

SPIRITUALITY AS A COPING MECHANISM FOR  
AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS FACING BEREAVEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

Research indicates that many African Americans rely on spirituality more than psychotherapy to deal with traumatic life experiences such as bereavement. This review explores the psychotherapeutic benefits of spirituality as a coping resource in the African American community. Justification for the use of spiritual-psychotherapy as a treatment methodology for bereaved African American college students is presented. Finally, ethical considerations for using spirituality when counseling with bereaved African American college students are posed.

## INTRODUCTION

Death is a spiritual event (Doka & Morgan,1999). Bereavement practices in both ancient and contemporary cultures display high levels of spirituality. Egyptian burial customs, for example, mummified their dead to preserve the essential aspects an individual needed to enter the afterlife. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Central Subarctic Indians also provided their deceased with necessary items for the spirit's journey to the afterlife (Hackett, 2005). The element of spirituality observed in ancient cultures is displayed in contemporary culture as well. As Doka and Morgan (1999) observed, a spiritual response to death is typical in contemporary culture. Bereavement customs often involve religious rites, spiritual counsel and church attendance. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, spirituality seemed to gain national prominence in the United States as a mechanism to cope with national bereavement. National prayer services were held, church attendance increased astronomically (Gallop Poll, 2002), and politicians encouraged the people to look to God for comfort. These events suggest that religion and spirituality were therapeutic alternatives that helped the nation cope with grief. Perhaps, the nation's resort to spirituality also suggests that while bereaved individuals may not profess a religion, they may have spiritual needs and concerns that must be addressed.

Spirituality has been a dominant method used by African Americans to cope with grief (Janowiak, 1995). Spiritual practices such as prayer and church attendance are among the notable coping behaviors of bereaved African Americans. Little attention has been paid to the usefulness of spirituality in helping African American college students cope with their grief, while spirituality is receiving increased recognition as a valid psychotherapeutic methodology in the field of mental health (Brigg, 2005), The current review attempts to examine the psychological benefits that spirituality may have for bereaved African American students.

## REASONS FOR THIS STUDY

Over the years ministers in Christian denominations have used spirituality in counseling with church members to meet their spiritual and emotional needs. Spiritual interventions used by clergy to help their members resolve problems are normally referred to as pastoral care or pastoral counseling. For many members, especially African Americans, pastoral counseling often may be the main therapeutic resource available to address their mental and emotional needs particularly in bereavement ( Moore, 2003). In pastoral counseling, the spiritual overtones are intentional. The sessions may begin with prayer and involve the use of scripture to find meaning for the problems experienced by the member. The ultimate goal is to strengthen the faith of the individual and promote mental and emotional healing and peace.

The issues that individuals present in sessions with their clergy and spiritual caregivers are numerous and diverse. In fact, members may consult their clergy for spiritual counsel for many decisions they contemplate. For example, concern about a medical problem or problems they may experience at work. Spiritual counsel from clergy may help people reduce anxiety, bring about clarity, inspire confidence, promote attitudinal change, resolve conflict and help them take action and move on with their lives. Such therapeutic benefits suggest that spiritual intervention may be a valid psychotherapeutic treatment option for believers within their particular religious context. This opinion is supported by Gruman and Messer (2003) who suggest that clergy counseling may provide great insight due to a common understanding of faith and its conflict with life struggles. According to Gruman and Messer (2003), such insights at best are not simply cognitive realizations – they are profoundly emotional, especially

when focused on the *here-and-now* relationship between two therapeutic participants. In this relational paradigm, spirituality is like a common language through which members and their clergy may explore difficulties, gain insight or take action to resolve bereavement conflict. Such insight is what analytic therapists have always relied on to bring about change.

Bereavement is a major psycho-emotional conflict that is frequently brought into pastoral counseling sessions. Specifically, bereaved African American college students who return to school soon after the funeral may find it difficult to cope without the support of family, pastoral support and involvement of their religious community. For bereaved college students grieving with the support of family may help reduce the psychological pain, grapple with existential questions, restore faith and find a reason to live. Since bereaved African American college students may not have family support or clergy presence on campus, their ability to depend on spirituality as a means of coping with bereavement may be compromised. African American college students who rely on spirituality during bereavement may be faced with certain problems due to the nature of the college experience.

#### STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Finding spiritual resources on a college campus for the purpose of resolving grief may be challenging for many reasons. Firstly, campuses are academic institutions where emotional problems tend to be addressed through traditional psychotherapy. Although, counselors on campus may subscribe to a variety of therapeutic orientations, typically only secular models of therapy are usually practiced. Since clergy have a long history of using spirituality to help people cope with grief, the scarcity of spiritual counseling on

campuses is regrettable. It is the intention of this paper to review the evidence that shows that spirituality has proven to be a beneficial coping resource to many students on campus, particularly African American students, in an effort to increase the use of spirituality in college counseling services. Such evidence may provide justification for using spirituality as a valid coping option for bereaved African American college students.

In an attempt to justify the use of spirituality in counseling with bereaved African American college students, the current review will

- (1) Present evidence that suggests that spirituality meets the criteria to be classified as an authentic treatment option in modern psychology.
- (2) Explore the function of spirituality in African American life especially its role in bereavement coping
- (3) Explore the potential benefits of spirituality in meeting the unique needs of college Students and finally
- (3) Examine literature that demonstrate how spiritual counseling may used competently.

#### SPIRITUALITY: A NEW DIMENSION IN MULTICULTURAL COUNSELING.

New trends in multicultural psychology increasingly embrace spirituality as a useful and valid coping strategy for certain populations. Jackson, (2006) indicate that multicultural psychology recognizes the broad scope of culture, the role of context, environment, history and sociopolitical conditions that are part of life experiences. Spiritual practices and understanding are pervasive elements in many cultures including

African American culture (Smith,1997). Hence, the spiritual dimension may be a way of understanding the African American culture itself.

Culture, like personal identity, is multifaceted therefore it includes dimensions of race, ethnicity, language, sexual/affectional orientation, gender, age, ability/disability, class status, education, religious/spiritual orientation, and other cultural dimensions (Jackson, 2006). The importance of cultural dimensions in multicultural psychology provides a basis on which spirituality may be recognized as a valid therapeutic resource in the practice of psychological counseling. Recognition of spirituality in the field of multicultural psychology represents a major shift from the way spirituality was viewed in traditional psychology.

#### *Traditional Views*

Traditionally, social scientists considered religion and spirituality as forms of escapism. Freud (1952) and Marx (1860) suggest that religion and spirituality help shield individuals from reality. Perhaps Freud's assessment of spirituality as a *neurotic illusion* may have seriously contributed to the separation between traditional psychotherapy and concepts of spirituality. A similar bias is evident in the work of Albert Ellis who promoted a highly critical view of religion equating it with irrational thinking and emotional disturbance (Ellis cited in Lukoff, Lu & Turner, 1992). These references suggest that early work in psychology was dominated by a rejection of spirituality as a rational explanation of human psychological functioning. Although in the minority, spirituality-sensitive work existed among traditional psychotherapists. Henry James' (1890, 1902, 1910/1968) work placed spirituality as a central component of personality. Despite this, the study of spirituality in psychotherapy remained a largely unexplored

area until recently. Of course, there were exceptions such as Carl Jung's (1933; 1938) work on psycho-spirituality which was widely known as rational theology at the time. However, modern trends towards globalization have created a greater appreciation for cultural practices, like spirituality, in the field of multicultural psychotherapy.

### *Current Trends*

The current trend in multicultural psychology has been to emphasize the importance of culture-sensitive interventions that seem more applicable to individual's cultural context. Ibrahim, Roysircar-Sodowski and Ohnishi, (2001) suggest that effective psychotherapy requires the therapist to understand and assess the complexity of their own worldviews and that of their clients. Spirituality is recognized as an important construct in multicultural psychology because it influences people's worldview, behavior and emotional reaction. In contrast to traditional psychotherapy which ignored the usefulness of spirituality, multicultural psychologists view spirituality as an important dimension in human psychological functioning.

Multicultural psychologists may recognize that bereaved individuals constitute a unique population with special spiritual needs. Multicultural counselors may also recognize that as a population bereaved African American college students may have needs that can be addressed through spiritual interventions. For example, African American college students may rely on spiritual coping measures such as prayer rather than psychological intervention. In multicultural psychotherapy, the use of prayer to meet the special needs of bereaved African American college students may be considered as authentic spiritual psychotherapy.

Within the African American culture, faith in God is a common belief (Hayes, 1993) Within this spiritual framework, many African Americans find religious explanations for sufferings and crises that in turn inspire resilience or *faith* ( Marable, 1991). Bereaved African Americans may take comfort in the belief of an afterlife and benefit from prayers that underscore such beliefs. In such instances, religious faith may act as a coping mechanism. Bereaved individuals constitute a unique population with special spiritual needs and African Americans college students have unique needs that can be addressed through spiritual interventions.

#### DEFINITION OF TERMS

##### *Spirituality*

For the purpose of this review, Spirituality refers to personal beliefs that help people make meaning in their lives. Such a personal sense of life and its meaning can be considered a person's spirituality. Clark (1958) suggested that a significant relationship exist between spiritual functioning and a sense of meaning in life. Myers (1992) and Sethi and Seligman (1983) see spirituality as "maintaining a sense of hope and optimism". It is this internal spiritual sense that helps the individual cope with life's difficulties (Pargament, 1997) and deal constructively with one's mortality (Hooper & Spikla, 1970). Although Christian spirituality and Christian religion share similar concepts and images (Wilson & Moran, 1998), spirituality in the Christian context is much wider in scope than religiosity. Spirituality includes broad existential, paranormal and experiential dimensions (Taylor, 2001). Spirituality in the current review therefore, has inclusive and unrestricted connotations.

##### *Religion*

Unlike spirituality, the definition of religion is more restricted. Mattis (2000) suggested that religion and spirituality have distinctly different connotations. Although the connotations are distinct and separate, Mattis (2002) posited that religion and spirituality are often used as synonyms because their connotations sometimes overlap. However, Mattis (2000) and Zinnbauer, et al., (1997) define religion as prescribed beliefs and practices that are organized. By this definition, religion is more circumscribed than spirituality. Religion formalizes and structures spiritual beliefs into a cohesive system with specific rules and doctrines (Brady, Guy, Poelstra, & Brokaw, 1999). Religion, therefore can be conceptualized as a tool used to express and facilitate spirituality while spirituality combines both religious and existential components. Formal religion as a coping strategy typical among African Americans is well documented (Mattis, 2002; Constantine, Lewis, Conner, & Sanchez, 2000; Mc Rae, Thompson, & Cooper, 1999). In the current review, African American religion indicates prayer, prayer meetings, religious services bible studies and religious instructions typical of African American faith traditions. According to Testerman (1997), religious faith traditions provide the language for expressing personal encounter with God. In bereavement counseling adopting the language of a bereaved person can be a crucial necessity. Religious words or expressions allow believers to communicate in a language that aids connection and understanding within the religious community.

Research shows higher levels of spiritual beliefs and religious participation among African Americans college students than their European American counterparts (Walker & Dixon, 2002). The level of religiosity among African American college students is analogous to the religiosity of the African American population in general. Therefore, the benefits of spirituality as a coping resource for the African American population in general, may indicate possible coping benefits for African American college students as well. However, for the coping benefits of spirituality to be analyzed in

the current review, it must be determined how African American spirituality will be measured.

*Measuring Spirituality.*

Spirituality is a complex enigmatic idea that is more easily described than measured. However, to be useful in study, spirituality must be operationalized. Testerman (1997) suggested that operationalized spirituality is religious observance. Since African American religion includes a range of ritual diversity, spirituality in the current review is limited to the Christian rituals that are salient within the African American religious culture. For example, prayer, church attendance and religious counsel and instruction represent salient aspects of African American religious practice (Janowiak, 1995; Musgrave, Allen and Allen, 2002; Mattis, 2002). Therefore each ritual is considered to be a potent vehicle of African American spirituality.

*African American*

Defining the term African American may be even more complicated than defining spirituality. However, from the standpoint of this review, African American includes all blacks living in America. Such a liberal and unrestrictive definition of the African American population is a cornerstone of the historical search for spiritual and social identity of the black population in America. W. E. B. Dubois (1990) pan-Negro outlook in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century called for solidarity of all Blacks in American as a singular and unique population. Weisbord (1973) urged the “creation of a common identity between all those of Negro stock”. On this theme the talented American black poet Langston Hughes wrote:

“We are related – you and I  
You from the West Indies  
I from Kentucky  
We are related – you and I  
You from Africa

I from these States

We are Brothers – you and I”

The perception of all blacks as a unique population was not limited to progressive thinkers in the black population. Scheimer and Tilden (1972) indicated that from the inception of black transmigration the most arresting characteristic of the African to the Englishman’s perception was his color. Perhaps given the psychological, social and spiritual loss of identity that slavery imposed on Africans, a sense of bond among the current generation of free blacks is inevitable. This common bond permeates through black literature. Robert Weisbord (1973) called it an “Ebony Kinship” and Cyrill Biggs (1862) saw it as an “African Blood Brotherhood.” Consequently, the term African American is used generically to encompass all blacks across the American continent.

#### *Bereavement*

Bereavement in the current review is defined as the situation or process of grief through which a person adjusts to the death of a loved one (Lund, 1996). The traumatic nature of an event that causes the death of a loved one may increase the intensity of grief for the bereaved. Such grief may be manifested in a crushing sense of loss, continuing attachment with the decease, or sudden unwelcome surges of tears (Waisanen, 2004).

While bereavement is a normal experience following the death of a loved one, traumatic grief may be detrimental to the health of the bereaved. Traumatic grief has been described as a condition in which losing a loved one under traumatic circumstances leads to development of trauma symptoms that impinge on the ability to negotiate the normal grieving process (Nader, 1997). Bruce, et al., (1990) Clayton, (1990) and Zisook et al., (1994) found that the loss of a spouse was associated with increase risk for major depressive disorder (MDD). Research also found an association between bereavement and post-traumatic stress disorder (Bryne & Raphael, 1997; Zisook et al., 1998) and symptoms of anxiety and complicated grief (Prigerson, et al.,1996). Not surprisingly, Prigerson, (2000) found suicide more common among bereaved individuals than non-

bereaved individuals. Although little is known of the factors that might protect against these negative outcomes, Dimund, Lund & Caserta, (1987) and Goldberg, Comstock & Harlow, (1988) found that the size and quality of social networks was associated with lower levels of depression, higher levels of coping and greater life satisfaction.

African American college students may benefit from the support of their religious communities in times of grief. In fact, given the salience of spirituality in African American life, bereaved African American college students may find spirituality a very significant coping resource.

### SPIRITUALITY AND AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE

High levels of spirituality and religious practices are evident in African American life. students. Research (Chatters, Taylor, & Lincoln, 1999; Gallup, 1984; Levin, Taylor & Chatters, 1994; Taylor, Chatters, Jayakody & Levin, 1996), found that baseline rates of religious involvement in the U. S. are higher among African Americans than the general population. Taylor et al., (1996) found that African Americans seek spiritual comfort through religion, read more religious materials and monitor religious broadcasts more than Whites. These findings support the proposition that spirituality is an important concept in African American culture (Boykin, 1983; Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996; Jagers & Mock, 1993). Billingsley (1968) and Hill (1972) have also posited that Christian spirituality is an important cultural strengths among African Americans.

#### *A Religious Culture*

Religious participation within the African American culture has deep historical roots. Boyd – Franklin (1989) and Frame and Williams (1996) suggest that African American culture stems from African ways of life that have been shaped by traditional African religions. In other words, African American culture is a blend of traditional religious rituals such as prayer to a personal God and difficult experiences such as slavery and segregation (Guthrie, 1980; Mbiti, 1991; Nobles, 1991). These religious traditions

within the African culture seem to have left a profound influence on the African American culture.

Guthrie (1980) and Boyd-Franklin (1989) suggest that the day-to day activities of African American life consist of myriad religious and spiritual practices and traditions “woven into the fabric of culture” For example, there are many methods through which African Americans express their cultural and religious practices. These methods include singing and praying, music, rhythmic dance, symbolism, imagery, meditation, service towards social change, and church attendance (Frame & Williams, 1996). Moore (1991) points out that African Americans may participate in some of these cultural or even religious forms without subscribing to a religion. This suggests that although many African Americans may participate in church-based religious activities some of them may not even identify themselves as spiritual people. Given the primacy of the church in African American spirituality, the current review explores the contribution of the church to African American spirituality.

### *The Role of the Black Church*

Research has estimated the membership in the Black church to be nearly 24 million in 1990 (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Richardson and June, (1997) suggest that the church is the primary means through which African Americans express their religious and spiritual beliefs and values. Perhaps when religious participation among African Americans is seen as a means of satisfying important social needs, the role of the church is better appreciated.

Historically, the Black church provided a way for enslaved Africans to maintain a sense of community and express themselves through worship (Moore, 1991). During the period of Black slavery in America the church provided safe haven for escaping slaves (Frame & Williams, 1996), was a locale for organizing political activities (Quarles, 1964), provided equality and social acceptance within the Christian Church (Neibuhr, 1996; Robateau,1994), and gave them a place to heal and protest against social

disenfranchisement and racial inequality within White-majority churches (Feagin & Vera, 1995). The Black church was therefore a place where African Americans experienced freedom that they could not experience within the society. For example, African American ministers typically owned and operated their churches and did not have to temper their thoughts for White employers (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Robateau, 1995). The idea, that the Black church was like an oasis in a country that sought overtly and legally to dehumanize African-Americans, is well documented (Berry, 1994; Hill, 1990; Jenkins, 1995; Robateau, 1995; Taylor, Thorton, & Chatters, 1987). The church as an institution was where African Americans found their will to endure and voice to protest. Morris and Robinson, (1996) posit that since the establishment of the Black Church over 200 years ago, American society has witnessed progress in race relations in many areas. The integration of schools, colleges, universities, judicial systems and entertainment centers in the American society today are cited as examples. Perhaps, this profound social influence of the church continues to impact the psyche of African Americans today.

Research has shown that in many African American communities, the church is the nucleus of many activities and is central to the functioning of the community (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Moore, 1991). If the church is central to social functioning in a community, perhaps, it is also most likely central to the social, emotional and spiritual functioning of individuals within the community. For example, Paris (1985) and Boyd-Franklin (1989) discuss important parallels between the empowering beliefs within the African American church and their prevalence within the community at large. For example, the church has been valuable in maintaining members' sense of self worth by proclaiming each member to be *a child of God* and *someone special*. The church also impacts the community with higher sense of self worth through church supported activities designed to meet the needs of the community. Some examples of these activities are, Boy Scouts, basketball teams, youth groups, youth camps, day care centers, church schools and on site schooling. The prevalence of church's influence within the

African American community underscores the belief that spirituality and religion are key components of African American personality and culture (Bromes, Owens, Allen & Vivaine, 2000). The influence of the church in African Americans culture and personality is yet another indication that spirituality experienced through religious involvement may be a means of coping for the African American population.

The importance of spirituality as a coping mechanism in the African American population is further justified by the presence of high spirituality levels among African American subgroups. For example, research has shown that African American women are more likely than White women to pray privately, practice religious rituals, attend religious services and believe in the Bible as the word of God (Jacobson, 1990; Johnson, Matre, & Ambrecht, 1991). African American women utilize these religious practices to meet their daily needs more than African American men. However, when compared with African American women Peppers, (2005) reported that African American men had higher levels of church attendance during the week. However, over the period of a year total attendance at church services was higher among African American women than men. High trends in spirituality among the foregoing African American subgroups provide a basis for examining the spirituality of another unique African American subgroup – African American college students.

#### *Spirituality and College Students*

The college population is unique in many ways and has been frequently utilized for empirical research on a variety of subjects. The following examples reflect a growing interest in the study of spirituality among college students. Shafer's (1997) study for example, examined the relationship between spirituality/religiosity and personal distress among college students. This study found that religious college students had lower personal distress and a clearer sense of meaning and purpose to their lives. Knox, Langehough, Walters and Rowley, (1998) found that high levels of religiosity in college students correlated with high levels of self-esteem. Bryant, Choi and Yasuno (2003)

found that Mcgee, Nagel and Moore (2003) found that spiritual health is a strong predictor of physical, emotional, social and intellectual health among students. Kuh and Gonyea (2006) found that college students who frequently engaged in spirituality-enhancing practices also participated more in a broad cross-section of college activities. Kuh and Gonyea (2006) also suggest that worship, meditation and prayer and similar activities during college appear to contribute to personal and social development through a deepened sense of spirituality.

### *Spirituality and African American College Students*

The impact of spirituality on the lives of African American college students is also an area of growing research. Leonard (2003) found that spirituality encouraged persistence in low-income African American college students, helped them to remain in college and ultimately graduate. In addition, Leonard (2003) acknowledged the role of spirituality in helping African American college students overcome a variety of obstacles to completing their bachelor's degrees. In a qualitative study, Herndon (2003) examined expressions of spirituality among 13 African American college males enrolled at a predominantly White institution. Herndon found that spirituality contributed to their success in three significant ways. (1) spirituality bolstered resilience, (2) spirituality provided a sense of purpose, and (3) provided spiritual support through African American religious institutions. Spirituality was accessed through prayer, bible studies and religious services. Research into the spiritual behavior of the African American college student population could inform intervention designed to address the needs of this population.

Exploring the relationship between African American college students and spirituality is important because traditionally, African American students display a low rate of seeking mental treatment (So, Gilbert & Romero, 2005) Since Increased levels of spirituality appears to be a distinguishing feature of this population (Walker & Dixon, 2002), spiritual interventions may be designed to meet social and emotional needs of

African American college students. Walker and Dixon, (2002) study found that African American college students reported higher levels of spirituality than European American college students. Dixon (2002) also found that in the African American group those who reported high levels of spirituality reported high levels of religious beliefs and religious participation. The salience of religious beliefs and religious participation among African American college students suggests that spirituality may play a significant role in their social and emotional wellbeing. The significance of spirituality in the lives of African American college students may justify its use in counseling with this population in times of bereavement.

#### COLLEGE STUDENTS HAVE SPECIAL NEEDS

College students represent a population in which individuals are actively pursuing academic goals such as obtaining degrees, developing personal identity and pursuing career development goals. Lucas and Berkel (2005) documented many distinctive developmental and environmental needs that university students face while pursuing their degrees. For example, the need to individuate challenges the student to leave home physically as well as psychologically, establish intimate relationships and plan a career. The student's need to individuate also involves more concrete issues such as maintaining an adequate grade point average, managing time, learning study skills, and dealing with financial stressors. Lucas and Epperson (1988, 1990) and Lucas (1993, 1997) studied university students' vocational decision-making processes and found that difficulties in that area went hand in hand with psychological distress. When Boyd et al. (1999) asked first and second year university students what types of issues concerned them and interfered with their studies, the students reported worries about grades (74%),

procrastination (71%), studying effectively (69%), pressure as a result of deadlines (65%), managing time (64%), preparing for exams (61%), stress from overload (60%), sleeping too little (59%), remembering what they had read (54%), and feeling nervous and tense (52%). Chandler and Gallagher (1996) listed anxiety and depression, and Stone and Archer (1990) and Stone, Vespia, and Kanz (2000) commented on the prevalence of eating disorders, alcohol abuse, and suicidality, as well as increasing levels of violence and mental illness among university students. Upcraft (2002) stated that especially today university students struggle with mixed familial support (e.g., coming from single parent families or from families with sexual and substance abuse problems) and mental and physical health concerns (e.g., relationship difficulties, learning disorders). These challenges in the student population show that college students have special needs that must be addressed.

The African American student population is another important subgroup with unique needs. Vereen, Butler, Williams, Drag and Downing (2006) suggested that the experiences and worldviews of African American college students differ greatly from those of other college students. Nikelly and Majors (1986) suggested that many African American students are first-generation college students, a fact that compounds their adjustment problems when attending White colleges. Adjustment for African American students adjusting attending White colleges is often compounded by historical oppression and bias within various systems of higher education (Atkinson, 1987). Dealing with the death of family members in this environment within a White campus context may be especially difficult for African American college students. As a result, it is important that counselors and counselor educators recognize the struggles and needs

that African American college students face as they matriculate and move through college.

#### BEREAVEMENT AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Bereavement in the African American experience can be considered a historical problem. Like the descendants of Holocaust survivors, bereavement in African American history includes horrific traumas that caused death such as slavery, lynching, capital punishment, violent crime and infant mortality. Allan Bass, (2002) argues that the psychological impact of trauma in African American ancestry is the cause of poverty, high mortality rates and low life expectancy in the present generation of African Americans.

Research suggests that bereavement is a significant problem in the African American community. The frequency of death among African Americans is well established. For example, African Americans record the highest rate of death from breast cancer, prostate cancer, and heart disease than any other ethnic group (American Cancer Society, 2000) In 2001, Blacks continued to have the highest neo-natal mortality rate, more than twice that of any other racial/ethnic population. (Lukacs & Schoendorf, 2004).

Death by capital punishment is also an area that reflects higher levels of mortality among African Americans. Cheatwood, (2002) reported that among eleven Southern states conducting executions in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century sixty-three to ninety percent of the persons executed were black. Jeffrey Adler's analysis of data from Chicago prior to the 1920 and found that African Americans were never more than 4.2 percent of the city's population but were 89 percent of all the offenders executed for rape, 12 percent of homicide offenders and 27 percent of offenders executed for homicide.

Recently the New York Times, March 7, reported a study that presents current evidence of racial bias against blacks in death sentences (Butterfield, 1998). The study found that black defendants in Philadelphia, Florida, North Carolina and Mississippi are four to five times more likely to receive a death sentence in murder cases. Death by capital punishment does seem to contribute to the high level of mortality among African Americans.

African Americans also die in record numbers as a result of violent crime. In fact U.S data on violent deaths by age and ethnicity shows that African American men have the highest violent death rates of all ethnic groups (Stillion & Noviello, 2001). Tiggs, (1995) found that the leading cause of death among the African American male 15 – 24 is murder. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS, 2003) reported that blacks were five times more likely to be a victim of homicide. Such an epidemic of violence increases the possibility for greater levels of grief in the African American community with due to higher levels of traumatic loss.

Significantly high levels of mortality among African Americans suggest that this population may be challenged to deal with grief and bereavement more frequently. The frequency of death in the African American community suggests that the impact of bereavement on African American college students should be explored.

*The impact of grief on African American College Students.*

The phenomenology of grief among African Americans is an area of research that has received little attention (Janowiak, 1995). Consequently, very little is known of the bereavement process in the African American community. Janowiak, (1995) points out that research on grief and bereavement typically focused on Anglo-American culture

and when the grief experiences of other cultures were considered very few investigated the grief experiences of African Americans. Therefore, exploring the impact of bereavement on African American college students, an even smaller population within the African Americans community, is challenging. Fortunately, the effects of grief on college students have been widely researched ( Balk, 1998; LaGrand, 1981, 1986; Vickio, Cavanaugh & Attig, 1990; Balk, 1997; Silverman, 1987). From this growing body of research that investigates the impact of grief on college students important inferences about the grief experiences of African American college students can be drawn.

Balk (1998) suggests that bereavement in the lives of college students is more prevalent than many persons realize. In a study replicated four times Balk (1998) demonstrated that at any point in time 25% of students were in the first year of bereavement due to the loss of a family member and 30% due to the loss of a friend. LaGrand's (1981, 1986) survey work with college students in the state of New York demonstrated a significant level of death of family members and friends among college students. Although the bereavement levels on campuses seem high, a college campus can be a challenging place to grieve. Balk (1998) found few persons on university campuses willing to mention death, acknowledge the importance of death in student life or to recognize the significance to the griever of the one who has died. This is quite troubling since research (Balk, 1997; Silverman, 1987 Vickio, Cavanaugh & Attig, 1990;) indicates that talking to someone is an important intervention that could benefit grieving college students. Despite the need of grieving students to talk about their grief Balk (2001) suggested that grieving students learn quickly that most people are afraid to be around them. Such reactions do not seem to be altogether strange as Balk (2001) contends that

people in general tend to flee, literally or figuratively, from a scene when a griever enters. While many explanations for this flee-the-griever phenomenon is possible, several scholars (Balk, 1997; Balk & Vesta,1998; Silver & Wortman,1980) suggest it indicates that outsiders underestimate the duration and intensity of grief reactions in grieving students. This leads to the conclusion that on a campus the bereaved student may be grieving with less support than that person may receive at home among family and friends. Perhaps even when support is available, bereavement may be especially difficult. for the college student.

Research (Balk, 1995; 2001; Fowler, 1991; Josselson, 1987; Marcia, 1980; Perry, 1970; Selman, 1980), suggests that the primary reason why college students have greater difficulty working through their grief is developmental. The foregoing studies indicate that traditional college –aged undergraduates face developmental transitions, such as forming autonomous lives, developing a clear sense of direction, and entering into lasting, intimate relationships. In this developmental phase forming a stable focused identity regardless of circumstances for college students is an important developmental task. Balk (2001) stated that college students who grieve can find their identity formation challenged and begin to question their own competence and self-worth. Many theorists, (eg. Erickson, 1963; Bowlby, 1980) suggest that adolescent life transition tasks such as identity formation and attachment can determine the quality of adjustment an individual would experience in adult life. Adolescents do not have the luxury of putting their developmental tasks on hold while they grieve. In fact, the foregoing theories indicate that undue frustration during these crucial developmental tasks may place adolescents at risk for complications in the grieving process. Adams, Corr, Davies, Deaneau et al,

(1999) suggest that adolescent grief is prolonged, excessive and tends not to come to a satisfactory conclusion. Dutton (1999) indicate that adolescents usually grieve longer since death conflicts with their thoughts of the future. Evidently, bereaved adolescents may face considerable risk for abnormal grieving due to developmental task complications. Abnormal grieving may be defined as “unusual and extreme reactions to normal grieving characteristics” (Adams, Corr, Davies, Deaneau et al., 1999 p. 448). According of Pfeiffer (2003), normal grieving characteristics in adolescents are usually displayed in anger, sleep disturbance, dream activity, irritability and loss of interest in school, poor school attendance and depression after suffering a loss. Clearly, these normal grieving responses could significantly undermine a student’s ability to achieve important life tasks thereby compounding the grief process for the grieving students. Furthermore abnormal or chronic grief may complicate a student’s life exponentially. Bereavement for college students therefore, should be given serious attention since their psycho-social development may be vulnerable to complications as a result of grief.

Another important reason why special attention should be given to grief among college students, is the alarming phenomena of suicide on college campuses. According to data published by the United States Department of Health and Human Services (2005), suicide is the second leading cause of death among American college students and the third leading cause of death among college age students. The report showed that suicide was second only to alcohol-related accidents as the leading cause of death among college students (USDHHS, 2005). Although Scharwtz, (2006) suggest that they rate of suicide among college students is on a downward trend, he admits that high incidence of suicide among college age students is an alarming problem. This alarming incidence of suicide

among adolescent college students is the focus of epidemiologic studies today (USDHHS, 2005).

African American college students who lose peers because of suicide may be vulnerable to complications in their bereavement. Several studies (Allen, Calhoun, Cann & Tedeschi, 1993/1994; O'Brien & Goodenow, 1991; Silverman, Range & Overholser, 1994 – 1995) indicate suicide survivors may be vulnerable to complications in the grieving process. Allen, Calhoun, Cann and Tedeschi, (1993/1994) found that college students whose bereavement was caused by suicide were perceived more negatively than those who were bereaved due to accidents or heart attacks. The qualitative data from the foregoing study indicated that for suicidal death, issues of blame and responsibility are more salient than for deaths due to accidents or natural causes. Silverman, Range and Overholser (1994/1995) compared bereavement from suicide with other forms of bereavement on standardized measures of grief, stress and social supports. The study found that bereavement from suicide was associated with more intense grief reactions than homicide, accidental death, natural anticipated death and natural unanticipated deaths. Solomon (1983) found that suicide survivors were stigmatized as a result of this type of death. Some survivors in Solomon's study moved away within one month of the death. Wyss (2003) listed social stigma with intense feelings of anger, guilt and shame as unique aspects of complicated grief following a suicide. Results from these studies suggest that bereavement from suicide poses added difficulties not seen in other forms of bereavement.

Although grief among adults has been researched, the phenomenology of child and adolescent grief is not well documented (Melhem, Day, Shear, Day, Reynolds et al.,

2004). Melhem et al, (2004) found a syndrome of traumatic grief among adolescents exposed to a peer's suicide. The grief reactions studied did not meet the criteria to be classified as either depression or PTSD. However, six months of traumatic grief in the sample studied predicted the onset of both complications. Ephraim (1998) found that an adolescent who experienced the suicide of a family member or friend had a more elevated suicide risk than adolescents who experienced death by other causes. If grieving adolescents are vulnerable to grief complications, perhaps every useful coping resource should be employed to help them process their grief. Research suggests that grief is multidimensional and that specific grief reactions have a unique set of predictors (Reed, 1998). The results of this study indicate that several characteristics of the survivor, cause of death, and social support are important determinants of grief symptomatology. When suicide is the cause of death, lower levels of support in the college environment may further complicate the grief of their peers. Without the needed support, bereaved peers may tend to isolate themselves from their unsupportive companions.

The grief experiences of college students in general provide useful information that may help to explain the impact of grief on African American college students. For instance, African American college students, like adolescents in the general population, may be vulnerable to complications in identity formation and frustrations in the developmental task of *intimacy versus isolation* (Balk, 1998; Erickson, 1963; Bowlby, 1980). Such frustrations may impact their eventual life adjustment. However, when certain socio-economic factors are taken into consideration, the loss of a loved one may have a more severe impact for African American college students than White college students. With the rate of unemployment twice as high among Africans than the general

population (Chollette, 2006), poverty among African Americans three times higher than White Americans (33.1% versus 12.2%), and unemployment twice as high (11% versus 5%, (U.S Bureau of Census, 2003), an African American college student who loses a loved one may face increased frustration in adolescent development and life adjustment. Poverty and unemployment in the African American family may complicate the bereavement process of African American college students especially when the deceased was the sole breadwinner. The U.S. Bureau of Census, (2003) reported that 55% of African American families were headed by single parents. Death within the African American family may impose a significant burden on the family's scarce resources. Such issues in the African American student's bereavement experience, has the potential to interrupt the student's academic life. Already, only 30% of African American students who graduate from high school attend college compared to 52% for White Americans (Stroud, 1987). Scarce financial resources may be a factor in this situation. It may also suggest scarce resources in the event of bereavement may place a student at risk of dropping out of college. Perhaps, for students who may need special clinical intervention to help them cope with bereavement financial resources may be limited. This could increase the risk of developmental task complications for the African American college student. Therefore, coping resources such as spirituality that may be available and accessible to grieving African American students should be explored.

The impact of traumatic grief on adolescents exposed to peer suicide cited in Manheim (2004) is instructive in exploring the grief experiences of African American college students. While suicidal behavior among African Americans may have received scant attention because of the belief that very few African Americans commit suicide

(Molock, Kimbrough, Lacy, McClure, & Williams, 1994), suicide continues to be the third leading cause of death among African American youth, aged 15 – 24 (U.S Bureau of Census, 2003). Some researchers (Hendin, 1969; Garrison, Jackson, Addy, McKeown, & Waller, 1991; Seidon, 1992) argue that there is a direct link between suicide and homicide particularly among African American males. These researchers suggest that homicides often seem like a sort of death wish, thereby assuming a suicidal character. Schaffer and Smith (1981) and Smith and Carter (1986) cite evidence that suggest some African American deaths reported as accidental may in fact be suicides. However, Molock et al (1994) acknowledged that no systematic studies examining suicidal behavior in African American college students has been done.

Bereavement in the lives of African American college students may inspire intense grief whether the loss of a loved one is caused by accident, homicide or suicide. Perhaps, the suddenness of the tragedy may inspire more intense grief than bereavement that is anticipated. In any event the experience of bereavement may be difficult for African American college students to cope with. Since the risk of suicide (Molock, 1994), and social maladjustment are increased for bereaved individuals (Falkenstein, 2004), coping resources for bereaved college students should be explored. The increased levels of spirituality observed among African American college students (Walker & Dixon, 2002) suggest that the value of using spirituality as a coping resource for this population should not be ignored.

#### *Healing Effects of Spirituality on Bereavement*

Balk's (1997) study of 994 undergraduates found that religion was important in many of their lives, and provided a useful means of coping with bereavement. In fact in

Balk's (1997) study, students who received spiritual help instead of clinical therapy for their grief reported a higher level of satisfaction. The Gallop Poll (1997) reported that in dealing with the crisis of death, people report interventions that are based on their belief systems prove more beneficial. Thus, when spirituality plays a major role in people's lives, it may be a useful coping resource in the crisis of bereavement.

Research (Bowlby, 1980; Parkes, 1972, 1993; Parkes & Weiss, 1983; Shuchter & Zisook, 1993) indicates that the activation of spiritual beliefs in times of bereavement is a part of normal grieving. Walsh, King, Jones and Tookman (2002) explored the relationship between spiritual beliefs and resolution of bereavement and found that respondents with low spiritual beliefs had not resolved their grief 14 months after the death of a loved one. In contrast, those reporting strong spiritual beliefs had resolved their grief progressively over the same period. In light of the foregoing findings spirituality seems to have a profound influence on individual's ability to cope. Perhaps, spirituality as a coping resource may be helpful even to non-religious persons. Millison (1988) suggested that even those who are not religiously active often derive comfort and cope with loss through some type of spiritual belief or experience. African Americans may find that connection to their religious community provide a measure of social support, a key factor of bereavement coping. Bereaved African American college students may find that on campus faith affiliations provide spiritual comfort that helps to soften their grief.

#### INTERACTION BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY AND TRAUMA

The interaction between spirituality and trauma has been the subject of wide research. Weaver, Flannelly, Garbarino, Figley and Flannelly (2003) reviewed 469 research and non research studies published between 1990 and 1999 in the Journal of

Traumatic Stress. They found that 8.7% of non-research articles, 4.1% of quantitative research articles and 2.9% of qualitative research articles considered religion and spirituality in their work. Weaver et al., (2003) demonstrate that the relationship between spirituality and treatment for trauma is increasingly recognized as important. Such a trend indicates that spirituality may be more widely utilized in treating victims of traumatic loss in the coming years.

The fact that many people turn to clergy as a source for counseling victims of traumatic loss (Weaver, Koenig & Ochberg, 1996), indicates that a relationship exists between spirituality and trauma. Clergy are most often called upon in crisis situations associated with grief including, depression or trauma reactions, personal illness or injury, death of a spouse, close family member, or a close friend, divorce or marital separation, or serious change in the health of a family member, (Fairchild, 1980; Smith, 1985; Weaver, Preston, & Jerome, 1999).

This trend of seeking pastoral counseling in times of crisis observed in the general population is especially evident in minority populations such as African Americans. Weaver, Koenig and Ochberg (1996) found that ethnic minority persons were more likely to receive pastoral assistance in times of crisis and psychological trauma than European-Americans. In like manner Mollica, Streets, Buscarino and Redlich, (1986) found that African American pastors were more likely to go into communities and seek out people in crisis than their non-African American colleagues. The responsiveness of African American clergy to crisis in African American communities may have some implications for African American college students who suffer traumatic loss. When crisis such as

bereavement occurs, the African American college student may see pastoral intervention as not just an experience but perhaps, even an expectation.

Pastoral responsiveness to trauma and the tendency of many to seek religious counsel when traumatic loss occurs raises some questions. For example, why do many people resort to religion when they face traumatic loss or need to resolve their grief? How does spiritual counsel or religious intervention meet the needs of trauma victims? The need for spiritual counseling that trauma victims demonstrate suggests that spirituality may have a positive effect on trauma.

#### *Effects of Trauma on Spirituality*

Psychological trauma by its very nature affects the spirituality of individual. Kaufman (2002) defines psychological trauma as a challenge to an individual's spiritual assumptive world. The word "trauma" comes from a Greek root meaning "wound" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1994). In much the same way that a physical blow may wound the body, bringing disability and pain, a psychological trauma can overwhelm the thoughts and feelings of a person and bring sustained suffering. Bereavement may cause psychological trauma when victims find it overwhelming. Bereavement trauma may disrupt an individual's assumptive world and cause a radical disruption of the survivor's worldview. A disrupted worldview may undermine the underlying sense of trust that is integral to one's understanding of the world. The loss of trust may impact a person's sense of self, relationship with others and one's concept of spirituality or one's belief system. Wilson and Moran (1998) suggest that when this trust collides with an event that is atypical, overwhelming, and possibly life threatening our ability to rely on our spiritual belief system is destroyed. Grant (1999) suggested that trauma has the ability to

deconstruct people's egos. People's sense of self is constructed over a lifetime and they come to understand themselves in relation to relationships and feedback from significant others. When trauma occurs many of these life experiences are "cracked open" (Grant, 1999). Grant (1999) posits that trauma, in addition to its ability to deconstruct reality horizontally, in terms of belief systems and frames of reference, also initiates a vertical deconstruction. It either displaces the ego or it obliterates it. Victims of trauma are thrust into the realm of the "Deeper Self" (Grant, 1999) without warning or preparation. The deconstruction of self, helps to illustrate the impact that trauma has on human spirituality.

The spiritual impact of self-deconstruction experience by trauma victims is evident in the spiritual issues that emerge when individuals face traumatic loss. Jordan, (1995) points to the fact that a natural human response to trauma is the tendency to question the balance of power between good and evil. Furthermore, trauma evokes the contemplation of spiritual issues such as personal identity, responsibility, guilt, justice, suffering and forgiveness (Grant, 1999). When faced with traumatic events in their lives, victims who struggle to understand the trauma may react in anger, despair, confusion, guilt and complete withdrawal (Grant, 1999). Such reactions to trauma, which bereaved individuals do experience, are profoundly spiritual. Bereaved college students may find that coping with the spiritual impact of their loss is difficult, confusing or complicated. For instance, a bereaved student may be angry with God for allowing a traumatic event to occur and yet experience shame and a sense of failure for not being able to come through the traumatic event with faith intact.

Morgenson (1989) offers another paradigm from which the impact of trauma on an individual's spirituality can be viewed. The study suggested that trauma can so

dominate an individual's posttraumatic life experiences that it becomes like a God. Morgenson (1989) suggests that in such an event the trauma in the survivor's experience may assume transcendent qualities. When survivors experience such deep emotional pain as traumatic loss may evoke, the traumatic event may seem overpowering and completely beyond the realm of human existence (Morgenson, 1989).

However, trauma may also have a positive spiritual upside if it provides a pathway for healing, reconstruction of self and rebuilding of one's spiritual worldview. Decker (1993) suggested that while trauma has many devastating consequences, it can also be understood as a catalyst for growth. When events seem so traumatic that it overwhelms the soul, Decker (1993) posits that the soul must expand to accommodate a larger spiritual consciousness. This need for expansion is what requires spiritual growth to occur. Grant, (1999) suggested that at this point the Spirit demands expansion and is intolerant of partiality.

Based on the evidence, there are many effects of trauma on one's spirituality. Parlotz (2000) suggested that these effects may include feelings of emptiness and abandonment, doubt in religious beliefs, pervasive cynicism, a sense of failure in one's relationship with God, betrayal of strongly held world views, loss of meaning and purpose, and a general sense of isolation and despair. However, spirituality may have a positive effect on trauma by causing spiritual growth to occur.

#### *Healing effects of Spirituality on Trauma*

One way that spiritual growth can occur is when a new layer of spiritual consciousness is formed on which the trauma survivor can make sense of the world. The

spiritual dissolution or fracture of the survivor's belief system may require a spiritual reconnection and growth in the reconstruction process. Grant (1999) posited that spirituality may provide a framework from which the trauma survivor can build a new set of beliefs. When trauma occurs there is a radical shift in spiritual consciousness (Lifton, 1979). However, this shift in consciousness may lead to different forms of behavior change including a sense of spirituality (Wilson, Friedman, & Lindy, 2001). This new sense of spirituality is like psychological *tissue* that is needed to dress the emotional wound. Healing the emotional wound of a trauma survivor could mean a reconstruction of the individual's spiritual world. Tedeschi and Calhoun, (1996) suggest that our sense of spirituality prior to a trauma may mitigate the degree of damage a traumatic experience may cause and also enable posttraumatic recovery. Psychotherapist and counselors use a variety of words to describe the spiritual growth that heals trauma. Words such as, "grounded," "centered," "integrated", "recovered," "healed," "transformed" "rejuvenated," "together," "transcended," "self-actualized," "psychosocially accelerated," and "spiritually connected," are frequently used to describe the extraordinary changes that may occur when trauma survivors emerge with human radiance and energy. (Wilson, Friedman, & Lindy, 2001). The need for spiritual growth connoted in these words, suggest that the resilient trauma survivor may need to reconstruct a new sense of meaningful existence or spiritual health. Healthy and resilient survivors of trauma are persons who have found pathways to reverse or attenuate the destructiveness of psychic burdens which affect their health (Wilson, Friedman, & Lindy, 2001). Spirituality, may provide such a pathway through which trauma survivors may reverse their psychic

burdens. Spirituality may also provide a foundation on which trauma survivors may rebuild their lives or rediscover meaningfulness in their existence.

The existential benefit, perhaps, best explains how spirituality helps trauma survivors reverse psychic burdens and rebuild their lives. Man's primary existential task of "finding meaning" emphasized in May, (1961), Van Kaam, (1967) and Frankl, (1988, 1997), reflects a strong spirituality based theoretical perspective that has been helpful in trauma recovery. Viktor Frankl's (1988) *logotherapy* for example, holds that man's basic life task is a search for meaning and purpose to for his existence. So profound is this quest that all events and experiences in people's lives only make sense to them when such experience fit into their framework of *meaning*. Frankl suggest that life has meaning and never ceases to possess this precious quality until people die.

Like trauma victims, many bereaved individuals find their assumptive sense of meaning and purpose becomes disorganized and confused (Wilson, Friedman, & Lindy, 2001). In their grief the entire world may seem painful, cruel and complicated. The bereaved student in this state may consider dropping out of school or lack the energy complete difficult assignments. Existentialists (Frankl,1988; May, 1961; Van Kaam, 1967) believe that attaining or regaining a sense of purpose and meaning can help assuage distress and enhance recovery. Therefore, restoration of meaning becomes the primary goal of the bereaved college student in the recovery process. Finding meaning in suffering inspires the will to survive and overcome (Frankl, 1988;). Freidrich Nietzsche own words states it best "he who has a why to live can bear almost any how."(Neitsche, 1895 cited in Kaufman, 1954 p.52). Nietzsche's statement implies that independent of religious influence, most trauma survivors embark on a spiritual quest in order to replace

the existential meaning they previously lost. Existential therapy explores what it means to be human in the light of our shared condition; that is, we live infinite possibilities, but we are essentially finite creatures (Fisher, 1982). According to Frankl, taking ownership of one's life, feelings, choices, and beliefs promotes authentic relatedness with oneself, the world, and others (Frankl, 1988). By taking ownership of one's feelings and choices, individuals can begin the healing process of finding meaning in trauma. Frankl's "tragic triad" of suffering, guilt, and death becomes less threatening as one actively pursues the meanings inherent in them. The emptiness and seeming futility (Frankl's existential vacuum, Frankl (1992), that survivors experience when faced with suffering and death, become transformed by active engagement with life and living (Breitbart, Gibson, Poppito, & Berg, 2004).

Breitbart and colleagues have applied Frankl's meaning-based psychotherapy to address issues of meaning and spiritual suffering in patients with terminal cancer (Breitbart et al., 2004). They argue that meaning-centered therapy which integrates themes of meaning and spirituality was associated with positive psychological outcomes in terminally ill cancer patients. Puchalski and Romer, (2000) describe spirituality in existential terms as "that which allows a person to experience transcendent meaning in life." Karasu (1999) also describe spirituality as a construct that involves concepts of faith and meaning. It appears that whether individuals identify themselves as spiritual or non-spiritual their self-understanding, sense on meaning and purpose indicate a basic existential spirituality within them. From this standpoint, spirituality may provide a useful tool for reestablishing a sense of meaning, purpose and self understanding for the bereaved African American college student. Recognizing the existential benefits of

spirituality may inspire psychotherapists and clinicians to design clinical interventions for African American college students using spirituality as a primary resource.

While spirituality may have a positive impact on bereavement trauma, spirituality can play a detrimental role in trauma recovery (Decker 1995). For example, (Decker, 1995) suggests that when survivors accept a “blame the victim doctrine” like natural disaster and other traumatic events are God’s punishment for sin, the spiritual effects can prove detrimental to trauma recovery. Many African Americans whose Christian faith follows a dogmatic tradition carrying a burden on their hearts for their deceased loved one who is unsaved. Their religious beliefs that often interpret the will of God in a narrow framework that is meaningful to them, may serve to intensify their loss. Taylor (2001) observed that while many people turned to religion as a coping mechanism in the wake of September 11, some religious leaders claimed that these events were God’s punishment for the sins of the nation. For the victims struggling to cope with traumatic loss such outcries may only increase fear, guilt, anger and emotional pain. Bereaved individuals in such situations may in fact become more torn from the effects of such misguided spiritual explanations.

In summary, there is evidence that some positive coping benefits have been experienced by trauma victims who relied on spirituality as a primary resource. Such benefits may justify the use of spirituality in treating trauma for special populations. In the African American population, for example, trauma and spirituality are salient features (Taylor & Chatters, 199; Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Bass, 2002). The interaction between spirituality trauma and spirituality is an important area to be explored since African Americans may find spiritual resources accessible and meaningful to them.

*Trauma and Spirituality among African Americans.*

When traumatic events occur in the African American community, spiritual intervention, such as prayer, is a typical coping response. With almost 90 percent of African Americans claiming to be religious (Taylor & Chatters, 1991) prayer is among the most common coping responses. Since the belief that there is healing power in prayer is especially prevalent among African Americans (Landrine & Klonoff, 1999), the dependence on prayer as a coping resource in this population is understandable. Bourjolly (1999) and Gates, Lacey and Brown, (2001) found that prayer and family support play a vital role with African American women coping with cancer. Henderson, Gore, Davis & Condon (2003) suggest that healthcare professionals should recognize that prayer and spirituality are important coping strategies in the African American culture. Ellison, (1994) and Taylor, (1996) discussed how prayer can enhance African American's ability to cope with stressful life events.

Bereavement is another crisis in the African American community that often requires a prayer response. Ellison (1994) suggested that prayer may serve as a buffer against depression. The loss of a loved one may be the most significant crisis African American college students may face. The trauma of their grief may seem overwhelming for students. African Americans college students may use prayer as a means of turning things over to a Higher Power (Mattis, 2000).

Mattis, (2002) found that "Turning things over" to a Higher Power was a crucial part of meaning-making and coping among African Americans. Cole and Pargament (1999) saw spiritual surrender through prayer as an important coping strategy in the

African American community. Other spiritual coping strategies in the African American population identified by Cole & Pargament, (1999) include religious service, pastoral or religious advice and bible teachings.

Perhaps, bereavement has been under recognized as a traumatic process. Consequently, the involvement of spirituality in the entire process of ministering to the bereaved may under valued for its benefits in trauma recovery. Bereaved individuals of varied ethnicities tend expect some meaningful spiritual ritual to be observed in laying loved ones to rest. These rituals may also be used by such individuals as a coping strategy to help soft the impact of the loss. In times of grief, many African Americans cope through prayer, pastoral advice and religious worship. Similarly, African Americans consult pastors more often than mental health providers for solutions to help them cope with trauma in their lives. The benefits of spirituality in treating trauma in bereaved African Americans suggests that spirituality may be an important coping resource for bereaved African American college students also..

#### *Benefits of the Spiritual Method*

Spiritual interventions may have other benefits for bereaved African American college students beyond enhancing emotional release. For grieving students whose worldview are deconstructed by the tragic loss of a loved one, spiritual interventions could be designed to help them reconstruct and make meaning of their lives. Therapeutic interventions may utilize spiritual underpinnings as a common language to help griever's explore their difficulties in coming to terms with their loss. Especially for griever's whose worldview is primarily spiritual, failure to explore spirituality may result in

perpetuating a *silence* that undermines the grieving process. Bereaved college students may find it difficult to coping with silence from peers. Many individuals have difficulty communicating with grievors about their grief because they don't know what to say. Interestingly, spiritual methods offer an important means through which students with similar religious orientation may break the silence and become more supportive to their grieving peers. For example, a supportive peer may offer to read the bible with a grieving friend. By using such a method with which both parties are comfortable, the silence is broken and doors of communication and support are open. This intervention can lead to listening, praying, singing and attending religious services on campus.

Perhaps for many African American college students when spiritual concerns are not addressed in their grief counseling, it may encourage silence and isolation. Such silence or isolation may be tragic for bereaved students who need support. On the other hand, when spiritual interventions are used effectively it may open channels of help and healing for bereaved African American college students. Therefore it is important to discuss here what spiritual interventions for African students may be designed that is consistent with established therapeutic methodologies.

## APPLICATION TO COUNSELING AND TRAINING

### *Introduction*

Designing spiritual intervention for grieving African college students may require a blending of the spiritual approach and the psychotherapeutic method. The spiritual method typical of pastoral counseling explores conflict in the context of individuals' relationship to God or personal spiritual experience. Psychotherapy following loss may

explore emotional conflict from the standpoint of an individual's sense of self, personal identity, interests, values and goals. In either method the central goal is a "search for meaning". This illustrates the reason why these approaches are not mutually exclusive. The attention to structure, personal insights and non-judgmental approach typical of psychotherapy is helpful when using spirituality in grief counseling. By utilizing the strengths of each of these approaches, spiritual interventions designed for African American college students may be more effective and efficient. African American college students who receive this kind spiritual counseling for grief can have their spiritual conflicts addressed within a framework of psychotherapeutic competence. By the same token, therapists who counsel bereaved African American students can use spiritual insight to engage their clients, build alliance, increase understanding and empathy, and ultimately reduce conflicts. Perhaps, in order to use spirituality effectively in counseling bereaved African American students, an assessment of their spiritual identity is essential.

### *Assessing Spiritual Identity*

Assessing the spiritual identity of the bereaved student is essential for several reasons. First, although African American college students may share similar religious orientation there is great variability in levels of religious diversity, commitment and involvement from person to person. To ignore this fact is to risk imposing subjective stereotypes in the grief counseling process that could undermine its effectiveness. Secondly, spiritual struggle of individual students may vary due to personal experience. Thirdly, individual students may grieve differently and require different interventions. Grief is a fundamental, necessary cleansing emotion that recedes with time, counseling and even spiritual-faith (Becvar, 2001). Grief according to Becvar (2001), is intensely

personal. As such, one can expect the manifestation of grief and spirituality to differ vastly among personalities. Therefore in every stage of the assessment the individual's spiritual sense of self should be a focal concern.

In the intake phase of a counseling process, for example, a bereaved African American college student may indicate a high religious involvement and a regular prayer life. In addition, the student may indicate symptoms of depression and sexual dysfunction while the presenting problem is grief from the loss of a loved one. Existential questions about the meaning of life and its uncertainty may be central to the student's struggles with grieving emotions. The client's answers to existential questions may uncover information about the grieving student's spiritual identity development. This may help the therapist avoid the ill effects of stereotyping. Poll and Smith (2003) suggest a model that describes spiritual identity development based on the work of William James (1902). Spiritual identity from this point of view develops through the interplay of spiritual experiences and self constructions. Admittedly, an attempt to assess and individual's spiritual identity is a challenging task. However, James (1902) proposed that spirituality develops through several that can be assessed.

The first stage of spiritual identity development that is proposed is *Pre-awareness* of self in relation to God. At this point the individuals do not consciously regard themselves in spiritual terms. Perhaps such students may not consider their spiritual experiences salient enough to identify themselves as spiritual. However, the spiritual experiences may still be useful to the therapeutic process. The therapist may avoid counter transference of his own spiritual experience to the client who is in the pre-awareness stage by not over spiritualizing the session.

The second stage proposed is *Awakening* of awareness in relation to self in relation to God. Individuals at this stage begin to recognize interactions or events in spiritual terms. The awareness stage though it affords spiritual learning is fraught with spiritual conflict that is generated by a series of several events that prompted the awareness in the first place. Poll & Smith (2003) suggest that although this recognition may at times be emotionally intense, the quality of spiritual awareness tends to be inconsistent, fragmented or specific to the crisis on hand. Examples of this inconsistency or fragmentation could be a child only thinking of God while attending church or a college student rarely thinking of God except when blaming Him for the premature death of a spouse. The counselor can utilize the spiritual questions raised by the student to explore the student's struggle with grief and spiritual self understanding instead of assuming that the student is spiritually minded.

The third stage of spiritual identity development proposed is *Recognition* in which recollection of other spiritual experiences in previous stages are progressively generalized to an awareness of spiritual experiences in other settings and interactions. At this stage the student may begin to develop a consistent spiritual identity by having more spiritual experience and reflecting similar experiences in the past. Perhaps religious associations may provide better social support for bereaved students at this stage of their spiritual identity than students in the pre-awareness or awareness stages. More significantly, the involvement of spiritual care by clergy who possess no training in psychotherapy is probably more useful at this stage than in earlier stages of a student's spiritual identity. As such a therapist may use greater caution in recommending that an African American college student schedule a visit with pastor of the African American church in their

community to help resolve questions about death. The problem seems to be the difficulty in deciding whether the student's struggle is essentially faith related or psychological. If the latter is the case a spiritually sensitive therapist may be more helpful to the student than a spiritual caregiver.

The fourth stage and final stage of spiritual identity proposed is *Integration* when spiritual experiences are integrated with the individual's self-concept. At the point, spiritual experiences that were previously seen as external to the person become internalized. It is in this stage that individuals typically interact with God and others in spiritual terms. Students in this stage may spontaneously take in and seek out spiritual experiences because doing so has become for them a way of life. A therapist on campus may help grieving students in the integration stage of their identity development by making them aware of on campus faith fellowships. The therapist may be more comfortable using spiritual language with such clients that may be the only means of forming an effective therapeutic alliance.

The four stages of spiritual identity outlined above recognize that individuals vary vastly in how they experience themselves spirituality and their relationship to God. Therefore spiritual idiosyncrasies may impact the level of deconstruction in spiritual worldview a grieving student may experience. Restoring a stable and consistent spiritual identity in the bereaved requires sensitivity and compassion to help the individual to accept the reality of the loss and grow from it. This form of spiritual reconstruction may inspire faith that may give the student renewed energy to heal spiritually. Such healing may be described as a restoration of one's spiritual identity. Given the complexity of individual's spiritual identity, spiritual healing may involve a constellation of issues

including family origin issues, social history, educational background and bereavement that may include rituals.

### *Applying Spiritual therapy*

When using spirituality as a treatment model from a Christian orientation, a counselor may find some attunement in preparing for the session by praying for the client, meditating on what purpose God might have in the meeting, and praying for wisdom and discernment in the meeting. Careful assessment of client's spiritual orientation or level of religious involvement may help the therapist decide whether such a ritual was appropriate. Admittedly, many therapists do not practice Christianity, however, if therapists possess the essential knowledge of and can be genuine about their own participation in the choice of ritual, they may increase their helpfulness to their Christian clients. Within the intake session itself the spiritual counselor may use prayer to create a sacred space for the grief processing. Prayers such as asking God's presence in the room and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in what the therapist is about to say may enhance early engagement with the client. The spiritual counselor should intentionally communicate warmth and compassion for the student so that the student feels safe, heard and understood. The counselor may listen attentively and share the grief of the student, using spiritual language to interject when necessary. Such engagement may help the counselor to show genuine concern and gather details of the student's loss and loss reactions

The spiritual counselor may keep in mind that some bereaved individuals may experience severe spiritual deconstruction that makes them vulnerable to suicide. For this

reason spiritual counselors may explore the level of depression and possible suicidality of the student. If there is a risk of suicide this becomes priority and immediate interventions including referral for psychiatric evaluation is necessary. If there is no serious risk of suicide, the spiritual psychotherapist may assess the student's level of depression using DSM –IV TR criteria as a guide. Depending on the severity of the symptoms the spiritual therapist may discuss the possibility of a referral for psychiatric evaluation or medication. The spiritual counselor should also address other problems the bereaved student may be experiencing, for example, the problem of sexual dysfunction. The therapeutic goal is to determine whether the problem may be organic or situational. A student may be referred to a physician for treatment if the problem is deemed to be biological.

Issues such as sexual dysfunction, suicide risk and depression can be addressed within a framework of spiritual support. Spiritual counselors may point out that adversity that eventually destroys human happiness is not assumed to be a part of God's purpose. Individuals may find support for their struggle by relying on God – a higher power – even in sessions as they explore their problems and seek treatment options. Admittedly, at this point individuals who grieve may find it difficult to rely of God. If reliance on God has been a significant coping resource in the students' life, exploring their religious questions and frustrations may help them re-establish a sense of personhood and reconstruction in their spiritual worldview. Spiritual counselors may explore and address bereavement issues with the convenience of genograms.

#### *Using Spirituality Focused Genograms*

Spirituality focused genograms offer an assessment method that highlights the spiritual and religious strengths that may exist within client's families (Hodge, 2001). These spiritual strengths which are frequently ignored may assume greater relevance to therapy with African American students when represented in context of a genogram. For example, the genogram of an African American student who may not identify as a spiritual person may show strong generational patterns of religious involvement. Although that student may not recognize the impact of such religious influence on their functioning, with the help of genograms the therapist can explore whether there is a spiritual framework that represents the individual's worldview. If a spiritual framework can be identified therapists may be able to challenge relevant issues in a manner that is consistent with the client's belief systems (Stander, Piercy, MacKinnon & Helmeke, 1994). A matter of concern when using spirituality-focused genograms is whether other relevant issues might be ignored as a result. Dunn and Dawes, (1999) argue that genograms provide a tool through which all dimensions of the human experience can be explored concurrently. If this is true, spirituality-focused genograms may explore spiritual belief systems as a major theme while exploring bereavement as an important sub-theme. Consequently, spirituality focused genograms may help therapists to "evaluate family strengths and vulnerabilities in relation to the overall situation" (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985).

When the overall situation of African American college students is complicated by death, the loss may impose changes both in their individual lives and in their family systems. In the college environment difficulties and achievements alike may awaken the need for the role the deceased loved one played in the student's life. For example, "*if dad*

*was here he'd know what to do*" or *"this is my biggest moment mom should be here"*.

Grief is a complicated thing, because students must deal with their own grief while coping with the others in the family. With the loss of a family member, the family system may change. Therefore, the entire family must reorganize and adapt to that change (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). African American families, like other ethnic groups, have their idiosyncrasies. Boyd-Franklin (1989) suggests that the genogram is a useful tool in information gathering on the complex family systems of Black families, once a therapist has established an alliance.

#### *Knowledge of the Client's Cultural Values and Traditions*

Therapists may find it difficult to build a strong therapeutic alliance without some knowledge of the cultural values and traditions of their clients. For example, grieving on a campus may be especially difficult for an African American student who is unable to *let it all out* (bawl). Another person may suffer grief complications from being unable to find a safe space to vent their anger because in their opinion boisterous expression is unacceptable. Perhaps such persons may comfortably express these emotions within their own cultural settings because it is understood differently. Therapists who misunderstand the meaning of such expressions, may exhibit reactions that could further inhibit the client. Verbal or non-verbal reactions of the therapist that inhibits the client may undermine the therapist's effort to attune to the client's grief. Consequently, the therapeutic alliance is jeopardized. On the other hand, therapists who understand the meaning certain forms of expression hold for the client may react differently. In fact they may even seek to elicit such responses and help the client to grieve comfortably. By creating a spiritually sensitive framework for therapy, therapists may help some African

American students to process their grief in safety. Therapists may find that religious songs can inspire deep emotional expression, encourage hope and help bereaved students gain strength. The power of spiritual interventions such as religious songs, scripture and prayer may have more meaning for the client than the therapist or vice versa. However, when it holds significance in the client's experience it could to help promote healing and recovery for the student.

Among many African Americans, the use of prayer as a means of healing and coping with various life issues is noted (Billings & Moos, 1981). African American women in particular tend to use prayer as a response to emotional, and death problems. Bereaved African American students who are unable to engage in prayer while in therapy may be losing an important coping and healing mechanism. Richardson and June (1997) indicate African Americans may actually avoid seeking counseling because they believe their counselors will ignore spiritual or religious issues. Bereaved African American students whose religious and spiritual issues are ignored in counseling may find the experience inherently oppressive. In contrast prayer should be a means of liberating and healing the soul. However, prayer can be misused and thereby defeat the purpose of its use in therapy. Prayer is a means through which assumptions and inappropriate or unfair judgments could be expressed. Pastors whose methods may combine religious advice giving and psychological counseling could experience and express counter-transference when praying with bereaved individuals. Such a misuse of prayer could significantly be detrimental to grief therapy, especially since prayer typically may be done to begin or to end a session. At the beginning of a session prayer could undermine the client-therapist attunement process and become a major obstacle to building a strong therapeutic alliance.

By the same token, prayer at the close of a session may raise issues that create misunderstanding or challenge the effectiveness of the entire session. In general, when using prayer and other ethno-religious forms that hold value for bereaved students, it is a good policy for counselors to observe the rules of empathy and brevity. However, the roles of some spiritual counselors include greater emphasis on some religious forms than others. In clinical practice it is important that distinctions be clarified between the roles of these counselors.

### DISTINGUISHING THE ROLES OF SPIRITUAL COUNSELORS

Spiritual counselors who may counsel with bereaved African American students differ from one from the other and from traditional psychotherapists. As such, it seems important for Spiritual counselors to maintain some professional boundaries thereby avoiding confusion in their roles. For example, a competent psychotherapist may administer spiritual care without taking on the role of a pastoral counselor. Likewise, pastoral counselors who acquire psychological skills should realize that their focal role is that of clergy, not psychotherapist. By maintaining professional boundaries when administering spiritual care to African American college students, Clergy and psychotherapists may demonstrate greater competence than those who fail to maintain professional boundaries. Spiritual counselors who maintain their professional boundaries may be classified in three main categories. They are spiritual directors, pastoral counselors and psychotherapists.

#### *Spiritual Directors*

Spiritual directors like pastoral counselors and psychologists help clients address their spiritual concerns and issues. The major difference between the foregoing professional roles seem to be the type of clientele served, goals and purposes, the nature of the relationship with the professional, and the type of intervention utilized (Sperry, 2003). Spiritual direction seems to emphasize prayer as an intervention through which the goals of therapy can be realized. Thornton, (1984) defines spiritual direction as the application of theology to a life of prayer. (Lescher, 1977) says that spiritual direction is curing souls by seeking after the Holy Spirit in a given psychological and spiritual situation. The relationship that spiritual directors maintain with their clients is one of spiritual guidance, spiritual friendship and spiritual companionship. According to Sperry (2003), the clientele that may be most responsive to spiritual direction are relatively healthy spiritual seekers. African American college students who meet the criteria may find this relationship supportive and therapeutic in times of grief. Unlike psychotherapy and pastoral counseling which focuses more on symptom reduction or problem resolution, spiritual direction focuses on the maintenance and development of spiritual health. The bereaved student in this relationship, often called the *directee*, is on a journey accompanied by the director. If the spiritual relationship is of a Christian orientation, this journey may lead towards God and the Holy Spirit. The relationship is one of mutual collaboration. Because no special training or certification is currently required of spiritual directors, perhaps peers, mentors or on campus faith fellowships can help provide spiritual direction for bereaved African American college students. Interventions in spiritual direction include instructions in prayer, the prescription of rituals and other spiritual practices. Culligan, (1983) suggest that when indicated, spiritual directors may

refer directees with certain psychological problems for concurrent psychotherapy or will suspend spiritual direction until the course of therapy is completed.

### *Pastoral Counselor*

The second role in the field of spiritual counseling observed in this review is pastoral counselor. Pastoral counseling like psychological counseling focuses on symptom reduction and problem solving. The need to solve problems and reduce grief symptoms in bereaved African American students when death occurs may be crucial. When bereaved African American college students face disruption within the family system and educational experience they often rely on their pastors to help them make decisions about the future. Pastoral counselors may meet the problem-solving needs of bereaved African American college students while providing them with the spiritual energy they need to execute their decisions. Two forms of pastoral counseling are currently practiced: a brief, time-limited form that is problem solving or solution focused, and a long-term form that is often psychoanalytically-oriented that focuses on personality and change (Stone, 1999). Clergy perform the majority of pastoral counseling, which is short-term. Training in pastoral counseling is required to administer pastoral care and counseling. Long term pastoral counseling in some instances is difficult to distinguish from psychotherapy (Wise, 1983). This level of pastoral counseling requires special formal supervised training in counseling and psychotherapy and a license is required to practice. Typically, pastoral counselors must meet the same academic requirement as psychotherapists to receive a license which is granted by the state. However, a few states offer licensure to pastoral counselors who are not formally trained as psychotherapists. Those states are Maine, New Hampshire, Kentucky, North Carolina, Arkansas and

Tennessee. Pastoral counseling could help bereaved African American college students resolve other issues that may emerge in bereavement counseling. Such issues may include loss of self-esteem, guilt, relational conflict, abuse and addictions. Since the relationship between the bereaved student and the pastoral counselor may vary based on the pastor's style, the pastoral counselor should adapt and assume a manner that is comfortable for the student. For, example the pastoral counselor's style of exploring the emotional and spiritual needs of the client may be similar to that of a spiritual director's who offers expert advice and makes interpretations. When the pastoral counselor's style varies the relationship between the person and the counselor may also vary. Similarly, the intervention of the pastoral counselors may vary. For example, interventions used by pastoral counselors may include active listening and other problem solving or solution-focused counseling methods, advice on religious matters (e.g. forgiveness), involvement in rituals such as prayer and exploring emotional issues that has meaning for the individual.

It is well established that African Americans rely on their clergy for help with life issues in times of grief (Taylor, Ellison, Chatters, Levin & Lincoln, 2000) Therefore, some bereaved African American students may have different expectations of the relationship from others. If the foregoing is true, the variability in style and intervention in pastoral counseling may be more suitable to the needs of bereaved African American college than mere spiritual direction. However, such a proposition may increase the challenge of pastoral counselors to make proper assessments, establish and maintain the right relationship and maintain the appropriate boundaries as a spiritual counselor.

*Spiritually-oriented Psychotherapists*

The final therapeutic role to be distinguished is spiritually-oriented psychotherapy which involves a variety of psychotherapeutic approaches that are sensitive to the broad spiritual dimension. Some examples of spiritually-oriented therapeutic approaches include non-Christian approaches such as, transpersonal psychotherapies (Cortright, 1997; Karasu, 2000;) theistic psychotherapy (Richard & Bergin, 1999) and various Christian approaches (Brenner, 2002; Sperry, 1998, 2001; Steere, 1997). Despite considerable differences among these approaches, the essential process and goals of therapy are quite similar. Of the foregoing approaches, however, the Christian approach to spiritually-oriented psychotherapy seems more applicable to the needs of African American college students. Religious practice in the African American community is predominantly judeo-Christian by tradition. Christian spiritually-oriented psychotherapists function as both psychotherapists and spiritual guides simultaneously (Sperry, 1998). Christian spiritually-oriented psychotherapists have a holistic focus. The holistic approach gives special attention to a comprehensive assessment of the client's overall health status, psychological strengths and defenses, and moral and spiritual considerations. Spiritual considerations for bereaved African American college students may include questions about their relationship to God and confusion about the character of God. For example, a devout African American student may be unable or unwilling to pray if faith in the goodness of God is shaken by his loss. Spiritually-oriented psychotherapists are sensitive to the impact of such disruption in the student's prayer life and belief system. For example, a bereaved African American college student whose image of God is shaken may not only cease to pray but may also withdraw from the spiritual community. According to Ruffing (2000), resistance to prayer is probably most

common. When resistance to prayer causes withdrawal from the spiritual community, it could decrease the level of social support the student need for successful grieving. The Spiritually-oriented psychotherapist relates to the entire situation with the goal of transformation in all its spiritual, psychological, moral and somatic dimensions (Sperry, 2003).

#### APPLYING SPIRITUALLY-ORIENTED PSYCHOTHERAPY

Spiritually-oriented psychotherapists may integrate psychotherapeutic and spiritual direction techniques such as advisement, relaxation, prayer and meditation (Sperry, 2003). Such an integrated approach may enhance holistic recovery for the grieving student. When a spiritual emergency such as death occurs in the life of African American student, academic pressures may further complicate the grieving process. According to Sperry (2003), when spiritual emergencies occur the self becomes disorganized and overwhelmed by an infusion of spiritual energies that clients are unable to integrate. Although spiritual counselors differ in their approaches to meeting the spiritual emergency, the differences are by no means vast. In fact, Sperry (2003) suggest that the differences in the functions of psychotherapy and spiritual direction are similar to the differences in function in psychotherapy and psychiatry. The point is that both disciplines follow a similar path to promote recovery and wellness. To this end Sperry (2003) elaborates on some integrated aspects of spiritual direction and psychotherapy that may be helpful in bereavement counseling with African American college students. One of the first spiritual aspects he mentions is transformation.

##### *Transformation*

Gratton (1992) sees transformation as a radical change of mind and heart, a dying of the false self, and a continual assenting of the true self, which reflects the image of God. This process is a lifelong process that is not as circumscribed as psychotherapy which emphasizes symptom resolution or increased functioning, or more extensive personality change. Bereaved African American students who enter a counseling relationship with their clergy, spiritual directors or psychotherapists may be seeking some form of transformation. When the bereaved students move from despair and brokenness to renewed zest for life, hope, faith and confidence in God, some important aspects of transformation may have been achieved.

#### *Fostering a relationship between God and the Directee*

Another aspect of spiritual direction that may be helpful to the grief recovery process, when integrated with psychotherapy, is *fostering a relationship between God and the directee*. Bereaved students who suffer primarily from a loss of relationship may seek to compensate for this loss by connecting or bonding with the Spiritual counselor. Sperry (2003) suggests that the relationship between the director and the directee can be instrumental in building the relationship between the directee and God. The psychotherapist may achieve the same goal by fostering a strong therapeutic alliance with their clients. Significantly, directors do not create a relationship between their God and their directees; they try to foster such relationship. Spiritual counselors, however, may use this instrumental relationship to provide a secure place for the grieving student to process their grief and heal.

#### *Advisement*

*Advisement* is another aspect of spiritual direction that may aid grief recovery in African American college students. This also has its counterpart in psychotherapy. In spiritual direction the directee is *advised* to “engage in prayer” and “other spiritual practices”. According to Sperry (2003), these practices are similar in function to clinical interventions such as interpretation, cognitive restructuring, and homework used in psychotherapy. Sperry (2003) suggests that spiritual practices are commonly discussed and prescribed in spiritually-oriented psychotherapies. African American students who lose loved ones may underestimate the therapeutic benefits of prayer, religious services and other forms of cognitive restructuring. Perhaps, if the potential benefits of prayer were better understood more grieving students would be advised to pray and engage in religious activities. However, resistance to religious activities by college students is not unusual, even bereaved African American students may refuse spiritual interventions. As such resistance is an issue that requires special consideration.

### RESISTANCE IN SPIRITUAL COUNSELING

Spiritual counselors must face the challenge of *Resistance* in order to use spiritual methods in resolving grief among African American college students. Quite often, when grieving students feel pain, they hide, withdraw and suffer silently. Such actions may overtly suggest resistance on the part of the bereaved student. However, covert resistance may be more subtle and less visible. Resistance in any form poses a challenge for the spiritual counselor or spiritually-oriented psychotherapist. It has the potential to nullify and undermine the therapeutic interventions completely to the detriment of the grieving student. Therefore, it is important for the spiritual counselor to expect resistance from the bereaved student and employ strategies to encounter it. Ruffing (2000) noted three forms

of resistance in spiritual direction: namely, resistance to spiritual experience, resistance to the spiritual director or the spiritual direction, and the spiritual director's resistance to the directees and their spiritual experience.

### *Resistance to the Spiritual Experience*

In the first instance bereaved students may be resistant to the spiritual experience that is utilized to help resolve their grief. For example, although many bereaved African American students may welcome prayer, the manner in which it is done may create resistance for the student. Prayer can come across to the student as unfair judgments or wild assumptions. Sometimes even the repetitiousness of certain phrases may be uncomfortable and distracting to the counselee and create resistance as a result. It may be helpful to invite the student to pray or use the student's own words in prayer. Ruffing, (2000) suggest that resistance to prayer may indicate some difficulty in establishing a regular discipline of prayer or unpleasant memories or effects while engaging in prayer. When issues such as unpleasant memories create resistance to prayer among bereaved African American college students, the spiritual counselor may use the resistance in beneficial ways for the student. For example, the resistance may provide useful information about the client, such as their psychological makeup and particular defenses that they habitually employ in other areas of their lives.

### *Resistance to Spiritual Director or Spiritual Direction*

In addition to prayer resistance, Ruffing (2000) mentions resistance to spiritual direction and the spiritual director as another pattern of resistance. This form of resistance may develop in response to the spiritual counselor's skill or presence. This could include

a constellation of factors such as the counselor's ineptitude, lack of attentiveness, judgmental attitude or abusiveness. Bereavement is an experience that requires compassionate care and attentiveness. Consider the hypothetical case of a grieving African American student who tries to talk to the spiritual director of the frustrations related to her loss. If her tone is loud and the counselor looks uncomfortable or tries to keep her quiet, it could undermine the overall chemistry of the therapeutic relationship. Ruffing, (2000) noted, however, that the spiritual director's avoidance of spiritual disciplines such as prayer and meditation has the greatest potential for creating resistance for the client. Perhaps, clergy who are trained psychotherapists are vulnerable to this form of resistance. For example, clergy counselors who are trained psychotherapists may unconsciously assume the posture of counselor instead of spiritual leader. When clergy assume the role of counselor instead of spiritual leader it may suggest to the bereaved student that there is resistance to the spiritual discipline on the part of the spiritual leader.

#### *Resistance on the Part of the Spiritual Counselor*

The third form of resistance involves the spiritual director's or spiritually-oriented psychotherapist's resistance to something in the spiritual counsel itself. Ruffing (2000) noted that this kind of resistance takes a variety of forms including avoidance. For example the spiritual counselor may dread dealing with the issue that must be confronted and then forgetting the appointment or arriving late, or the counselor may be discouraged at the counselee's lack of progress. Such resistance is perhaps most detrimental to bereaved clients since they may find the therapeutic relationship a sort of cushion to their loss. In the event that resistance develops on the part of the spiritual counselor, it could impact the client like a double jeopardy.

The counselor's aware of such resistance may increase their ability to provide sensitive care. Bereaved students with less resistance may enjoy a more supportive relationship with the spiritual director and may experience outcomes from the therapy.

## ETHICAL GUIDELINES

The importance of maintaining ethical boundaries is as essential in administering care for bereaved African American students as it is for bereaved clients in general. Boundaries help to protect both the bereaved student and the spiritual caregiver so that neither feels exploited or uncomfortable in the counseling process. Maintaining spiritual boundaries may require attention to the vulnerability of bereaved students and the variety of religious and spiritual backgrounds they may bring to the counseling situation. For example, although African American college students who are in bereavement may be receptive to prayer, their religious or spiritual values including beliefs about prayer may differ. As such, the question of whether or how to include prayer in counseling in a way that is respectful to the bereaved student is appropriate. An ethical dilemma that presents itself in an attempt to use prayer in a counseling situation is the extent to which prayer is considered necessary either by the spiritual counselor or the African American student. If the counselor considers prayer to be genuinely beneficial to resolving the student's grief, the counselor may feel inclined to go beyond *offering* to pray and *urge* the student to pray. On the other hand, though the bereaved African American student may be a firm believer in prayer, issues such as anger or self-blame which bereaved individuals do experience may cause an African American student to decline an offer for prayer. To some extent declining an offer for prayer may create feelings of guilt and complicate matters for the bereaved student. It may also be true that resistance to prayer by the

student may provide a useful therapeutic opportunity. For example, African American students who pray frequently but decline an offer to pray may indicate by their refusal that obstacles exist that hinders this form of spiritual intervention. However, while willingness to pray may be used as some sort of spiritual barometer, numerous questions about the use of prayer in therapy should not be ignored. For example, will students who decline prayer wonder at its impact on the rest of their care? Will it affect the spiritual counselor's ability to render competent care when such an important ritual is refused? What about a student whose religious practices differ greatly from the spiritual counselor? Can the spiritual counselor genuinely participate in forms of prayer that are contrary to the counselor's own belief system? Finally, what about the spiritual counselor who does not believe in prayer at all? How does such a counselor respond to a prayer request from a bereaved African American student? To answer these questions present no small challenge for the spiritual counselor. However, these challenges may be surmounted when spiritual counselors are attentive, respectful and make the needs of bereaved students paramount. Winslow and Winslow (2003) posit that understanding a client's spiritual needs is both the challenge and hallmark of respectful spiritual care. In Winslow and Winslow (2003) work on respectful care, some ethical guidelines are presented that may benefit spiritual counselors in their work with bereaved African American college students.

Firstly, Winslow and Winslow suggest that in order to provide spiritually respectful care, spiritual caregivers should seek a basic understanding of the bereaved student's spiritual needs, resources and preferences. The fact that there is vast individual difference in the needs resources and preferences of African American students suggest

that for these needs preferences and resources to be addressed, they must first be understood. Puchalski, Post and Larson (2000) propose some questions that may help counselors assess the spirituals needs of individuals in order to deliver respectful spiritual care. Perhaps, the following questions proposed by Puchalski, Post & Larsen (2000) may be help counselors assess the spirituals needs of bereaved African American students.

- (i) Does the bereaved student consider himself religious or spiritual?
- (ii) How important are the spiritual beliefs to the student and do those beliefs influence how the student care for herself?
- (iii) Do they belong to a spiritual community?
- (iv) How does the spiritual caregiver address any needs with regards to the student's religious community?

In addition to being ethically appropriate, these questions may enhance counselor's effort to administer respectful care.

Secondly, to administer spiritual counseling that is respectful may require that the counselor follow the bereaved student's express wishes about rituals. To override, repudiate or ridicule a student's values is an assault on the student's humanity (Pelligrino, 1990). Such ethical violations may further complicate the grieving process for the student involved.

Thirdly, spiritual caregivers should not prescribe spiritual practices, urge bereaved students to adopt spiritual beliefs nor should they pressure bereaved students to relinquish their spiritual beliefs or practices. Practices must be voluntary. At times even suggestions may cause a counselor to step beyond the ethical boundary. For example, a gentle *"would you find it helpful if I were to pray for you?"* is different from *"I think we should*

*pray about this*". Perhaps, even in religious advice giving suggestions may pose ethical problems due to the level of pressure that is involved.

Fourthly, spiritual counselors who care for the spiritual needs of bereaved students should seek to understand their own spirituality. Comprehension of one's own spirituality including "spiritual weaknesses" opens the way for caring for another's spiritual needs. Although, there are huge benefits to this openness and show of vulnerability, there are potential risks involved in this form of identification. For example, clergy counselors who confess to a personal spiritual weakness may disappoint a student and destroy a therapeutic alliance instead of building one. Perhaps, when counseling with bereaved African American students clergy counselors should take great care in acknowledging spiritual weakness.

The final ethical guideline proposed for respectful spiritual care proposed by Winslow and Winslow (2003) is that the spiritual counselor's participation in any spiritual experience with the bereaved should be consonant with the counselor's integrity. For example, if a bereaved student requests prayer, unless a counselor who is cynical about prayer can be genuine the counselor should not pray. According to Winslow and Winslow (2003) there is no place in a trusting relationship or in the delivery of respectful care for inauthentic prayers. There is always, however, the option to refer which can be done with the student's best interest in mind.

#### SUMMARY

This exploratory review suggests that the acknowledgement of spirituality in the context of bereavement therapy may be particularly important for African American

college students. This study provided preliminary information to indicate that African American college students are a population with special bereavement needs. From the evidence reviewed, it appears that designing spiritual interventions to help African American college students cope with grief may be an essential aspect of multicultural competence in for this population. As such, the current review was sensitive to the difficulties that bereaved African American college students may experience in their attempt to access spiritual coping resources on a college campus.

Whenever African American college students need clinically designed spiritual interventions to help resolve their grief, clinicians who practice on campus may be challenged to move from within their comfort zone to provide innovative coping strategies. The literature examined how spirituality may be used in clinical therapy such as when and how pastoral counselors may be helpful in working with bereaved African American students. In addition, the literature indicated that therapists who are attuned to the client's spiritual need may administer genuine and helpful therapy. Such findings could encourage therapists to genuinely appreciate the spiritual experiences of African American students regardless of their own spiritual difference.

A major weakness in the literature was the lack of any specific research that examined bereaved African American college students as a unique population. Hence, the inferences drawn from larger populations in the review, for example, African Americans, or bereaved individuals in general, and their spiritual experience may not truly explain the bereavement experience of African American college students. Since the literature reviewed is based mainly on clinical observations, suggestions about the bereavement

experiences of African American college students should be reinforced by follow-up quantitative studies.

This exploratory review examined evidence that suggest a growing interest among researchers in whether spirituality may be essential to the psychological functioning of certain populations. Empirical studies that examine the spirituality and coping behaviors of bereaved African American college students may help spiritual caregivers and clinicians make informed decisions for this group. Research is needed to explore, for instance, what kind of training in pastoral care or psychotherapy may be needed for mental health providers or clergy to be able to design spiritual interventions that are suitable to bereaved African American college students. Furthermore, the question of whether some kind of spiritual intervention are more or less effective or even detrimental in bereavement coping for African American college students needs to be examined carefully. In summary, further research is needed to replicate and broaden current findings and make useful recommendations for clinical practice. This effort calls for the need to bridge the gap between the mental health and religious communities, as they work together to meet the needs of this population.



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