

[Home](#) > [Coping With Cancer](#) > [Managing Emotions](#) > [Grief and Loss](#) > Understanding Grief Within a Cultural Context

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<http://www.cancer.net/coping-with-cancer/managing-emotions/grief-and-loss/understanding-grief-within-cultural-context>

## **Understanding Grief Within a Cultural Context [1]**

**This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 12/2015**

Everyone experiences [grief and a sense of loss](#) [3] following the death of a loved one. But the way that people have and express these feelings differs across cultures. Culture is the mix of beliefs, values, behaviors, traditions, and rituals that members of a cultural group share. Each culture has its own rituals that influence the expression of grief. Carrying out these practices offers a sense of stability and security. Also, it helps people who are dying and their loved ones who are coping with loss.

### **Culture and the meaning of death**

Every culture has its own worldview. It has 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. This informs how people in those cultures approach death. For example, people may find death more bearable if they believe in a life after death. In some cultures, people believe that the spirit of a deceased loved one directly influences the living. The family members are comforted by the belief 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 associated with rituals and customs to help people in the grieving process. Rituals offer people ways to express their grief. Also, they provide ways for the

community to support the bereaved. This is the name for people in a period of grief and mourning after a loss. Death creates chaos and confusion. Rituals provide a sense of routine and normalcy. Rituals and customs provide a set of directions that help structure the time surrounding death. Also, it directs people's roles during this time. Rituals and customs help address the following issues:

- How people care for the dying person as he or she approaches death. This includes who is present and what ceremonies are performed at the moments before and after death.
- How the body is handled after death. This includes how the body is cleansed and dressed, who handles the body, and whether the body is buried or cremated.
- Whether grief is expressed quietly and privately or loudly and publicly. This includes whether public crying or wailing is appropriate.
- Whether people of different genders or ages grieve differently.
- What rituals the people perform. Also, who is included in these rituals, including children, community members, and friends.
- How long family members grieve. In addition, how they dress and behave during the mourning period.
- How the deceased are honored over the lifetime of the family. This includes ongoing rituals to celebrate or talk with the deceased.
- What new roles family members are expected to take on. This includes whether a widow remarries or an oldest son becomes the family leader.

## **Personal differences in grief and mourning**

People adopt the beliefs and values of their culture to meet their unique needs and their current and past experiences. As a result, grief responses within a culture vary from person to person. This is especially true in societies made up of people from many cultural backgrounds. A family with members from two or more cultural backgrounds may develop its own set of rituals and customs.

In some instances, a person's experience of grief may be at odds with cultural norms. Someone

who is quiet and reserved may not feel right to cry in public as expected. Others may have a level of despair that feels out of step with cultural beliefs about life after death. Despite cultural norms, people need to grieve in ways that feel right to them.

## **Grief and cultural sensitivity**

There is no correct way to grieve. Mourning rituals that are normal to one culture may seem strange to another one. 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 normal grief responses within the person's own culture?
- What are the bereaved family's beliefs surrounding death?
- Who should 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 expressed?

Find out more about the customs and mourning practices of a person from another culture. Consider talking with someone who shares that cultural background 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-with-cancer/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>