



Working with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Grief and Bereavement

A Resource for Workers

Given there are approximately 350 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander nations across Australia, there are a diverse range of ceremonies and grieving processes within different regions and communities. Whilst Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people share some common beliefs, not all share the same cultural and grief practices. Traditions vary across communities, particularly between regional and urban communities, and are influenced by the country from where the tradition originates.

This Fact Sheet aims to provide general guidelines only, relating to grief and bereavement practices in both regional and urban communities. Workers are advised to always consult with the individuals and families they work with to obtain an understanding of local community grieving and cultural practices.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian's experiences of loss have many dimensions. They may experience losses related to:

- identity, culture, language and kinship
- country, land and place
- traditional foods, and medicines
- cultural events and traditional ceremonies
- lowered life expectancy
- death linked to abuse and violence
- intergenerational trauma
- unexpected or expected deaths
- children forcibly removed from their families and many never reconnected ¹.

¹ The Bringing Them Home report (1997) acknowledges many thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people were affected by forcible removal, and the hardship endured, and sacrifices made. It is recognised that these losses have affected the social and emotional wellbeing of many Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families and communities across generations and continue to do so.

The Concept of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Community

The basis of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander societies is the concept of community. Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people may not think of themselves as individuals but view themselves in terms of their community. This means that a death in a family will affect their community and not just the individual. Family, in this context, may also not necessarily be a person's immediate family or blood relative.

The challenge for non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander workers is to be culturally sensitive and balance their practice responses, to the bereavement experience of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people they work with.

Bereavement Practices in Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australian Culture

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people have a unique way of viewing their world, life and spirituality. Below are some examples of how these views are expressed in their responses to grief and bereavement.

Sorry Business

Following a death, many Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people refer to bereavement as 'sorry business'. This is an important period of mourning. Family time is very significant culturally. It involves obligations to attend funerals, participate in cultural events, traditional ceremonies and take responsibility to support family members in a multitude of ways such as help with travel, accommodation and finances.

Even if a worker has been present during the end of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person's life, sometimes they may not be invited to take part in sorry business. If asked to attend a sorry business ceremony, it is essential to allow adequate space for the families to grieve.

Mourning Periods

Depending on the beliefs of the community and the social status of the deceased person within the community, mourning may last for days, weeks and even months.

Due to the extended family make up in some communities, sorry business can be a common event with no set time frame. Duration of sorry business can also vary between individual family members. Attending sorry business events can impact on people's work, housing, financial or educational commitments.

Funerals

Funerals can involve entire communities. Sometimes in regional areas, the entire community will be closed during the day of the funeral.

Grieving relatives may need to travel long distances to attend the funeral. In some instances, relatives stay in a special area called the 'sorry camp'. The residence where the deceased person lived may be left empty for some time.

Burials can be delayed if there is a family dispute related to the origins of the deceased person. The dispute may be about where the deceased person can be buried, or it may be about the inheritance of their land and property. In some areas of Australia, especially the Top End, burials may be delayed due to the wet season and funerals held in succession when the water recedes.

Ceremonies

Many Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people believe that ceremonies help the spirit move into the afterlife. They believe that ceremonies assist with this important transition.

Examples of how Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people show grief in traditional ceremonies may include taking part in 'smoking ceremonies', held in private houses or where the person died. Some relatives may cut off their hair or wear white pigment on their faces. 'Sorry cuts', are wounds that a person may inflict to themselves to "let the blood flow and bring a release of pain".



Key factors to be aware of when working with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander clients

It is important to be aware that Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people may communicate in different ways. The grieving process for some Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people is highly dependent on a person's Aboriginal country from where they originate. When unsure of how to communicate effectively with a bereaved individual or family, ask what approach is appropriate to them. Awareness of this helps to create respect, understanding and better relationships.

Communication with the Family

Talking to the family of the deceased person is vital to determine cultural beliefs and what kind of cultural practices are required for the family. Open, respectful and empathic communication is essential to clarify any questions and, support the grieving process. Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people may prefer to communicate with one key worker to assist them rather than receive support from multiple workers.

Gender

During the grieving process, some Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people will only want to communicate and receive support from people of the same gender as them and not discuss or share information with the opposite gender. Some male Elders, may not interact with female workers. Ask the individual or family their preferences for how they receive support and communication.

Urban and Regional Community Differences

Urban and regional communities are different in their ways, practices and lifestyles. In remote regions, cultural practices regarding death are more likely to remain unchanged. However, workers are advised not to make assumptions related to urban or regional communities and ask the people they work with what is their local cultural practice.

Language

For some Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, English is not their first language, and this can lead to some miscommunications. Check with the person if you are not sure and seek information about local interpreting services.

Silence

Silence may not mean the person does not understand. They may be listening and thinking or want to hear the views of other people before they speak.

What not to ask

It is important not to ask some questions of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. They may feel embarrassed if you ask them about sorry cuts (self-harm) or other physical signs of grieving. If you are worried about the physical risk to the person, you must follow your organisation's duty of care policies and procedures.

Be aware that mentioning the deceased person's name or even asking 'who has died?' may cause distress and unease. Follow organisational procedures for informing the next of kin of a death.

Understanding the Cultural Context

Building and strengthening cross cultural skills requires training, reflection and adaptation to the community context. This means taking responsibility for cultural learning and applying organisational procedures that are consistent with local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities.

There are some behaviours, such as eye contact, that could be misunderstood unless put into cultural context.

Why can't you name a deceased Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person?

Most traditional law in Australia means that if you say a deceased person's name, you can recall and disturb their spirit.

Before media can use a deceased person's first name, in print or on television, they must show a warning that an image or voice recording of a deceased Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australian is used. Each community may have a different approach to naming deceased people and whether names can be spoken or not. In some areas, families use a substitute for a person's name or they may say Auntie or Uncle. It is always best to take the lead from the family, or ask what terminology is appropriate.

Definition of terms and accepted terminology

The terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are not interchangeable and refer to specific groups of Indigenous Australian people.

Aboriginal

Aboriginal person means a person who is a descendant of an Indigenous inhabitant of Australia but does not include a Torres Strait Islander. (Racial Discrimination Act, 1975).

Torres Strait Islander

Refers to a person who is of Torres Strait Island descent and is accepted as a Torres Strait Islander person in the community in which he or she lives or comes from.

Centrelink Support

If the deceased person's family receives a benefit, a family member can contact Centrelink in relation to bereavement support payments. For more information about this, contact the Centrelink Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Call Centre on: 1800 136 380.

When to seek further support

If you are working with a person who is struggling with their grief or finding it difficult to manage on a day to day basis, assist them to access support from their doctor, a bereavement counsellor, health care professional or contact the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement on 1800 642 066 or Lifeline on 13 11 14.

This fact sheet was written by the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, in consultation with: Mr Lance James (Rumbalara Corporation Grief, Trauma and Bereavement Clinical Practitioner & Bringing Them Home Worker); Ms Cindy Paardekooper (Aboriginal Consultant). A Community Consultation Group consisting of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander local council policy officer, two Aboriginal liaison officers, an Aboriginal support worker at a health service and one community Elder.

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of this land. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

253 Wellington Road,
Mulgrave VIC 3170

Ph: (03) 9265 2100
Fax: (03) 9265 2150

ABN: 22038 903 478
ACN: 159 297 444

1800 642 066

www.grief.org.au



The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.