



Media Release

Australian-first resource aims to better understand grief and bereavement in Indigenous cultures

27 June 2019

The [Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement](#) (ACGB) has developed a resource that helps counsellors better understand the varying cultural practices around bereavement and grief in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

[*Working with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Grief and Bereavement: A Resource for Workers*](#) has been created in response to the kinds of questions the Centre was responding to from practitioners about how certain cultural groups grieve. Importantly, it was developed with input and guidance from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and leaders in the field.

ACGB Chief Executive Officer, Christopher Hall, said the Centre wanted to provide cultural context and insights into the various ways of grieving within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. “There are around 350 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander nations across Australia, so we’re talking about a diverse range of cultural grief practices that may be relevant when members of these communities die,” he said.

“Ritual and community is of critical importance. This Guide aims to ensure an appreciation of the importance of language and the important role of ritual and ceremony for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.”

The guide explores a number of these practices and processes, including:

- A death is likely to affect a whole community, rather than just a number of individuals. Family in the context of a death may not necessarily be a person’s immediate family or blood relative
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people commonly refer to bereavement as ‘sorry business’; the grieving process comes with obligations to participate in or attend various community ceremonies, traditional funerals, and cultural events
- Depending on the beliefs of the community and the social status of the deceased person in the community, mourning periods may last for days, weeks, and even months
- There is a common belief that ceremonies assist the important transition of the spirit of the deceased person into the afterlife
- Commonly, traditional law in Australia means that if you say a Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deceased person’s name, you may recall and disturb their spirit

The Guide also outlines the importance of cultural context when it comes to communicating with bereaved families, including the relevance of gender, the meaning of silence, and what not to ask or say.

“We know that people draw from their cultural heritage and will adopt and adapt cultural practices when grieving. This Guide is designed to give counsellors a better understanding of cultural differences and equip them to provide appropriate and sensitive bereavement care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians,” Mr Hall said.



“We’ve been working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and funeral services for a number of years on this issue, and it became clear that it was important to have a dedicated resource. The objective is not to inflict unintentional harm by responding inappropriately in our services. We can’t offer our services without first understanding the broader cultural themes in the communities with which we work.

“In the bereavement field, much of our theory and practice is known from a non-Indigenous perspective. Therefore we need to appreciate and understand the cultural assumptions and biases we bring to our work. This Guide is one way in which we can all achieve this,” Mr Hall concluded.

About the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (ACGB) is the largest provider of grief and bereavement education in Australia. The independent, not for profit organisation opened in January 1996, and received operational funding through the Palliative Care Program of the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services. Its mission is to build the capacity of individuals, organisations and communities in order to enhance well-being following adverse life events.

Media Contact:



Christopher Hall
Mobile: 0419 381 377
c.hall@grief.org.au