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.