

Paper Presentation

Topic: Social Capital and Volunteering

Befriending Funeral Volunteer Support Service

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Abstract

In Chinese culture, death is a taboo not to be discussed or mentioned in public. After attending a funeral, an attendee will be given a coin and a sweet as gifts that must be eaten and spent (Chan, 2000). It is a common belief that death is bad luck. No one is willing to touch on the funeral issues. However, funeral ceremonies are important in the healing process of the survivors. If planned carefully, the ceremonies can meet the important social and emotional needs of the survivors, reestablish relationships, affirm values, provide emotional support for the family, thus significantly speed up the healing process. The Comfort Care Concern Group (CCCG) organizes a volunteer team called “funeral support volunteer”. They are equipped with the relevant knowledge and skill. Volunteers will accompany the bereaved persons until the funeral is complete.

‘After he died, I only cried and didn’t know what to do. One night my emotion became so bad that I had to be admitted to the hospital. Luckily, CCCG volunteers supported me. Everyday they gave me a call and I could express my worries, loss and angry feelings. They expressed their sympathy for my loss and were full of tender solicitude towards me. Now, I know that I am not alone and I need to live independently.’ (These are words from Ms. Lai a client who has lost her spouse). Grief is a dichotomous process of change across the period of bereavement (Duke, 1998). It is recommended to acknowledge, address and choose strategies directed to help the survivors express their feelings. In planning the funeral, it helps the survivors to feel important and useful at the time when they are experiencing overwhelming feelings. Funeral volunteers will take an important role like a teacher explaining the whole funeral process and what needs special consideration. A

funeral that is well prepared can reduce the overall emotional and behavioral problems faced by the survivors.

Traditionally, children are not welcome in funerals as adults commonly feel that this will bring bad luck to the children. The emotional responses and behaviors of children are varied around the time of loss but are strongly influenced by the reactions of the surviving parent and other adults (Worden, 1996). Volunteers play the role as peers and express sympathy as well as concern about the need of the children. Also, they will help the children prepare themselves for the last chance of meeting their loved ones.

In order to satisfy the tremendous demand for the service and to provide the best-quality care, CCCG and volunteers are endeavouring to develop and improve. We are constantly looking for new members to join our volunteer team and to help build up a comfortable platform for those in need.

1) Introduction: Death and Social Relation

“Death” to the Chinese is often regarded as a “taboo” that should never be mentioned; i.e. not to discuss with others, sometimes even among family members. Some Chinese even believe that the family members of the deceased should grieve for at least one hundred days. During this period, the grieving family members cannot go to other people’s homes as it is a common belief that such action will bring bad luck to those visited by the family members. This indirectly means that bereavement care among Chinese is often provided only to the family members or relatives. Other people are generally unwilling to touch on the subject about death. Let’s take Mrs. Chan, one of The Comfort Care Concern Group(CCCG) bereavement counselling clients as an example.

After Mr. Chan’s death, I find that my friend have some changes. They don’t come to my home and only said, “ Don’t think too much!” Do I have any illnesses? All my friends are unwilling to contact me. (These are words from Mrs. Chan, a client who lost her spouse).

In view of the knowledge gap and tradition culture, many Hong Kong people are anxious about death and the bereaved (Cheng, 1999). Cheng’s study showed that 500 respondents had successfully completed the questionnaire, and 190 declined the

interview upon knowing the interview content contain the death issues. Others, after attending a funeral, an attendee will be given a coin and a sweet as gifts that must be eaten and spent (Chan, 2000). People normally feel that the bereaved are giving bad luck. It may be due to the fact that death should not be discussed in the public. No one is willing to touch on the funeral issues except on the bereaved family.

2) Facilitating Grief through Funeral Ritual:

People will try their best to arrange the whole funeral process as the last opportunity to show the love with the dead. The funeral acts as a symbolic and a physical barrier between family members and outsiders between those who can come into direct contact with the dead and those who cannot (Tong, 2004). To totally complete the funeral rite will be a main task of the mourning work.

A well-done funeral service has an important adjunct in aiding and abetting the healthy resolution of grief. Worden in 1991 said that funeral could do four important things. It is helpful for bereaved person to pass through the process of grief.

First of all, it can help the bereaved realize the fact of the loss. Seeing the body of the deceased person helps to bring home the reality and finality of death (Worden, 1991). People can learn the differences between life and death. When seeing the dead body inside the casket has a symbolic meaning that the deceased will leave us. We strongly advise the family members including the children to see the body of the deceased loved, whether it is at the funeral home or the hospital. It is because we no such chance can be available after the body cremation.

Second, a funeral can give people an opportunity to express thoughts and feelings about the deceased (Worden, 1991). In the funeral process, this is a traditional culture through the different religion ceremonies to show the miss about the lost of a love one. Even though this thought will generate anger, disappointment or other negative feeling, the expression can give people a chance to forget the complicated or inappropriate thought.

Third, a funeral can also be a reflection of the life of the person who has gone

(Worden, 1991). During the funeral rites, there will be a brief statement to introduce the dead person. The survivor has an important task to sum up the life of the dead. This provides an opportunity for the bereaved persons to have a new role or task to complete. It can help them to find the new meaning of their life. For example, they will learn to take care of the children or they will try their best to finish the unfinished business of the dead.

Forth, a funeral can draw or find a social support network close to the bereaved family after the loss has occurred (Worden, 1991). The funeral rites have a symbolic means to enhance the family cohesiveness to support one another. This can help the bereaved persons to pass through the difficult time easily. However, if the bereaved persons don't have any social network, they will feel extremely lonely and helpless.

To sum up, the death ceremonies are important in the healing process of the survivors. If planned carefully, the death ceremonies can meet important social and emotional needs of the survivors, reestablish relationships, affirm values, provide emotional support for the family, and help significantly in the healing process.

3) Death, Funeral and Bereavement Practice in Hong Kong:

The funeral rites can help the grief process as it allows people to talk about the deceased. In Hong Kong, over 30,000 people die each year. To provide quality care to the bereaved person, we need to understand the funeral culture among the Chinese. However, there is a lack of study or research about funeral and bereavement in Hong Kong.

In Hong Kong, different domestic cultures have a great difference at the funeral rites. Traditionally, a funeral rite among the Chinese is provided by the funeral home. The bereaved persons will look for the funeral director to facilitate the ongoing of religious rites. They understand the full funeral tradition and customs. It is because they are expected to carry out the duty of interpreting the rites and directing the bereaved during the rites.

However, funerals are often highly elaborated and are quite expensive nowadays, with costs running into tens of thousands of dollars. From the costing issues not all

people can benefit for the funeral director's help. Many times they need to do it with no support.

The funeral rites in Hong Kong include multiple tasks. People should go through many procedures. Normally, the whole process may last for several months. In the community, many services agencies and hospitals have provided a pamphlet to teach people how to complete the funeral rites. The relatives can start the funeral process based on the guidelines. Unfortunately, those pamphlet only provide guidelines, the bereaved person strong request support for the social, psychological and educational need.

4) Volunteer Service of Funeral:

The CCCG noticed this services gap between the new bereaved person and funeral service, so a funeral volunteer support service was organize in 1999. This service is to assist the bereaved to complete the funeral procedure after the immediate loss of his or her loved one. Trained volunteers will accompany them during the entire funeral process. During the process, volunteers not only focus on the funeral procedures and also facilitate them ventilate their emotions.

Volunteer services include a wide range of work. It includes assisting the bereaved to collect a medical dead certificate from the hospital concern, making funeral ritual arrangements, arrange the dates of funeral cremation and purchase a niche etc. Let me use a service example to deduce the helping process.

Ms. Lam a CCCG volunteer whose husband died of a fatal disease in 1997. After she recovery from the grief and finished the CCCG volunteer training, she becomes an active volunteer helping the new bereaved persons. Ms. Lai, whose husband died of a sudden accident in 2005, had no children and any social support in Hong Kong. She didn't know how to start the funeral task. She was so upset and worries that she has to be admitted to hospital. The Medical social worker understood her situation and then referred her case to the CCCG funeral volunteer support services. Ms. Lam helped Ms. Lai to pass through all the funeral tasks. Now Ms. Lai has a new life and she thanks Ms. Lam very much.

'After his death, I only cried and didn't know what to do. One night my emotion became so bad that I had to be admitted to a hospital. Luckily, CCCG volunteers supported me. Everyday they gave me a call and I could express my worries, loss and anger. They expressed their sympathy for my loss and were full of tender solicitude towards me. Now, I know that I am not alone and I need to live independently.'
(These are words from Ms. Lai, a client who lost her spouse).

Grief is a dichotomous process of change across the period of bereavement (Duke, 1998). Funeral volunteers will take an important role as a instructor. They will explain the whole funeral process and what special things to be considered. Therefore the deceased family will be well prepared for the funeral and with less emotional and behavioral problems.

CCCG funeral volunteer services have several characteristics or features. The first thing is the quick respond of the referral. From receiving the referral to providing volunteer services, it normally takes around one to two working days. We understand that a bereaved person urgently hopes to complete the funeral process as soon as possible. Luckily, volunteers are eager to give up their leisure time and help the bereaved whole-heartedly.

Second, the service does not only focus on finishing the task but also providing an emotional support to the needy. In Ms. Lai's case, volunteers actively listened to her lose of husband and assisted her with the intake of fluids and food to restore her health. It is because they understood that her psychical condition could not complete the full funeral process. The volunteers also shared with her experience with Ms. Lai and so she could pass the difficult period easily.

Third, the service is free of charge. Our service users were mainly on the new immigrants and elderly. We don't receive any client's money but if they want to show the thanks for the volunteer help. Volunteer would follow the traditional culture to get the "red bag" which means that the bereaved persons wish to give a good luck to all participants attend the funeral ritual. "Red bag" was containing a sweet and a coin. We suggest the "bag" contain not more than ten dollars.

Forth, we have follow-up. The volunteer will keep in touch with the bereaved

persons and assist them in their recovery process such as inviting them participate in any individual or group counseling and befriended volunteer support service.

5) A Special Client: Children and Grief

Traditionally, children are not welcome in funerals as adults commonly feel that this will bring bad luck to the children. The emotional responses and behaviors of the children are varied around the time of loss but are strongly influenced by the reactions of the surviving parent and other adults (Worden, 1996). Volunteers play the role as peers and express sympathy as well as concern about the needs of the children. Also, they will help the children prepare themselves for the last chance of meeting their loved ones.

It is a great challenge for the volunteer to deal with children facing grief. They will try to use the specific simulated activity like drawing “What is funeral home?”. To get children to understand more about the funeral home and rite includes different religious people, environment and some special decoration etc. (Chow, 2000). Through the intervention activities children can reduce the fear on misunderstanding of funeral ritual and facilitate the various tasks of mourning (Worden, 1996). The child bereavement studies (Bowlby, 1980 & Strength, 1991) show that intervention activities are most useful to children when they are designed to meet the needs of bereaved children which is a best adaptation to the loss.

6) Continuous Support & Improvement:

Become a qualified CCCG volunteer, interested bodies need to complete many tasks and fulfill the basic required standards. The volunteers should be aged 21 years old or above. They must need to complete the basic volunteer training organized by CCCG and submit the self-nomination letter. All applicants should be interviewed and approved by our social workers. After that, successful applicants will become volunteers. They must work under the CCCG volunteer code of practice and be supervised by our social workers, staff or senior volunteer. Every year they must complete a basic service requested and go through evaluation of past service performance.

In order to satisfy the tremendous demand of the service and to provide the best-quality care, CCCG and volunteers are endeavouring to develop and improve. CCCG will regularly organize the share-meeting and advanced-skill training to support our volunteer including children bereavement care skill, laws on funeral, feeding techniques and how to use the wheelchair etc. to update and enrich their knowledge on every aspects of services. These things have fulfilled the volunteers' knowledge of information, emotion, bereavement, nutritional, physical, spiritual and social support skill.

Through sharing, learning and practising on the volunteer work, CCCG hopes to give the best benefit to our volunteers and service users. We are constantly looking for new members to join our volunteer team and to help build up a comfortable platform for those in need.

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