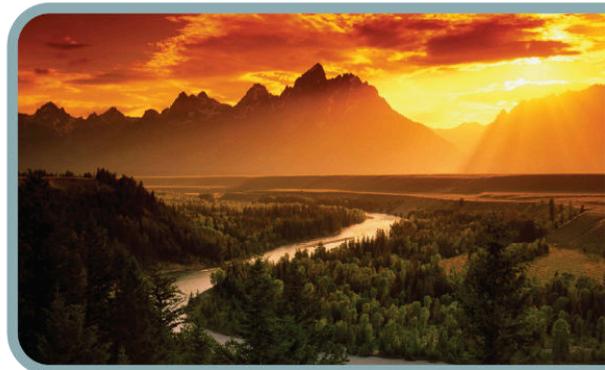


The purpose of this discussion guide is to foster humility and awareness among communities and organizations of the Native perspectives on loss, grief, mourning, and bereavement. It serves as a companion to the fact sheet, "Understanding Grief and Bereavement Among Native Communities: Cultural Considerations in the Aftermath of Child Death." This guide does not explain specific ceremonial rituals. It provides information on the cultural strengths of Native communities, raises awareness of the unique challenges Native people may face while grieving, and provides discussion points for what support Native people who are mourning may need



---

*“The spirits of our ancestors are always with us, guiding and protecting us.”*  
– Unknown

---

The purpose of this discussion guide is to foster humility and awareness among communities and organizations of the Native perspectives on loss, grief, mourning, and bereavement. It serves as a companion to the fact sheet, “Understanding Grief and Bereavement Among Native Communities: Cultural Considerations in the Aftermath of Child Death.” This guide does not explain specific ceremonial rituals. It provides information on the cultural strengths of Native communities, raises awareness of the unique challenges Native people may face while grieving, and provides discussion points for what support Native people who are mourning may need.

## Discussion Guide Topics

- Loss, grief, mourning, and bereavement from Native perspectives
- Foundational Native beliefs of grief
- Guidance for discussions on grief and bereavement with Native communities

## Key Considerations from Native Perspectives

This section of the discussion guide defines loss, grief, mourning, and bereavement and raises key considerations from Native perspectives. It explores the nature of grief, its impact on Native individuals and communities, and the importance of cultural sensitivity in workplaces and schools.

---

*“It’s a fundamental Indigenous belief that our ancestors—  
the people we have lost — are always with us.”*  
– Tribal Elder

---

## Loss and Grief

**Defining loss:** For many Native communities, loss encompasses the physical absence of a person and broken connections to ancestral lands, community, and culture. Cultural loss includes the loss of traditional knowledge, Native languages, traditional practices and ceremonies, and ways of life.

**Defining grief:** Grief is a profound, holistic, and deeply personal experience that affects individuals, families, and communities. It is often seen as a natural, spiritual, and transformative experience that connects individuals to their ancestors and the spirit world. Many Native communities do not view grief as a problem to be fixed or “healed”, but as a journey to be navigated with support, cultural knowledge, and connections to community, ancestors, and land.

## Loss and Grief from Native Perspectives

**Spiritual dimension:** Many Native communities see death as a transition within the circle of life, not an ending. The spirit of the deceased continues to exist and interact with the living.

**Historical impacts on present-day loss:** Historical trauma from colonization and past injustices toward Native communities has created a landscape of layered losses that continues to shape their present-day experiences of grief. Traumatic experiences, such as harmful boarding school policies, caused many Native people to become silent to avoid drawing attention to themselves. This learned behavior suppressed their spirits, making it difficult for them to express their needs, especially around loss and grief. Despite historical trauma and these ongoing challenges, many Native communities have demonstrated remarkable resilience in maintaining and revitalizing their cultural practices.

**Collective grief:** While grief is a personal response to loss, it is often experienced collectively within Native communities, where the entire community shares in the pain of their community members.

**Cultural grief:** Disruptions from cultural knowledge, languages, traditional practices, and ways of life passed down through generations may take the form of cultural grief. Native people show their resilience by coping through humor, emphasizing relationships, and maintaining strong ties to the land and their ancestors.

## Mourning and Bereavement

---

*“Designated timeframes of when to stop and let go don’t always resonate with healing in the mind and the body’s cellular memory. Grief vibrates across the senses with memories and spirited dreams.”*

*– Traditional knowledge keeper*

---

**Defining mourning:** Mourning is an outward expression of grief and sorrow. It is shaped by cultural traditions, ceremonies, and practices. In many Native communities, it’s a communal process that involves family, clans, and community coming together to support the bereaved and honor the deceased and ensure their safe passage to the spirit world. Mourning rituals may involve specific foods, songs, dances, storytelling, and periods of seclusion or public gatherings, all of which are guided by cultural protocols.

**Defining bereavement:** Bereavement, the loss of a significant relationship through death, is often followed by individual and community-led mourning practices. It’s a time for adaptation, reflection, and reconnection to cultural identity. Bereavement practices support the bereaved’s reintegration into the community, maintain their connection to the spirit of the deceased, reinforce community bonds, and transmit cultural knowledge to future generations.

## Mourning and Bereavement from Native Perspectives

**Connection to land:** The land serves as a source of healing and comfort within the mourning process. Rituals and ceremonies performed on ancestral lands help connect people to their ancestors and the spirit world.

**Communal mourning practices:** Communal mourning practices support grief processing, wellness, transitions, and interconnectedness. Without them, many Native people have been left to grieve alone, particularly as colonization dismantled Native communities' communal ways of life and ceremonies.

**Mourning periods:** Grief is a profound experience that has a lasting impact on individuals, families, and entire communities. The mourning process is a period of significant transition during which people need time to experience grief and rebuild their lives around it. It is not a linear process; it manifests in waves, resonating through memories, dreams, and connections to land. This trait makes it difficult for people to adhere to the more expedited Western timeframes for grief processing. Many traditional practices acknowledge grief as a personal journey of building a relationship with loss, which takes time.

## Foundational Beliefs on the Nature of Grief

---

*“Bereavement and grief are missing a loved one who is no longer here. It is the price of loving somebody. It’s learning to adapt to a new reality without that person being physically here.”*

– Tribal member

---

This section explores the foundational beliefs that shape Native understandings of grief. It explores the significance of ancestors, the interconnectedness of life, and the nature of grief.

### Connections to Ancestors, Land, and Community

---

*“Cultural practices, land, ancestral connections, and community are integral to the bereavement process.”*

– Tribal member

---

Rooted in enduring cultural wisdom, Native approaches to transforming trauma and fostering well-being are intrinsically connected to ancestral relationships, cultural traditions, the land, relational worldviews, and the power of humor. Maintaining these connections through ceremonies, storytelling, and community engagement provides pathways for processing grief, building community resilience, and reclaiming cultural identity. Processing grief included weaving their loved ones into their own narrative and reclaiming cultural identity. By honoring these inherent strengths, we can create effective support systems that deeply resonate within Native communities.

**Role of ancestors:** Many Native cultures share a belief in the presence of ancestors, which shapes experiences with and expressions of grief. Many traditional practices honor the transition to ancestors through ceremonies that acknowledge the interconnectedness of all life, and ancestors are thought to be present to provide a supportive, non-judgmental space for grieving.

**Communal support:** Cultural practices provide structured ways to express grief, honor the deceased, and maintain connections to ancestors. Practices may include ceremonies, songs, dances, storytelling, and the sharing of food.

**Land as a giver of life and wellness:** Many traditional practices acknowledge that the land can hold trauma, which they recognize as land grief. Engaging with the land through rituals, ceremonies, and traditional practices helps process this grief, fostering connections to the land and a sense of belonging.

**Relational worldview:** Native communities tend to have a relational worldview, placing great value on kinship with extended family and community. Many traditional languages reflect this worldview, and they may have multiple ways to address kinship based on relationships. Additionally, Native people traditionally learned about their responsibilities to the world through their families and tribes. Many traditional Native teachings include lessons about how the very attributes that distinguish humans from other forms of life are what make us responsible for those lives as human beings.

**Cultural disconnection:** Deep grief from historical and ongoing trauma arises from the loss of cultural traditions, languages, and practices. This grief can lead people to feel disconnected from their heritage, resulting in feelings of loss and identity crisis, without cultural knowledge or practices to help them cope. Reclaiming and revitalizing cultural practices are vital, and these practices should be incorporated in the mourning process where possible.

**Humor as coping:** In many Native communities, humor is a means to navigate the aftermath of a death. It can be a crucial coping strategy, providing a safe and familiar way to process grief. Humor can help people feel acknowledged and normalize their grief.

## Cultural Loss and Its Impact

Cultural knowledge, connectedness, and humility provide structure and strength in the bereavement period, offering pathways for processing and thriving with Native communities.

**Cultural knowledge:** Many Native cultures take a holistic view of death, loss, and mourning, emphasizing the continuation of relationships with the land and community as people transition into becoming ancestors and join the spiritual realm. Elders and knowledge keepers can foster this understanding in discussions of grief and mourning.

**Cultural connectedness:** Many Native cultures offer a framework for mourning that centers on cultural connectedness, with an emphasis on community, ancestors, spirituality, cultural knowledge, and connection to land.

**Cultural humility in the workplace:** Training staff on cultural humility can provide more supportive environments for Native people who are mourning in the workplace and school settings. For example, human resource departments and schools could ask what the staff member or student needs to participate in their cultural practices and ceremonies, such as time away to participate in a ceremony or the ability to carry culturally significant items. Questions should focus solely on their needs, rather than asking unnecessary questions about their culture.

**Promoting understanding:** Fostering patience and understanding in the workplace and school is essential. Schools should recognize that participation in ceremonies could look like absenteeism, and grief can manifest in mood changes and chronic absenteeism due to limited support opportunities. Creating inclusive learning and working environments with cultural humility can decrease harmful responses.

## Medicalization and Stigma

Cultural humility in workplaces and schools shows respect and honor for Native approaches to grief. From a Native perspective, grief is an essential part of life, not a disease or problem to be medicated. A more culturally sensitive approach to grief would address stigma around certain causes of death and promote community- and culture-based support systems.

**Honoring the human experience:** Native communities view death as an integral part of life, where the grief for those who have died and what they have lost is a vital aspect of the human experience. The growing trend to diagnose grief as an illness and treat it with medication within Western practices contrasts with this Native perspective. There is a concern among Native communities that the medicalization of grief may lead people to withdraw and numb their pain, which would prevent them from fully processing and adapting to their loss. Rather than medication, approaches that address the stigma associated with some causes of death and provide supportive resources would resonate more within Native communities.

**Community approach:** When a community experiences multiple deaths, it can face stigma, suggesting the deaths stem from community problems. In reality, the community is mourning, and they need resources and support to respond and prevent future deaths. In this way, approaches to bereavement that focus on community support systems can also support bereaved individuals.

## Guidelines for Discussions on Grief and Bereavement in Native Communities

This section provides discussion points to guide conversations on grief and bereavement in Native communities. The discussion points are designed as questions to deepen engagement and invite reflection while practicing cultural humility.

**The following steps can help foster supportive environments for these discussions.**

- 1. Create a safe space:** Emphasize confidentiality, respect, and non-judgmental attitudes so that participants feel free to share their experiences and preferences openly.
- 2. Active listening:** Encourage participants to listen attentively, seek to understand diverse perspectives, and avoid making assumptions.
- 3. Cultural humility:** Approach the discussion with a willingness to learn and acknowledge the limits of your own knowledge.
- 4. Respectful language:** Use respectful and inclusive language. Avoid making assumptions about experiences or beliefs.
- 5. Native leadership:** Ensure discussions center on Native voices and that Native partners have the opportunity to lead the discussion. Include Native elders and knowledge keepers when appropriate.
- 6. Actionable steps:** Identify additional steps you can take to improve support for Native communities experiencing grief.

# Discussion Guide on Grief and Bereavement in Native Communities

## 1. Discussion Points: Understanding Foundational Beliefs

How does the belief in the continuous presence of ancestors shape how grief is expressed and supported within Native communities?

- What does this belief make possible in the grieving process?
- What are the risks of not acknowledging this belief when supporting someone who is grieving?
- What does it mean to honor the transition of becoming an ancestor? How can that understanding be promoted in personal and professional spaces? (For instance, what protocols, language, or actions show respect for this transition?)

In what ways does the concept of interconnectedness influence mourning and the transformation of grief and loss?

- How might this belief support long-term grief processing compared to more individualistic beliefs?

### Reflections:

- How might Western, individualistic views of death differ from these beliefs?
- How do these differing worldviews create misunderstandings?
- What opportunities exist to strengthen support systems for Native people who are grieving?

## 2. Discussion Points: Understanding the Impacts of Colonization on Grief

How has colonization disrupted traditional mourning ceremonies and communal support systems?

- What has been lost, what has been adapted or reclaimed?

What are some of the long-term effects of forced assimilation policies (boarding schools, religious conversion, relocation, etc.) on cultural knowledge of grief practices?

- How does intergenerational trauma manifest in contemporary grief responses?
- What are some examples of how unresolved grief from land loss, culture loss, and language loss is expressed in Native communities, even when it's not identified as grief?

### Reflections:

- How can we acknowledge and address the layers of historical trauma that influence grief in Native communities?
- What do institutions, workplaces, and community partners have in place to support coping and adapting?

## 3. Discussion Points: Understanding Key Aspects of the Grieving Process

What are the unique challenges tribal people experience when they're expected to adhere to Western timeframes and medical models for coping and adapting?

- How can we reframe grief as a gift and a reflection of the love, connection, and responsibility of the legacy of those who came before us?
- How does this reframing affect how we provide support to someone who is in mourning?
- How does land grief manifest, and how do traditional practices support the processing of grief?
- In what ways can you support grieving individuals in connecting with land and community?
- How does the loss of culture impact grief and identity?
- How does cultural revitalization support the grief process?
- How might culturally connected approaches improve mental health outcomes and restore a sense of identity?
- In what ways can we support Native communities' cultural revitalization efforts to address grief related to cultural loss?

### Reflections:

- How can we adapt our systems and approaches to honor the non-linear nature of grief?
- How can we adapt our systems and approaches to honor the importance of cultural connections?

## 4. Discussion Points: Fostering Supportive Workplace and School Environments

How can we educate human resource personnel, administrators, and school staff about respecting cultural grieving practices?

- What are some culturally sensitive policies and practices that effectively raise awareness without placing a burden on the Native staff, students, or families experiencing the loss?
- Are there traditional practices and ceremonies that workplaces and schools could be incorporating to honor the deceased?
- Who needs to be involved in setting those policies and practices?

What are some fears, added stressors, or anxieties a Native person who is grieving may experience from their workplace or school while trying to honor their traditional mourning practices?

- What policies and leave practices could support Native people who are grieving to enable them to honor their cultural mourning practices without added stress or anxiety?
- How can we foster patience and understanding in the workplace and schools, especially when grief may resurface?
- How can we address the ways schools account for the absences of Native students who are grieving?
- What processes could honor Native students' cultural responsibilities and support educational equity?

**Reflection:** How can we move from tolerance-based approaches to creating inclusive environments that validate and accommodate diverse grieving processes?

## 5. Discussion Points: Cultural Coping Practices that Honor Our Collective and Independent Identities

- What do we need to understand about the use of humor during mourning in Native communities?
- How might outsiders misinterpret its use, and what are the risks of misinterpreting its use?
- How do connections and a relational worldview support collective grief processing?
- How do these concepts contrast to individualistic approaches to grief and mental wellbeing?
- What are some barriers to accessing culturally relevant coping approaches?
- How can we ensure access to culturally relevant coping approaches?

### Reflections:

- How can we integrate land, ancestral connections, and community into bereavement processes? What are some examples?
- How can we promote and support culturally specific coping mechanisms within our programs?
- What partnerships or shifts in perspective would help gain access to culturally specific coping mechanisms?

## 6. Discussion Points: Avoiding the Medicalization of Grief and Bereavement

In what ways does labeling and treating grief as a disease and problem to solve invalidate the human experience?

- What do we lose when we prioritize diagnosis, timelines, and medical treatment of grief over understanding cultural and community support?
- How does medicalization rob individuals of the journey of loving someone?

**Reflection:** How can we ensure that grief is understood as a natural part of life, rather than a medical condition?

## 7. Discussion Points: Addressing Community Challenges with Stigma

How can we reduce the stigma associated with deaths in the community (especially deaths involving suicide, overdose, or domestic violence)?

- How do blame, shame, guilt, and unexpressed feelings further isolate grieving individuals and families?
- How can we address the root causes of stigma associated with community deaths?
- How can we highlight the need for resources, services, and support?

**Reflection:** How can we foster a community-centered approach to address issues, like a lack of resources and cultural disconnection, while providing support and reducing the burden for individuals and families?

## Closing

*“Suddenly, all my ancestors are behind me. Be still, they say, watch & listen. You are the result of the love of thousands.” – Linda Hogan*

Native bereavement is a shared emotional response to loss among Native peoples, which is characterized by a recognition of spiritual connections and relationships. Many traditional grieving processes for Native people include ceremonies, burials, and social support. However, practices vary widely across tribes and locations. Despite significant challenges, Native communities demonstrate resilience through cultural practices, such as using humor to cope, emphasizing connections and relationships, and maintaining strong ties to the land and their ancestors.

With this guide, partners can engage in meaningful discussions and develop strategies that honor and support Native perspectives on grief, loss, mourning, and bereavement. We encourage Native and non-Native partners to explore how engaging in community and reclaiming cultural practices can support individuals, families, and communities to process grief.

### About the Authors

#### Evermore

Evermore is making the world a more livable place for all bereaved people by raising awareness, advancing bereavement science, and advocating for policy change. Visit [evermore.org](https://evermore.org) to learn more.

#### Kauffman Associates, Inc.

Kauffman and Associates, Inc. (KAI) is a 100% American Indian– and woman-owned small business located in Spokane, WA, specializing in planning, evaluation, communications, training, and facilitation. To learn more, visit [kauffmaninc.com](https://kauffmaninc.com).