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# Understanding Grief Within a Cultural Context [1]

**This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 07/2013**

### Key Messages:

- There is no correct way to mourn the loss of a loved one.
- Each culture has its own way of helping people cope with death and grief.
- Beliefs, rituals, and traditions specific to a person?s culture can provide some predictability and normalcy during a time that is difficult and confusing.

Everyone experiences grief and a sense of loss [3] following the death of a loved one, but the way these feelings are experienced and expressed differs across cultures. Culture is made up of the beliefs, values, behaviors, traditions, and rituals that are shared by the members of a cultural group. Each culture has its own rituals and practices that influence the expression of grief. Carrying out these familiar rituals and customs offers a sense of stability and security and helps people who are dying and their loved ones cope with loss.

### Culture and the meaning of death

Every culture has its own worldview?a core set of beliefs that describe how the world works and people?s roles in the world. In societies in which most people share the same religion, religious beliefs significantly shape the culture's worldview. Each culture's worldview includes beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life and what happens after death, which informs how people within those cultures approach death. For example, some people may find the loss of a loved one more bearable if they believe in a life or existence after death. In some cultures, people believe that the spirit of a deceased loved one directly influences the living, and bereaved family members may be comforted by knowing that their loved one is watching over them. Beliefs about the meaning of death help people make sense of it and cope with its mystery.

### Cultural rituals regarding death

In each culture, death is surrounded by rituals and customs that help people grieve and mourn. Rituals offer people ways to express their grief and provide opportunities for community members to support the bereaved. Death creates chaos and confusion, and rituals provide a sense of predictability and normalcy for both the bereaved (people in a period of grief and mourning after a

loss) and the wider community. Rituals and customs provide a set of directions that help structure the time surrounding death and prescribe people?s roles during this time. Rituals and customs help address the following issues:

- How the dying person should be cared for as he or she approaches death, including who should be present and what ceremonies should be performed at the moments before and after death
- How the body should be handled after death, including how the body should be cleansed and dressed, who should handle the body, and whether the body should be buried or cremated
- Whether grief should be expressed quietly and privately or loudly and publicly, including whether public crying or wailing is appropriate
- Whether people of different genders or ages should grieve differently
- What ceremonies and rituals should be performed and who should participate, including children, community members, and friends
- How long family members are expected to grieve and how they are expected to dress and behave during the mourning period
- How the deceased should be remembered over the lifetime of the family, including ongoing rituals to celebrate or communicate with the deceased
- What new roles family members are expected to take on, including whether a widow is expected to remarry or whether an oldest son is expected to become the family leader

**Personal differences in grief and mourning**

People adapt the beliefs and values of their culture to meet their unique needs, based on their past experiences and current situation. As a result, grief responses within a culture vary from person to person, especially in societies made up of people from a variety of cultural backgrounds. And a family with members from two or more cultural backgrounds may develop its own set of rituals and customs. The grief experiences of members of the family will likely reflect this cultural blend.

In some instances, a person?s experience of grief may be at odds with cultural expectations. Someone who is usually quiet and reserved may not feel comfortable publicly crying as might be expected. Another person may experience a level of despair that feels out of step with his or her culture's belief in life after death. Despite cultural norms and expectations, people need to grieve in ways that feel right to them.

**Grief and cultural sensitivity**

There is no correct way to grieve or mourn. Customs, behaviors, and feelings that may seem strange or inappropriate in one culture may be considered usual or appropriate ways of grieving in another culture. Given these differences, it may be difficult to know how to be sensitive to a grieving person from a different cultural background. Consider the following questions as you seek to support that person:

- What emotions and behaviors are considered normal grief responses within the grieving person?s culture?
- What are the bereaved family's beliefs surrounding death?
- Who is expected to attend mourning ceremonies, and how are attendees expected to dress

and act?
- Are gifts, flowers, or other offerings expected?
- What special days or dates will be significant for the bereaved family?
- What types of verbal or written condolence are considered appropriate?

To find out more about the customs and mourning practices of a person from another culture, consider talking with someone who shares that cultural background, looking for books at your local library, or searching for information on the Internet.

**More Information**

Grief and Bereavement [4]

Understanding Grief and Loss [3]

Coping With Grief [5]

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**Links:**
[1] http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/managing-emotions/grief-and-loss/understanding-grief-within-cultural-context
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/25293
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/25111
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/25289