**Battling loss and grief during Covid -19 in a South Asian landscape**

[Haya Fatima Sehgal](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/haya-fatima-sehgal/)

April 5, 2021

The therapist I spoke to told me that ‘channeling’ grief was not the first stage that we should be speaking about as far as mental health was concerned. Particularly in this cultural environment, ‘battling’ grief would be the terminology better used. To her, Covid survivors or Covid-loss related survivors are likened to warriors. Warriors who were tethered to their state, in a drawn-out battle with extenuating circumstances, that prevented them from closure or relief via mourning or familiar means of support. Another affect were the complications faced in South Asia, where seeking help for or talking about mental health conditions is already a complex process from a cultural perspective.

Covid-related mental health conditionsare in themselves highly complicated as millions globally are suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a noted emerging consequence of the global pandemic. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), bereavement, isolation, loss of income and fear have triggered mental health conditions or exacerbated existing ones. Helplessness of the situation was experienced in extremity on a global scale as multitudes fell ill and simultaneously because of the conditions of the virus, were unable to go bury their dead or have traditional funeral rites. Moreover so, gone was having loved ones, relatives and a support system physically around which vanished due to strict lockdown conditions and quarantines. Within the first few months of the pandemic, several million people were reported globally to have lost their jobs. So where does this leave countries which have the bare means of focusing on mental health as well as healthcare resources?

Affected by the cultural values system, the bereaved are often hushed into silence to hide their emotions. Grief then becomes prolonged with feelings of frustration, coupled with anger, and other complications with no outlet to vent these emotions

Syed Kaiser Jillani is a filmmaker and a Covid survivor in Pakistan. He battles Covid related trauma daily, six months after losing his 32-year-old pregnant wife, his unborn child and his mother-in-law to the virus. They were expecting their first child when his wifeMunza passed away from Covid-19 complications. Kaiser bluntly says, “There is little or no adequate support system for mental wellbeing currently in Pakistan.” He was dissatisfied with several existent professionals in the field as the solutions initially offered did not address his situation holistically. He does maintain that his in-laws and his family have provided him with the familial support to get through. However, anger and pain do persist for him. Some people’s opinions, after the funeral, were unwarranted as even the talk of contracting Covid-19 is still a sensitive subject culturally. There also remain thought processes in Pakistan, that are not able to grasp or accept that Corona is very real.

There are also no support networks of counselling that Kaiser can join like the ones he has noticed abroad. He is part of a support group in America yet nothing on the ground here. Being a man in this society, it would be very difficult for him to speak openly on suffering from PTSD. He was surprisingly open about seeking assistance in trying to cope with his emotions despite cultural expectations. Cultural expectations which require him to hide his emotions or issues. However, Kaiser has been brave, speaking frankly about issues faced with emotional trauma. He has used this grief to try and create a public service message through his filmmakingby educating people on the novel coronavirus and helping them as part of a tributein memory of his late wife, Munza.

A simple example comes forward on cultural and belief set confines when dealing with loss; Muslims have tenets of faith that encourage them to complete the funeral rites within three days of the death as well as the formal expression of mourning. Most of the confusion here lies with mixing funeral rites with the process of grieving and grief as an emotion. Affected by the cultural values system, the bereaved are often hushed into silence to hide their emotions. Grief then becomes prolonged with feelings of frustration, coupled with anger, and other complications with no outlet to vent these emotions.

The mental health professionals here that I spoke to have been acutely aware of an impending problem for the populations of South Asian countries. People continue to struggle with anxiety, panic attacks, depression and discombobulation as events have unfolded and are still unfolding in the world today.

Mental healthand mental wellbeing particularly during the global pandemic, are one of the main concerns in the world today. Additional human and financial resources need to be devoted to mental health in order to circumvent chronic under-budgeting by countries as reported by the WHO. Here the state should enable public health mechanisms that encompass professionals bridging gaps as far as mental health awareness is concerned by directly addressing social and cultural taboos. Demystifying mental health disorders for the cultural landscape in South Asia is the need of the hour to help countless survivors who are trying to process through trauma from the ravages of the global pandemic.

*The writer is known for articles on Cultural Impact*