



<https://www.kera.org/television-old/blackchurch/>

“Blessed & Highly Favored”

*Understanding the Importance of Faith, the Church
and the Pastor when supporting the African-
American Grief Process*

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Abstract Summary

The grief process for African Americans can be complicated and challenging.

Research suggests that many African Americans seek psychological support from their pastors rather than seek formal mental health services (Avent et al., 2015; Hays, 2015; Stansbury, Harley, King, Nelson & Speight, 2012).

Thus, many will rely on their faith, the church, and their pastor to navigate this process (Hovey et al., 2014; Webb et al., 2011).

This session will therefore, examine the importance of the African-American client's faith, their church, and the pastor's role in supporting a congregant through the grief process aided by psychologists or licensed mental health professionals.

Learning Objectives

1. Discuss and explain the importance of the African American client's faith, church, and pastor's role in supporting the congregant through the grief process
2. Identify the "Descriptors of the Grief Process."
3. Develop ways to serve the grieving African American population that is culturally and spiritually sensitive.

Understanding the Important Role of Faith and the Church in African American Coping with Grief



Brief Historical perspective of the Black/African American Church

The African American church has been a significant component of the African American cultural experience over many decades.

In their book, *'Fortress Introduction to the Black Church'*, Pinn & Pinn (2002), states the black church is “obscure(ambiguous, vague) in origin, secret in development, rich and complex in it’s flowering (growth or peaking)”, yet it remains the “oldest and most influential institution in African American Life.”(p.VII).



Stats as it pertains to Black/African American Christians

According to Pew Research (2018) “Black Americans are more likely than overall public to be Christian, Protestant”.

They also indicate that “Nearly eight-in-ten Black Americans (79%) identify as Christians”...this was in 2018.

Reference: Retrieved from:<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/23/black-americans-are-more-likely-than-overall-public-to-be-christian-protestant/>

Stats as it pertains to Black/African American Christians

In 2021, it's estimated that over 85% of African Americans state they have a religious belief system where they practice that belief system to cope with stress & grief. Therefore, rituals such as going to church; being active in bible study; prayer; meditation/devotion; having a "prayer partner" and talking to their pastor or spiritual leader, are all vital as they go through the grief process. (Hays,2015)

In her book entitled “Black Pain; It just looks like we’re not hurting”, Terrie M. Williams (2008), states:

“Under slavery, church was by law the only place we could gather in groups, and those precious Sunday mornings were the only times we could see one another outside of enforced work and could even come close to socializing. For generations the preachers’ words and our song might have been the only thing confirming our humanity in a world filled with people who constantly tried to convince themselves –and us – that we were not human. After slavery, the church became the center of the communities we built from scratch.....our preachers were our leaders not only because they could reach the most people, but because their soul-saving message kept church at the center of our lives.” (p.199)

So, why is the history important?

The former statement says it.

Also, we need to know this because it helps us have a better understanding of the rich generational history of the Black/African American church, the power of our spiritual and emotional connectedness and the significance of grief.

It also helps us understand the strength and deep-rootedness of the Black/African American belief system.

So, because of this Rich History, the Black/African American Church is:

1. An Informal social service provider that is influential in helping congregants begin to utilize formal social service support. (Blank, Mahmood, Fox, and Guterbock, 2002, p.1668).
2. Continue to be a preferred resource for mental health services/grief & other issues among African Americans. (Hays,2015,p.296)
3. Considered by many to serve as the genesis, essence and pulse of the African American community thus addressing the “social, psychological and religious needs of the African American community”. (Adksion-Bradley, Johnson, Sanders, Duncan and Holcomb-McCoy,2005, p.147)
4. The place where congregants go for “psychological, spiritual, social and economic support”. (Queener & Martin,2001, p.113)



The African American Church is vital in helping its congregants through the death and grief process.

And the Pastor also plays a key role.

The Black Pastor then is described as:

1. Being a crucial element in treating, supporting and meeting the emotional, mental, physical, social and spiritual needs of the African American congregant. (Blank, Mahmood, Fox and Guterock, 2002; Mattis, Zapata, Grayman, Taylor, Chatters, and Neighbors, 2007; Taylor, Ellison, Chatters, Levin and Lincoln, 2000).
2. The individual who congregants may seek psychological support from rather than seeking professional help. (Allen, Davey, & Davey, 2010; Bledsoe, Setterlund, Adams, Fok-Trela & Connolly, 2013; Hankerson, Watson, Lukachko, Fullilove & Weissman, 2013 & Neighbors, Musick, Williams, 1998).

The Black Pastor is described as:

3. “Respected community leader”, who is “firmly embedded within the African American community”

(Mbiti,1989, p.761-762).

4. Having a significant degree of community admiration, influence, respect, and civic responsibility that justifiably classifies them in a unique honorable position. (Mbiti,1989, p.761-762).

The Black Pastor is described as:

5. Charismatic & Transformational leaders (MacPhee, 2007).

6. Counselors (Young, Griffith, & Williams, 2003)

7. Gatekeepers of social services for members (Taylor, Ellison, Chatters, Levin, & Lincoln, 2000).

8. Central, Pivotal Figure.(Greenwald, 2007).

Therefore, the African American Pastor's role in supporting congregants through the death and grief process is vital.

~Even in the midst of grief & loss, you still may hear your Black/African American patients/clients say~

“I’m Blessed and Highly Favored”

or

“God is Good All the Time, and All the Time, God is Good”

So,

Having this background knowledge of the foundation of African American church as well as the strong leadership of the African American Pastor in the community.

Let's unpack the following Case Study.

Case Study

The patient is a 69 year old Black Female who has been married for 42 years. She has three daughters (two are nurses and one is a pharmacist.) She retired from UPS several years ago and she and her husband, who's also retired are living comfortably. Unfortunately, she started a cycle of going in and out of the hospital due to intestinal issues. After countless surgeries along with many other medical conditions that could no longer be treated, the doctors spoke with the family and suggested moving the patient into a hospice house. With reservations they agreed. There was a daily ritual for the week that this patient was in the hospice house for many visitors to visit and there was a nightly ritual for the family and friends to gather and pray around the hospital bed.

Case Study Continued

You are assigned as the staff (SW, Nurse, Therapist, Bereavement Coordinator, Chaplain, Doctor, etc) to work with this patient. You enter the room and it is crowded with four clergy members (three which are family members as well as the patient's Pastor). There is a large circle around the bed with individuals holding hands. The patient has shallow breathing and is on "comfort meds" so she is semi aware of what's happening. You are invited in as the Pastor is about to pray. He asks everyone to say a brief prayer. As he begins, you audibly hear those in the circle saying things like- "hallelujah", "amen", "thank you Lord" along with other things. You also hear individuals crying loudly.... You are starting to feel nervous and uncomfortable in this setting. You really want to leave! As the third person begins to pray, the patient stops breathing and transitions. The praying stops and the loud weeping and wailing begins.....people are hugging each other, some leave the room, others sit next to the bed and weep silently while talking to the patient who has just passed away.

Questions to Ponder

Take about 10 minutes and discuss the following with someone sitting next to you. Questions to Ponder:

- * **What do you do when this happens?**
- * **How do you handle this situation?**
- * **How do you do your job well and show compassion to the family, even if it makes you feel uncomfortable?**
- * **Let's Talk about it!**

Final Questions, Thoughts or Comments on the Case Study

The Cultural Contrast



<https://www.bostonherald.com/2010/05/14/teens-funeral-all-too-familiar/>



Scriptures that the Black/African American Church uses to offer comfort during this time that are usually read at Funerals

Hebrews 12:1

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

John 14:1-6

1“Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. 2“In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. 3“If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. 4“And you know the way where I am going.” 5Thomas said to Him, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?” 6Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.

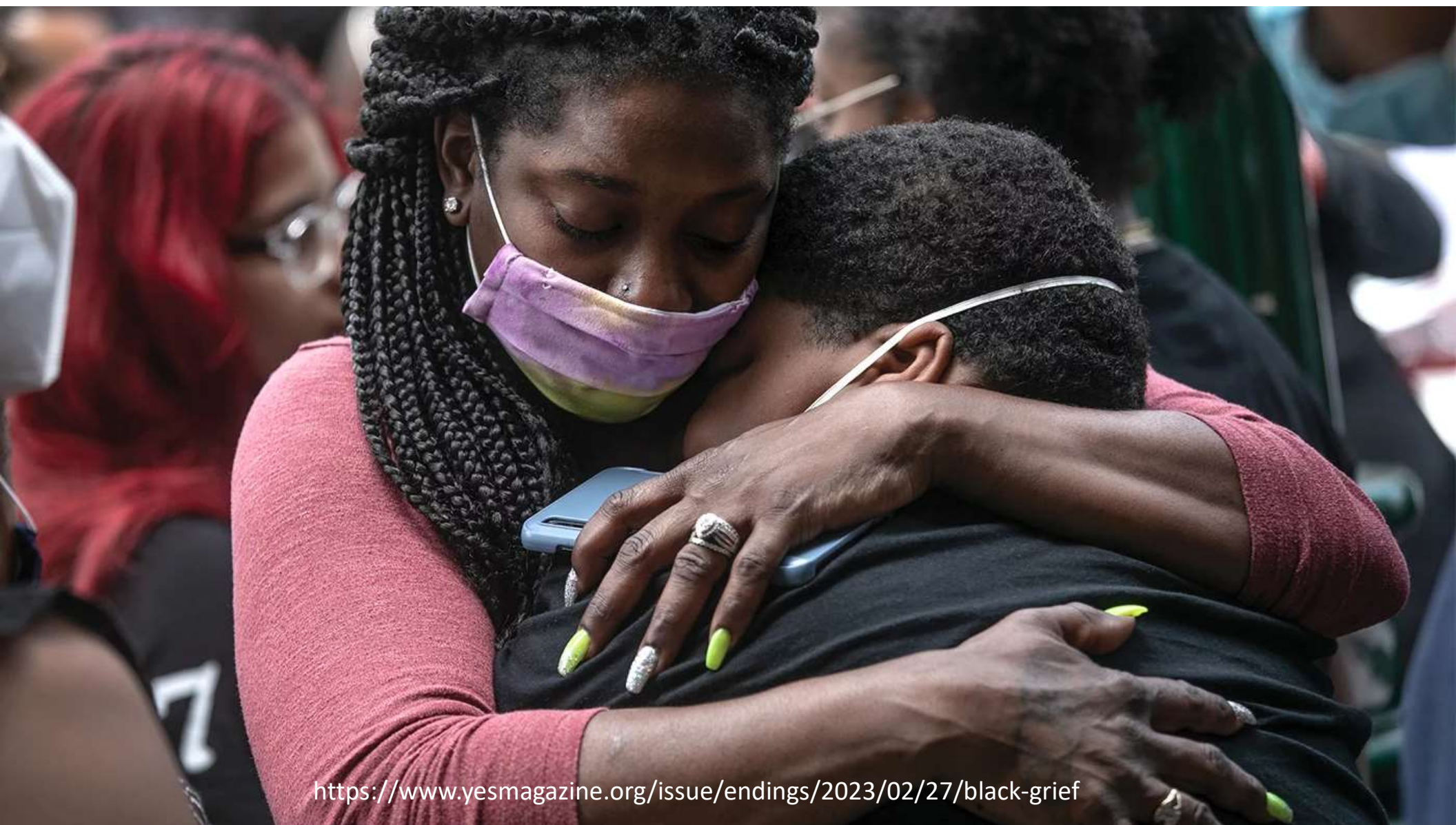
Scriptures that the Black/African American Church uses to offer comfort during this time that are usually read at Funerals

Certain passages are expected to only be read in the King James Version (i.e., John 1;1, Psalms 23, Psalms 100, Psalms 34:1).

John 14:1-6 KJV

***14** Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. ⁴ And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know.*

⁵ Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way? ⁶ Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.



<https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/endings/2023/02/27/black-grief>

Scriptures that the Black/African American Church uses to offer comfort during this time that are usually read at Funerals

2 CORINTHIANS 5:8

We are of good courage, I say, and are willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord. (ASV-American Standard Version)

[Yes] we have confident and hopeful courage and are pleased rather to be away from home out of the body and be at home with the Lord. (AMPC-Amplified Bible, Classic Edition)

We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord. (KJV – King James Version)

Scriptures that the Black/African American Church uses to offer comfort during this time that are usually read at Funerals

1 Corinthians 15:54-57 NIV

54 When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." 55 "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:54-57 KJV

54 So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. 55 O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? 56 The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Descriptors of the Grief Process

* **Rituals of Visitation/Wake:** This time is deemed similar to many other cultures in that it is a time for viewing the remains and “spending time” with the deceased loved one before the funeral. In the African American culture- once the Family, Community and Church members find out about the transition, they usually bring food; drinks, etc. to the person's home.

Rosenblatt, P. C., & Wallace, B. R. (2005). African American Grief. New York: Routledge.

Descriptors of the Grief Process

* **Funeral/Home-Going Service:** Because “Death is viewed not as the end of life but as the beginning of a new type of life” (Schoulte, 2011,p.15). This time is deemed as a time to honor the deceased(and “celebrate their life”- Therefore the funeral is typically at the church & might be very long. It may therefore consist of several people speaking admirably about the deceased, you may have sharing stories, loud festive gospel music singing, dancing, and the pastor may issue a eulogy or words of comfort for the family and loved ones.

Rosenblatt, P. C., & Wallace, B. R. (2005). African American Grief. New York: Routledge.

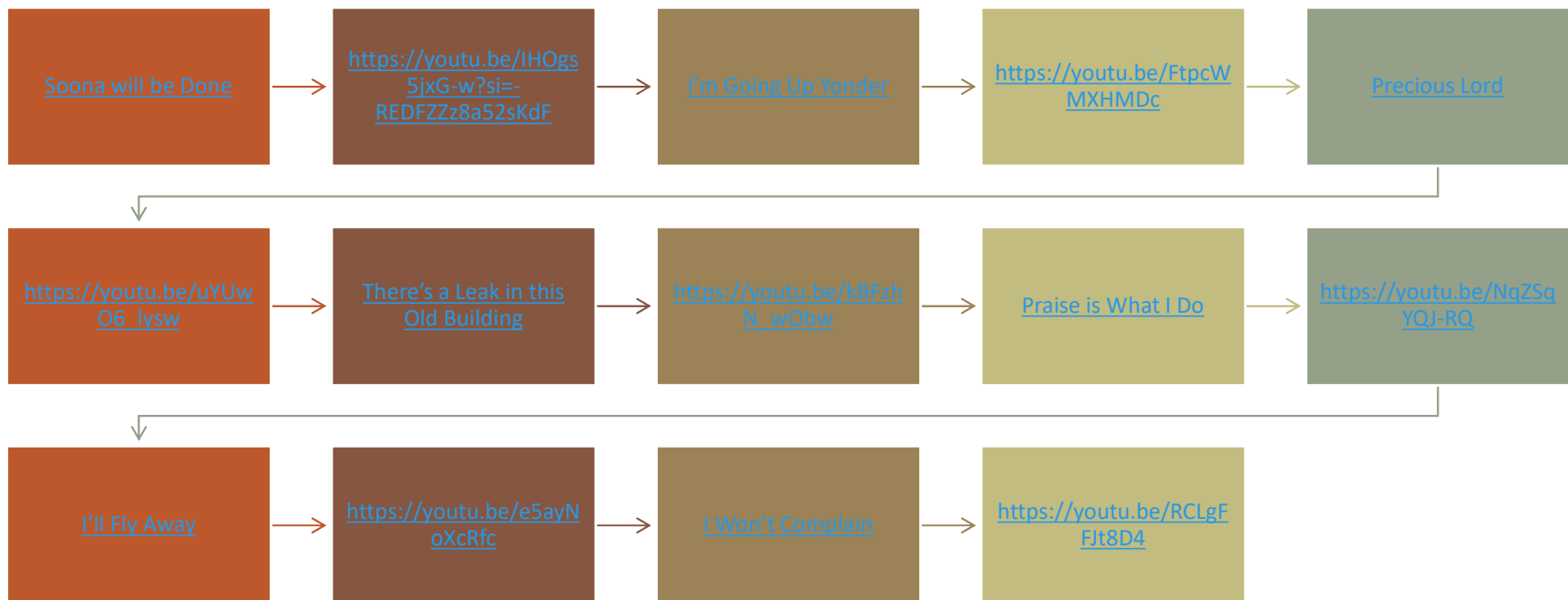
Traditional Songs at African American Funerals/ Homegoings

1. Soon and Very Soon
2. I'm Going Up Yonder
3. Soona Will be Done
4. I'll Fly Away Oh Glory
5. Amazing Grace
6. Precious Lord Take My Hand
7. Praise is What I Do
8. Total Praise
9. Precious Lord
10. I Won't Complain
11. There is a Leak in this Old Building
12. When We All Get to Heaven

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The Music, The Message, The Meaning



Funeral Music / Emotional

Soona will be Done

<https://youtu.be/IHOgs5jxG-w?si=-REDFZZz8a52sKdF>

Precious Lord

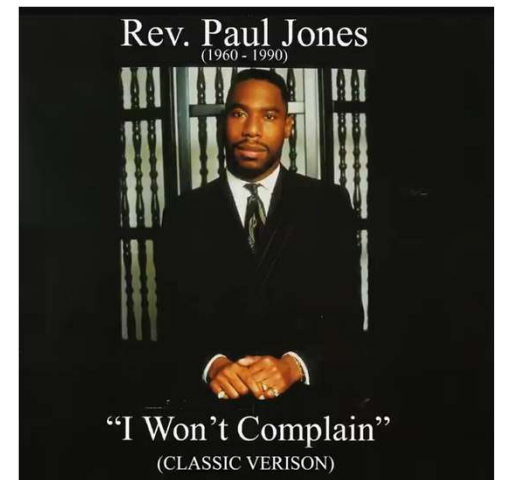
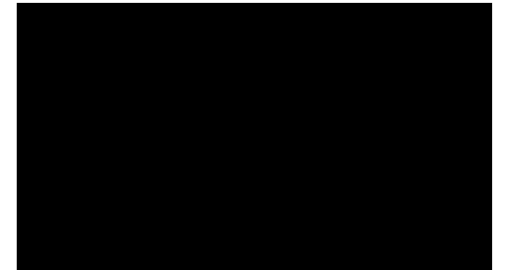
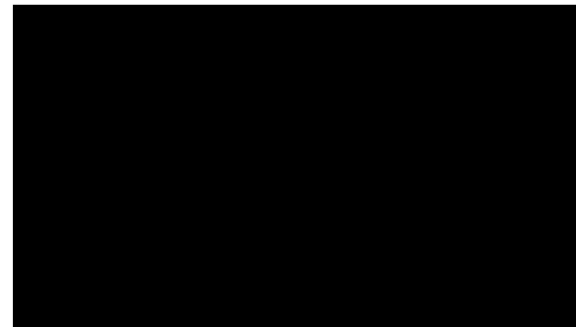
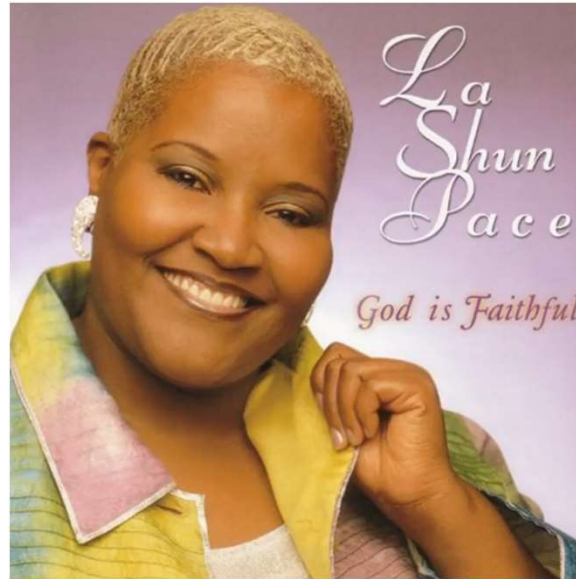
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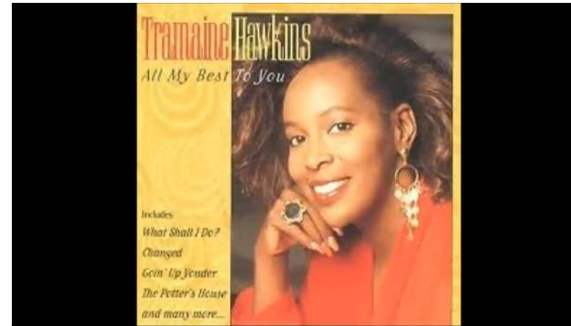
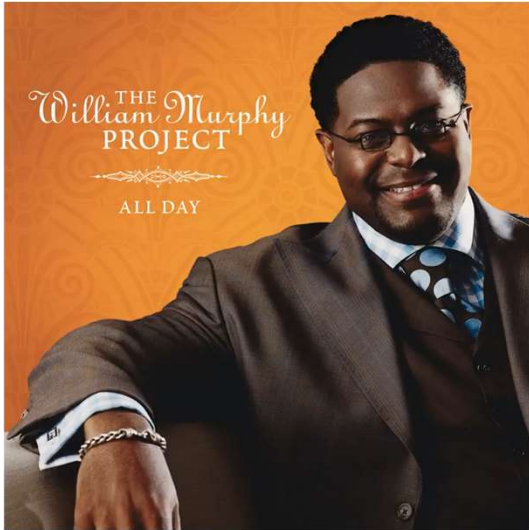
There's a Leak in this Old Building

https://youtu.be/kBFzhN_wObw

I Won't Complain

<https://youtu.be/RCLgFFJt8D4>





I'm Going Up Yonder

<https://youtu.be/FtpcWMXHMDc>

Praise is What I Do

<https://youtu.be/NqZSqYQJ-RQ>

I'll Fly Away

<https://youtu.be/e5ayNoXcRfc>

I'm Free

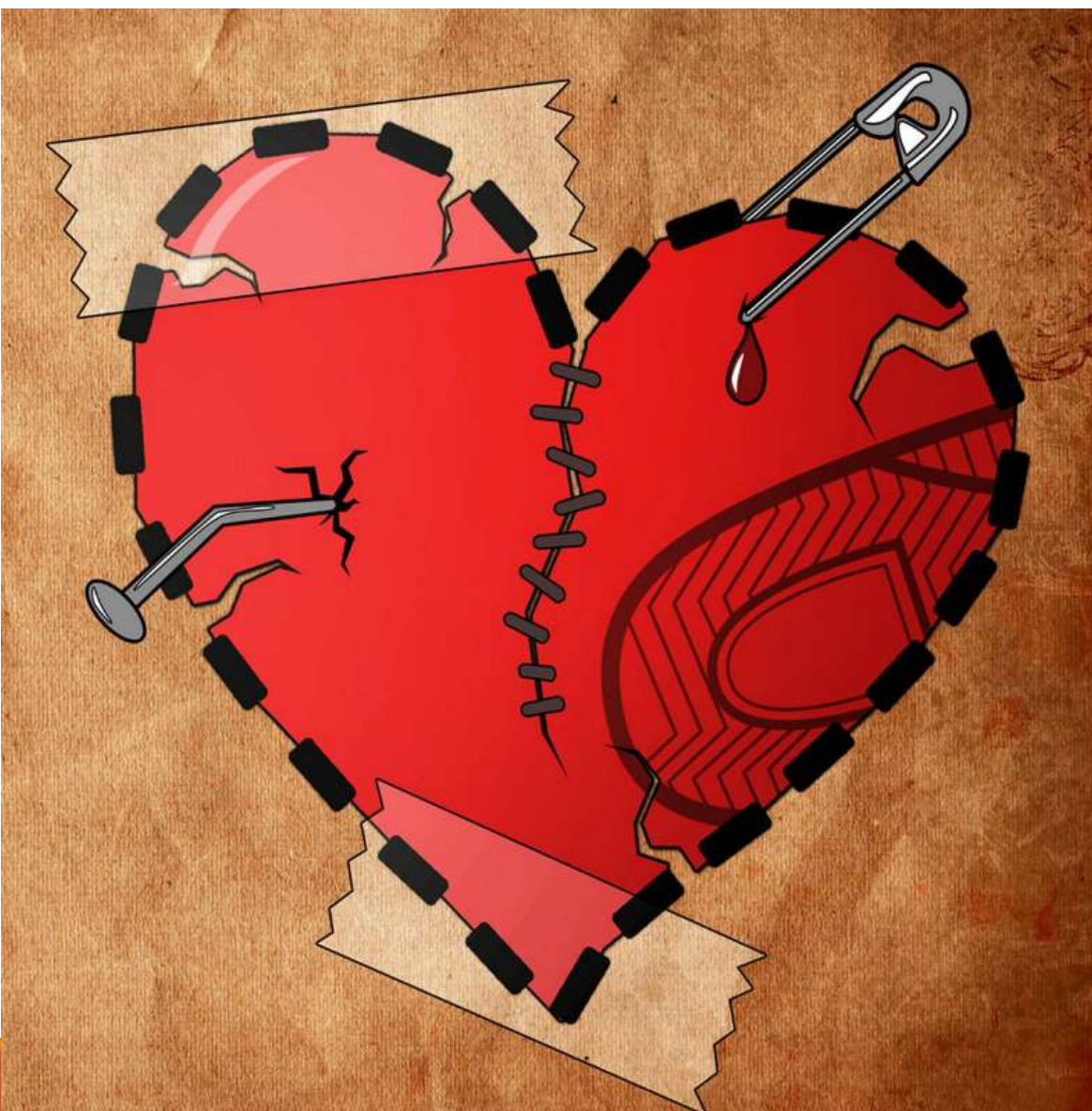
<https://youtu.be/UgDMUMVpTkk>

Homegoing Music / Rejoicing

Descriptors of the Grief Process

***Repass:** This ritual is deemed as the time when the family and friends of the deceased loved one come together and eat a traditional meal after the burial. It is usually at the church, or at the family's home. Typically the church where the eulogy of deceased was held is where the meal is prepared and served- possibly in the church fellowship hall. Most likely, the church members will provide the meal.

<http://peopleof.oureverydaylife.com/funeral-customs-african-american-southern-baptists-6189.html>



Ministering to the Grieved

1. Remember the person may be heartbroken, in crisis, and traumatized. (Terminology is important)
2. Remember to be Christlike and demonstrate love that is sacrificial and unconditional.
3. Remember to simply “**BE.**”
 - Be present.
 - Be prayerful.
 - Be practical.

Practical Ways of Serving this population

1. Ask if you can contact the patients/clients Pastor or Faith Leader if you are serving the family~ and if they have one.
2. Ask the patient & family how you can support them, especially as the patient/client is close to transitioning- and try to honor their wishes.
3. Although you all have protocols in place. i.e. aftercare for reaching out, it may be vital to follow individualized plans based on the patients/clients family needs.

Practical Ways of Serving this population

4. Don't minimize the importance of the patient/clients spiritual condition.

i.e. so when they quote scripture, they may truly believe it-it may not necessarily be the person being hyper-religious

5. Be Culturally Sensitive to the rituals as they pertain to the grief process and funerals.

6. So as a Chaplain, Clergy, Social Worker, Therapist or Medical Personnel...if you are able to, try to attend the funeral.

(Please make sure you comply with your organizations protocol as it pertains to this. i.e. confidentiality and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act -HIPPA Laws; Codes of Ethics for Clinicians- Social Workers, Licensed Counselors, Nurses, Doctors)

Practical Ways of Serving this Population

7. If you are asked to be on the “program” to speak on behalf of the hospice....try to do so....only if you can speak about the person and if permitted by your organization.
8. Visit an African American church to have the “African American Church Experience” so you can have a better understanding of the rituals. This allows for immersion in the culture.
9. Please have a candid, open and honest communication with your patients, clients and family members. i.e. let them know you don’t want to offend them and allow them to “teach you” about their culture.....I practiced this often when I did counseling.

Ministering to the Grieved

- Begin where they are in the grief cycle.
- Clarify their feelings.
- Empathize, sympathize but don't minimize (even if you don't agree).
- Be sensitive and don't say too much (listen more than you speak – Job 2:11-13).
- Don't use faulty reassurance that sound cliché.
- Don't give placated responses or make scripture sound trite.



Grief and Loss: Providing Counseling

Various Forms and Approaches to Counseling

- Help counselees acknowledge and adjust to loss.
- Help counselees to express emotions and grieve loss.
- Help counselees consider and address practical matters
 - Legal matters (copies of death certificate, contact county clerk, probate & lawyer)
 - Financial matters (banks, stocks, bonds, VA, IRS, SSI)
 - Insurance matters (life, health, home, auto, beneficiaries, wills, trusts)

Grief and Loss: Providing Counseling

- Help counselees to deal with unresolved relational issues
 - Anger, Bitterness, Forgiveness
- Help counselees prepare for upcoming holidays (birthday, anniversary of death, season of loss, traditional calendar of holidays beginning at time of loss).
- Help counselee process memories of deceased or loss.
- Help counselee dialogue with God and stay in His presence.
- Help counselee to stay connected to other believers for support.

Review

1. We have discussed and explained the importance of the African American client's faith, church, and pastor's role in supporting the congregant through the grief process
2. We have identify the "Descriptors of the Grief Process."
3. We have shared ways to serve the grieving African American population that is culturally and spiritually sensitive.

***May God be with you as you do this work.
Let us pray.***

Thank You!!

Final Thoughts, Questions, Comments???

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Personal Foundational Servant Scripture:

35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, **36** I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. (Matthew 25:35-36)



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Dr. Sabrina D. Black is an international speaker, author, counselor, and life coach. She has been working in the community and around the world on five of seven continents for over 25 years helping people live the **Abundant Life** (which is also the name of her Counseling and Coaching Private Practice). She is a high energy, dynamic presenter that impacts audiences with hope, help, and healing. Dr. Black has degrees in Counseling and Psychology. She has served as a Professor at Ashland Theological Seminary, Grace College and Moody Theological Seminary. She is the author of 10 books and workbooks including "**Live Right Now.**" Dr. Black is also a nationally known expert on **Race and Reconciliation, DivorceCare,** and **GriefShare.** She is a first responder for natural disasters, trauma and crisis intervention. In 2019 and 2020 respectively, she was the host of **#MentalHealthMonday** and "**The Conversation on RACE**" where she addressed a series of topics to help people deal with life, relationships, COVID-19, and beyond. In 2021 Dr. Black hosted a midnight sing-along on Facebook Live for 365 days. In 2022 she did a daily narration the Bible from Genesis to Revelations. Dr. Sabrina has been married for over 3years; she loves movies, live theater, board games, karaoke, and traveling.



Disclaimer Disclosure

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