

Headline	Mourning is a great universal		
MediaTitle	Sunday Star		
Date	29 Jan 2012	Color	Full Color
Section	Supplement	Circulation	320,964
Page No	7	Readership	1,072,000
Language	English	ArticleSize	482 cm <sup>2</sup>
Journalist	MEGHAN O ROURKE	AdValue	RM 18,037
Frequency	Weekly	PR Value	RM 54,112



# Mourning is a great universal

Nothing unites a community more than the death of a loved one. Yet we often feel the need to shoulder our sorrows alone.

By MEGHAN O'ROURKE

**W**HY do we find it so hard to discuss death – or support those who are mourning a loss? My mother died of cancer on Christmas Day 2008. She was 55 and I was 32. Although I knew that she was dying, I was completely unprepared for the reality of her being dead – and for how alone I would feel with my grief.

In the strange days after her death, I wondered what I was supposed to do. So did my friends, especially those who had not yet suffered a major loss. One sent flowers but did not call for weeks. Another sent a kind e-mail, saying she hoped I was “well” and asking me to let her know if there was “anything I can do to help”.

But I wasn't “well”. Within a week, people stopped mentioning her name. After a month had passed by, I had the distinct feeling that I was supposed to “muscle through it” and move on, as if I were recovering from flu.

Today, most Westerners are uncomfortable around death. As Western cultures have become more secular and heterogeneous, the mourning rituals that once guided mourners and communities through the painful currents of this intense time have dropped away. Grief has become more private

even as it has been framed more psychologically.

Friends talk to you about “getting through it” and “healing”. They raise the question of antidepressants – but don't know how to offer the simple help that many mourners need: acknowledgment and recognition of their loss.

We shy away from talking about death, not out of cold-heartedness, but out of fear.

Death scares us. No one wants to say the wrong thing. The result is a dysfunctional culture in which we avidly consume news of death on TV and duck away from it in real life.

It wasn't always so: until the 20th century, private grief and public mourning were allied in most cultures. If your husband died, the village came to your door and you put on special mourning clothes. In many nations death was met with lamentation among family and neighbours.

A ceremony usually followed the cleaning of the body; a year later, another marked the first anniversary of a death.

During the Victorian era, family members restricted their social lives and adhered to a dress code for up to two years.

Then mourning rituals in the West began to disappear. The anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer conjectures that the first world war was one cause in Britain: communities were so overwhelmed by the numbers of dead that they dropped the practice of mourning the individual.

But clearly broader changes in the culture accelerated the shift.

More people, including women, began working outside the home; in the absence of caretakers, death increasingly took place in the protective isolation of the hospital.

Psychoanalysis led to a shift from the communal to the individual experience. In 1917, two years after Emile Durkheim wrote about mourning as an essential social process, Freud defined it as something fundamentally private; by the 1960s, Gorer would write: “Today it would seem to be believed, quite sincerely, that sensible, rational men and women can keep their mourning under complete control by strength of will and character, so that it need be given no public expression.”

In the wake of the AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) crisis and 9/11, the conversation about death in the West has grown more open. Yet we still think of grieving as something to be done alone.

There might not be a “right” way to grieve, but it's interesting to note that in Western countries with fewer mourning rituals, the bereaved report a higher level of physical ailments in the year following a death – suggesting a very real human need to mourn communally.

This may be one reason that we've witnessed a boom in memoirs about loss; they reflect our need to share our experience in an age that's let go of the ceremonious language that once bridged the stark boundary between inner sorrow and outer function.

Each loss may be private, but mourning a death is the great universal – a condition that unites us. – ©Guardian News & Media 2012

Headline	Mourning is a great universal		
MediaTitle	Sunday Star		
Date	29 Jan 2012	Color	Full Color
Section	Supplement	Circulation	320,964
Page No	7	Readership	1,072,000
Language	English	ArticleSize	482 cm <sup>2</sup>
Journalist	MEGHAN O ROURKE	AdValue	RM 18,037
Frequency	Weekly	PR Value	RM 54,112



**Private affair:** Today, most Westerners are uncomfortable around death. The mourning rituals that once guided mourners and communities through the painful currents of this intense time have dropped away. — AP