighted how shared group dreams and symbolic processing of grief facilitated not only emotional release but also community bonding. Since participants were from a collectivistic background, the group format allowed them to express grief in ways that were culturally sanctioned; emphasizing mutual support, communal strength, and the ongoing presence of the deceased within the group consciousness.

What unites these studies is the recognition that group psychotherapy, when culturally adapted, can mirror and enhance the communal grieving processes already embedded within collectivistic cultures. The group setting serves not just as a therapeutic intervention but as a modern replication of traditional healing circles, mourning ceremonies, or spiritual gatherings. This allows for emotional expression, shared ritual, and co-regulation of grief all of which are foundational to healing in non-Western societies. These findings suggest that effective bereavement group therapy in diverse cultural settings must: (a) Reflect communal values, (b) Honor spiritual and ritual practices (c) Create shared narratives, and (d) Offer emotionally safe, culturally responsive group environments. When these conditions are met, group psychotherapy transforms from just a treatment to a culturally congruent experience of collective healing.

A proposed culturally sensitive bereavement group psychotherapy framework

Grief in collectivistic cultures unfolds within social and spiritual systems, where healing is not an isolated psychological process but a communal journey rooted in rituals, storytelling, and collective memory. In light of this, the design of bereavement group therapy must go beyond Western clinical paradigms and intentionally integrate cultural values, communal structures, and spiritual practices. This section presents a proposed culturally sensitive framework for bereavement group therapy, grounded in Narrative Therapy, Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT), and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT).

This model recognizes that healing in collectivistic communities often takes place through storytelling, communal rituals, emotional resonance, and spiritual anchoring elements that align naturally with the three therapeutic approaches used. Narrative Therapy (White & Epston, 1990) supports participants in re-authoring their grief stories by engaging in culturally familiar practices of storytelling, communal remembrance, and legacy building. Practices such as “re-remembering conversations” and therapeutic letter writing empower participants to maintain continuing bonds with the deceased (Klass et al., 2014) and frame their grief in collective terms rather than personal failure.

Emotion-Focused Therapy, developed by Leslie Greenberg, offers an emotionally attuned, process-oriented framework for accessing, differentiating, and transforming grief emotions. In collectivistic cultures, where public emotional expression may be discouraged or regulated, EFT provides safe spaces such as group therapy; for validating and transforming suppressed or culturally bound emotions (Greenberg & Watson, 2022). Through techniques such as evocative dialogue, empty-chair work, and empathic reflection, EFT fosters connection and emotional healing while resonating with communal values of emotional co-regulation and shared mourning (Greenberg, 2011).

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (Segal et al., 2013) incorporates structured meditative practices such as breath awareness, body scans, and loving-kindness meditations. These practices help regulate emotional distress and echo traditional spiritual rituals in collectivistic cultures, such as candle lighting, group prayer, and ancestor veneration (Huang et al., 2021).

The group model is designed as a closed group of 6-8 bereaved adults, meeting weekly for 8 sessions (120 minutes each), facilitated by licensed therapists. Participants will be grouped by type of loss i.e. parent, spouse, child, sibling, and sessions incorporate cultural practices such as communal altars, grief rituals, prayer circles, and storytelling ceremonies. Groups will emphasize shared experiences, empathy, collective meaning making and will apply Yalom & Leszcz's, (2020) principles of composing therapeutic groups.

The group will not only encourage individual emotional processing but also facilitate collective resilience, a critical need in collectivistic societies where grief is seen as a disruption to community harmony. By incorporating spiritual traditions, communal storytelling, and culturally resonant rituals, this framework offers an affirming, safe space for grief processing that aligns with local worldviews. This approach aligns with findings from Mathew (2021), who observed that blending Eastern and Western mourning practices enabled more meaningful grief resolution. It is further supported by Chow et al. (2019), whose culturally tailored group intervention (DPBGI-C) yielded better mental health outcomes among Chinese elders than standard bereavement models.

Ultimately, this culturally sensitive framework restores grief work to its rightful place: not only as an individual task of letting go, but as a community process of remembrance, transformation, and reintegration

Theory	Session/week	Interventions	Homework
MBCT	Opening our Hearts: Coming Together in Grief	<p>Informed consent</p> <p>Introductions</p> <p>Joining</p> <p>Safety creation</p> <p>Discuss grief within collectivistic cultures</p> <p>Acknowledge spiritual beliefs and communal rituals</p> <p>Highlight importance of community healing and shared mourning</p> <p>Psychoeducation</p> <p>Use mindfulness and grounding techniques</p>	<p>Write about significant memory of the loved one</p> <p>Guided meditation for 15 minutes daily</p>
Narrative Therapy	Grief as an Unfinished Story: Exploring the Narrative of Our Loss	<p>Members explore and narrate their grief story; therapist identifies how it is perceived in that culture</p> <p>Reframe grief story while identifying and separating accompanying feelings</p> <p>Discuss group as a new community of support</p> <p>Participants retell their grief experience in an empowering way</p> <p>Include spiritual traditions such as rituals and memorial practices that accompany storytelling</p>	<p>Write grief story with a focus on positive memories and role of community in their grief journey. This will be shared in group in the next session.</p> <p>Guided meditation for 15 minutes a day</p>
MBCT	Living with Loss: A Mindful Approach to Our Emotions	<p>Focus on emotional awareness and acceptance techniques</p> <p>Mindfulness to create distance from intrusive thoughts and emotional reactivity</p>	<p>Mindfulness practice for 15 minutes daily and whenever grief symptoms arise</p>

		<p>Use guided meditations, identify and label emotions, thoughts and resulting behavior</p> <p>Introduce self-compassion exercises</p> <p>Discuss communal activities like prayers that encourage mindfulness</p> <p>Psychoeducation</p> <p>Introduce rituals like candle lighting in the group to symbolize mindfulness and connection.</p>	Journal about impact of mindfulness on their emotional state
EFT	Emotion as a Bridge: Accessing and Differentiating our Emotions	<p>Access primary emotions and differentiate from secondary emotions</p> <p>Process emotional blocks and allow full expression of grief</p> <p>Share how emotions are handled in their families/cultures</p> <p>Psychoeducation</p> <p>Suggest communal rituals/symbols like shared altars</p> <p>Empty chair technique to explore unexpressed emotions</p> <p>Use mindfulness exercises</p>	<p>Engage in emotional expression activity like letter writing</p> <p>Guided meditation 15 minutes a day and whenever grief symptoms arise</p>
Narrative Therapy	Rewriting the Story of Loss: Exploring the Meaning of our Grief	<p>Reframe grief as part of life's journey, incorporate continued bonds with the deceased and personal growth</p> <p>Meaning making exercises aimed at rewriting a significant part of the story of loss to foster healing and purpose.</p> <p>Connect participants' grief to community rituals such as remembrance rituals to symbolize continuity or transformation.</p>	<p>Write about the meaning attributed to their grief and its impacts on their identity and relationships</p> <p>Mindfulness exercise for 15 minutes a day and whenever grief symptoms arise</p>
MBCT AND EFT	Healing through Connection: Mindfulness and Compassionate Presence	<p>Foster a compassionate healing environment</p> <p>Create safe space for vulnerability</p> <p>Cultivate mindfulness and compassion towards self and others</p> <p>Psychoeducation</p> <p>Use compassion meditation, sharing in group and empathetic listening.</p> <p>Group prayer, collective reflections on shared healings, spiritual practices from their culture</p> <p>Introduce upcoming termination</p>	<p>Practice giving compassionate responses to their own grief through writing as if they were responding to a close friend.</p> <p>Mindfulness exercises daily</p>
EFT and MBCT	Letting Go and Moving Forward: Embracing the	<p>Help participants begin integrating grief so they can move ahead with acceptance and healing</p>	Engage in an activity that symbolizes letting go

	Future While Honoring the Past	<p>Process unresolved grief and promote self-compassion in the context of moving on.</p> <p>Psychoeducation</p> <p>Use guided visualization for a future without the deceased, reframing and closure techniques</p> <p>Acknowledge rituals that honor the deceased while moving on.</p>	Mindfulness of a daily activity
MBCT and EFT	Continuing the Journey: Closing with Mindfulness and Gratitude	<p>Reflect on the progress made, action plans and relapse prevention</p> <p>Solidify integration and resilience</p> <p>Use gratitude exercises, share on personal growth, mindfulness practices to reinforce skill</p> <p>Group ceremony or closing ritual, incorporating cultural and spiritual traditions</p> <p>Finish with a mindfulness activity</p>	<p>Writing a letter of gratitude to the group for their support in healing</p> <p>Guided meditations at least 15 minutes a day</p>

Note: Information compiled from Neimeyer (2014), Yalom & Leszcz (2020), MacLaren et al (2022), Greenberg and Watson (2022), Segal et al. (2013), MacKinnon et al., (2015); Nelson et al. (2022) and Johnson (2002).

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLECTIVISTIC CONTEXTS

Cultural integration and symbolic communication

In collectivistic cultures, grief rituals should not be understood as merely symbolic acts but as active forms of relational and spiritual communication. Practitioners are encouraged to conceptualize culturally embedded rituals as ongoing “spirit dialogues” that sustain the bond between the living and the deceased. Therapeutic incorporation of practices such as lighting incense, maintaining family altars, storytelling ceremonies, or the use of memorial objects within group sessions can help validate culturally normative expressions of continuing bonds. These practices reinforce the understanding that grief is not about detachment but about the transformation of relational presence (Klass et al., 2014; Adinkrah, 2016).

Aligning grief work with indigenous philosophical frameworks further enhances cultural resonance. Concepts such as filial piety, which emphasizes respect and obligation toward ancestors, or *samsāra*, which frames death as part of an ongoing cycle of rebirth and transformation, can be used to reframe grief as a transitional process rather than a final rupture. Integrating these worldviews allows clients to situate their loss within familiar moral and spiritual narratives, thereby supporting meaning-making and emotional regulation within culturally sanctioned frameworks (Adinkrah, 2016; Haram, 2020).

Where appropriate, therapists should also consider collaborative partnerships with community elders, religious leaders, or traditional healers. Such partnerships help bridge the divide between Western clinical models and community-based healing practices, strengthening cultural legitimacy, fostering trust, and reducing resistance to formal mental health interventions (Haram, 2020).

Structural adaptation of bereavement group therapy

To enhance accessibility and sustainability in collectivistic and resource-limited contexts, bereavement group psychotherapy models must be structurally adaptable. One effective approach is the implementation of task-sharing strategies, in which trained community workers, semiprofessionals or paraprofessionals deliver low-

intensity, manualized grief interventions under the supervision of licensed therapists. This approach has been shown to increase service reach, reduce stigma, and align with communal caregiving traditions commonly observed in collectivistic societies (Forte et al., 2004; Maass et al., 2022).

Hybrid delivery formats may further enhance engagement by offering flexible combinations of individual, family-based, and group sessions. Given the interdependent nature of collectivistic families, incorporating family members into selected sessions can support relational healing and shared meaning-making. Such flexibility acknowledges that grief is often negotiated within family systems rather than experienced solely at the individual level (Klass et al., 2014).

Standardized screening procedures should also be incorporated prior to group entry. The use of culturally sensitive assessment tools to identify individuals at elevated risk for prolonged or complicated grief allows practitioners to make informed treatment-matching decisions. Early identification supports appropriate referral pathways and safeguards group cohesion and emotional safety (Kokou-Kpolou et al., 2017; Maass et al., 2022).

Refining culturally responsive therapeutic techniques

Culturally responsive grief work benefits from adapting therapeutic techniques to reflect communal meaning-making processes. Cultural narrative therapy approaches emphasize externalizing grief by separating the identity of the bereaved from the pain of loss, while simultaneously honoring culturally specific spiritual and religious beliefs. Narrative practices may be structured around ancestral storytelling, collective remembrance rituals, or mindfulness traditions that resonate with clients' belief systems, allowing grief narratives to be re-authored without undermining cultural or spiritual meaning (Denborough, 2014).

Group psychotherapy settings also provide a powerful context for fostering emotional co-regulation, a process through which individuals manage intense emotional experiences through shared witnessing, collective reflection, and empathic resonance. Emotional co-regulation within groups has been associated with reduced isolation, normalization of grief responses, and strengthened relational bonds, all of which are particularly congruent with collectivistic values that prioritize shared emotional responsibility (Bowlby, 1982; Johnson, 2002; Greenberg & Watson, 2022).

In addition, integrating principles from positive psychology can broaden bereavement interventions beyond pathology-focused models. Emphasizing strengths-based outcomes such as post-traumatic growth, altruism, spiritual maturity, and life wisdom allows participants to recognize both personal and communal transformation emerging from loss. This orientation affirms grief as a meaningful developmental experience rather than a condition to be resolved (Klass et al., 2014; Maass et al., 2022).

Systemic and practitioner-level considerations

Effective bereavement care in collectivistic contexts requires practitioners to prioritize cultural safety. This includes engaging in accredited training that equips clinicians to recognize collective grief expressions and to avoid mislabeling culturally normative behaviors; such as ritualized weeping, prolonged mourning, or communal lamentation as psychopathology. Cultural humility and ongoing reflexivity are essential competencies when working across diverse grief traditions (Haram, 2020).

Providing multilingual and culturally adapted educational materials further enhances accessibility and engagement. Written and audiovisual resources delivered in the community's primary language can demystify therapeutic processes, reinforce psychoeducation, and support informed participation in group interventions (American Psychological Association, 2018).

Finally, ethical practice in collectivistic settings requires viewing the therapeutic relationship as a cultural partnership rather than a hierarchical expert model. Community networks, family systems, and spiritual institutions should be recognized as primary sources of support, with psychotherapy functioning as a complementary resource rather than a replacement. Such partnerships honor indigenous knowledge systems and promote sustainable, community-centered approaches to bereavement care (Haram, 2020).

LIMITATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Cultural stigma, secrecy, and loss of face

In many collectivistic cultures, grief is deeply embedded within family and community structures where maintaining social harmony and family reputation is paramount. Disclosure of personal distress or family dysfunction to outsiders, including therapists or group members, may be perceived as bringing shame or “loss of face” to the family. Such stigma can significantly inhibit open emotional expression in group psychotherapy settings and may lead to guarded participation, partial disclosure, or early dropout. Cultural norms emphasizing privacy and secrecy around suffering further complicate engagement, particularly when grief is associated with socially sensitive deaths or unresolved family conflict (Adinkrah, 2016; Haram, 2020).

Religious and cultural constraints on group participation

Group psychotherapy models may inadvertently conflict with religious or cultural norms governing gender interaction, physical proximity, or spiritual conduct. In certain contexts, mixed-gender group settings or closed-room discussions may violate religious laws or cultural expectations, creating ethical and practical barriers to participation. Without careful cultural adaptation and community consultation, these constraints may limit accessibility and undermine the perceived legitimacy of group-based interventions (Haram, 2020).

Limitations inherent in group dynamics

While group psychotherapy offers communal support, it also presents inherent risks. Exposure to others’ traumatic loss narratives may intensify distress for some participants, leading to emotional overwhelm or secondary traumatization. Group processes may also give rise to unhelpful dynamics, such as competitive expressions of grief, emotional withdrawal due to lack of trust, or interpersonal tensions and jealousy. Additionally, group formats may not provide sufficient individualized attention for participants experiencing complex or prolonged grief, necessitating supplementary individual support (Forte et al., 2004; Maass et al., 2022).

Therapist skill dependence and theoretical bias

The effectiveness of culturally responsive interventions such as Narrative Therapy and mindfulness-based approaches is highly dependent on therapist skill and cultural competence. Practitioners must navigate nuanced belief systems related to death, rebirth, ancestral presence, and spirituality, requiring advanced training, reflexivity, and cultural humility (Denborough, 2014; White, 2007). Moreover, despite cultural adaptations, many therapeutic models remain rooted in Western psychological assumptions, such as prioritizing individual autonomy and self-expression. These assumptions may conflict with collectivistic values emphasizing interdependence, familial obligation, and communal identity, potentially limiting cultural congruence if not critically examined (Neimeyer et al., 2014; Neimeyer, 2019).

Evidence gaps and sustainability challenges

Empirical research on bereavement group psychotherapy in collectivistic contexts remains limited. Existing studies are often constrained by small sample sizes, short follow-up periods, and a lack of randomized controlled trials involving diverse non-Western populations. These limitations restrict generalizability and hinder the development of evidence-based guidelines for large-scale implementation. Questions regarding long-term sustainability, cost-effectiveness, and integration into existing community systems remain insufficiently addressed in the current literature (Forte et al., 2004; Maass et al., 2022).

Systemic and structural barriers to implementation

Structural barriers further complicate implementation, including the scarcity of bilingual and bicultural mental health professionals capable of facilitating groups in participants’ native languages. Additionally, some individuals in collectivistic communities may prefer directive, problem-solving approaches to grief support rather than exploratory or emotion-focused models. This preference may reduce engagement with therapies that

emphasize prolonged emotional processing, highlighting the need for flexible, culturally responsive intervention designs that integrate structured, solution-oriented elements where appropriate (Haram, 2020; Forte et al., 2004).

CONCLUSION

The integration of group psychotherapy for bereavement grief in collectivistic cultures offers a powerful framework for healing, that emphasizes the importance of shared experiences and community support. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, this article has highlighted the therapeutic benefits of group therapy, particularly in collectivistic cultures, where communal bonds and shared rituals play a central role in healing. Group psychotherapy provides not only an environment of mutual support and understanding but also facilitates meaning making reconstruction, a key aspect of grieving in collectivistic settings (Maass et al., 2022; Mathew, 2021). The blending of Western therapeutic practices with traditional collectivistic rituals creates a holistic approach that acknowledges both individual emotional processing and the need for collective healing.

Research demonstrates that group therapy interventions, such as those incorporating psychoeducation, emotional expression, and cognitive-behavioral techniques, are effective in reducing grief symptoms and enhancing resilience (Zimpfer, 1991; Forte et al., 2004). These interventions are further enriched by culturally relevant practices that reinforce community connections and provide a sense of continuity and shared meaning in the face of loss (Forte et al., 2004; Walls & Meyers, 1984). Moreover, the impact of such interventions is amplified when tailored to the cultural context, with participants benefiting from the collective engagement and spiritual practices common in collectivistic cultures (Mathew, 2021).

As bereavement care continues to evolve, the importance of culturally sensitive interventions cannot be overstated. For collectivistic cultures, group psychotherapy offers an opportunity to weave together diverse cultural rituals and modern therapeutic techniques, creating a more inclusive and effective approach to grief. Future research should continue to explore the long-term effects of these integrated models, examining their efficacy in diverse cultural contexts, expanding the understanding of how shared community rituals can support grief processing and recovery and, test the proposed group psychotherapy framework in this article. While the proposed framework offers culturally grounded practice implications, its application must be understood within the contextual, methodological, and systemic limitations discussed.

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