

Summary Project Report: Confronting COVID-19 Loss in Harlem: New Approaches to Overcoming Prolonged Grief in the Black Community

Project Period

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Acknowledgments

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Columbia World Projects (CWP) is a university-wide initiative established in 2017 to bridge scholarly knowledge and real-world action. With the goal of achieving the greatest possible impact on pressing challenges of our time, CWP mobilizes Columbia University's scholars, researchers, practitioners, and students to identify and implement interdisciplinary solutions to complex societal challenges in partnership with targeted change agents, such as policymakers, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and corporations.

For more information, contact Ann Bourns at akr25@columbia.edu or visit <https://worldprojects.columbia.edu/confronting-covid-19-loss-harlem>

CONFRONTING COVID-19 LOSS IN HARLEM:

New Approaches to Overcoming Prolonged Grief in the Black Community

Introduction

Deaths from COVID-19 are higher in Black communities than in white communities in the United States. Studies also show that inequities and disparities interfere with the process of adapting to loss. While attempts have been made to address the causes of these health disparities, less attention has been given to how to address and alleviate the Black communities' persistent and pervasive grief in the context of COVID-19.

The Columbia World Project (CWP) **Confronting COVID-19 Loss in Harlem: New Approaches to Overcoming Prolonged Grief in the Black Community** project was selected as one of three projects from a CWP-led Forum held in June 2020 as part of CWP's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This collaborative social impact project was implemented by the Columbia School of Social Work, Columbia University Center for Prolonged Grief, Mobilizing Preachers and Community-New York (MPAC-NY), and SAFELab at the Annenberg School for Communication and the School of Social Policy & Practice at University of Pennsylvania.

What is Prolonged Grief? With prolonged grief disorder, the grief that follows loss can seem endless, especially when the death is especially difficult. Work and family functioning is often impaired. Physical health is jeopardized with cardiovascular changes, an increased risk of heart attacks, and a weakened immune system.

A Unique Partnership, Born out of Urgency

Within Black communities in Harlem, COVID-19-related deaths occurred against a backdrop of COVID-19-related financial, employment, caregiving and other social stressors. This was in addition to a context characterized by ongoing racism, with its associated inequities and injustices—racial profiling, police violence, mass incarceration, voter suppression, and disparities in health, access to medical care, educational, and economic opportunities, among others. The increased burden of bereavement, added to these ongoing multilayered stresses led to an increased likelihood of mental and physical grief complications.

It was in this context that the idea for this project built on a burgeoning relationship between Reverend Dr. Johnnie Green, senior pastor of Mount Neboh Baptist Church in Harlem, New York and President and CEO of MPAC-NY, and Dr. Katherine Shear, founder and director of the Center for Complicated Grief at Columbia University. After COVID-19 reached New York in early 2020, Rev. Dr. Green quickly found himself at the center of the pandemic, with 12 of his parishioners dying from the coronavirus within a 60-day period—what was then the highest death toll within any church in New York City. Despite decades of experience as a counselor and bereavement specialist, Rev. Dr. Green found the task overwhelming and connected with the Center for Prolonged Grief.

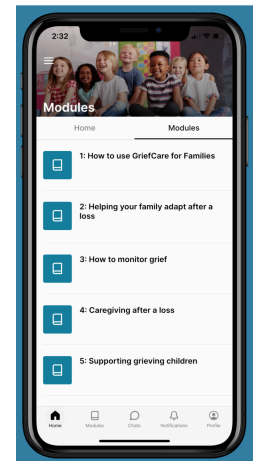
Rev. Dr. Green and Dr. Shear saw an opportunity to collaborate in order to better understand COVID-19-related prolonged grief in Black communities in Harlem and to support those affected by adapting tools created by the Center for Complicated Grief. They also brought in Dr. Desmond Patton, director of SAFELab, whose expertise in understanding how people of color express grief online would complement the stories told by community members. As Dr. Patton pointed out, “the grief piece of COVID has been understudied, under-supported in the overall process of tackling this virus. Prolonged grief has not been a part of the conversation the way other issues around COVID have been. Once everyone is vaccinated, the grief won’t just disappear.”



Dr. Desmond Patton presenting findings at Columbia University

Objectives

- **Better understand COVID-19 related grief and prolonged grief in black communities in Harlem.**
- **PROVIDE Black individuals in Harlem experiencing COVID-19-related loss with new tools and support to address prolonged grief.**
- **MODIFY the GriefCare for Families App to be more accessible to Harlem residents. The GriefCare for Families App** is a free web and mobile-based app with evidence-based information and learn-by-doing activities to help parents and caregivers get to know their grief and manage bereavement-related parenting stress.



Methods

Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania researchers partnered with MPAC NY to implement a qualitative and quantitative study to better understand complicated grief experiences in Harlem and to use the data to inform community-specific treatment tools.

Key methods were:

- Guided by experts at SAFE Lab at the University of Pennsylvania, Black community leaders and youth in Harlem were engaged in focus group discussions to introduce and adapt *Columbia University's Center for Prolonged Grief's* digital tools to be more accessible to the Harlem community.
- 830 digital diary entries were upload to the Integrating Emotional Stories Online (Ieso.) platform. The entries were analyzed in order to improve how algorithms understand language used to express grief and loss.



Guiding Focus Group Discussion Topics & Questions

Related to the experience of prolonged grief in the Harlem community: How do people in Harlem talk about grief? How were these conversations before COVID-19? Has COVID-19 changed how the Harlem community talks about grief? How might historical trauma affect how people experience, express, and adapt to grief?

Related to assessment of the GriefCare for Families App: How would you change these to better meet the needs of Black people in Harlem and the Harlem community overall?

Related to community dissemination strategies: Where do people in the community currently seek help for grief? How should we market GriefCare for families to people in the community?

Listening, Learning, and Adapting the Project Design

Once underway, community focus group participants brought up the importance of understanding grief among Black youth in Harlem, as well as the increased need for resources for treating prolonged grief in this group. In light of preliminary findings, the study team realized the significance of including this group and extended the original aims of the project to include additional 15 focus groups with 11 Black/African American youth from Harlem.

Findings

Experiences of grief in the Black Harlem community:

- There is desensitization and numbness to death, as a result of multiple losses.
- Alcohol and drugs are used to cope, and thus avoid the grieving process.
- There is a lack of resources in the Black community for people who experience grief (for example, the need for grief counselors FROM the community and IN the community).
- The need for resources to support community leaders, including pastors, is great.
- While the pandemic inhibited people from grieving in person, people found ways to hold culturally important processes, such as funerals via Zoom.
- Community collectivism helps Black people in Harlem adapt to grief.

How racism influences experiences of grief among Black people in Harlem:

- Losing loved ones to the carceral system is a source of grief in the community.
- Financial challenges and a lack of resources, both for everyday life things and for mental health needs, makes it difficult to adapt to grief.
- Discrimination in the medical system can intensify grief.
- Some believe that there is a lack of education about historical trauma for the community and especially youth, which can prolong the generational influence of historical trauma.
- There is fatigue related to death and grief.
- There is an institutional indifference to Black grief, and negative feelings were evoked when discussing systemic oppression.
- There are potential protective factors that help Black people in Harlem cope with grief, for example leaning into celebratory practices for loss loved ones (e.g., memorials, funerals, community solidarity, etc.). As well, there can be increased community connectedness after certain losses and feelings of resilience that can help Black people navigate and adapt to grief.

Experiences of grief among Black youth in Harlem:

- Grief is pervasive and they have lost many of their peers to community violence.
- Police violence against Black youth is a common experience, compounding their experiences of trauma and later feelings of grief and loss.
- Youth experience high amounts of non-death related losses and feelings of grief associated with losing loved ones to incarceration, drug abuse, or housing instability due to gentrification.
- Black youth often feel as if they have to deny or avoid their feelings of grief due to a lack of support, and this avoidance helps them survive and function.
- Despite this, they also noted that cultural practices such as memorials and feelings of collectivism help them adapt to grief, but they discussed a desire to have more resources for grief support.

Adapting and disseminating the GriefCare for families tool in Black communities:

- Expand and add new modules about grief as it relates specifically to Black and Harlem communities; community-wide grief; dealing with non-death losses (i.e., incarceration).
- Improve the App's appearance to include culturally relevant pictures, pictures of places and people from Harlem, and videos and animations.
- Include information and skills that focus on empowerment and resilience.
- Use social media, community ambassadors, and creative dissemination strategies such as "App parties" to help educate the community about the app and other grief resources.

"I think I'm real numb to grief...And I think death is happening so fast, like at a faster pace now, that you don't have time to cope, you don't have time to feel. Because as soon as you start feeling for one person who died, another person is gone..." – youth focus group participant in Harlem

Why This Project is Important

This project pulled expertise and knowledge from the community, across academia and non-profit organizations to reach some key findings:

1. Racism, historical trauma, and other sociocultural factors influence the experience of Prolonged Grief Disorder for Black Americans.
2. Community-based approaches can improve the dissemination of grief interventions for this population.
3. Integration of storytelling and other innovative approaches should be used to disseminate community-based projects. The community connects as a result of loss, influencing feelings of **solidarity**, especially as it relates to commemorating loss.
4. There is a severe lack of representation for Black Americans struggling with prolonged grief in the existing literature. In addition to attempting to add to the research surrounding Black grief, the findings from this project will inform clinicians in the fields of psychology and social work, provide helpful grief coping strategies and resources, and promote the need for grief-specific training for clinicians from or living within Harlem, rather than clinicians from elsewhere entering the community.

5. This research also addresses the need for awareness and treatment regarding numbness and emotional desensitization as a result of compounded grief, the role of historical trauma and racism in dealing with personal and systemic losses, and resilience in the face of large-scale losses such as COVID-19, viral police brutality incidents, and other current events.

6. The use of social media apps and digital diaries can play an important role in informing clinicians about language expressed online surrounding loss, and how to detect where resources are needed for those struggling with loss and/or prolonged loss (i.e. warning signs of grief online.)

Conclusions

- Allowing flexibility in research approaches can lead to deeper engagement and understanding. For example, creating smaller focus groups than originally planned helped to facilitate a more intimate and secure space, while also giving time to go in-depth on difficult topics.
- Community-based research does not exist in a vacuum; many systemic factors influence the relationship between community members and researchers. It is important to be reflective throughout the process and reflexive to the needs of participants, especially when working in the context of community mistrust.
- Anti-racism approaches should be actively integrated into community-based research methodology.

"Don't underestimate the convening power that the University has and that researchers have, that can be birthed out of community-based, collaborative partnerships" – Dr. Desmond Upton Patton

What's Ahead

Using these insights, the project will continue its adaptation of the Center's suite of prolonged grief disorder therapy tools to better support the needs of Black communities in Harlem. A consortium from Columbia University, University of Pennsylvania, and University of Maryland and community partners has been established to further cross-disciplinary learning and teaching about grief in the Black community and a documentary on Black grief is underway with plans for community dissemination. The team will continue to collaborate with MPAC-NY and explore the potential to expand this research in Harlem, as well as to other cities, including Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C.



Project Team Members

WORLD PROJECTS

Columbia Global