



# Helping Bereaved Muslims



Amina –  
the Muslim Women's Resource Centre



**MWRC**



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# Introduction

What is bereavement? Bereavement means literally ‘deprived by death’. This booklet covers bereavement from the perspective of the Islamic faith, and also gives some useful information about how the Islamic faith tackles issues surrounding death, about funeral rites and customs, and how these topics are viewed in cultures that are based on Islam.

Are Muslims who are going through bereavement any different from those of other cultures? No, of course not, yet differences exist in the way Muslims view life, the practical variations that culture may bring and the faith perspective brings its own distinction. These combine to alter the way bereavement is approached and dealt with; the purpose of this handbook is to help identify the impact of these differences on Muslims and ways to improve the helping experience. The person who has suffered bereavement is the best person to let you know what is happening, but it is hoped that what is contained here will assist in understanding what the bereaved Muslim says more easily.

At the end of this booklet basic and fundamental beliefs in Islam and some commonly heard terminology is briefly covered for additional background information – it may be useful to peruse shortly before dealing with bereaved Muslims.

## Who is this booklet meant for?

As a trained or experienced counsellor, you will have already been exposed to the generally accepted thinking about the stages and experience of grief. The purpose of this handbook is to add to that knowledge some information about factors that might particularly affect a bereaved person, or family, of the Muslim faith. This handbook will also be useful to people who provide support and advice to bereaved Muslims such as Hospital Chaplains and palliative care staff.

## What information does this handbook contain?

Some basic knowledge of the potential beliefs of those left behind will assist a counsellor in understanding the ‘language’ bereaved Muslims are using, and offer advisors a view of what, if anything, is appropriate advice.

The rites and practices which are covered in this booklet are based on and taken from the Quran and the “Life Practices and Sayings” (*sunnah*) of the Prophet Mohammed ﷺ. Although the fundamental issues will be the same across different Muslim cultures, some of the secondary traditions may vary from culture to culture and between differing sects of the Faith. Therefore there may be slight differences between what is mentioned there and what happens in an individual case, but the general approach is outlined below.

## Beliefs about death and the afterlife, according to Islam

- That the soul departs at the time of death.
- That the body should be buried at the first available opportunity, within 24 hours if possible. Delay in burying the deceased may cause anxiety to the bereaved family, in particular where the delay is long e.g. due to a post-mortem.
- That the body should be buried and not cremated, and all body parts should be included – even if there has been some kind of tragic car accident where death follows or surgery where body parts may have been removed.

- That there is a Judgement Day, when each soul accounts for its deeds in this life, the balance of good against the bad is taken, and the soul is given either hell or heaven as their residence for the Hereafter.
- That there is no re-birth into this world as in the Hindu or Buddhist faith.
- Anyone who has committed suicide may not be granted Paradise. Allah has promised Paradise to all who believe in Him without assigning partners to Him. Only Allah knows the state of mind and the last thoughts on an individual at the time of death, and we here on earth can not have certainty on the final outcome.
- That a Divine Will or *qadar* governs our time of death. This means that nothing could be done to change it, as people say “it is written” (in the book of destiny). This is an important belief when dealing with emotions of grief as it may give relief to acknowledge that no man can influence *Allah’s* decree.
- That there is a Hereafter. This world is a passing time with eternity to follow. With this belief comes the concept that our actions in this world and how we deal with them affects where we spend eternity.

## Funeral rites in Islam

- Soon after the death of a Muslim, the body receives a ritual washing (*ghusl*), performed by (where possible) close family members of the relevant gender, i.e. daughters and daughters-in-law, or sisters would wash a woman, while brothers and sons would wash a man. A wife is allowed to wash her husband and vice versa with the husband bathing his wife with closest female family members helping.

Where needed or on request in this country, respected elders in the community familiar with the burial rites can perform the ritual washing. Contact numbers in Glasgow are: Central Mosque 0141 429 3132, or 0141 420 1232 or where required Glasgow Central Mosque and other Mosques can arrange a full funeral and burial service including washing and wrapping of the body.

- Once the body has been bathed, it is wrapped in a plain, white cotton shroud, and where possible, the body should be buried without a coffin.

As this is not always possible in this country, a simple box should be used; with a very plain headstone (only if it is a requirement of the cemetery).

- Family members are allowed to see the face of the deceased before the shroud is closed prior to the burial.
- A special prayer is performed called *Salat-ul-Janazah*. Most male family members will attend this; the number of women attending is usually lower. As many people in the community as possible should be informed that this prayer is taking place. It is a communal obligation to perform the funeral prayer and men are expected to attend if possible – even if they did not know the deceased.
- The burial takes place after the prayer – and as said above, within 24 hours of death, if at all possible. The body is buried facing the holy city of Mecca, in Saudi Arabia.
- Inheritance issues are to be dealt with as soon as possible after death. Burial costs and debts are dealt with first before inheritors can get their shares. Inheritance matters can in many cases cause great stress especially where family members fall into disagreement.

## Mourning in the Islamic community

- There is an official three-day period of mourning for the deceased. This period is an ‘official’ recognition of a person’s death and an opportunity for the bereaved family to wholly embrace their grief before life intrudes once more and offers a time for condolences to be made to all members of the family together. The wife will observe a mourning period of four months and 10 days – this period is called *Eddat* (or *iddat*). If the wife is pregnant, this period lasts until the birth of the child.
- During the three days of mourning normal life ceases to allow the immediate family to mourn. Neighbours and friends are encouraged to take over chores such as cooking and looking after small children during this period, while people pay personal visits at the family’s home to offer condolences. Sending cards of condolences is not a common practice; personal visits to the home to console the family is more common and done as soon as learning of the death.
- It is also customary for community members and relatives to go to the home of the bereaved family and begin to read prayers with the family.

The Quran may be read to completion a number of times over the next three days. Those relatives who have come a long distance will, in all likelihood, reside in the family's home.

- Work and life should resume back to normal at the end of the 3-day period. This is often wrongly assumed to mean that this period is all that you may grieve in. This is not so. The heart and soul may grieve for a long time to come.

*One thing that both you and Muslims in the community may hear being said at this time is that crying for the deceased is frowned upon or prohibited in Islam – or that crying and showing grief after the first three-day period is prohibited – but it must be stressed that neither of these two things are true.*

What is being misunderstood here is *Hadith* (saying of the Prophet Mohammed ﷺ). At the time of revelation of the Holy Quran, it was customary to wail and eulogise (praise or berate loudly) – as well as beat themselves, or tear their clothes – to show how deep their grief was. It was this latter practice which was referred to, and completely discouraged.

Both the Quran and *Sunnah* demonstrate that honest and heartfelt crying is not only acceptable and permitted but a mercy from Allah to help ease the pain and heartache of grief. Counsellors should reassure all persons of the Muslim faith that crying is both natural and fitting, and will help in dealing with their grief.

## Other cultural practices

- After the first three days, the Quran may be read and again on the seventh day. This will be in Arabic, in one sitting, and done by a number of people. When this happens, food is often offered afterwards to those reading.
- Many Islamic cultures repeat this act of reading on the 40th day after death, and charity and gifts to the poor and needy are also offered, in the name of the deceased.
- On certain dates e.g. Anniversary of deceased's death some Muslims arrange a gathering to recite the Quran again with the intention of increasing the deceased's balance of good deeds. Strictly speaking, this is

discouraged within the tenets of Islam, as people often see it to be compulsory. When people feel they *have* to perform these deeds then it becomes wrong to do them.

The root of these traditions can be traced to Hadith; the Prophet ﷺ is said to have said that if three people say good things about the deceased, it is affirmed to him, and adds to his good deed balance. These are not necessarily practices that are known to have been carried out by the Prophet ﷺ or his followers during his lifetime. Certainly anyone feeling that they were wrong in not following them can be reassured that this is not the case. However reading of the Quran at any time is encouraged and deemed necessary to receive guidance and comfort. These readings and prayers are all intended to offer comfort and relief to the bereaved family and to assist in the deceased's pathway to Heaven.

- The Funeral may be held back for a little while to wait for family members coming from far. This has become a common practice and causes tension within the family as other members are fully aware that this is a discouraged practice in Islam, and may feel that it is a wrong thing to do.
- Some people, especially first generation immigrants, wish to return the body to the country of origin, so that it can rest with its relatives, to rise with them on Day of Judgement. The family back home will also have the opportunity to visit the grave. Many scholars consider that there is no Islamic basis for this, and that this practice should be discouraged as it involves mutilating the body in the embalming process as well as delay in burial. The desire to do this (and for many on low incomes the financial barriers to doing this), the absence of a grave to visit for those still resident in UK, and even guilt for those who have done this and later been told it is Islamically incorrect, may all add to stress factors around the bereavement.

## Complicated grief

There are other cultural factors which may arise which are particular to the Muslim community, and the resolution of which may require expert help with a case-worker who is both trained in counselling and also has an in-depth understanding of the community and Islamic faith. These factors can include:

- the fact that the deceased may have been very pious; If the deceased was a firmly practicing Muslim who, the bereaved person feels will go to Paradise, then in order to meet them there they may begin to reassess their life from this goal orientation. (e.g. what do they need to do to get to heaven to be with their loved one);
- that if the deceased was not known to be a practising Muslim; the greatest fear of the bereaved person may be that their loved one may go to Hell; reassurance may be offered that Allah is the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful and that the best thing to do is pray for the deceased to be granted Paradise;
- that if the deceased was a family member who had become estranged due to marriage outside of the faith, community, or sect; not being allowed to openly grieve may cause distress to the bereaved person;
- that the death took place ‘back home’ – the lack of visual or physical evidence of the death can interfere with the ability to grieve;
- that the bereaved has no family nearby or is living far from any Muslim community; death is both a community and family event and in the absence of these may be particularly hard at this time plus a specialist knowledge may not be available outwith the Muslim community;
- that either the deceased or a surviving partner has married into the culture and become a Muslim relatively recently with not enough background knowledge of the faith and culture;
- that someone born in the UK feels unable to identify with the faith and cultural norms of the country they have never visited or lived in;
- that the loss of a stillborn premature child – i.e., a miscarriage – does not ‘qualify’ for *Salat-ul-Janazah*, since this may not be considered a real loss;
- that the bereaved person was in a secret relationship which was hidden from the family and friends, so now no-one knows of that person’s grief;

With these and similar aspects of the culture, again, the recommendation is that you consult with a colleague who has experience of both counselling work, and helping people with their faith. The ‘Resources’ section below may assist you find such a person or at least refer you to similar contacts in your locality.

## Resources

### **Amina, The Muslim Women's Resource Centre**

311 Calder street, Network House, Glasgow G42 7NQ

Helpline Number 0808 801 0301

[www.mwrc.org.uk](http://www.mwrc.org.uk)

Bereavement Counselling offered from an Islamic perspective. For more information and appointments call 0141 585 8026. Lines open from 9.30am to 5pm

**Cruse Glasgow** branch, 1st Floor, Central Chambers, 11 Bothwell Street, Glasgow G2 6LY

Helpline Number 0141 248 2199

[www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

Cruse for children [www.rd4u.org.uk](http://www.rd4u.org.uk)

**SOBS Survivors of Bereaved by Suicide** 0870 241 3337 – 9am–9pm daily

[www.bereavedbysuicide.org.uk](http://www.bereavedbysuicide.org.uk)

Dunbartonshire (West)

Support group for those left behind by suicide, Tel: 0141 951 6234

Glasgow, Life Link, (contact Gerry) Tel: 0141 548 1515

**Winstons Wishes** for support of bereaved children 0845 203 0405 –

[www.winstonswishes.org.uk](http://www.winstonswishes.org.uk)

Enquiries +44 (0) 1242 515157 Fax +44 (0) 1242 546187

[info@winstonswish.org.uk](mailto:info@winstonswish.org.uk)

The Clara Burgess Centre, Bayshill Road, Cheltenham, GL50 3AW

**The Way Widowed** for support of Widows and Young: 0870 011 3450

[www.wayfoundation.org.uk](http://www.wayfoundation.org.uk)

Or write to:

The WAY Foundation, PO Box 6767, Brackley, NN13 6YW

**SAMARITANS** 0845 790 9090

[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

210 West George Street, GLASGOW, G2 2PQ tel: 0141 248 4488

Usual hours open to receive callers: 09:30–22:00

Facilities for visitors with disabilities: Access at rear of building. Phone to arrange.

Department of Health Policy and Guidance on Bereavement [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk)

## **BSA – Bereavement Services Association**

The Department of Health, Richmond House, 79 Whitehall, London SW1A 2NS

Phone: 020 7210 4850

Lines are open from 09:00 to 17:00, Monday to Friday

Textphone (for deaf and hard of hearing) 020 7210 5025

Lines are open from 09:00 to 17:00, Monday to Friday

**Janazah and Burial** – Talimul Haq Part 10: for information on Janaza and Burial

[www.inter-islam.org/Actions/Part10](http://www.inter-islam.org/Actions/Part10)

## **Glasgow Central Mosque**

1 Mosque Avenue, Glasgow, G5 9TA

Tel: 0141 429 3132 and 0141 420 1232

# **Some of the key beliefs and practices of islam**

[Reference material that may be of benefit]

You may have heard of ‘the Five Pillars of Islam’ – these are the five main duties every Muslim should perform:

*Shahadah* – belief in the Oneness of Allah

*Salah* – five daily prayers (these are said: before dawn, around but not at midday, mid-afternoon, at the beginning of sunset, and at night in the direction of the Holy City of Mecca. Your being aware of these timings may be relevant when you make appointments)

*Saum* – fasting – from dawn to dusk – during the month of Ramadan, (The Islamic calendar is lunar, ie has 12 lunar months, each of 29 or 30 days, and so Ramadan falls at a different time every year when compared with the ‘standard’ Gregorian calendar.)

*Zakat* – an obligatory payment of charity on any profit you have at the end of a year.

*Sadaqah* is the name for voluntary charity, which may be given at will and has no set amount.

*Hajj* – Pilgrimage to the Holy City of Mecca once in your lifetime is obligatory if you can afford the expense. (It is possible to perform this on behalf of a

person who has died and has been unable to fulfil this tenant of faith, provided this, again, is affordable without resorting to loans.)

For a Muslim, there are then six things in which you are required to believe in:

- Belief in the Oneness of Allah
- Belief in his Angels
- Belief in his Books – Divine Revelations
- Belief in his Messengers (all of them)
- Belief in the Hereafter (Akhera)
- Belief in Divine Will (Qadar)

**It is common practice for Muslims from all nations to use Arabic words and phrases of the Quran when expressing themselves, here are a few you may hear and find helpful to know:**

*Akbeerah* – afterlife (pr. ah-kheey-rah)

*Alhamdulillah* – All praise is to Allah (pr. Ul-hamd-dhu-lil-lah)

*Allah* – the One God who has no partners nor children

*Allahhu Akbar* – God is Great (pr. Al-lah-who-uk-burr)

*Astaghfirallah* – (Us-tag-fur-Allah) I ask Allah for forgiveness

*Ghusl* – full ritual washing of the body, including after death, with intention to purify

*Hadith* – documented and corroborated sayings and witness of actions of the prophet Mohammed ﷺ

*Iman* – belief in God (pr. ee-maan)

*Inshallah* – ‘if Allah wills’ (pr. in-sh-Allah)

*Jannah* – paradise or heaven (pr. jun-nah)

*Jahannam* – hell (pr. jah-han-am)

*Mashallah* – ‘by the wish of Allah’ (pr. maa-sh-Allah)

*Niyaat* – intention (pr. Knee-yut)

*Quran* – Islamic Holy Book

*Quran Khani/Quran Khatum* – a collective reading of the Quran in Arabic (pr. Koo-ran kaa-ni or Koo-ran kaa-tom)

*Salallah-hu-alaihiwasalam* – May Allah’s Peace and blessings be Upon Him – it is always said after the Prophet’s name (pr. Sul-lul-lah-who-alay-hi-wa-salum) ﷺ

*Sadaqah Jahriyah* – ongoing or continuing charity (pr. Sa-dah-kah Jah-ree-yah)

*Saparah* – one-thirtieth division of the Quran [often read person at Quran Khatums] (pr. Sah-pah-rah)

## References

*The Quran – English translation, A summarised version of At-Tabari, Al-Qurtubi and Ibn Kathir with comments from Sahih Al-Bukhari (summarised in one volume by Dr. Muhammad Taqi-ud Din Al-Hilali, Ph.D (Berlin) Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan.)*

*Summarised Sahih Al-Bukhari – translated by Dr.Muhammad Muhsin Khan*

*Royal College of Physicians website*

*Hadith translation from Sahih Al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim from Quran.net website.*

*Islamic content checked by Shaykh Amer Jamil*



My hope for the bereaved ...

**Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, says in the Quran:  
“Allah burdens not a person beyond his scope ...”**

QURAN Surah (chapter) 2, Ayat (verse) 286.

Bereavement and working through grief is a difficult time for everyone, and each passage through this veil of tears is an individual one. Yet the common themes felt by all – the shock, denial, anger, fear, despair, and loneliness – can be made to feel worse, or they can be made much easier to bear – if the right kind of support is available.

It is my hope and prayer that this booklet is beneficial to all that read it, and will help you or someone like you to provide support for a person suffering loss. I hope, too, that it enables a greater understanding of our similarities as well as our differences – and leads to the easing of grief, which comes to all of us with the natural passage of time.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank some very important people who helped in the compilation of this document; my uncle Eric Robbie, and Sheikh Amer Jamil for his assistance with the Islamic content. It would not have been the same booklet without them.

SHAMALA ADNAN SHAUKAT.

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