

Complicated Grief: Cultural Considerations When Working with Loss in Hispanic and Latino Students and Their Families




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WHAT IS COMPLICATED GRIEF?

Research suggests that when a person is exposed to the loss of a loved one in the context of violent circumstances including suicide, homicide or an accident, the most common grief response is known as complicated grief. Complicated grief is a prolonged form of grief that could interfere with normal functioning.

The grieving process in children is different from adults (Darman, 2011). Children need assistance and guidance to cope with the emotions related to the loss of a loved one (Lenhardt & McCourt, 2000). If left untreated, complicated grief can persist over time.



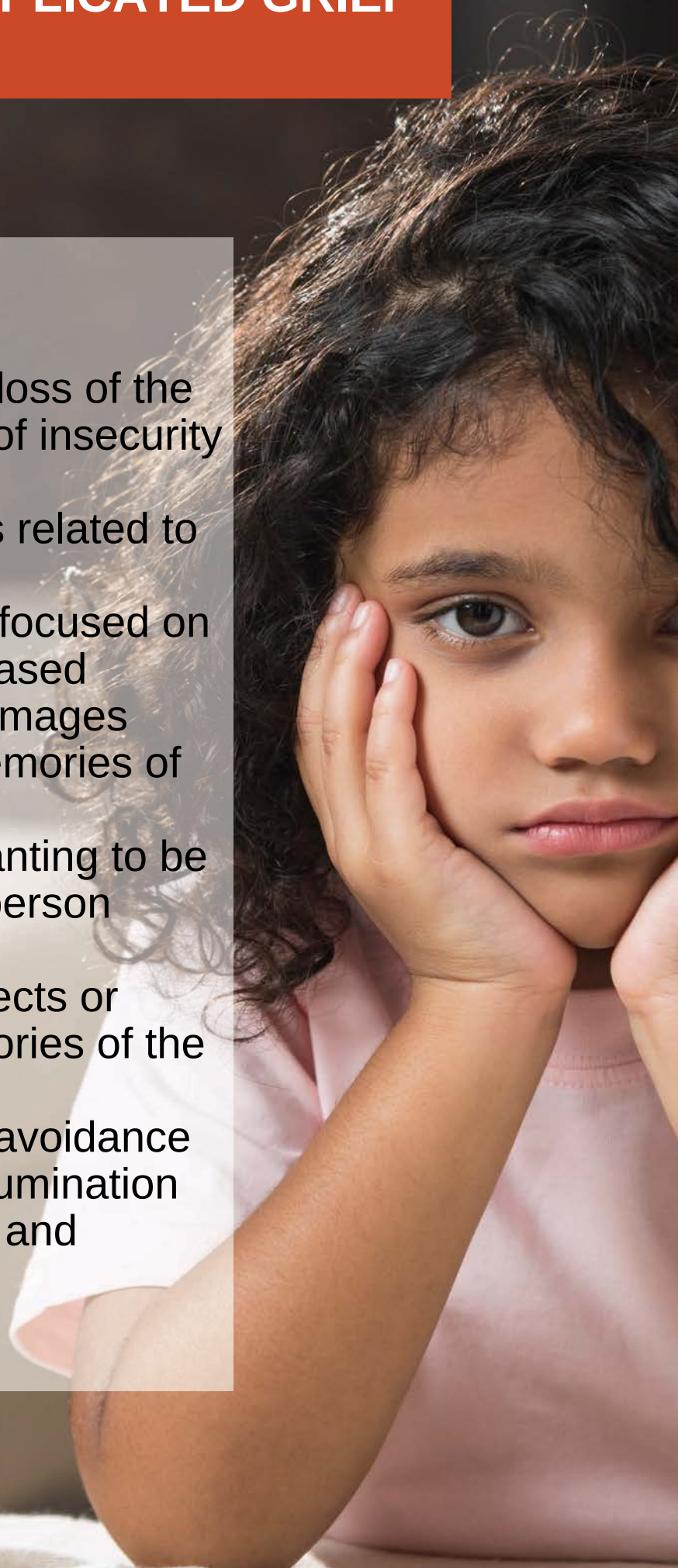
SYMPTOMS OF COMPLICATED GRIEF

Children can experience difficulties in accepting the death of a loved one. Children might express different emotional, physical, and psychological responses, including anger, fear, withdrawal, illness, weight gain or loss, trouble sleeping, confusion, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Also, children might experience behavioral problems including acting out, hurting oneself or others, running away, lack of motivation or other problems at school or in the community (Alvarez, 2011).

Paying attention to these signs is essential in order to help Hispanic and Latino children experiencing complicated grief:

SYMPTOMS OF COMPLICATED GRIEF

- Sadness
- Anxiety focused on the loss of the deceased and feelings of insecurity
- Yearning or longing
- Guilt focused on regrets related to the deceased
- Preoccupying thoughts focused on thinking about the deceased
- Recurrent thought and images focused on recalling memories of the deceased
- Seeking proximity or wanting to be close to the deceased person
- Suicidal ideation
- Avoiding situations, objects or places that evoke memories of the deceased person
- Disturbed sleep and/or avoidance of going to bed due to rumination about troubling aspects and memories of the death





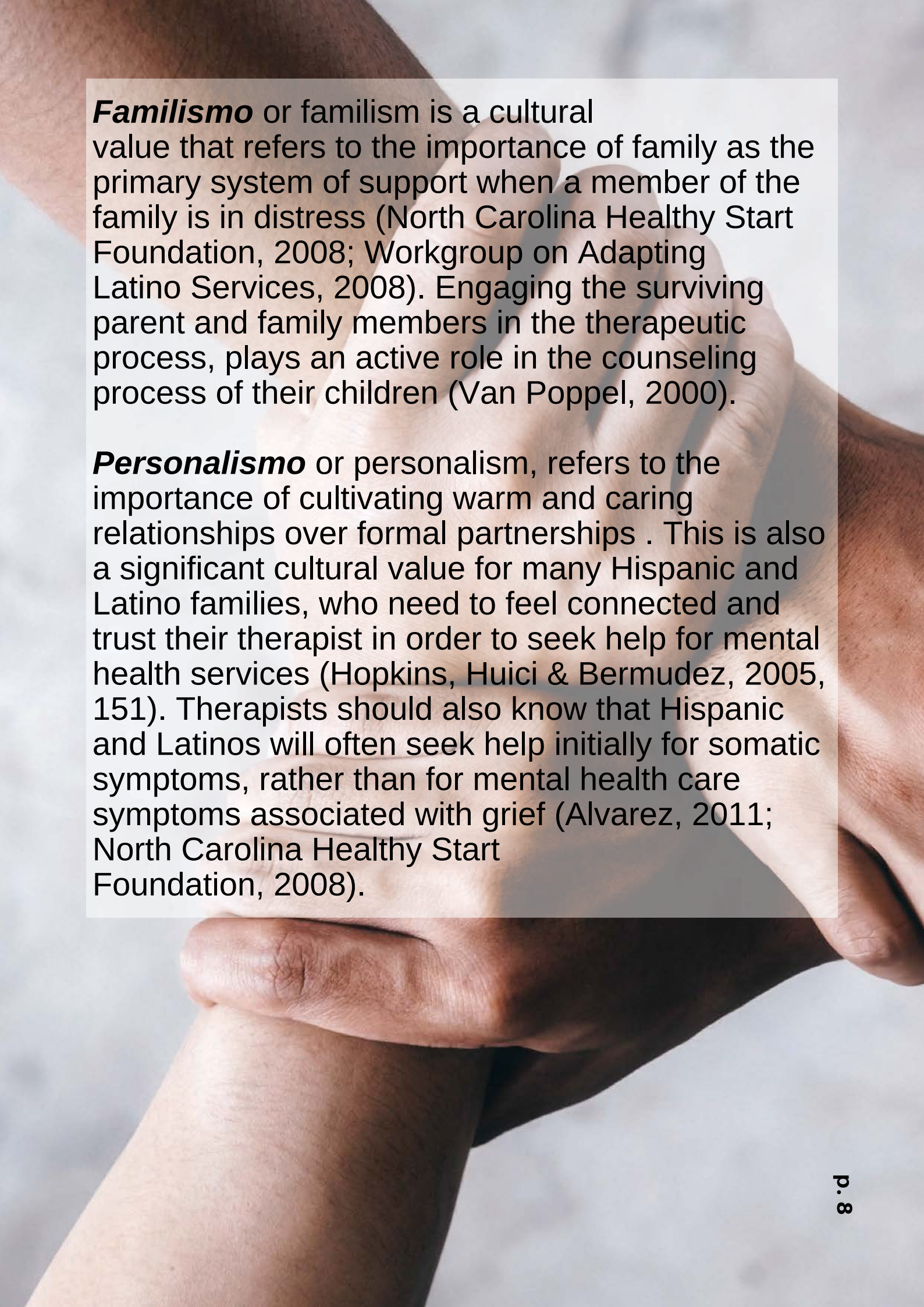
GRIEF AMONG HISPANIC AND LATINOS

Among Hispanics living in the United States are people from various countries like Mexico, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Chile, Perú, and Puerto Rico among others. Even though they are part of Latin America, each country has their own cultural heritage, belief systems, norms, values and different ways in which first, second, and third generation of immigrants express and understand grief.



Children may have difficulty sharing physical, emotional or psychological symptoms of distress as a result of some of these cultural norms. Some Hispanic and Latino children may believe that by not showing their emotions, by displaying manly attitudes, by not questioning, and by not becoming a burden to their family, they are helping their families (Athán, 2014; Houben, 2012).

Mental health providers need to be mindful about each student's specific cultural values and social norms. Extended family members like cousins, grandmothers, uncles and aunts, could serve as useful resources in helping mental health providers explore the family traditions and values.



Familismo or familism is a cultural value that refers to the importance of family as the primary system of support when a member of the family is in distress (North Carolina Healthy Start Foundation, 2008; Workgroup on Adapting Latino Services, 2008). Engaging the surviving parent and family members in the therapeutic process, plays an active role in the counseling process of their children (Van Poppel, 2000).

Personalismo or personalism, refers to the importance of cultivating warm and caring relationships over formal partnerships . This is also a significant cultural value for many Hispanic and Latino families, who need to feel connected and trust their therapist in order to seek help for mental health services (Hopkins, Huici & Bermudez, 2005, 151). Therapists should also know that Hispanic and Latinos will often seek help initially for somatic symptoms, rather than for mental health care symptoms associated with grief (Alvarez, 2011; North Carolina Healthy Start Foundation, 2008).



Respeto or respect, a strong cultural value that prioritizes respect to elders in the family hierarchy, might play a vital role in the grieving process (Bougere, 2014). Often parents do not discuss with their children topics that are considered taboo, such as expressing how they feel about the loss of a loved one. Awareness about this cultural value can help therapists to better understand how to adapt their therapeutic approach, so that it meets the needs of grieving children within Hispanic and Latino families.



RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Many Hispanics embrace religion and spirituality at the core of their lives. As part of their religious beliefs, the family may continue a relationship with the deceased person through prayer, rituals, and traditional practices. Mexican culture particularly has a holiday, known as *Día de los Muertos* to remember and honor those who have passed away. In other Hispanic and Latino traditions, people create altars, use candles, and pray to remember their deceased loved ones.



TIPS FOR CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS



Mental health professionals and school personnel must take in consideration cross-cultural differences if they want to help alleviate the suffering involved with grieving. Counselors should become culturally competent, by using culturally adapted coping mechanisms and strategies, to help grieving students cope with the death of a loved one. Counselors could encourage Hispanic and Latino children to share their feelings with people they trust and feel comfortable with, to alleviate their burden and to help them understand that grief is a normal process, and they are not alone (Houben, 2012).



Grieving therapy for helping Hispanic children should incorporate the family, religious and cultural beliefs, and the children level of acculturation (Arman, 2014).

The implementation of grieving counseling for children is recommended to avoid long-term consequences. Some options include:

- Weekend Bereavement Camp Counseling, which teaches Hispanic children adaptive skills. The therapeutic approach addresses signs and symptoms of complicated grief, and it is delivered for eight weeks (once a week) among children aged 7 to 10 years old (Alvarez, 2011).



- Family Bereavement Program was developed to assist children and families through the process of grieving (Murphey & Wahiba, 2012). This therapy uses modeling, role-playing, homework assignments, and collaborative group learning activities. The family bereavement program provides children and their caregivers with coping skills.
- Grief and Trauma Intervention is based on cognitive behavioral therapy, narrative therapy, and expressive therapy. It was developed by Houben to help Latino children with posttraumatic stress disorder. The intervention incorporates art, drama, play, and culturally relevant approaches such as “death rituals, spiritual beliefs, coping strategies, historical occurrences and the child’s language” (Houben, 2012).

SCHOOL SETTING

School personnel can cultivate more meaningful and supportive relationships with Hispanic and Latino students by exploring, showing respect for, and acknowledging their cultural values.

Hiring bilingual school personnel is the most effective way of overcoming the language barrier of communication if the primary language of the student and family is Spanish. Schools must also identify important school forms and documents that need to be translated into Spanish, as yet another critical step to overcome the language barrier that further alienates Hispanic and Latino families from seeking emotional support.





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