

Support for Native People Experiencing Grief and Loss

Honoring Individual Journeys and Cultural Traditions in Mourning

Grief is the emotional, psychological, behavioral, social, and physical reactions people go through when experiencing a loss, such as a death in the family, a traumatic event, or a loss of connection to their community.¹ Individuals may experience grief before, during, or after a traumatic event or loss.

Multiple factors, including past experiences with loss and grief, can influence how someone experiences grief. Understanding that everyone walks through grief differently reminds us of our shared responsibility to show up with strong, compassionate support for one another.

Honoring Personal and Traditional Practices

While it is important for many American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) people to gather with their community members to process grief, there are also a variety of individual customs practiced by Native people experiencing grief. Traditions can vary across Tribes, clans, communities, and regions.

Some grieving practices include:

- **Cutting one's hair:** For many AI/AN people, hair holds ties to one's spirit and history. Cutting one's hair can be an outward expression of a deep experience of mourning and loss. It is symbolic of the transition manifesting in the grieving person's life after a loss.

¹ Boerner, K., Stroebe, M., Schut, H., & Wortman, C. B. (2016). Grief and bereavement: theoretical Perspectives. In: Pachana, N. (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of geropsychology*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-080-3_133-2

- **Symbolic colors:** Some Tribes avoid certain colors, such as bright colors, during the grieving period, preferring darker colors to symbolize their grief. However, others embrace vivid colors to represent the celebration of life. The color red is a good example of the different ways colors are viewed. Some communities believe red is the only color their ancestors can see, which makes it an integral part of the mourning process. Others avoid red after a loss, believing it draws the spirit back and interferes with the spirit's ability to move on.
- **Giveaways:** After a loved one has passed, removing their earthly possessions from their home and giving them to other community members is believed to allow for an easier transition to the spirit realm. Additionally, it reinforces healing and communal ties through sharing.
- **Learning to cook traditional foods:** Learning more about harvesting, preparing, and sharing traditional foods provides comfort and healing, and it can also serve as a pathway for AI/AN people to learn more about their culture and traditions. Gathering around traditional foods allows people to nourish their bodies, support one another, and honor those who are no longer with us through stories, laughter, celebration, and mourning. Some individuals may also provide a spirit plate (an offering of food given to the ancestors) to help sustain their loved one as they journey to the spirit realm.

Cultural Factors in the Grieving Process

Some AI/AN people may experience unresolved grief related to disconnection from their culture, family, homelands, and Tribal community. Using and learning traditional Native languages is one way to address this sense of disconnection; it can contribute to healthy grieving for many AI/AN people.

Native people often use traditional medicines and teachings like water and pipe ceremonies, traditional sweats, or quests to connect to their cultural roots and provide a safe space to heal.

While culture plays an integral role in the grieving process for many AI/AN people, honoring one's personal timeline and unique path is also essential to processing grief and loss.

Questions?

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

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