

Kenya's starvation cult left over 100 dead—a psychologist's view on how to support people as they process tragedy

May 8 2023, by Stephen Asatsa



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In [early April 2023](#), Kenyan police discovered a mass grave linked to a Pentecostal church in the coastal town of Malindi. By the end of the month, at least [110 bodies](#) had been dug up from shallow graves in the area's Shakahola forest.

A loss of this magnitude is [traumatic and painful](#) for the families and friends directly affected, and also for the public exposed to the details. The [level of media attention, public backlash and judgment of the dead](#) makes the experience of the loss even more difficult for those directly concerned.

The Shakahola story is being controlled by parties outside the families affected because of the [government scrutiny](#) and a [police investigation](#) related to the [criminal case](#) against the church leader. This has the potential to disrupt healthy grieving.

Africa is considered [one of the most religious continents](#) in the world. Many people use religion as a coping mechanism during difficult moments, yet in this case, [religion is center stage](#) as the possible perpetrator of the grief being experienced. This complicates the grieving process as people experience betrayal from one of their most valued support systems: religion.

Most families will adapt their own style and process—all valid—to handle the pain and trauma. As a counseling psychologist, I have [conducted studies](#) on how [communities deal with death](#) and found unique practices that help in processing grief.

However, there are certain common stages of grief that people will experience—and can be helped to process—as the Shakahola tragedy continues to unfold. These stages are:

- shock and numbness

- yearning and searching
- despair and disorganization
- reorganization and recovery.

Shock and numbness

This is one of the initial responses individuals experience when they receive news of the death of a loved one. It manifests in the form of denial of the fact that the person is dead. Some people hope that what's happening will be reversed. Others react by minimizing the magnitude of the loss.

Shock or denial is one of the immediate healthy reactions to a traumatic event. This gives affected people the time to absorb and accept a difficult reality before they come to terms with it. Families should resist efforts to get them to accept a loss and "move on". Shock, disappointment, anger, frustration, denial or even acceptance are all valid reactions.

Yearning and searching

At this stage, a grieving person has begun to get in touch with the reality of their loss. Staring at a perceived impossible future, a grieving individual tries to search for the comfort they used to enjoy from the deceased. This manifests in a continuous preoccupation with the person who has died, and an attempt to look for reminders of them. Some grieving people will cling to their loved one's photos or clothes, or spend

time in their favorite places.

In a traumatic case like the Shakahola one, one of the most important things that families will be yearning and searching for is justice and information about what caused their loved one's death. A satisfactory [autopsy process](#) and prosecution of the perpetrators would help people to grieve in a healthy way.

Families should be allowed to experience this stage without any external regulation. This can be therapeutic as it helps families reflect, experience the pain associated with the loss and vent their emotions. In this stage, individuals will cry and feel sad, confused or frustrated as the reality of their loss sets in.

Despair and disorganization

With the reality that their loss is permanent and irreversible, bereaved people in this stage may feel hopeless and angry, and question their situation. For families affected by the Shakahola saga, many are likely to be furious at government agencies, their deceased loved ones and the church.

This anger may also be directed at themselves, especially if they feel they could have done something to prevent the death of their loved one. It may also be directed at others for causing the death or not doing enough to prevent the death, or at God for not listening to their prayers to prevent the death.

It's important to allow families to express these mixed reactions at whoever they choose to without trying to convince them otherwise. It's healthy for them to ask questions and blame whoever they choose to. This stage is not permanent.

Reorganization and recovery

At this stage, the intensity of grief declines and hope is restored. A grieving person begins to see the possibility of living a good life again. They begin to relinquish some of their loved one's property or start to carry out some of the duties that were performed by the deceased.

These four stages, however, manifest differently for different people. And they're not linear. They may appear in any order. Time is also a silent stage and factor that helps people process grief.

The public watching the stories coming out of Shakahola can experience secondary trauma. This is difficult to avoid since access to information is a fundamental right. It's therefore important for people to be aware of negative emotions that may develop as a result of following the saga. It shouldn't raise alarm, though, as with time, these emotions will subside.

Journalists, security forces and other workers with [direct access](#) to the tragedy and exhumation of bodies are exposed to the danger of high-level traumatisation. They may need to seek psychosocial support to avoid developing severe psychological effects, including insomnia and anxiety.

Understanding grief is an important step towards healing. When you experience a tragedy, it's important to realize that any accompanying emotions are normal reactions to an abnormal event. The process may take time and the pain may not subside quickly, and it all remains valid.

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