

Grieving Aboriginal Way

WHEN YOU'RE GRIEVING

When someone you love has passed on you will be feeling a lot of different emotions. It is also true that for Aboriginal people, there are some different things that you need to do with your people and community to help you with these feelings. This booklet is to help you to understand these things. It will also explain the difference between "normal" grieving, and when you need to get some help with your grief.

When you first lose someone there are some common feelings that people will go through as they try to come to terms with their loss. These feelings may also be different depending on how the person has died. It is normal to feel like this. Some of the things you might be feeling are:

- ◆ Numb - you will be in shock. This means that you find it hard to believe that the person has died. You will expect to see them in their usual places; you might talk about them like they are still alive.
- ◆ Pretty sad, maybe even depressed. When you lose

someone, you will miss them a lot and probably be crying heaps for them. If you feel like crying, then you should. You have to 'let it out', or you will feel even worse.



- ◆ Angry - at yourself, or at someone else. Sometimes we want to blame someone for our loss.



- ◆ Longing for country or home. This means that you may feel like you need to go home to do your grieving. 'Home' can also

be the land of the person who has died. This is normal for most Aboriginal people. Even though this is expected of you, it is also an important part of your healing.

- ◆ You might spend a lot of time thinking about things you should or shouldn't have done. Many people believe that they have done something wrong to cause the person's death. Sometimes 'Aboriginal way' the person's death may be seen as 'payback' for wrongdoing. If you feel this way, you need to talk to with an Aboriginal Health Worker who can listen to you, or help you to talk to your elders about this.



SUICIDE OF A LOVED ONE

If the person has died by taking their own life, or suicide, there are

some different feelings and emotions you may be experiencing.

While some feelings are similar, you will have a lot of questions which may make your healing a harder. For instance, some common questions people ask themselves are; "Why didn't he/she say something?"; "Why didn't I see the signs?"; "Why did they die alone?"; "Why did they kill themselves?"

These questions and more need to be talked about with professional people who work with suicide and understand the issues. At this time, people who were close to the deceased person may also be having some thoughts of suicide. Get help for you and other people who have been affected by the suicide.

What you should be doing straight away:

- ◆ If you are away from the home of the person who has died, you need to get there as soon as possible. This will help you to grieve. If you can't get home straight away, pay your respects in other ways - by phoning relatives, or sending a card expressing your sympathies.

- ◆ Aboriginal ways of grieving means that when someone has passed away people will come to pay their respects. It may take some time for everyone to arrive. This is called 'sorry time', and is how communities 'cry together' for your lost loved one. This is the time that you should try to heal, and talk about the person who has died. You need to be able to remember the good things about the person



◆



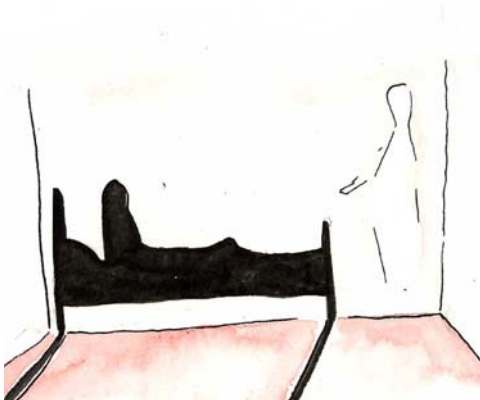
(Picture should say "I'm so sorry about your bad news") Being together and remembering funny stories can help you to remember the person in a good way. You need to try and do this with your family and relations.

DURING SORRY AND FUNERAL TIME

- ◆ There are many things you must do to 'show respect' for the person who has passed away, and this is very important. This is different depending on your traditions. For instance, it is common in communities not to mention the deceased person's name and substitute another name out of respect for the deceased person. Your family and relations can help you to understand this better.
- ◆ These traditions are done to make sure that the person's

spirit is shown respect and can find peace. This is the responsibility of certain family members, and you should not be frightened about this.

- ◆ It is not unusual for the spirit of the deceased person to 'visit' many Aboriginal people. This is very much a part of culture, and you should not be scared. Sometimes, your loved one may just want to let you know that they are okay, or want to 'watch over you'.



- ◆ You will probably feel a "bit shame" or even frightened about this, and may not want to tell anyone, but this is a very common thing for many Aboriginal people to experience.

AFTER THE FUNERAL AND 'SORRY TIME' IS OVER.....

- ◆ This is the hardest time, and you will probably feel very sad because everyone will leave and go back home, or you will have to go back to your home.



- ◆ Your grief may be at its worst at this time. Make sure that you have people around you all of the time and can talk when you need to. You should keep talking about your loved one and especially the good memories you have. Don't be afraid to talk about your loved one, it is very important not to forget them.

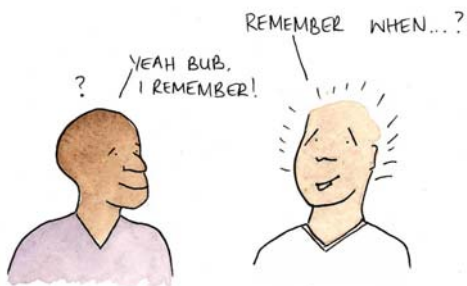


- ◆ Remember, everyone else is probably feeling the same way, and it also helps them to be able to talk.



HOW LONG WILL I GRIEVE FOR MY LOVED ONE?

- ◆ You will always feel a sense of loss when you lose someone you love. In time you will think about it less often, and probably be able to have good memories of the person you have lost, instead of just remembering their death.



- ◆ Remember, that everyone grieves in their own way, and take different amounts of time to come to terms with their loss.
- ◆ Don't let anyone tell you how long you should be sad for - listen to your heart, and you will

know when your grief is getting better.

WHAT SORTS OF THINGS TELL ME THAT I AM NOT COPING?

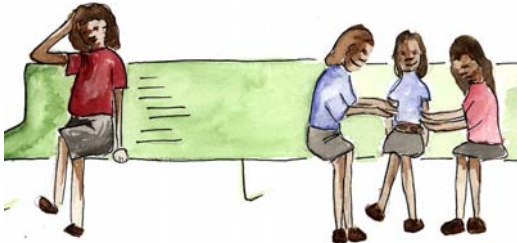
- ◆ Feeling numb, shocked, sad, angry, guilty are all normal. But if you are feeling all of these things for a longer time than your other relations, or friends of your loved one, you may not be coping well with your loss.
- ◆ You might find that your friends or relations seem to be getting on with their lives and you are not.



- ◆ You might still believe that your loved one is not really dead, and will come back to you.



- ◆ You might start wanting to be alone more and feel like 'no-one understands you.'



- ◆ You might blame yourself somehow, for the death of your loved one. Sometimes, 'Aboriginal way' people look to find reasons for a person's death. If it is believed that someone is to blame, they may be 'paid back' for the wrongdoing. If you feel that this is happening to you, then you need to talk with one of your elders about this. An Aboriginal Health Worker, or someone strong in your community will be able to help you with this as well.



- ◆ You might also start drinking or groggin' on a bit more than

usual. Some people might also use Gunga or other drugs, to help them to cope with the pain.



- ◆ Other people start picking arguments with their friends and relations for no reasons. You might get moody and snap at people for no reason.
- ◆ You may have bad dreams; find it hard to sleep; or keep seeing the dead person's spirit. If the person's spirit makes you feel scared or upset, then this is also not good.



HAVE A YARN WITH SOMEONE LIKE A DOCTOR OR HEALTH WORKER.



THOUGHTS OF SUICIDE

- ◆ Unfortunately, for some people, they feel like they don't want to go on living without their loved one. We call this, thoughts about suicide, and some people may also try to end their life. **IF YOU HAVE ANY THOUGHTS OF WANTING TO DIE YOU MUST TALK TO SOMEONE STRAIGHT AWAY.** Don't feel shame about this. It is better to talk to someone then do something that will cause your family more pain and grief. Use the numbers at the end of this booklet or go and talk to someone you can trust. They can help!

IF YOU NOTICE ANY OF THESE THINGS HAPPENING TO YOU, THEN YOU NEED TO

- ◆ You shouldn't feel shame about talking with someone - they have spoken to lot's of people about these sorts of things before, so they won't think you are 'silly' for feeling this way.
- ◆ Also, talk to your family - they might also be feeling the same way but might also feel 'shame way' about telling anyone.
- ◆ Maybe, you can yarn with someone together.

If you think that you aren't coping with losing your loved one, you can contact any of these services to help you. You can also ask them to find a professional person like a psychologist or social worker to talk to.

Aboriginal Medical Services

Derbarl Yerrigan	9421 3888
Broome	9192 1338
Bunbury	9791 2779
Carnarvan	9941 2499
Geraldton	9921 5588
Halls Creek	9168 6266
Kalgoorlie	9091 3199
Kununurra	9168 1288
Port Hedland	9140 2922
Roebourne	9182 1054
Wiluna	9981 7063

©Westerman, T.G (2001). Not to be copied, distributed or reproduced in any form without the permission of the author or representative of Indigenous Psychological Services at: ips@ips.iinet.net.au

Illustrated by Kye McGuire