



CASE REPORT

# Transitioning from dramatic spiritual struggle to desirable spiritual well-being through beliefs flexibilization after dysfunctional bereavement - A case study of a Brazilian family

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**PUBLISHED**

31 May 2026

**CITATION**

Saad, M., and de Medeiros., 2026. Transitioning from dramatic spiritual struggle to desirable spiritual well-being through beliefs flexibilization after dysfunctional bereavement - A case study of a Brazilian family. Medical Research Archives, [online] 14(5).

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**ISSN**

2375-1924

## ABSTRACT

The objective of this report is to discuss how the flexibility of beliefs can positively impact mental health indicators. The case highlights the role that adaptability within a belief system may play in transforming the grieving process. A Brazilian Christian family faced the critical situation of their young son being diagnosed with a cancer deemed incurable from the outset. The parents firmly believed that a miracle would surely heal their son. When the boy died at nine years old, the family experienced an overwhelming sense of anger and injustice. Their belief system was shattered, and the father struggled with suicidal thoughts. They sought Spiritism in the hope of communication with their late son. With an open mind, they approached this possibility without regard for dogmatic impediments. A medium received a letter through automatic writing with verifiable information about their son. Almost immediately, the couple entered a more balanced grieving process as, for the first time, something made sense. Months later, a second letter informed them that the deceased boy would reincarnate in the baby of the mother's current pregnancy. This paper underscores these key insights: (a) an intense spiritual struggle may be rapidly appeased as soon as one's belief system becomes coherent; and (b) such a significant transformation may be facilitated by personal adaptability in matters of faith and/or a social-cultural openness toward religious perspectives. What makes this case unique is the drastic change in grief management once the loss was given new meaning through an opening in the belief system. The unusual data in this report may be another piece in unravelling the enigma of the psychological mechanisms involved. The authors hope this report will be useful for behaviour researchers, clinical psychotherapists, and spiritual counsellors.

**Keywords:** attitude to death; belief systems; religiosity; spirituality; Spiritism; Brazil; case report.

## Introduction

The intense anguish following diagnoses of lethal diseases leads many people to desire and even supplicate for a miracle. Certain people with fundamentalist religious interpretations may turn to a fervent hope for a miracle when their relatives are in such a clinical situation. In these cases, the disappointment after an unfavourable outcome can generate frustration, denial, and anger, with potential negative impact on mental health<sup>1</sup>. In these scenarios, how "from wine to vinegar" can be the degeneration in the individual belief system?

A peculiar form of intense grief follows the loss of a young child, a situation some researchers suggest may form a unique subtype<sup>2</sup>. Whether from illness or accidents, such tragedies often cause prolonged or complicated mourning in the parents. The loss of a child is always a traumatic event, resulting in significant painful responses and potentially initiating an enduring crisis of meaning<sup>3</sup>. In these situations, the parents' belief system is put to the test, and their faith structure can be severely shaken. A dysfunctional, severe, and prolonged response to loss can trigger a crisis of faith, which is prolonged and debilitating spiritual suffering.

Thus, the already difficulty in integrating loss in secular terms can be worsened by a profound spiritual struggle. This situation is called complicated spiritual grief, a troubling form of suffering that includes discord, conflict, and estrangement from God<sup>4</sup>. It's conceivable that such a spiritual crisis could further degrade mental health, possibly creating a vicious cycle. May the resolution of the spiritual struggle break this negative feedback loop?

On the other hand, this challenge may lead some parents to spiritual growth, such as heightened spirituality or increased religiosity<sup>5</sup>. However, what is the cause and what is the consequence? Does the reformulation of a belief system cause a reinterpretation of what happened, or is it the other way around? In any case, restructuring a belief system is always a complex undertaking. It is well known that religious pluralism in a multicultural society offers alternatives in the development of personal identity, overcoming conventional boundaries<sup>6</sup>. Could a spiritually supportive environment facilitate the reconstruction of a belief system after a complicated spiritual bereavement?

Brazil is known for its great religious diversity, a result of rich cultural mixing and the influence of different ethnic groups. In Brazil, mediums who claim to communicate with deceased individuals are sought out by people anxious for news of a deceased relative. Conventionally, this phenomenon would be relegated to delusion on the part of the client, the medium's ability to read signs (voluntary fraud), or mental disorder of the medium (involuntary fraud). However, selected studied mediums can provide information not accessible through conventional senses or inferential reasoning<sup>7</sup>. Given this dangerous impasse, would it be beneficial for parents experiencing complicated spiritual grief to resort to this activity?

The case presented in this report refers to a Brazilian couple who transformed their grief over the loss of their

son through a reformulation of their beliefs. As a result of an unusual sequence of events, the couple understood their newborn baby as the reincarnation of their deceased son. Thus, the aim of this case report is to emphasize how flexibility of beliefs can have a positive impact on grief management. This report contributes to the existing literature with unusual data that may help to better understand the involved psychological mechanisms.

The primary author first heard about the case via the Spiritist community. Since the family had already given permission, the authors received their phone number. The main author then began exchanging messages with the family to get acquainted and confirm their interest in sharing their story. An interview was conducted by telephone in March 2026, with another brief contact one month later for specific questions. The interviewed couple agreed to sign a free and informed consent form, authorizing the publication of the following communication. The names of the people involved have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

## Case Presentation

The couple consists of Fidelis (male, 38 years old, contractor) and Suely (female, 33 years old, homemaker), living together in a common-law union for 20 years. Their children were Jasmin (born in June 2009), Arnaldo (born in August 2014), and Marina (born in May 2019). The family has a low income and lives in a modest neighbourhood in the metropolitan area of São Paulo, Brazil. The couple tend to a Catholic identity, attending masses regularly. However, only Fidelis grew up within this denomination, while Suely comes from a Pentecostal environment. Besides religious identity, Suely had for a long time some sensitivity, often experiencing meaningful dreams and insights.

The focus turns to Arnaldo, a healthy boy until December 2023 when, at age 8, he began experiencing coordination disturbances. Further investigation revealed a brainstem tumour, the location of which would prevent any surgical plan. Even back then, physicians predicted no possible cure, but the family insisted that everything possible be done. An evangelical pastor known to the family has begun providing frequent support, which has continued after the hospitalization. The whole family began to regularly attend the church connected to that religious leader. During the treatment, they had an unwavering belief that their son would be saved by a miracle. They devoted themselves to a routine of rituals that included extensive sessions of prayer and fasting. Their belief in a miracle cure was so blatant that the couple perceived mildly sarcastic reactions from the healthcare team.

Arnaldo started oncological treatment at the largest public hospital in Brazil and Latin America, undergoing several months of radiotherapy and chemotherapy. The boy had never been informed of the illness severity, as the family always used euphemistic versions. Over time, his motor skills progressively worsened, as well as his general health. Ultimately, the boy required hospital

admission due to seizures and a decreased level of consciousness. By developing complications from pneumonia, Arnaldo passed away at age 9 in August 2024.

The grief period was very turbulent, manifested by an intense revolt against God and a profound feeling of having been betrayed. The lack of understanding about this injustice led Fidelis to leave engineering school and begin studies in theology. The couple was suffering, lost and without ground, and Fidelis secretly thought about suicide. One day, a cousin of Fidelis mentioned that, in Spiritism, some mediums were able to contact the spirits of the deceased. He was aware of anecdotal cases in which precise information was brought forth during séances of automatic writing. This cousin was a follower of Umbanda, a Brazilian religion with an African matrix that accepts communication with non-material beings. In that sequence, Fidelis's mother recommended a trustworthy Spiritist centre that could provide this type of communication.

Therefore, they sought Spiritism by September 2024, hopeful to receive a message informing them about their deceased son. The couple's open minds ignored potential contradictions between Spiritist and Christian precepts about spiritual communicability. They visited diverse Spiritist centres on several occasions, as this type of mediumship is not commonly offered. The couple felt warmly welcomed during these visits, experiencing gratification in a search that would have seemed more arduous. Meanwhile, during a dream in November 2024, Suely experienced a visit from her deceased son. He said he was doing well in the company of "Grandma Marina" (the Suely's mother, who passed away during Arnaldo's pregnancy). He also communicated to her that he would return soon for the family, although he did not specify how.

Eventually, the couple started attending séances in the "Spiritual Emergence Aid for Parents and Children" (an English translation from the Portuguese name). This is a traditional Spiritist centre founded in 1985, offering public sessions of automatic writing. A few times a year, these sessions involve the participation of Mr. Orlando Noronha, a prominent and respected medium with 41 years of practice. Before each séance, as a standardized way to connect with the goers, the medium speaks briefly with each one. However, the only data he gets are on the deceased's name, the date of death, and the name of the

proxy akin.

In February 2025, on their third attempt, the couple received a letter from their son through this medium, produced firsthand by Arnaldo. Besides general statements, the message also contained verifiable information that the medium was unaware of. This included: (a) the mention that Arnaldo always loved the father's name, Fidelis; (b) the nickname always used by Suely for the boy, "Prince"; (c) the mention of being cared for by "Grandma Marina"; (d) he reported being treated to eliminate residual effects from the physical illness. The video recording of this séance is available in Portuguese at <https://youtu.be/J7-NSiqqbUU>. The couple felt an indescribable relief, as the striking details of the text were indisputable. They got to reshape their belief system, as for the first time, something seemed to make sense.

Suely became pregnant again in June 2025, with a turbulent pregnancy marked by gestational diabetes and placental abruption. The couple continued attending the mediumistic sessions in the same centre in the following months. Eventually, in January 2026, the couple got a second letter related to Arnaldo through the same medium. This time, the reporting was not produced by the boy himself but by a spiritual benefactor acting as a messenger. The text informed that Arnaldo was reincarnating in the ongoing Suely's pregnancy, and that he would give signs of this reality in the future. The video recording of this séance is available in Portuguese at <https://youtu.be/PoRRT0hnUgQ>.

The couple progressed with a more functional form of grief, as they sometimes still cry over the absence of Arnaldo. On March 10, 2026, the baby was born and named Helio, supposedly a reincarnation of Arnaldo. The baby was born prematurely due to the gestational conditions already cited, but without complications. Today, the family carries on, supported by this comforting perspective, although still in grief. The couple continues attending meetings at Spiritist centres, but without delving deeper into this system. Currently, they prefer not to characterize themselves as belonging to any specific religion. Rather, they adopt any positive or constructive value to their belief system, independently of its origin. Figure 1 illustrates the family at two moments: (A) before the events, with Arnaldo; and (B) nowadays, with Helio. The photographic material was gladly provided by the family themselves.



Figure 1 - the family at two moments: (A) before the events, with Arnaldo; and (B) nowadays, with Helio.

## Discussion

The subsequent paragraphs examine significant events from the referenced case and incorporate commentary aligned with findings from contemporary scientific literature.

**THE STRONG BELIEF IN A MIRACLE.** During cancer treatment, some individuals may possess unwavering certainty that a miracle cure will occur, regardless of clinical expectations. While hope for miraculous recovery can provide resilience and comfort, this belief may become problematic when it manifests as denialism<sup>8</sup>. The studied family reacted to the challenge with a markedly intense religious fervour, although they did not consider that the answer to their plea could be a "no". Nevertheless, the clinical team's harsh reactions did not meet healthcare quality standards. A person-centred approach emphasizes respect, rather than validation or invalidation of such beliefs. A comprehensive healthcare should always be both technically grounded and culturally sensitive. When addressing the spiritual dimension of patients, healthcare professionals and institutions should not improvise but rather rely on objective guidelines for practical use<sup>9</sup>.

**GRIEF OVER THE LOSS OF A CHILD.** The loss of a child constitutes a profoundly traumatic event, often leading to intense grief responses. Such experiences may precipitate an existential crisis that challenges previously held beliefs. Research indicates that negative religious coping is associated with more severe grief, sometimes referred to as complicated spiritual grief<sup>10</sup>. In the studied case, the family exhibited heightened reactions due to their prior conviction that the loss of their child was inconceivable. Following the event, they found their religious framework no longer provided meaningful support, resulting in substantial feelings of anger and perceived betrayal by God. The psychological distress was particularly pronounced in the father, who experienced frequent suicidal ideation. Nonetheless, the couple shifted from these extreme emotional states to actively seeking explanations, suggesting a process of meaning pursuit.

**FROM DESPAIR TO OVERCOMING.** Several factors contribute to alleviating post-traumatic suffering in bereaved parents. As noted in a systematic review<sup>11</sup>, these include the search for meaning, sustaining the bond with the child, support from other bereaved families, as well as specific family and personal characteristics. Beneficial elements within the latter category encompass active coping strategies, seeking external support, and openness to new experiences. In the present case, the family demonstrated alignment with nearly all identified factors facilitating recovery. Notably, their willingness to be open allowed them to explore forms of faith that they had not encountered before. The couple attended Spiritist centres, aiming to maintain a sense of connection with their deceased son. These places are also frequented by other bereaved parents, fostering a community based on shared experiences.

**THE PROACTIVE SEARCH FOR MEANING.** The pursuit of meaning represents a significant human drive, as it supplies individuals with hope when confronted with adversity. The process of uncovering meaning can improve spiritual well-being, which constitutes an important component of mental health. Life's meaning is frequently defined as the subjective perception that one's existence possesses coherence, purpose, and significance<sup>12</sup>. Belief systems play a pivotal role in forming existential meaning, especially during challenging circumstances. Such frameworks offer individuals comprehensive and integrated perspectives, enabling them to interpret difficult life events in a rational and satisfactory manner<sup>13</sup>. Establishing a foundation for existential meaning supports individuals in managing stressful situations and may facilitate post-traumatic growth.

**RECONSTRUCTION OF THE BELIEF SYSTEM.** Maintaining religious or spiritual well-being has been linked to improved mental health and can even lower suicide risk<sup>14</sup>. Faith often helps reshape how people see illness and supports finding inner peace. Spiritual and religious experiences may lead to changes in one's religious identity, sometimes triggered by events like premonitory dreams, which can signal shifts in belief systems<sup>15</sup>. In this

case, the mother frequently experienced spiritual experiences, including vivid intuitions and dreams. This trait may have contributed to the couple's openness to explore alternative perspectives when reframing their circumstances.

**RELIGIOSITY IN A MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT.** A large part of the Brazilian population has a well-defined religious identity, being Catholicism and Evangelicalism the most prevalent denominations. However, a significant part of Brazil's population develops a form of religiosity shaped by various sources. These beliefs go beyond established religious doctrines and identities<sup>16</sup>. The ethnic and cultural diversity found within Brazil influences people's religious practices, resulting in distinctive expressions and some tendency for multid denominational affiliation<sup>17</sup>.

**BELIEF IN LIFE AFTER DEATH.** Many faith-based perspectives conceptualize death as a transition rather than a finality, which may contribute to reduced anxiety regarding mortality. Belief in an afterlife is linked to the development of coping mechanisms that can alleviate mental health disorders and improve overall quality of life<sup>18</sup>. This belief sometimes extends to the notion of communicating with the spirits of deceased individuals. Although this concept is not endorsed by Christian denominations, some spiritualist traditions perceive the practice as natural. In Brazil, Spiritism represents the primary organized form of spiritualism and is the third most frequently declared belief system among the Brazilian population<sup>19</sup>. Originating in France during the 1860s, Spiritism proposes that trained mediums can transmit messages from spirits<sup>20</sup>. Within the context of post-mortem communication, a medium seeks to establish contact with a deceased person's consciousness.

**BELIEF IN SPIRITUAL COMMUNICATION.** Automatic writing is a unique form of mediumistic trance in which the medium's body becomes a channel for spiritual communication. The purpose is to deliver comforting messages from deceased individuals to their families. Today, some automatic writing mediums in Brazil produce thousands of these letters per year. Several are respected within Spiritist communities and have undergone empirical evaluation<sup>21</sup>. A meta-analysis has found that certain mediums can accurately share information about anonymous deceased people<sup>22</sup>. This evidence helps explain why many people believe in the authenticity of this practice. Thus, the couple's choice of this path does not represent a defence mechanism, but a well-founded and informed decision. In seeking mediumistic communication, the couple also ignored a dogmatic contraindication to this practice. Some fundamentalist Christians decree that consulting the dead is an abomination before the Lord. They base this on certain biblical passages such as Leviticus 19:31; Deuteronomy 18:10-12; and I Chronicles 10:13.

**SPIRITUAL LETTERS FOR BEREAVED PEOPLE.** Leaving aside this strict biblical interpretation, mediumistic messages can support bereaved individuals in managing their grief more effectively. Such messages often offer a

sense of ongoing connection with departed loved ones, fostering hope that encourages autonomy and healthier coping mechanisms<sup>23</sup>. According to a recent Brazilian study<sup>24</sup>, mediumistic messages with verifiable information eased emotional pain and helped participants feel reconnected to those they had lost. The researchers concluded that mediumistic sessions may assist with adapting to prolonged grief and help people reinterpret their experiences of loss. Thus, the role of faith-based institutions in public mental health cannot be underestimated; this role can be especially evident in Spiritist initiatives<sup>25</sup>.

**BELIEF BASED ON RATIONALITY.** Some instances of purported communication after death may stem from fraudulent practices. However, in selected cases, it is possible to recognise specific details within a message that accurately reflect the unique characteristics of the deceased. In the reported scenario, the protocols employed during séances are designed to prevent any leakage of information that could influence the contents of the letter. In this Spiritist centre, the stage is free from electronic devices, and the medium ensures his mobile phone is turned off. Participants remain anonymous, as there is no requirement for prior registration that might facilitate identification of the deceased. Often, the medium provides information about the family that is not accessible through public domains. This environment of transparency and accuracy contributed to the couple's acceptance of the communication as authentic in the present report.

**REINTERPRETATION OF LIFE EVENTS.** A traumatic event may ultimately foster spiritual growth, as it challenges an individual's core faith and values. Newly embraced positive ideas can ease emotional distress, offering comfort, building connection, and nurturing a sense of safety. Experiencing an unusual spiritual occurrence might encourage the belief that a deceased person's consciousness somehow persists in existence. Many find solace in the idea that death does not mark the end of individuality and that those who have passed away can share this insight with us<sup>26</sup>. The family described found ways to handle their profound loss by reframing their experience spiritually. In addition, the couple feels supported by the belief that their newborn is the reincarnation of their late son.

**ABOUT THIS CASE PRESENTATION.** One strength of this report is its illustration of an outstanding grief behaviour transformation "from vinegar to wine." Additionally, the video recording of events during two séances provides some documentation that distinguishes the study. Conversely, the primary limitation lies in the considerable time lapse between the occurrence of events and the composition of the narrative. Another limitation is that, apart from some specific data, the account relies significantly on the recollections of the couple interviewed. Future prospective research may track other parents undergoing comparable experiences to determine the prevalence of overcoming stories like the one presented here. Such a forthcoming sample can be

achieved through a permanent collaboration between researchers and specialized Spiritist centres.

In short, this paper underscores these key insights: (a) an intense spiritual struggle may be rapidly resolved as soon as one's belief system becomes coherent; and (b) such significant transformation may be facilitated by personal adaptability in matters of faith and/or a social-cultural openness toward religious perspectives.

## Conclusion

The reported case strongly emphasizes the positive and causal relationship between religious-spiritual well-being and desirable mental health parameters. This relationship

could and should be further explored by behaviour researchers, clinical psychotherapists, and spiritual counsellors.

## Conflicts of Interest And Funding Statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest or funding sources to declare.

## Acknowledgement

The authors gratefully acknowledge the couple's bravery and openness in sharing their personal story. Appreciation is equally extended to Orlando Noronha, the medium who communicated this account directly to the researchers.

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