Guidance on what to do when a student dies

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Appendix 2 (provided by the University Chaplaincy)

Attitudes to death, dying and bereavement in various world faiths and cultures

When students die at university, especially if the death is sudden or unexpected, it may be very important for their families to know that the body has been treated appropriately according to their faith and/or cultural background. Similarly, when students suffer a bereavement but are unable for reasons of distance or time to attend the funeral, care must be taken to ensure that they are able to access the right spiritual and/or cultural support, and perform any rituals of remembrance that may be required of them. This paper endeavours to look at some of the possible issues which may be experienced by students or their relatives from particular cultural and faith groups, in order to resource the university to respond appropriately.

Bereavement manifests itself in many different ways. The bereaved person may need time and space to perform certain rituals, to tell the story of their loss (sometimes repeatedly) and to be assured that their relationship with the person who has died continues in some way. This will be true even for those of no explicit faith background. Faith, or the customs associated with faith, may provide particular comfort as performing accepted rituals gives a sense of ‘doing the right thing’ by the deceased, and provides structure to begin to manage the bereavement experience.

Most current bereavement theory has been researched and written from within a Western and broadly Christian cultural framework which may fail to meet the needs of other individuals or groups. A person’s culture or faith may affect the way s/he responds to bereavement; what looks callous or uncaring to one culture may be a deep sign of respect to another. Conversely, reactions which appear extreme or inappropriate in a Western context may be culturally necessary; e.g. in Chinese and Hindu families it is a sign of respect to respond to a death with loud wailing. Some students may find themselves caught in tension between the custom of their family, faith or ethnic community, and the expectations of other students or university staff about what is appropriate.

Faith and culture can deeply influence beliefs about the value of life itself. For those with a religious faith, their attitude to a bereavement will be affected (consciously or not) by their beliefs about life after death. All faiths share a basic belief that this life is not the end of a person’s existence. They vary a great deal in what they believe happens to the soul after death (Buddhists and Hindus believe in reincarnation; the ‘Abrahamic’ faiths tend to believe that the soul continues eternally and is judged at the end of time according to its actions
during life). It is also important to remember that within these general parameters, individual members of faith or cultural groups will respond differently to the same situation. The majority of British people consistently claim to believe in some form of life after death and/or the prospect of reunion with the deceased in some unspecified way, even where they adhere to no formal religion. This belief is a comfort to many in time of bereavement. Praying for the deceased person (perhaps but not exclusively at the time of the funeral, for those unable to attend) is a way of stressing that bonds of love and care do not end with death. It may also be something tangible to do in a situation of extreme powerlessness and vulnerability.

For members of some faiths (e.g., Jewish, Muslim) the way in which the deceased’s body is treated, and the rites which are performed at the time of death and at burial/cremation, may be held to make a difference to the eventual destination of the soul; in the case of the Chinese community, if the normal rituals are not performed it is thought to bring shame and ill fortune upon the family of the deceased. For other faiths (e.g., Hinduism), the person’s fate after death will be determined by how they have acted in life, and the sense that it is wrong to protest or interfere with this karma can affect the extent to which it is felt appropriate to express grief. It is not uncommon for people of faith, perhaps especially those from cultures where death is more ‘everyday’ and less sanitised than it is in the West, to express the view that the death must have been God’s will, and therefore to be unwilling to speak openly about grief in case it is construed as protest against the divine order. To encounter this attitude may be a particular shock to university staff in the event of the death of a student or young person, where a sense of outrage or wrongness at a premature death would be considered normal.

NB: When Jews and Muslims die, time may be an extremely important factor, as burial is supposed to take place within 24 hours. This may have implications for those involved with issuing a death certificate, especially if the death occurs over a weekend, or if a post mortem needs to take place. The need to observe the correct proprieties within a short time-frame may preoccupy the family of the deceased to such an extent that they do not appear to want to engage with what other cultures might see as the required ‘norms’ of grieving.

Decisions about how much a bereavement may count as a mitigating circumstance have to be taken on a case by case basis. Judgements as to how far bereavement has affected a student’s performance may need to take into consideration the requirements of their faith or culture, e.g., a male Jewish student in the first year after the death of a parent would be under extra ritual obligation, on top of the pressures such a situation would be expected to place on any individual.

Whatever their faith or cultural background, there will be a wide range of ‘normal’ practice depending on the individual’s degree of adherence, their denomination and background. It will always be good practice to be guided by what the individual or family says they need. It may not be in the university’s power to provide for those needs itself, but it is important for those university staff who are likely to deal with bereavement to have an awareness of the
issues which may arise, and how they might access the necessary services to deal with them.

Some specific points to be aware of in different faiths/cultures

BUDDHIST/TAOIST:

- The Chinese funeral customs described below belong largely to the Buddhist/Taoist tradition.
- Christianity is growing very fast in mainland China. The Chinese church in York, St Helen's, may be able to provide information and support in the event of a death involving a Chinese Christian (www.yorkchinesechurch.org)
- Cremation is uncommon in China.
- In Buddhism, it is thought that not only will 'improper funeral arrangements' bring shame on the deceased's family, they will also imperil the next stage of the soul's journey to rebirth.
- Respect is shown by younger to older people in China, not the other way round - so it would be normal for the funeral of a child or young person to take place in silence, and with minimal ceremony.
- Both the house and the body of the dead person must be carefully prepared.
- Gifts of food are placed by the coffin. Paper money and paper models of other possessions are burnt. Buddhist or Taoist scriptures are chanted.
- Prayers will continue for at least 7 days after the funeral, and if possible for 49 days.
- The deceased's soul is expected to return to its former home after a week. The family should stay at home to await the soul's return. It may therefore be very important for a family to see a student's room after a death, in case the soul returned there.

CHRISTIANITY:

- Christians believe in eternal life. The resurrection of Jesus Christ symbolises the ultimate triumph of life over death for all human beings.
- Some Christians (e.g. Roman Catholics) prefer to avoid cremation, out of a belief that the physical body will be resurrected alongside the soul at the final judgment.
- As death approaches, or just after death, prayers may be said and the dying person anointed with oil. These are often called ‘the Last Rites’ and are most familiar in, but are not restricted to, the Roman Catholic tradition.
- In some cultures, e.g. Afro-Caribbean and Indian, the coffin will be left open during the funeral service and the congregation will be invited up to pay their respects. At Eastern Orthodox funerals a flower may be placed on the coffin.
Christian funerals take many forms. A funeral for a ‘practising’ Christian will take place in church, followed by cremation or burial at the family’s choice. A ‘nominal’ or ‘cultural’ Christian ceremony is more likely to take place in a crematorium.

Christian funerals have become increasingly tailored to the personality of the deceased and may include music, readings and a eulogy reflecting their life. An explicitly Christian funeral will also include Scripture readings, prayers and possibly also hymns. In some Christian traditions, the funeral will also include a celebration of Holy Communion (Jesus’ last supper with his disciples), but this is not usually appropriate if the majority of those attending are not familiar with church ceremonies.

**HINDU:**

- The dying person should be placed on the floor. Special leaves and Ganges water should be placed in the mouth by a Hindu priest and mantras chanted.
- It is a sign of respect for as many people as possible from the extended family to visit the dying person, and to comfort the bereaved. Loud wailing is a conventional public expression of grief.
- The body is ritually washed and dressed in a white cloth. Embalming is not permitted.
- Hindu funerals take place by cremation, believed to release the soul from ‘entrapment’ in the body.
- It may be that the family will want to accompany the body from the crematorium chapel right into the furnace room itself, as the nearest equivalent of watching the cremation outside, as is normal in India.
- An offering of food will be made before the cremation and placed in the coffin.
- Hindus believe in reincarnation. One’s conduct in life affects the next incarnation.
- Shraddha, an 11-day ritual to ensure the safety of the soul, takes place after the funeral. Rice balls called pindas are ritually offered each day.
- The ashes should be placed in a river (traditionally the Ganges) along with garlands of flowers.
- Official mourning makes the bereaved family ritually unclean, and prohibits them from taking part in some normal social activities. It will last for about a month.

**ISLAM:**

- If there is warning that death is imminent, the Shahada (declaration of faith) should be said with the dying person, or on their behalf if they are unable to speak.
- Muslims normally insist on burial. Shipping a body overseas would require embalming, which is contrary to Muslim law as it may involve alcohol.
- It is usually preferable to avoid a post-mortem unless absolutely required by law, as it is thought to be a violation of the body. Similarly, Muslims prefer to avoid leaving the body in a mortuary.
• The burial should take place within 24 hours if at all possible, or as soon after death as possible.
• The body must be washed, dressed and prepared for burial by members of the same sex (relatives if possible) and the correct prayers said. It is better to do this at home, in a mosque or the funeral parlour than in the mortuary.
• The funeral service is normally attended by males only. Some Muslim burials will take place without a coffin.
• The Muslim Burial Council can advise on practice in case of need, e.g. how to arrange a funeral out of hours when council facilities are closed. They have an excellent and comprehensive website (www.mbcol.org.uk) covering all areas of procedure.

JUDAISM (customs may vary across the different traditions, eg Liberal, Orthodox etc. Not all Jews believe in bodily resurrection, but all believe in the immortality of the soul):

• Contact with the body of a dead person contaminates the living.
• A Jewish burial society (Chevra Kadisha) can be called in to provide the proper ritual care for the body after death. Our nearest one is in Leeds.
• On hearing of the death of a close relative, tearing your clothes is a normal response which demonstrates respect.
• Cremation and embalming are forbidden.
• Post mortem may take place if the law of the land requires. Organ donation is permissible within certain circumstances
• The burial should take place as soon as possible after death.
• A coffin will not always be used, so that the body may be closer to the earth. If there is a coffin, it will always be closed.
• The support of the community for the bereaved is very important. An intense 7-day mourning period (Shiva) will take place after the burial, in which members of the community visit the family and prayers are said. Normal activities, including study, shaving and bathing, do not take place during this period.
• Formal mourning continues for 11 months. If a parent dies, the eldest son will have particular responsibility for reciting the mourner’s Kaddish every day during that time.

SIKH:

• Sikhs believe in reincarnation. Mourning is therefore discouraged.
• At the moment of death, passages from the Sikh scriptures (Guru Granth Sahib) should be read.
• The body is bathed in yoghurt, washed and dressed in clean clothes, as well as the ‘5 Ks’ which symbolise the adult baptised Sikh (uncut hair, dagger, comb, special underwear and a steel bracelet), while prayers are recited.
The body may be taken home for public viewing before the funeral, as a reminder of the transience of life.

Sikh funerals take the form of cremation; to destroy the physical body frees the soul for its next stage of life. Families may wish to accompany the body from the crematorium chapel into the cremator.

The funeral service will consist of a prayer for the salvation of the soul; a short eulogy; the Sohila (‘bedtime prayer’) and Ardas (formal prayer).

Ashes are usually disposed of in the river where this is permissible, but may otherwise be buried. Sikhs generally prefer not to erect permanent memorials to the deceased.

A ten-day recitation of the Sikh scriptures should take place after the ceremony, either at home or in the gurdwara. Family members take part in the recitation. Charitable donations are made and hospitality offered.