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African Americans and COVID-19 Pandemic: Spiritual Healing for Coping with Grieving After the Pandemic

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Abstract

Historically, spirituality and religion have been critical components of African Americans' lives. Spirituality is defined as a connection with oneself, others, nature, or God. For Christians, spirituality is the trust in the power of the true and living God in the Bible. Spirituality and religion help many African Americans draw strength to overcome various forms of adversities such as poverty, illness, rejection, prejudice, and racism. This paper is a brief report on the spiritual healing of African Americans for coping with grieving after the pandemic. During the pandemic and after the pandemic spirituality and religious practices will be vital in the healing of the world. African Americans especially experienced numerous losses of family members and friends during the pandemic due to their co-morbidities of chronic health conditions. Spirituality will be an important component in the healing of others after the multiple losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The faith-based community is in a key position to assist others with coping with grieving after the pandemic.

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Key Words: African Americans; grief; death and dying; bereavement; COVID-19; pandemic; culture; religion; spirituality.

Introduction

Historically, spirituality and religion have been a critical component of African Americans' lives (Kennedy 2020). Spirituality is defined as a connection with oneself, others, nature, or God (Roberto et al., 2020). For Christians, spirituality is the trust in the power of the true and living God in the Bible (Kennedy, 2020). However, For, secular belief, spirituality is defined as referring to the human experience of discovering meaning, which may or may not include the concept of a personal God (Kennedy, 2020; Kennedy & Rhodes, 2019). Spirituality is often used interchangeably with religion.

Spirituality and religion help many African Americans draw strength to overcome various forms of adversities such as poverty, illness, rejection, prejudice, and racism (Kennedy, 2020). Religion, in contrast to spirituality, typically includes institutional affiliations that share a system of beliefs, rituals, and behaviors (Kennedy & Rhodes, 2018; Kennedy & Rhodes, 2019). However, the use of prayer typically overlaps in the conceptualization of both religion and spirituality regardless of organizational affiliation. African Americans who use high levels of spirituality reported higher levels of religious coping strategies (Kennedy & Rhodes, 2019). During the pandemic and after the pandemic spirituality and religious practices will be vital in the healing of the world.

Method

This paper is a brief report on the spiritual healing of African Americans for coping with grieving after the pandemic. First, the impact COVID-19

pandemic has on the religious community will be addressed. Last, strategies for spiritual healing when coping with grieving after the pandemic will be explored.

COVID-19 Impact on the Religious Community

COVID-19 has impacted the entire world and has caused harm and greatly damage our emotional, relational, financial, and physical well-being (Wang, 2022). It has also presented a unique challenge to our spiritual growth and development. Congregational fellowship and assembly have suddenly shifted virtually, and churches reopen physically. With great caution, members as well as leaders, perceive an overwhelming reposition in the world they live in and are left to ponder the world they know will never be the same again (Wang, 2022). The fact of the matter, church as we know it or have experienced it, will never be the same. Wang (2022) propose that our world will never again be the same because of the different extent of grief experienced during the pandemic.

Loss takes on many forms, shapes, and sizes during a crisis, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen just how loss has truly taken on many sizes, shapes, and forms. For the Body of Believers, we have lost our ability to not only physically assemble but we have also lost our ability to physically congregate to have closure, honor, and celebrate the life of our loved ones who died. Wang (2022) explained, “God created us to be relational beings, and though technology enables us to remain in contact through computerized images, something important is lost when we’re unable to physically connect with each other.”

In the world today we have all experienced losses. Wang (2022) shared the following list of losses that many experienced during COVID-19:

1. We've lost our previous life rhythms.
2. Children are grieving the structure and schedule that used to provide contexts to be with their friends and to participate in meaningful and worthwhile activities.
3. We've lost our sense of safety in the world.
4. We've lost hopes and dreams we once had for the upcoming year(s) of life.
5. We've lost many of the activities we used to enjoy.
6. We've lost our sense of normalcy.
7. We've lost our sense of control over our lives.
8. We've lost the feeling of being out in the world without needing to be constantly vigilant about catching a disease we cannot see.

In one way or another, we are all dealing with loss, it is fair to say we are all in grief, one stage of grief or another.

As a Christian, I believe in the true and living God and the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (The Trinity). Although for healing to take place we need to seek and develop a personal and unique relationship with the true and living God. The social isolation brought about the distance from fellowshiping with others or worshipping in our traditional ways. Historically, worshipping in a physical setting such as a church is especially important for Christians (Kennedy, 2021b). The importance of worship is especially important for the African American

culture (Kennedy, 2021b). However, some virtual worship took place for church and funeral services during the COVID19 pandemic. Religious practices such as reading the Bible, praying, and communion with the Holy Spirit are important in the life of a Christian.

Resilience is a protective factor against mental illness assisting a person to cope mentally and physically when challenged with adversities in life (Roberto et al. 2020). Some parishioners said social distance brought about a closer and personal relationship with God. Although, in the absence of church attendance, they continue to read their Bible, pray to God, and commune with the Holy Spirit. Isolation and social distance allow them to seek God more and focus on his presence through mediation. Their resilience comes from forming a personal relationship with him in the quietness of the home or outside in nature in their yards during isolation. During the pandemic, spirituality had a positive correlation with resilience. Hebrew 4: 12 says *“For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”* Psalms 1:2 says, *“But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditates day and night”* (KJV).

During the pandemic, some pastors and congregants continued to attend church and trust that God will protect them. Some denominations believed in participating in the physical church based on the scripture *“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one*

another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching (Hebrew 10:24-25, KJV). Personal contact is recommended in the Bible and some congregants had difficulties not attending the physical church building over virtual attendance. However, some parishioners contract COVID-19 infection during church attendance (e.g., church services; Bible studies, choir practices/rehearsals, funerals, etc.) Also, for some who attended church services or funerals ended in death, especially at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. However, some churches met in the church parking lots for services to comply with the required mandate for social distance. Others violated the required mandate for social distance by the law and continued to attend church. The scripture of Hebrew 10:24-25 is often misinterpreted; however, this scripture emphasizes the importance of remembering the teachings of Jesus Christ. For example, during the pandemic, some pastors emphasized the physical church attendance but did not check on, take care of, or provide safety to the parishioners. Some pastors did not offer virtual or parking lot services as a way to ensure connection for continued spiritual growth and development. Some parishioners that chose not to attend church because of health reasons or to comply with the social isolation ordinance were ostracized by the church for not having enough faith. Christians, regardless of life crisis I need you to be reminded of God's Words about the Holy Spirit that lives in you. 1 John 2: 27 states "*But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him*" (KJV).

Overall, in the United States, Christians supported the COVID-19 vaccinations. However, some pastors and congregants opposed the vaccinations because of “walking in faith.” Their faith in God would prevent them from contracting the coronavirus and the need to get a vaccination. Some opponents of the vaccination were related to conspiracy theories based on its origin and safety.

Spiritual Healing for Coping with Grieving After the Pandemic

African Americans especially experienced numerous losses of family members and friends during the pandemic due to their co-morbidities of chronic health conditions (Kennedy, 2021a; Kennedy, 2021b). Not only have African Americans experienced the loss of family members, but they experienced great loss in other areas of their lives. These losses were included but not limited to this list: jobs, income, houses, cars (due to businesses being closed or shut down due to the Pandemic), social interaction with others, scene of the normalcy of daily routines and day-to-day living that we all once knew. The ability to fellowship/gather with others (e.g., funerals/home-going celebrations of life, cookouts, sporting events, family reunions, weddings, baby showers, bridal showers, picnics, concerts, and graduations, etc.); family and friends especially, the ability to worship (e.g., Church Worship Services, Bible Studies/Classes, etc.). The ability to attend funerals, gather with family and friends, and the ability to attend church to worship all have been cited as very important to the African American culture (Wang, 2022). Multiple losses can cause grief and grief can be expressed in several ways. (Wang, 2022) proposed that grief can be expressed

through anger, by seeking to find a culprit or scapegoat to direct attention towards rather than facing the painful realities of what was lost. Many express our grief by denying there's even anything wrong in the first place. Some express grief by feeling sad, hopeless, alone, and even abandoned. Others express grief by feeling guilty thinking that if we had just tried harder or planned with greater foresight, things might have ended differently. All of these grief reactions can manifest themselves spiritually as well (e.g., anger or disappointment toward God, feeling abandoned by God, etc.).

Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross identified five stages of grief, which are: *denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance* (Kessler, 2019). David Kessler suggested there's a sixth stage as well called *finding meaning*. The Christian faith speaks profoundly to all six stages of grief. Pastors and other church leaders are searching for ways to assist with the sixth stage of grief - *finding meaning*. We all would like to find meaning to the trauma that we have all faced during COVID-19 (Kessler, 2019). These scriptures are helpful for parishioners when dealing with grief:

- “*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me*” (Psalm, 23:4, KJV).
- “*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*” (Hebrews 11:1, KJV).
- “*Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved*” (Psalm 55:22, KJV).

Spiritual leaders and faith-based organizations are needed now more than ever before to address the mental, emotional, and spiritual health needs of this population. This population has experienced lots of loss. Strategies for coping with death and dying and mental health needs are as follows:

- Encourage families to have memorial services for loved ones that die during the pandemic.
- Spiritual counseling for those experiencing grief or referring parishioners to outside professional counseling if needed.
- Assisting parishioners with working with the stages of grief and last *finding meaning* after the pandemic.
- Participate with parishioners with spirituality including reading the Bible, praying, mediation, and offering communion services in the home if needed.
- Providing education on health promotion and disease prevention (the cause of COVID-19-infection, signs, and symptoms of COVID-19 infection, the importance of vaccination, stages of death and dying, and abnormal grieving).

Conclusion

In conclusion, African Americans are disproportionately affected by death because of the pandemic due to co-morbidities of chronic health conditions. Spirituality will be an important component in the healing of others after the

multiple losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The faith-based community is in a key position to assist others with coping with grieving after the pandemic.

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