

## A self-help resource to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people trying to cope with sorrow, loss and grief

### What is grief?

The word 'grief' is used to describe what we feel and what we do after the loss of someone or something that is very important to us. We also call this 'sorry business'. Grief comes when we lose relationships, good health, a job, a way of life or when we lose a loved one. We may feel grief and sadness today because of the after-effects of the stolen generations. We may feel separated from our traditional spiritual strengths of land, language, art, music, storytelling, dance, and law. We may feel we have lost our cultural heritage and our own cultural identity. Grief is not an illness – it cannot be cured or hurried along. No two people grieve and start healing in the same way. It changes depending upon who or what we have lost, our past history, our cultural and spiritual beliefs, and our personality. There is no right or wrong way to experience grief.

### Some common worries we might have during times of grief are:

- Sadness, crying
- Shock, numbness, not feeling anything at all for a while
- Difficulty accepting the loss, not believing it has happened
- Anger, guilt, shame, blame
- Isolation, alienation, loneliness
- Confusion
- Not looking after ourselves or others
- Not caring about work
- Relief (that the suffering is over or that a new beginning can now take place)
- Fear that what we are feeling or doing may not be normal
- Thoughts of self harm or suicide
- Difficulty concentrating
- Acting out of character and being different to the way we usually are
- Substance abuse, drinking, using drugs or smoking too much
- Physical worries such as headaches, not eating well, or not sleeping well
- Seeing or hearing the spirit of the person who is gone (this can be normal and okay)
- Wanting to go home to country or family
- Wanting to show our respects but not being able to because of money, work or family worries

### **Why do people grieve differently?**

We are all different. We come from different family backgrounds and cultures. Every culture has its own ways of grieving. People have different traditions, lore and laws across Australia and the Torres Strait Islands. This tool kit cannot say exactly how different people grieve in all of their different cultural traditions, so it talks about common worries that we may have and common things that can help.

### **How long does grief or sorry business last?**

We can't put a time limit on grief. We don't know how long it will last. The best answer seems to be 'as long as it takes'. Grief doesn't follow a smooth pathway and is different for each of us. We gradually learn to live with the loss. The way we adjust depends on what sort of person we are, how we grieve, who we grieve with, what grief we have been through before, our physical health and the support we have. There are no simple ways to get through the pain caused by loss. We may feel that no person, no words, no talk can ease the pain. However, when we feel ready, hearing about what has helped other people might help us too.

### **What can I do to manage grief?**

Let yourself grieve. It is important to be able to express and share our sadness and grief rather than keeping our feelings locked inside. At times we may feel overwhelmed by the intensity and strength of our feelings. That is normal and okay. We can delay grief and hold it off for a while, but we cannot avoid it. If we delay and avoid feeling the pain of grief for too long, we will find it harder to deal with the next time worry or grief visits our life.

We don't all show our grief by crying.

### **There are many other ways to let those strong feelings out including:**

- Physical activity and doing lots of things
- Listening and playing music
- Story telling
- Dancing
- Writing
- Painting, drawing, etc.
- Talking about the loss
- Praying
- Meditating
- Keeping a diary of feelings and memories
- Ceremonies and memorials to say good bye and share our feelings
- Rituals and ceremonies that are part of family, cultural and/or religious heritage

### Look after yourself

- Prioritise nutrition, sleep and exercise
- Keep doing things you enjoy, even if you don't feel like it
- Try to get back to your regular routine when you can
- Avoid using alcohol and other drugs to numb your pain
- Connect with yourself and remember who you are – through religion, meditation, music, walking, sport, or hobbies

### Postpone major life decisions

The stress and sadness of grief can affect our ability to make good decisions. It can be tempting to make decisions quickly. Sometimes we feel pressure from other people to move on and make changes. If possible, we are best to delay and put off major decisions until a time that we can think more clearly. If decisions have to be made now, it is best to talk with someone we trust who is not directly affected by the loss.

### Say good bye and share your feelings

Following your cultural traditions is an important part of grieving. These may include ceremonies and rituals related to the place and the person you have lost. Each person, family and cultural group also has a different way of working out what to do with the physical memories of the person. All of these things can be a healthy part of grieving.

### Let people know how they can help

We need to tell others if there are practical things they can do to help us. It is okay to say that we are not ready to talk about our loss, and that we will let them know when we are. It helps to be around people who are supportive, understanding and willing to help. Friends, family and elders can be the best help. Sometimes, though, family and friends may not be able to give us the kind of emotional support we need.

### Other people or services that can help are:

- Traditional healers
- Counsellors who specialise in Stolen Generation issues
- Healing Circles or other similar cultural healing groups
- Bereavement or sorry business support groups
- Counsellors or psychologists

- Doctors, nurses, health workers, mental health or social and emotional wellbeing services
- Priests or ministers or other religious or spiritual leaders

### Let yourself heal

Healing does not just mean 'letting go' or 'saying goodbye'. Sometimes we feel guilty for forgetting the person for a short time or beginning to move on with our life. This is a normal part of healing. It does not mean the loss does not matter. It can be helpful to enjoy happy memories by talking, smiling and laughing about the person. We might want to set aside some time alone each day to let the feelings out, look after ourselves, or just remember. We can spend time with friends and family telling stories and sharing our grief. Some people find a support group useful because the members of the group are all grieving too. Other people who are grieving may have more of an understanding of what we are going through. Know that you can come through this.

We will never completely be the same person again, but we can survive big losses. Sometimes this is hard to believe. Sometimes old beliefs and ideas and ways of doing things seem empty and useless because of what has happened. We may need to change how we do things. This takes time. We need to just take one moment, one step, and one day at a time.

### Set our own limits and learn to say no.

Expect some set backs, but know we will get through this part of our life. This may be the hardest thing we ever do. We need to be patient with ourselves. Be prepared for stressful situations and events. Stressful times can include birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, or hearing stories that remind us of our loss.

### All of these events and anniversaries can be less worrying if we can be a bit prepared for them:

- Be aware of places that bring out strong memories and expect to have strong feelings there
- Plan activities, rituals and ceremonies – for remembrance and to acknowledge the loss
- Let ourselves be sad even if it is meant to be a happy occasion
- Let ourselves have fun and enjoy happy memories and the company of other people close to us
- Sometimes the time leading up to these events is the hardest. The day itself may not be as hard as we fear

### When is grief a problem?

Sometimes we can't understand our loss and can't move on with life. We might become stuck grieving, worrying and feeling sad. We might become involved in a lot of activities to avoid feeling the pain of our loss. This can start to get in the way of the things we need to do in our lives. It can lead to family, relationship and work worries. It may lead to an increased risk of physical or mental illness. This is the time when we need to think about getting extra help. Talking to family, friends, counsellors or doctors can help us to feel stronger and start healing.

### **Information for family and friends**

It's hard to know how to help or what to say to someone who is grieving.

These ideas may help:

- Let them know you care – acknowledge their loss and what it means to them
- Let them know how you feel – that you don't know what to say, but you are there for them if needed
- Be there to listen – when they want to talk, let them tell their story
- Let them know it's okay to share their grief
- Keep in touch – let them know you are there. Keep including them in activities. They may not wish to join in, but give them the option
- Be understanding – they may act differently to their usual selves
- Look out for signs of them being overwhelmed by bad feelings. This can include thinking about killing themselves, hurting themselves, hurting others, or giving up on everything
- Find help and information if they need or want extra support
- Look after yourself – take time out and talk to someone about how you are feeling and coping during these stressful times

### **What not to do:**

- Don't play down their loss
- Don't think you can take away their pain
- Don't tell them "You'll get over it"
- Don't say "I know how you feel" – everyone is different



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We often do or say these things because we want to help, but best way to help the person is just to be there for them and connect them with professional support if they need help. Please call **Lifeskills Australia** on **1800 870 080** to book in to see a counsellor for support.