

The Role of Community in Supporting Native People in the Grieving Process

The Impacts of Grief

In Tribal communities, grief is something we share together. For American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) people, increasing access to traditional grieving practices can reduce health risks, soften the impact of compounded grief (when multiple losses occur in a short time), and provide a path toward healing.¹

How Tribal Communities Show Up for One Another

People in Tribal communities widen their circle of support by gathering to grieve together through practices like:

- Community fire rituals: Some Tribes believe in tending a memorial fire to help guide the spirit of the lost loved one and provide a space for grieving family members to gather.
- Mourning feasts: Sharing a meal provides nourishment and allows the family to focus on moving through their grief.
- Yearly memorials: Many gather on the anniversary of a loss to keep the memory of the loved one alive through storytelling and shared prayers.
- Honor dances: Traditional dances may be performed to help grieving families honor a loved one.
- Drum circles: The beat of the drum provides spiritual strength and a sense of unity to those who are grieving. Many believe the drum is the heartbeat of the community.

¹ Gameon, J. A., FireMoon, P., Skewes, M. C. (2024). Development and preliminary validation of the complicated and adaptive grief inventory for Native Americans. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 52(7).
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Ways to Support and Honor the Grieving Process

Grief rituals differ across the 575 federally recognized Tribes, yet many common traditions bring people together. Small, intentional acts of connection can help community members process grief and recover from loss. Some ways to support and honor the grieving process include:

- Adding a log to a ceremonial fire and telling stories of the departed loved one
- Laughing with grieving loved ones over a humorous memory
- Helping a loved one make a spirit plate—a small offering of food to honor the deceased—at a family gathering
- Performing household chores for a grieving friend or family member
- Attending a ceremonial fire or memorial event
- Preparing a meal for a hurting family to help ease the burden of grief

Questions?

Contact SPRC's Tribal Initiatives team: sprctribal@ou.edu

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