



Grief, Loss, and Bereavement

Fact Sheet #4: Cultural Responsiveness

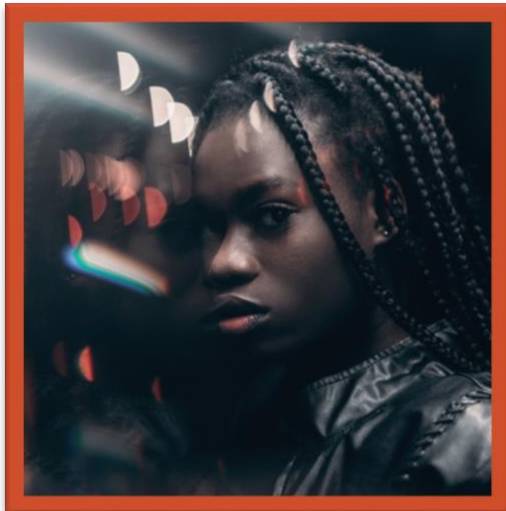
This series of fact sheets, developed by the MHTTC Network, is designed to help mental health professionals and school mental health personnel support patients, students, and families who may be experiencing grief at any time, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Cultural Responsiveness

Cultural Humility

Attitudes, beliefs, and practices regarding death, mourning, and grief vary widely between individuals and across different cultural groups. Studies have found that even with different cultural rituals, expectations, and implications related to the loss of a loved one, an individual's or family's reaction to the event is highly personal and unique. It is necessary to interact with clients with *cultural humility* to begin to learn about and understand their mourning and grief process, since each person will carry a unique perspective based on their personal identification with various aspects of cultural identity, such as race, ethnicity, assimilation process, gender roles, inner resources and community support, and religious beliefs, among others.



Using a *cultural humility* lens, a clinician can view grief and mourning by understanding different ways of perceiving death, loss, and acceptance. Practice cultural humility by asking questions about how the patient views mental health services around times of grief, while understanding their context, history, and cultural practices, as well as their personal identities.¹ The following are considerations for providing culturally responsive mental health services to various cultural groups affected by bereavement, recognizing that each individual will have their own experience.



African American Expressions of Grief

A unique history of poverty, racism, and oppression has placed untold stresses on African Americans that may contribute to a distinct grieving process within this cultural group. Common themes when working with African American clients affected by grief include:

- Within the African American community, problems may be dealt with informally or indirectly, or in some cases with no action being taken.² The tendency to talk less with others about their loss or seek professional support may place African Americans at higher risk for developing complicated grief symptoms.
- African Americans report a high degree of religious participation, religious coping, and spirituality. The grief process may involve an ongoing spiritual connection with the deceased that must be honored and respected. Treatment providers may consider involving African American clergy in treatment programs to improve clergy members' understanding of the grieving process and to better engage patients and their families.
- A reluctance to use health services, including mental healthcare, may be present in some African American communities, as a result of mistrust of medical care and a cultural bias against services that are perceived to be discriminatory. African American clients are likely to benefit from orienting sessions that review treatment and counseling processes, reassure confidentiality, and discuss treatment goals and other components of services.



Hispanic and Latino/a/x Expressions of Grief

Among Hispanic and Latino/a/x individuals living in the United States are people from various countries in North, Central, and South America who each represent unique values and customs. Because there is no single “Latino/a/x culture,” practices related to grief and bereavement vary. Despite the many variations, some similarities can be identified as references to work effectively with the Hispanic population:

- Hispanic and Latino/a/x families may seek help initially from health care providers for somatic symptoms, rather than mental health providers for symptoms of grief.³
- Stigma related to mental health disorders and mental health treatment may prevent Latinos from seeking services.



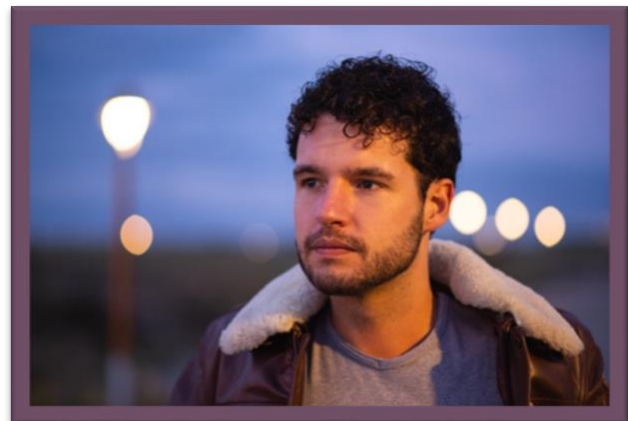
- Recognizing and incorporating cultural values and rituals as important elements in grief processes will promote engagement, trust (*confianza*), and, thus, adherence to treatment.



- Hispanic and Latino/a/x cultures place a strong emphasis on the importance of family as a primary system of support, and there is a strict family hierarchy (usually older to younger). This cultural value is known as *familismo*. Individuals of Hispanic-Latino descent expect health care providers to engage surviving family members in the therapeutic process.
- Many Hispanic and Latino/a/x

individuals embrace religion and *spirituality* at the core of their lives, as well as a belief in the spiritual and psychological continuity between the living and the dead. As part of their spiritual practices, the family may continue a relationship with the deceased person through prayer, ritual, and traditional practices.

- *Personalismo*, or the importance of cultivating a warm and caring relationship, is a significant cultural value for many Hispanic and Latino/a/x families. Hispanic families need to feel connected to and trust their therapist in order to fully engage in treatment.



Asian American and Pacific Islander Expressions of Grief



The Asian American/Pacific Islander cultural group encompasses a heterogenous cultural group. Because expressions of grief and bereavement are affected by cultural, generational and acculturation levels, treatment providers must assess these specific cultural factors when working with this population.

- For many Asian-American/Pacific Islander cultures, restraint in expressing negative



feelings is valuable in maintaining self-esteem and interpersonal harmony. As a result, Asian American individuals may report somatic or physical manifestations of grief, as they are viewed as more acceptable than psychological symptoms. Treatment providers should be aware of their clients' cultural beliefs related to psychological distress and how they may influence their grief symptoms.⁴

- Asian American clients may look to counselors for expertise. Asian American clients may expect and be most comfortable with formalism on the part of counselors, especially at the beginning of treatment and prior to assessment of clients' needs.
- Indigenous healing has long been a practice of many Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders. Religion/spirituality, community, and family may also be seen as protective factors for bereaved Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders.



Native American and Alaska Native or Indigenous Peoples' Expressions of Grief

Native American and Alaska Native (AI/AN) or Indigenous Peoples' beliefs about death and dying can differ across Tribal groups. There are, however, commonalities that differentiate Indigenous bereavement practices from mainstream culture in the United States.



- In many Native American family systems, everyone is involved during times of death, and extended family may travel great distances to provide support. Extended family members are often involved in decision-making surrounding burial and mourning, and counselors can consider including them in the counseling process.⁵
- Receiving non-Native professional assistance in the dying and grieving process has traditionally been avoided, but is

becoming more commonly accepted. Ceremonies and burials are often private. It is important for practitioners to understand that it is best to work with all clients, including Indigenous participants, on their terms, and consider both individual and family interventions.

- For many Native Americans, grief and mourning are generally seen as necessary and natural. However, there exist some gender differences in grief expression shaped by



communal expectations. For example, in some communities, men may express minimal emotion publicly, while women may express their emotions more openly.

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a new reality marked by grief and loss. While illness, death, and dying are universal experiences, the ways in which our clients respond to them are shaped by their individual cultural identities. It is the responsibility of the provider to learn how the cultural backgrounds of their clients influence their beliefs about death and mourning. By approaching grief with *cultural humility*, providers can more compassionately and effectively support clients in their individual expressions of loss.



Resources

[Grief Speaks: Cultures and Grief](#)

[National Hispanic and Latino MHTTC: Communicating Death and Dying to Latino Families during a Pandemic](#)

[National Hispanic and Latino MHTTC: Complicated Grief: Cultural Considerations When Working with Loss in Hispanic and Latino Students and Their Families](#)

[Pacific Southwest MHTTC: Building Skills for Cross-Cultural Communication and Resilience During COVID-19](#)

[Pacific Southwest MHTTC: COVID-19 and Mental Health Resources: For Diverse Populations and Providers Who Support Them](#)

[Quality Interactions: Cultural Competency and COVID-19 \[Infographic\]](#)

[South Southwest MHTTC: Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness in Telehealth | Mental Health Technology Transfer Center](#)

[University of Montana Institute of Health and Humanities: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Death, Dying & Grief](#)

Please visit the [MHTTC COVID-19 Grief, Loss and Bereavement Webpage](#) for additional resources, webinars, and training toolkits.

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