

Culture and Grief

*And while we laugh or cry for different reasons,
The sound of happiness is much the same everywhere.
And tears, wept for whatever reason,
Always taste of salt.*

— Marilee Zdenek

As we approach the holiday season, opportunities for celebration with family and friends abound. But the coming months can also be a difficult time for anyone missing a loved one. We focus on grief in this newsletter not to cause you sadness, but to share ideas from other cultures that may be of comfort.

We all grieve the death of a loved one. It's a universal, though highly personal, experience influenced by our relationship with the person who died, the cause of death, and our cultural and religious backgrounds.

EAP clinician Kim Narvaez, LMFT, grew up in the Philippines. After losing her best friend at age 10, Kim remembers celebrating her friend's life during a several-days-long wake.

"When my friend passed, everyone came to the house to play bingo, share stories, and eat good food. It felt more like an American Thanksgiving in some ways," Kim shares. "There was mourning and sadness, but we wanted to be as happy and jovial as possible, so she didn't worry about us as she moved into the afterlife."

People of different cultures honor their loved ones in unique ways. See the list at the right to inspire your own special customs.

For additional ideas for reframing loss and grief, visit mhanational.org/finding-positive-after-loss.

- Many Latin American countries celebrate **Día de Los Muertos** (Day of the Dead) on Oct. 31. Festivities include bringing pictures, mementos, food, candles, and flowers to loved ones' grave sites.
- At an **Irish wake**, loved ones and neighbors pay their last respects to the deceased with an open casket, rituals, prayers, music, poetry, food, and drink.
- During the **Hungry Ghost Festival** in China, people set out deceased loved ones' photos and other mementos and burn candles and incense next to them. They may also put out plates of food for their ancestors.
- Mourners at **New Orleans Jazz Funerals** participate in processions with a brass band playing heavy and sad music that transitions to celebratory.



What is the Employee Assistance Program (EAP)?

Sutter EAP provides referrals to licensed therapists who can help with personal problems that may impact your job, relationships or overall well-being. EAP is:

- Confidential
- Open to all employees and family members
- No charge to you

Living with Grief

Grief doesn't end after a funeral. In fact, it comes and goes—sometimes when you least expect it.

Returning to our regular routines after losing a loved one can be challenging. That's why it's essential to communicate with family, friends, and co-workers about our needs, says EAP clinician and grief specialist Mercedes Silver, LMFT.

"You are the expert when it comes to your feelings. You can tell people, 'I'm having a sad day, I need time by myself,' or 'I need to take a PTO day,'" she suggests.

EAP Clinician Kim Narvaez, LMFT, agrees. "People can't read our minds; we must advocate for ourselves. We cannot expect others to know what to say or how to act. Be honest when you're struggling."

"When I lost my dad, my boss asked me, 'How do you want this shared with the team, if at all?'" Kim says. "If someone you know is struggling with grief, simply ask how you can be of support. It's not uncommon to struggle with how to show you care when someone you know is grieving. If the grieving person does not know now, then offer an invitation for them to reach out or let them know you will be checking in."

Kim and Mercedes agree that grief comes in waves, and it's important to allow the feelings and memories to surface as they ebb and flow.

"Grief often mirrors the amount of love in the lost relationship," Kim says. "If you've lost someone, remember to celebrate, feel and honor your experience."



Honoring your loved one

EAP clinicians suggest finding your own meaningful ways to honor your loved one.

Mercedes' example: "My grandma's gift to me was music and dancing. She taught me about these things, and when I sing or dance, I am honoring her."

Other suggestions:

- **Memory Jar:** Write down memories as they come to you and save them to read later among family or friends.
- **Memory Garden:** Plant trees or flowers your loved one enjoyed to create an everyday reminder of them.