

# AIDS-related multiple losses: A threat to care, culture, and communalty

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## Background

A professional *ethos* of caring and compassion compels nurses to engage with patients. Yet, an overwhelming burden of debilitation, loss, and grief resulting from AIDS-related multiple losses has serious implications for the nurses' professional and personal lives.

## Methods

The Nurses SOAR! program provides an innovative 'Loss & Grief' retreat for nurses in Lesotho, Swaziland, and South Africa.

The overnight intervention explores personal and professional losses, allows the expression of emotions in a safe, confidential, and supportive setting, and recognizes individual responses to grief. Grief management strategies are contextualized to one's culture.



## Results

Symptoms of overwhelming grief and mounting stressors take an emotional toll on nurses who report:

- unprecedented numbers of patient deaths
- feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness
- unable to provide resources, counseling, and support for patients
- emotional numbness that undermines quality of HIV/AIDS care
- increased absenteeism due to physical and emotional stress
- caring for ill family members and assuming the care of orphans



Frequent funerals are undermining cultural values. Nurses report:

- truncating – or eliminating – traditional rituals due to expense
- an erosion of cultural values due to constraints on time, resources
- diminishing communalty as individuals focus on their own needs

The Loss & Grief Retreat intervention helps by:

- facilitating the expression of difficult and distressing emotions
- providing a safe setting to explore the spiritual distress
- acknowledging the unique aspects of grief for nurses
- exploring practical strategies for building systems of support for nurses
- highlighting nurses' unique role in the wellbeing of their community



## Conclusions & Implications

Nursing capacity building depends upon maintaining nurse wellness. The HIV/AIDS pandemic threatens the health of nurses, the integrity of their culture, and the fabric of their community.

Unprecedented numbers of AIDS-related deaths that nurses experience may diminish quality nursing care, cause spiritual distress, and erode the support systems that maintain an effective healthcare workforce.

Supporting a 'community of self-care' with theory-based, culturally appropriate grief interventions and support services is crucial for nurses confronted with multiple AIDS-related deaths. Sustainability requires training local nurses with the skills necessary to facilitate the retreats.



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