



Dealing with grief and loss using an Indigenous lens

The purpose of this infosheet is to provide basic knowledge on grief and helpful tips for staff and students dealing with grief through an Indigenous lens.

What is grief?

Grief is a natural response to loss and is a complex and intense emotion.^{1,2} Grief may result from the death of a loved one or pet, loss of job, end of a relationship/friendship, or a change that alters your daily life in a significant way.³ However, for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis individuals and communities, grief also extends to the loss of culture, ancestral land and social structures impacted by colonization.^{4,5,6}

While there are many types of grief, for the purposes of this infosheet, we will focus on **“normal grief”**. We encourage those who are dealing with grief beyond the scope of this infosheet to please reach out to friends, family, Elders, counsellors or a health practitioner for support and guidance. This infosheet is for general information only and is not a substitute for professional medical or mental health advice.



WHAT IS NORMAL GRIEF?

Normal grief is when someone suffers a loss and exhibits a range of emotions associated with grief. The individual will gradually learn how to adapt to this change in their daily lives and find balance in their well-being.⁶

Symptoms of grief⁶⁻⁸

There is no right way to grieve, and the grieving process varies from person to person.

This list is not exhaustive; you may experience other symptoms besides the ones mentioned below:

- **Mental/emotional:** feeling empty or numb, sadness, guilt, regret, anxiety, anger, fear, helplessness, long and short-term memory loss
- **Physical:** eating less or more, sleeping too little or too much, fatigue, pain, stomach pain, chest pressure, backaches, anxiety
- **Spiritual:** questioning belief or faith, feeling disconnected, decreased sense of meaning and purpose in life, feelings of emptiness
- **Social:** increased dependency on others, withdrawing from family and friends, neglecting the self

Please consider seeking necessary supports for your grief, including counsellors, health practitioners, family, friends and/or culturally relevant supports (Elders, Knowledge Keepers) for guidance if you are experiencing these or other symptoms

Begin to heal

It is important to acknowledge and process your feelings and begin your healing journey. Connecting or reconnecting with your culture can provide healing and offer new perspectives on grief.¹ For example, it allows space to provide comfort, ease pain and bring people, family and community together.⁹ Here are some tips and things to keep in mind when beginning your journey to heal^{3,5,7,9}:

- Remember to please be kind and patient with yourself
- You are learning to live with the loss, it does not mean you are ‘letting go’ of the loved one
- Engage in traditional practices of healing which may come in the form of ceremonies, special medicines and songs
- Reach out to friends and family
- Seek support and guidance from an Elder or Knowledge Keeper for encouragement
- You can also reach out to mental health counsellors, spiritual care and/or support groups (e.g., grief or healing/sharing circles of supports)
- Reconnect and spend time on the land and in nature, appreciating the natural gifts of Mother Earth (e.g., walking in nature, being by the water, building a fire, gardening)
- Listen to your favourite music
- Remember to eat and drink water



Examples of Indigenous perspectives on healing

Haudenosaunee perspective: Through Haudenosaunee teachings, having a good mind, “Ka’nikonhr̄:io” in the Mohawk language, is important to have because as you are grieving, your mind is clouded and not clear during this time. Clearing the mind (the ability to think clearly) will help ground yourself and improve your mental health and well-being during your healing journey. For example, go outside for walk, be in nature, go by the water as water has the power to help clear your thoughts.^{5,7,10}

Inuit perspective: When faced with trauma, it is important to express your emotions, open and share how you are feeling. It is not healthy to keep those feelings and emotions inside. Through talking with someone, you are allowing yourself to unpack deeper feelings and emotions and can begin to start dealing with your grief journey.⁷

Métis perspective: Healing begins with the connection of culture and spirituality. This can include learning the Michif language, connecting with family and returning to the land and water.¹¹ Through these practices you begin to self-reflect, learn to care for yourself and begin to heal.⁵

How to support someone who is dealing with grief^{2,5,8}

When supporting individuals who are going through a grieving process, remember that they are in a vulnerable place. It can be difficult to know how to talk to them and what to say, however, words are not necessarily needed to connect with someone going through grief. Your presence is more than enough to make a difference in supporting someone who is on their healing journey. Providing and showing your support, allows the person to heal, self-reflect and receive the help they need. Here are some examples you can show your support with someone dealing with grief:

- Finding a mutual connection through grief is a powerful way to help people move forward
- Connecting through a phone call or video call
- Offering to prepare or deliver a hot meal
- Offering to help with pet care (walking their dog, feeding their pet, etc.)
- Offering them a hug
- Spending time with them on the land
- Sharing community resources that further their connection to culture - songs, drumming, dancing, ceremony, craft making
- Asking them questions or talking about their loved one and sharing stories of their loved one
- Remembering their loved one is an important way to begin healing
- Storytelling – the ability to share knowledge and experiences and to learn from each other, shows that we are not alone

Further reading

Living my culture website: <https://livingmyculture.ca/topic/after-death-and-ceremonies/>

Healing and Wellness supports on the Métis Nation website: <https://www.metisnation.org/programs-and-services/healing-wellness/>

Grief Teachings with Jock Hill: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0KybEGp1PU>

Resources to Support Myself at McMaster University: <https://a-way-through.mcmaster.ca/resources-to-support-myself/>

Grief student support at the University of Toronto: <https://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/program/grief-support-group/>

Tell us what you think!

