

# Dying, Grief and Culture

There are diverse cultures with different traditions, rituals and ways related to death, dying, and expressing grief. In such situations where you are assisting clients/patients/customers who belong to a culture that you are not familiar with, you may choose to ask them about their culture's traditions so you are appropriately informed. Also, consider that they may not necessarily follow their culture's traditions or the tradition is modified. For instance, in recent years, people have chosen to replace the ritual of the funeral ceremony with a [celebration of life](#) ceremony. As well, people who have immigrated from another country may drop the traditions of their country of origin and adopt the traditions of the country they are now living in.

Following is helpful information obtained on long-standing traditions obtained from [www.griefspeaks.com](http://www.griefspeaks.com)

## Observances and Practices of Various Cultures

**1. *Practices of the Native American Culture:*** Native American observances also vary considerably in their traditions, religions and rituals, but there is a strong commonality among many tribes that centers on the natural world - the earth, the animals, the trees, and the natural spirit. Even among those who have been converted to Christianity, there is an emphasis on the reunion with nature that occurs with death.

Common practices include:

- a. The Medicine Man or spiritual leader usually moderates the funeral or death service. It may or may not follow a particular order since each individual is unique. In some tribes or clans, burial is not traditional.
- b. Some tribes call on their ancestors to come to join the deceased and, in effect, help in his or her transition.
- c. Most Native American cultures are not concerned about preserving the body and so embalming is not common. However, dismemberment and mutilation outside the natural deterioration of the body is taboo.
- d. There is a belief that the spirit of the person never dies; therefore, sometimes sentimental things and gifts are buried with the deceased as a symbolic gesture that the person still lives. The spirit of the person may be associated with a particular facet of nature - animal, bird, plant, water, and so forth. Symbols of such spirits may be a part of the ritual in the death ceremony.
- e. It is important to ensure that the burial of the person takes place in their native homeland, so that they may join their ancestors, and so that they may also inhabit the land to which their loved ones will also return.
- f. In some tribal cultures pipes are smoked at the gravesites.
- g. In some tribal cultures, there is significance to burying people with symbolic reference to a circle.
- h. In some, there is significance in non-burial, but allowing the deceased to pass on to the other world in a natural way.

**2. *Practices of the Asian-American Culture:*** Asian-Americans may follow Buddhist, Confucian, or Taoist practices regarding death, with some elements of Christian traditions.

Common practices include:

- a. A family gathering at the funeral home to make arrangements, with the family elders assuming ultimate responsibility for the ceremony.
- b. There is great respect for the body. Warm clothes may be used for burial and watertight caskets are used to keep the elements out.
- c. Stoic attitudes are common, and depression may result from the internalization of grief.
- d. An open casket allows for respect to elders. Often poems in calligraphy are left for the deceased. Among Chinese Americans, a cooked chicken may be placed by the casket as a last meal for the deceased and spirits. The chicken will be buried with the body.

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- e. Music is often used. A band may wait outside the funeral home and accompany the procession to the cemetery.
- f. The funeral route, burial location, and the choice of the monument are important. Incense may be burned at the grave. Among some populations, sacrifices may be made at the funeral.
- g. A gathering of family and friends for a meal after the funeral shows respect for the spirit of the deceased, and gives thanks to those who came to pay their respect.
- h. A picture or plaque is usually kept in the home and displayed with items that create a shrine

**3. *Practices of the African-American Culture:*** Black/African-Americans have traditions concerning death that draw from many cultures, ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Some common patterns include:

- a. High involvement of a funeral director in preparations for mourning and burial.
- b. A gathering of friends and family at the home of the deceased to offer support and share in the common grief.
- c. A wake during which music, songs and hymns are played or sung. Some African-Americans hold a service known as a "Home-Going" service. It usually reflects the personality of the deceased and celebrates the conviction of going home to Jesus and being reunited with past friends and relatives.
- d. A shared meal among grieving loved ones after the wake and funeral.
- e. A funeral service followed by a burial. Cremation is less accepted in the Black community.
- f. A deep religious faith and integration of church observances.
- g. Memorial services and commemorative gifts.
- h. Many in African-American communities mourn by dressing in white as a sign of resurrection and celebrate with music and hope. However, Native Africans often wear red or black.
- i. Black/African-Americans often express grief at death with the physical manifestation of great emotion.
- j. African-Americans may believe in the concept of the "living dead". This concept refers to people who have died but whose spirits live in the memories and thoughts of those still living. These people are the ones who will help others who die move to the next world

**4. *Practices of the Haitian-American Culture:*** Although there is diversity in religious practices among the Haitian/Haitian-American population, they tend to share the following common patterns in the aftermath of death:

- a. Close family members and relatives make arrangements for the funeral and church services.
- b. A gathering of family members and close friends at the home of the deceased to pray and to offer support.
- c. A wake is held at the home of the deceased every night from the time of the death to the time of the burial. At the wake, they chat, eat, drink, and share jokes.
- d. A viewing is followed by the funeral service and burial.
- e. Close family members mourn by dressing in black or white. The wearing of bright colors such as red is not considered an expression of mourning. It is preferable to wear dark colors such as blue, purple, and brown to attend a funeral.
- f. Many Haitians express grief with the physical manifestation of great emotion.
- g. After the burial, family members and friends usually gather at the home of the deceased for a reception, where flaky pastries, black coffee, tea, and other foods are served.

**5. *Practices of the Hispanic-American Culture:*** Hispanic/Hispanic-American populations also have diverse cultural backgrounds including individuals from the islands of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic, and those who come from Spain, Mexico, and Central and South America. Most Hispanic populations practice the Roman Catholic faith, but not all.

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Common patterns in the aftermath of death are:

- a. High involvement of the priest in the funeral plans.
- b. Family and friends are encouraged to be part of the commemoration
- c. The rosary is said by surviving loved ones, often at the home of the deceased. Among some Hispanic groups the rosary is said each night for nine nights after the death. Some families say the rosary every month for a year after the death and then repeat it on each anniversary.
- d. Funeral services often include a Mass. Loved ones are encouraged to express grief and many are involved in the procession to the grave.
- e. Many Hispanic survivors commemorate the loss of their loved ones with promises or commitments. These promises are taken very seriously and those who fail to honor them are considered sinners.
- f. Money gifts to help cover the expense of the funeral and burial are not unusual.

**6. *Practices of the European-American Culture:*** European-Americans follow various cultural, ethnic, and religious traditions regarding post-death ceremonial and bereavement practices.

General tendencies include:

- a. Friends and family gather at the home of the deceased or family member to support and share in the common grief. This practice usually occurs following the announcement of the death.
- b. High dependence upon a funeral director and/or person of the clergy in preparations for mourning and burial.
- c. A visitation and/or viewing at a funeral home is typically followed by a religious and/or graveside/crypt side service.
- d. Funeral services tend to rather subdued.
- e. Traditionally, dark clothing tends to be worn during ceremonial services; although this trend has shifted in recent years to a more color-based wardrobe focused on creating an atmosphere of celebration and hope.
- f. Interment is followed by a gathering at the home of the deceased, or a family member where food and refreshment are provided.

## Religious Observances of Death

The role of religion is important for most victims/survivors because their answers to religious questions form their view of life, death and meaning. Many people do not know their position on religion until disaster strikes, and then their religious faith and beliefs are formed. Some religions give individuals more power over life than others. Some religions give collections of individuals power over life. Some religions give spirits more power over life than the living. Some give free will. Some give fatalism. All have defined ways of dealing with death. Some religious differences include:

### 1. *Jewish observances*

- a. All customs are designed to treat the body with respect; therefore, autopsies and embalming are generally prohibited. Viewing the corpse is also considered disrespectful.
- b. The emotional needs of the survivors are very important.
- c. There is variance among Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jewish practices.
- d. No funeral is allowed on Saturday (the Sabbath) or on major religious holidays.
- e. Music and flowers are *not* encouraged.
- f. Eulogies are given by rabbis, family and friends. When the deceased person is held in high regard, there are usually several eulogies.

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- g. Family members and others accompany the casket to the grave and are encouraged to place a shovel of earth on the casket, as a sign of the finality of death.
- h. The period of mourning lasts for one year. The mourner's "Kaddish" or declaration of faith is said at the gravesite: "Blessed, praised, glorified and exalted; extolled, honored, magnified and lauded be the name of the Holy One. May abundant peace from the heavens descend upon us, and may life be renewed for us and all Israel, and let us say Amen."
- i. "Sitting shiva" refers to the seven-day mourning period immediately following burial. The family cooks no food and a candle or lamp is kept burning in the memory of the deceased. The Kaddish is said every day during this time.
- j. Some people observe a period of three days following the burial during which visitors are not received and the time is devoted to lamentation.
- k. After the first seven days, survivors are encouraged to rejoin society but still maintain mourning by reciting the Kaddish twice daily for thirty days.
- l. Many mourners may wear a black pin with a torn ribbon, or a torn garment during the funeral and for the next week as a symbol of grief.
- m. Newborn babies may be named after the deceased. (This is important to remember since many cultures believe it improper to name people after the dead and, in fact, adults may change their names to avoid being named after someone who was died.)
- n. The first anniversary is marked by the unveiling of a tombstone at a special ceremony.

### 2. *Roman Catholic observances*

- 1. Since the Second Vatican Council, the terms "last rites" and "extreme unction" are no longer used by the Catholic Church.
- 2. The Sacraments of the Sick are prayers that are said as the person is dying, and involve confession and communion. If a person dies before the sacraments are given, the priest will anoint the deceased conditionally within three hours of the time of death.
- 3. There is often a wake and, if so, the priest will conduct the service or say the rosary.
- 4. There are distinct phases to "The Mass of Christian Burial."
  - 1. Prayers at the funeral home
  - 2. Welcoming the body to the church
  - 3. Covering the casket with a white cloth
  - 4. Sprinkling the casket with holy water
  - 5. The Eucharist is celebrated
  - 6. Prayers are said after the Mass
  - 7. Casket is escorted to back of church
  - 8. At the cemetery, the grave is blessed.
- 5. Consecration is a reaffirmation that the person will rise again. Prayers address not only the dead but the survivors - their faith in eternal life is encouraged.
- 6. The one-month anniversary of the death is often celebrated by a Mass, as are those of other anniversaries.

### 3. *Protestant observances*

There are a wide range of Protestant observances, including:

- 1. Often there is a family gathering at the family home or funeral home.
- 2. Caskets, open or closed, are part of passage. Memorial items may be placed in the casket.
- 3. Cremation is an accepted option for some.
- 4. Black dress is a part of mourning.

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5. Funeral services include music and testimonials. Music may include traditional hymns and/or songs of praise celebrating the Christian experience and the hope of everlasting life.
6. Gravesite visits may be made.
7. Memorial services are common, and sometimes replace funerals and other immediate observances of death.
8. Flowers and donations are preferred ways to express condolences.
9. Church members and friends will usually assist in providing the food needs of the family. The period of time will vary according to the needs of the family.
10. There is no formal structure to observe the death, month after month or year after year.

### 4. *Islamic Traditions*

Traditions differ in every country and the Turkish interpretation of Islam is in some ways different than those in other Arabic countries. These comments are basically relevant for Turkish culture:

1. Death is considered an act of God is not questioned. Faithful followers believe that all the events in the life-course of an individual, including the time and type of death, are pre-written by God.
2. People in grief are encouraged to show their feelings openly. They are encouraged to cry loudly as it is believed that crying cleans the soul. Any expression of rebellion against God's decision to take a person away from her/his dear ones is considered a sin.
3. Friends visit the house of the deceased and talk with the family members, encouraging them to describe how the death occurred, what they were doing at the time of death, etc.
4. For seven days, the family members are never left alone. Friends and neighbors bring food, as no cooking is supposed to be done in a funeral home during those seven days.
5. Traditionally, no television, radio or any musical devices would be allowed for 40 days but this practice has waned in recent years.
6. There is a religious prayer at the 40<sup>th</sup> and another at the 52<sup>nd</sup> day after the death.
7. Muslims are very sensitive to where their beloved ones are buried. They definitely want them buried in a cemetery for Muslims. They also want the funeral prayers to be led by a Muslim, not by a rabbi or a Christian priest.
8. A special ceremony and prayers accompany the funeral. The body is buried without the coffin and wrapped in white clothes, as it is believed that the body should touch the earth.
9. The body must be washed/bathed with certain rituals before the funeral ceremony begins. This usually takes place at either a special section of the mosque or in the morgue of the hospital. It is very upsetting when a body is buried without being washed.
10. When meeting with someone who has lost a relative, conversations start by saying: "May you be alive and May God's blessings be on him/her - the deceased."

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