

Grief in Native Communities

Background

The Suicide Prevention Resource Center's (SPRC) Grief in Native Communities Summit was held in Mashantucket, Conn., from June 22 to 25, 2025. The summit brought together 35 participants representing 32 Tribes from across the United States. During the summit, participants took part in focus groups in which they discussed grief practices commonly shared among American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people as well as those unique to their specific Tribal community or region.

The goal of the summit was to help SPRC build foundational knowledge of existing suicide postvention resources in Tribal communities. A secondary goal was to develop recommendations for addressing suicide postvention needs in AI/AN communities for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Through better understanding how Tribal people heal, SPRC hopes to create practical and tailored resources to support AI/AN communities as they navigate and heal from grief and loss.

The summit covered various topics including Indigenous grief practices and how they have or have not changed over time; current challenges in practicing grief-related rituals; and ways youth (ages 0-24), adults (ages 25-54), and Elders (ages 55+) are supported through grief.

Observing traditional Tribal grief practices has been shown to act as a protective factor against suicide among AI/AN people, and many Tribes continue to pass down knowledge of these practices.¹

In this report, we will be sharing some of the findings from the summit and some recommendations for addressing postvention needs among AI/AN people. To protect the privacy of the participants, the data gathered during the summit have been aggregated so no Tribes or individuals are identifiable.

¹ Suicide Prevention Resource Center. (2019). *Transforming Tribal communities: Indigenous perspectives on suicide prevention*. <https://sprc.org/resources/transforming-tribal-communities-indigenous-perspectives-on-suicide-prevention/>

Community-Based Grief Practices

During the summit focus groups, SPRC learned there are a wide variety of ways Tribal communities may offer support to those who are grieving. This has been true both in the past and today. Grief looks, and is experienced, differently for different communities as well as different individuals. Additionally, expressions of grief and grieving processes may vary by region or community. The practices in this report were shared by summit participants.

In some communities, grief practices include giving away or burning the departed's belongings. This is due to the belief it is important to separate the departed's belongings from their earthly home to allow them to make a safer journey to the spirit realm. Some communities don't speak the name of the dead for a period of up to a year.

Food is often central to the grieving and healing process. Traditional foods play a pivotal role in ceremonial feasts. Many of these foods hold spiritual and sometimes medicinal significance. An example of a food practice with spiritual significance is the making of a "spirit plate," which is a plate of food from a ceremony or feast that is made and left outside in honor of, and as an offering to, ancestors.

Nature, the elements, and our connection to them is an important aspect of healing in many Tribal communities. It is not uncommon for a cedar tree to be planted in honor of someone who was lost. Fire and water ceremonies are also commonly held in the time between death or loss and burial. These ceremonies act as a way for communities to gather, heal, and honor the departed while holding up the community and loved ones. They offer an opportunity to connect with the world around us.

During funeral processions, expressions of laughter, often emerging from communal gathering and storytelling, are recognized as forms of medicine and are integral to the healing process. Singing, drumming, hymns, and dancing support the departed person's spiritual transition and help the living process grief. Some Tribes dance to heal and honor their dead, while others believe dancing is not appropriate at a time of grieving.

Evolving Practices and Cultural Shifts

In recent years, many Tribal people have shifted from preparing the bodies of the dead at home to using the services of funeral homes. For some Tribes, their ancestors had traditional medicines and ways of caring for or preparing bodies that are no longer practiced or cannot occur in Western funeral home settings.

Loss of traditional languages creates additional hardships for grieving communities. One participant shared, “Some Tribes are losing the language. Language is a valuable tool for grief. Unless you use the language during the ceremony, the [gods/spirits] cannot hear you.”

Financial, geographic, and even legal barriers (such as cemetery zoning issues or property access) can also interfere with AI/AN families’ ability to engage with their traditional grief practices.

Generational Perspectives, Gender Roles, and Protocols

Many of today’s AI/AN youth are working to break the silence that often surrounds death and grief in Tribal communities, especially after a suicide, in the belief that no one should grieve alone.

In some cases, gender roles in traditional practices have evolved, with women taking on what were previously considered male roles. For example, in the past only men served as pallbearers, but women are now taking on that role.

Family and Individual Observances

Customs like cutting one’s hair, opening windows, covering mirrors, or not wearing certain colors during the grieving period are common among AI/AN people, but these practices vary widely across individual families and clans. The practice of wearing black after a death is closely related to Western practices. Red is believed by some Tribes to be the only color their ancestors and spirit relatives see, so some wear red as part of the grieving process. For others, red clothing and floral arrangements are avoided during funerals and periods of grief because they believe the color calls the spirit back and does not allow them to move on.

Approaches to Postvention

Grief practices in AI/AN communities are varied and rooted in spirituality, family, and traditional teachings. These practices have been passed down, serving our relatives since time immemorial.

Reflecting on the information gathered during the summit, our recommendations for effective approaches to postvention for AI/AN people include thinking of community and traditional practices as prevention, emphasizing the importance of community-focused postvention efforts, understanding the role of language and ceremony in grieving, and addressing the need for community-based mental health support that bridges traditional and Western practices.

During our focus groups, we learned that the practice of engaging with spiritual leaders as a way of navigating grief contributes to upholding and reinforcing traditions. While Elders are key knowledge keepers for grief practices, youth and adults also have an important role to play. Engaging youth in grieving rituals is essential for the survival of these practices and supporting the emotional, mental, and spiritual healing of youth, adults, and Elders. Participants emphasized the importance of passing down knowledge, stories, songs, and teachings that keep us connected to our traditions, communities, and ancestors to help us navigate grief and the grieving process.

Limitations

The generalizability of the findings from the summit is limited by several factors. There are 575 federally recognized Tribes in the United States and hundreds of state-recognized Tribes.² Given the vast nature of Indian Country, SPRC staff made an effort to ensure geographic representation from across the United States. Despite these efforts, some regions are underrepresented due to travel considerations, lack of contact information, and limited space at the summit.

Another limitation was the difficulty of capturing the full breadth of unique family and clan protocols around grieving, which can vary significantly even within a single Tribal community.

² U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs. (2024). *Indian entities recognized by and eligible to receive services from the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs*. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/01/30/2026-01899/indian-entities-recognized-by-and-eligible-to-receive-services-from-the-united-states-bureau-of>

Many of the ceremonies and practices AI/AN people use are sacred, so they are not to be publicly disclosed or discussed. This necessarily limited the information we were able to gather about these practices.

To build upon these foundational insights, subsequent research should include broader Tribal representation and seek to further refine and specialize postvention recommendations in Tribal contexts.

Conclusion

The discussions that took place during the summit revealed how deeply communal and spiritual grief can be and highlighted the importance of honoring Tribal sovereignty, spiritual beliefs, and the frameworks that support Indigenous communities in navigating loss.

SPRC's 2025 Grief in Native Communities Summit served as a profound gathering for listening, learning, and reflecting on the grief practices, traditional wisdom, and community needs of AI/AN people.

Reflecting on the summit, SPRC believes that going forward, we must work to educate community members about grief, remember the importance of humor and support during the grieving process, and create spaces for healing.

Suggested Citation

Suicide Prevention Resource Center. (2026). *Grief in Native communities*.

<https://sprc.org/resources/grief-in-native-communities-report>