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SHORT COMMUNICATION:

BEYOND THE LAST BREATH: A MICRO-TOOLKIT FOR GRIEF SUPPORT IN MYANMAR FAMILIES

¹SHOON MYA AYE and ^{2,3}SHYH POH TEO*

1. Karuna Compassionate Care Center, Yangon, Myanmar
2. Geriatrics and Palliative Medicine, RIPAS Hospital, Brunei Darussalam
3. PAPRSB Institute of Health Sciences, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei Darussalam

*Corresponding Author: shyhpoh.teo@ubd.edu.bn

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INTRODUCTION:

Grief is a universal human experience, yet the experience is profoundly contextual. Grief, the behavioral and emotional response to bereavement, is different for everyone. Different cultures also have their own unique rituals, traditions and practices to respond to the loss. These practices offer mourners pathways to express emotions, honor memories of the deceased, and reintegrate back into daily life [1]. In Myanmar, bereavement is deeply intertwined with Buddhist teachings; values of impermanence (anicca), compassion or wish for people to be free from suffering (karuna) and community solidarity. Monasteries, family homes, and community gatherings provide spaces for mourning, while practices such as offering alms or chanting sutras are intended to ease the transition for the deceased and comfort the bereaved [2]. However, there is little systematic development of compassionate

bereavement support tools that align with psychological insights on grief and adaptations to local cultural practices [3].

The grief theory describes the active processes through which individuals cope, starting from accepting the reality of loss, processing pain, adjusting to a new environment, and finding enduring connections [4]. While cultural bereavement practices guide people through this process, urbanization, migration and limited formal bereavement services make it difficult for grieving families to maintain these traditional practices [5]. Approximately 10% of grief is complicated, where there is difficulty accepting or adjusting to the loss, or ongoing traumatic distress beyond six months [6]. As there is significant variability in the provision of formal bereavement support [7], we propose a set of culturally resonant micro-practices for grief support among Myanmar families. These are

intentionally small, accessible acts of compassion that can be used in homes, monasteries, or healthcare settings to support bereaved families.

Proposed Micro-Practices for Bereavement Support:

Silent Listening Ritual:

Sit together for several minutes of intentional silence, without offering advice, distraction or judgement. Silence is a form of emotional expression, without pressure on a person to articulate their grief. Presence is a compassionate act to show they are not alone. *“It’s okay to feel sad. Grief is not weakness; it is love that has lost its voice”*.

This can be done during home visits, memorial gatherings, or hospital follow-ups to normalize grief without forcing conversations.

Dhamma Candle Offering Ritual:

Find a quiet space at home. Light a candle or oil lamp in memory. While watching the flame, offer a moment of silence, make a wish in your heart and send your love and blessings to them. *“As these light shines, may your next journey be peaceful. Your love continues to shine brightly, even in our darkest hours”*.

Families may incorporate this ritual daily, during anniversaries or religious observances, as a way to remember their loved ones and send blessings for the onward journey.

Breathing with compassion (karuna breathing): Sit and breathe gently. With each inhale, accept your grief and know that this sadness is a natural part of your love. With each exhale, send compassion (karuna) to your own grieving heart and loving kindness to your loved one. *“May I be gentle with my grief. May my loved one be free from suffering and find peace”*.

Compassion-focused breathing helps to regulate distress and build self-soothing capacities [8]. This can be carried out individually during moments of acute grief, or in small groups at home, monasteries, or community gatherings.

Compassionate Legacy Letter Writing:

Write a letter to the one you lost. Use this space to express gratitude, unspoken thoughts or blessings. The letter can be kept privately, placed on a family altar, or ritual burned to symbolize release and the sharing of merit. This act of expression helps clear your heart, allows you to honor their actions (kamma) and find peace in their memory.

While this practice is not a Myanmar tradition, it is an emerging practice in urban communities, where individuals write letters to loved ones before death, especially in palliative care settings. This is increasingly used by clinicians and spiritual caregivers to help patients articulate their values, regrets, hopes, and blessings. Expressive writing also facilitates emotional processing and meaning making, providing a safe outlet for complex emotions [9].

This provides a private, flexible space for grief expression, is useful for younger family members, or those less comfortable with rituals, and is currently being explored as a tool for dignity therapy and emotional closure.

Compassionate Check-Ins:

Healthcare providers, family members, neighbors, or community leaders send a note, short phone call, or text message several weeks after the funeral to remind families that they are not forgotten. *“We are thinking of you. You are not alone”*.

While condolence notes and community solidarity are common in Myanmar, extending these gestures beyond the immediate funeral period sustains compassionate presence and remind families that they are not forgotten. Hospitals, clinics and monasteries can integrate this as a simple follow-up practice for bereaved families [10].

DISCUSSION:

These micro-practices are deliberate actions to empower families to take ownership of the grief process. They can be integrated into daily routines and do not require specialized training. Professional bereavement support and counselling may be inaccessible or unavailable and should not be limited to clinical settings. While these actions are rooted in Myanmar traditions, they have the potential for adaptation elsewhere. For example, letter writing may

resonate in Western contexts, while silent presence may be universal.

These practices also illustrate compassion as an embodied, relational process. Compassion here is not a grand intervention but a quiet presence, such as lighting a candle, writing a note, or breathing with awareness. Such acts reaffirm the bereaved person’s dignity and humanity, reminding them they are seen and supported.

This proposed approach is reflective, and practice-based rather than empirical; and is not aimed to be prescriptive, but to inspire culturally responsive grief care. The micro-practices require further evaluation regarding acceptability, cultural resonance, and perceived impact; as well as an exploration of integrating these practices into palliative care follow-up.

CONCLUSION:

Bereavement is never an easy journey and often carried quietly with limited formal support by Myanmar families.

The micro-practices described from silent listening, candle rituals, compassionate breathing, letter writing, and compassionate check-ins are rooted in Buddhist values, intentionally small in scale, accessible and may have profound impact on families. It is hoped that these micro-practices will empower families and communities to accompany each other in grief, transform silent suffering into shared healing, and provide compassion beyond the last breath.

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