

Keyfacts - Grief, loss and trauma

Social and emotional wellbeing workers web resource

What is grief and loss?

Grief describes how a person feels after the loss of someone or something that is very important to them. The grief experienced from a loss affects the whole person, including their mind, spirit, and body, as well as the relationships they have with other people. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people refer to grief as 'sorry business'. It is important to understand grief within the social (e.g., family relationships) and cultural context in which it takes place. Grief can occur with the loss of:

- personal relationships (e.g., relationship breakup)
- good health
- a job
- someone important due to death
- someone important due to imprisonment
- someone important because of a drug or alcohol problem, which causes them to not always be there for others in the family.

Grief can also occur because of the long-term effects of the *Stolen generations*, or a cultural separation from land, language, or knowledge. In some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the grief is ongoing because of the 'unfinished business' of the *Stolen generations* and other impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. If this grief stays unresolved, it may be passed on through the generations of a family; this is called intergenerational grief.

Grief is different for every person and a time limit cannot be put on it. Grief is an unfortunate part of life, but too much grief is not good for a person. How a person grieves will depend on:

- their personality

- the nature of the event that has led to the grief
- who they can share their grief with
- how many times they have had to deal with grief and loss
- their physical wellbeing
- the emotional support available to them.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are very supportive of each other and, when a loss occurs in a community, the grief experienced is often felt by many people and can have a crushing impact on the health and the stability of the communities involved.

What are some of the feelings a person might experience during times of grief and loss?

When grieving, people may experience the following:

- shock or numbness (not feeling anything)
- ongoing sadness and crying
- depression or thoughts of self-harm or suicide
- anger for the person gone or anger at oneself
- denial (not believing the loss has happened)
- guilt because there may have been something that could have been done to avoid the loss
- relief because the deceased (dead) person is no longer suffering, or relief that a new beginning can take place
- a strong need to go back to 'country'
- wanting to show respect for a person who has gone but being unable to because of money, work, or family problems.

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Sometimes these feelings can be confusing because people might see their family and friends reacting in different ways. People grieve in different ways and no way is better or worse than another. Grief is normal and very important because it helps people to let go of these feelings and move on with their lives.

During times of loss and grief people may find it hard to do the everyday things that are an important part of life, for example:

- eating well
- getting enough sleep
- caring about work
- looking after other family members.

There are also physical signs and behaviours that may happen during times of loss and grief including:

- headaches, cramps, and body pain from stress
- substance misuse (e.g., drugs, alcohol, smoking too much)
- having visions or hearing the spirit of a person who has gone.

It is important to understand that people must grieve. Hiding it by drinking too much or taking drugs will only make the memories go away for a short time. It is okay when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people talk about being visited by the spirit of a loved one who has died because it is part of their culture - the deceased person may be letting them know that they are okay. If, however, someone is scared by these visits, they should seek advice from an Aboriginal Health Worker, traditional healer, Elder, or family member.

How do you help people who are experiencing grief and loss?

Loss, and the grief that comes with it, does not always lead to mental illness. However, if a person does not deal with their grief very well, it can affect their mental health. It is important to be aware of the cultural aspects of loss and grief. For example, visits from a deceased person's spirit should not be misunderstood as a sign of mental illness. Other cultural aspects of loss and grief are the traditional ceremonies that are performed after the loss of a loved one; these take place so that the spirit is shown respect and can find a place of peace. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who take part in traditional ceremonies and 'sorry business' say it helps them to deal with their feelings of grief and loss.

There are different traditions and laws for each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and therefore different ways of grieving. It has been suggested that because of this, a community-based approach to healing is the most effective strategy for managing grief and loss.

There are a number of things that people can do to help themselves manage their grief, including:

allowing themselves to express feelings of grief and not hold the feelings inside; this may involve anything from crying to physical activities, such as meditation or dancing

- looking after themselves by eating and sleeping well, and taking time out to do enjoyable activities
- postponing major decisions
- following cultural traditions for dealing with grief
- being around people who can provide the emotional support needed - this may include Elders, traditional healers, counsellors, support groups who specialise in 'sorry business', or health professionals
- reminding themselves that they will get through this grief, however long it takes
- being prepared for occasions which remind them of their loss.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a long history of survival and there are many great stories involving individuals, families, and communities which demonstrate their resilience (ability to recover from difficult situations) and strength in overcoming loss and grief.

Please note the term 'mental illness' has been used in place of 'mental disorder' and 'psychological disorder' because it is a more common term.

References and further reading

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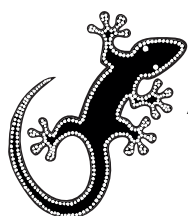
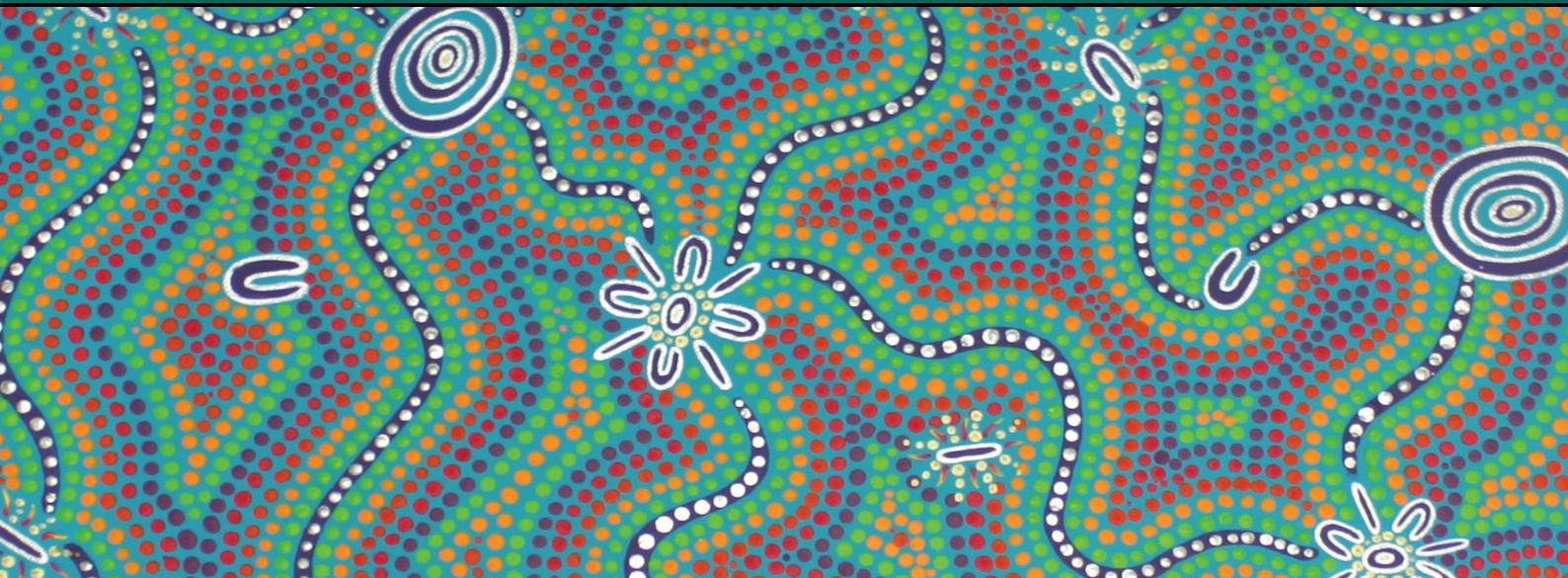
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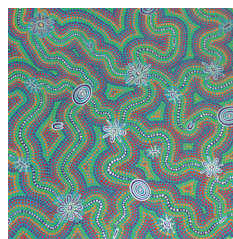
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Two concepts underpin the HealthInfoNet's work. The first is evidence-informed decision-making, whereby practitioners and policy-makers have access to the best available research and other information. This concept is linked with that of translational research (TR), which involves making research and other information available in a form that has immediate, practical utility. Implementation of these two concepts involves synthesis, exchange and ethical application of knowledge through ongoing interaction with key stakeholders.

The HealthInfoNet's work in TR at a population-health level, in which it is at the forefront internationally, addresses the knowledge needs of a wide range of potential users, including policy-makers, health service providers, program managers, clinicians, Indigenous health workers, and other health professionals. The HealthInfoNet also provides easy-to-read and summarised material for students and the general community.

The HealthInfoNet encourages and supports information-sharing among practitioners, policy-makers and others working to improve Indigenous health – its free on line yarning places enable people across the country to share information, knowledge and experience. The HealthInfoNet is funded mainly by the Australian Department of Health and Ageing. Its award-winning web resource (www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au) is free and available to everyone.

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