# I'm Grieving: What Culture Teaches Us About Grief

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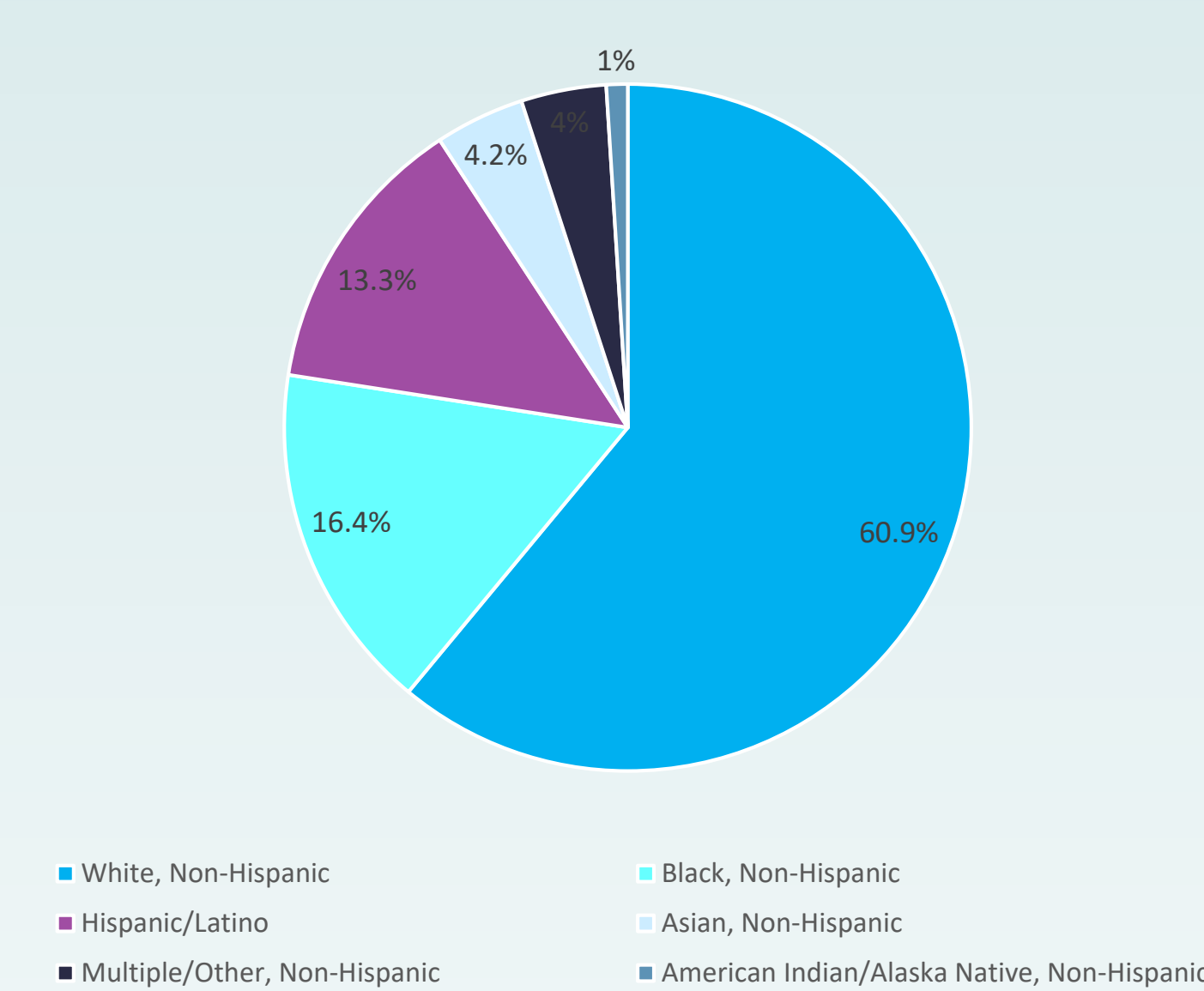
## Introduction

Death is an emotionally hard and inevitable process of life and how we are taught to cope with this process is through our culture, religion, and personal experiences. Culture is the beliefs, values, traditions, and rituals that individuals within a cultural group share. During the process of death, each cultural group has their own beliefs and rituals, which helps give them a sense of security, community, and the ability to cope. Although there is no correct way to grieve, we naturally (cognitively and emotionally) experience the 5 stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). In the 2020 year, there has been much grief due to the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has claimed the lives of nearly 400,000 people in the United States. While enduring COVID-19, many cultural traditions and rituals for death of an individual are interrupted due to nationwide restrictions. These restrictions caused many individuals to die alone from COVID-19 in hospitals.

Racial and ethnic minority groups are greatly disproportionately represented among COVID-19 cases and deaths. Social injustices and racism which include poverty and limited access to healthcare have led to the large disproportionate rate of COVID-19 deaths, especially within the African American and Latino American communities. The percent of cases for racial and ethnic minority groups are higher than their majority counterparts within the United States population. The comparison between the percentage of cases to the U.S. population by race and ethnicity shows the disparity. Non-Hispanic White people represent a majority of the U.S. population (60%), followed by Hispanic or Latino people (18%), non-Hispanic Black people (12%), and non-Hispanic Asian people (6%). According to the United States Center of Disease and Control (2020), based on 201,232 COVID-19 deaths, 13.3% are Hispanic/Latino (26,789), 16.4% are African American (32,947), and 4.2% are Asian American (8,546).



Percentage of U.S. Population per Race/Ethnicity
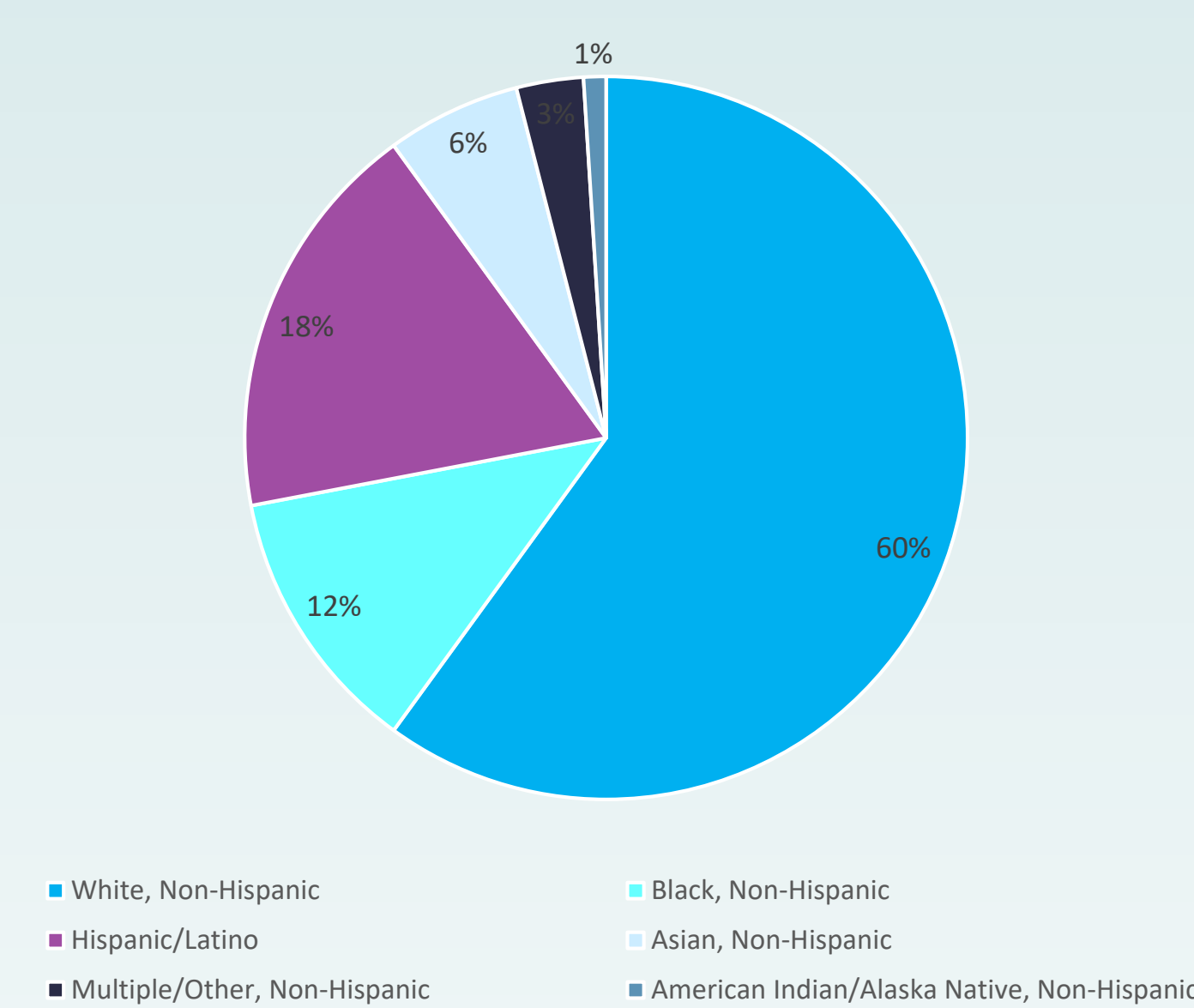
Percentage of Deaths per Race/Ethnicity

- White, Non-Hispanic
- Black, Non-Hispanic
- Hispanic/Latino
- Asian, Non-Hispanic
- Multiple/Other, Non-Hispanic
- American Indian/Alaska Native, Non-Hispanic

The objective of this study is to compare the attitudes and practices regarding how the cultural groups of African American, Asian American, and Latinx move through each phase of the grief process during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this unprecedented time of COVID-19, the increasing number of deaths has called for examination of grief and how various cultures cope. The preliminary findings of this literature review will help provide school psychologists with the awareness and tools for them to become more equipped to handle the increasing number of students who are grieving.

## Methodology

The racial/ethnic minority groups chosen for this study represent the largest minority groups within the United States population that were mainly affected by COVID-19. COVID-19 caused a disproportionate rate of death among the Latinx, African American, and Asian American communities. A literature review was conducted to examine how people of these racial/ethnic groups use their grief of death cultural norms to help them navigate through the 5 stages of grief although there are large rapid number of individuals dying from each minority community and COVID-19 restrictions.

## Literature Review

### 5 stages of grief Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2014
- The first reaction refers to an individual in **denial** that the death of a loved one occurred. They choose to believe a false preferable reality.
- Once denial cannot continue, the individual feel **anger** or frustration of the death.
- The avoidance of the cause of grief is experienced in the **bargaining** stage. The individual tends to bargain for the deceased to have more time to live.
- The individual feels hopelessness with the recognition of the death and experiences **depression**.
- The individual experiences an **acceptance** of the death and typically comes with a stable condition of emotions



5 Stages of Grief
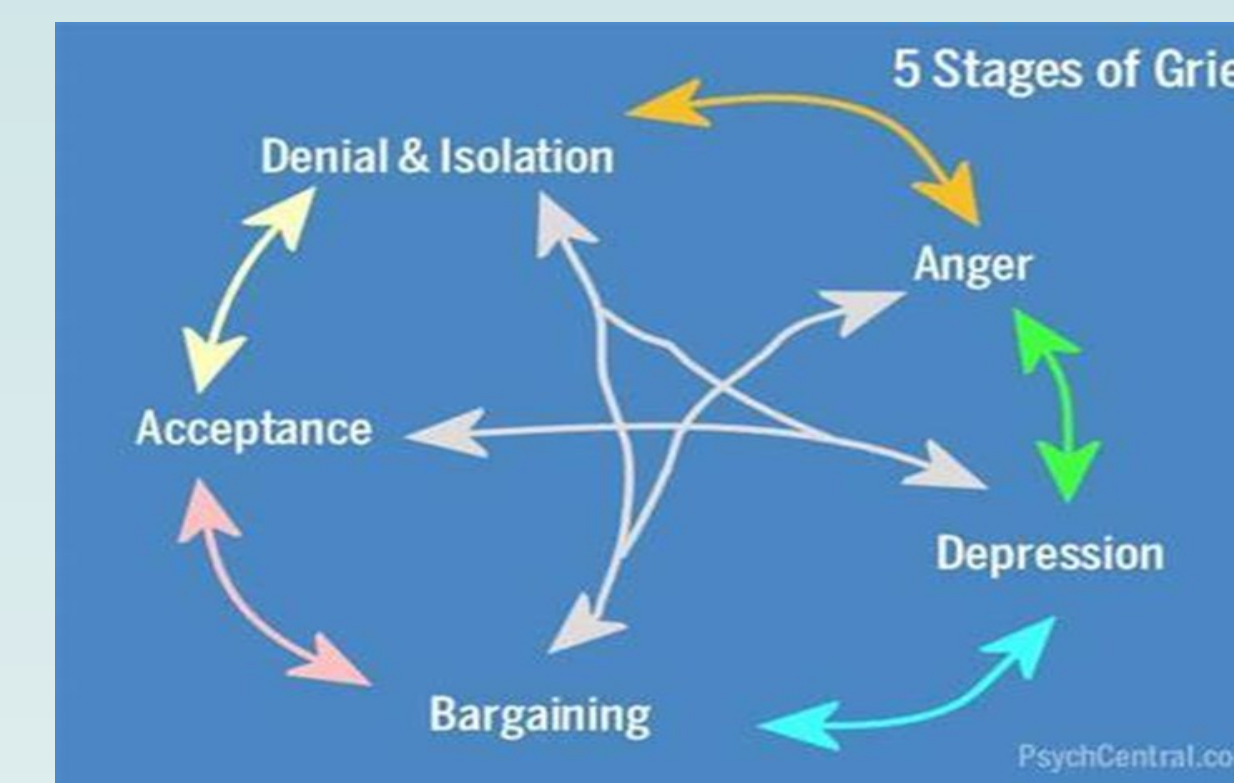
### Latinx
- The Latinx population may grieve differently based on whether or not the death was expected. In a study, after a sudden death those who lost someone unexpectedly reported more intense grief than Latinx grieving an expected death and non-Latino/as grieving any death, expected or unexpected (Grabowski & Frantz, 1992).
- Within the Latinx culture there is a preference for *death at home* surrounded by family and friends, with caretaking done by the women in the family. If patients are hospitalized at the end of their life, family members may crowd their room or the hospital waiting room to show support (McGoldrick et al., 2004).
- Adult Latino men feel the need to show male dominance or the male role by having limited emotional response. This occurrence is due to the expectation of "being strong" for the family and not to openly grieve (Clements et al., 2003).

### African American
- Death within African American culture is described as "active and response" (Barret, 1998). African American families, both immediate and extended, gather in one location to provide support to the grieving family (Clements et al., 2003). Family friends, community and clergy members also gather to provide strength, comfort, and support to the bereaved family (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008).
- African Americans are more likely than other cultural groups to give and receive intergenerational support during the death of a family member (Mutran, 1985).
- African Americans report a high degree of religious participation, religious coping, and spirituality (Taylor, Chatters, & Jackson, 2007).
- The sense of kinship/family is important within the African American community/culture. Laurie & Neimeyer (2008), suggests that African American are more likely to distress over the loss of an extended family member compared to their Caucasian counterparts.

### Asian American
- Wilson and Ryan (1990) noted many Chinese Americans are hesitant to talk about death because it is considered to bring bad luck.
- In Asian American culture it is important to adhere to strict proper funeral rituals. For example, in Chinese American culture if the person is buried without the rituals, a hungry ghost will plague the living (Watson & Rawski, 1988).
- In Chinese American culture, the deceased cannot be moved or touched after the first 8 hours of death. In Japanese American culture Pillow sutra needs to be performed at the bedside at the time of death (Braun & Nichols, 1997).
- Braun and Nichols (1997) stated that Japanese Americans and Vietnamese Americans hold memorial services Memorial services held every 7 days for 7 weeks, after 100 days, 1 year, 3 years, 7 years, and so forth.

## Discussion

"The subsequent isolation undermined their healing process and affected their ability to cope, as they received little support during their mourning and could not share their traumatic experiences" (Rabelo, Lee, Fallah, et al., 2016).

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, visitors were not allowed to accompany patients while in the hospital, therefore, many patients with COVID-19 ultimately died alone. As learned during this literature review, racial/ethnic groups have their own cultural rituals for death and grief that helps them cope and navigate through the 5 stages of grief. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, cultural rituals were not able were not able to be enacted. Death, grief, and bereavement are all personal experiences. An exploration of alternative and culturally appropriate coping skills and grief counseling should be conducted due to COVID-19 restrictions.

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