



# Understanding Death in the Aboriginal Community

In many different Aboriginal language groups there are warning signals or signs telling about a family member or a close friend that has passed on. This gives the family a message before they have been told verbally. It is usually a bird or an animal or an unexplainable feeling that only they can describe.

When a death occurs all family members come together immediately. All family and extended members and their children and grandchildren will travel to the place or community to show their respect, offer support to the family and come together for a cry. Shaking of hands and hugging family members is very important too.

The family and extended family takes on the responsibility of making sure that all necessary arrangements are made. Everyone has a role to play. It usually takes up to two to three weeks for the burial but may take longer. Many families have difficulty in having enough funds for the funeral and they do require some financial assistance.

The family that is affected by a death expects most of their family to attend the funeral. If they don't attend it is seen as a sign of disrespect. When family members are unable to attend the funeral then a message is sent to the family with an explanation. Usually the family gathers at the Church and the majority of people and extended family will meet the family at the cemetery for the burial.

In most cases the family members put on a family afternoon tea back at the Church or community hall. Other family members will go to a particular family member's house and gather there (especially if they want to have a drink of alcohol or catch up for a yarn) and this where family bonding takes place and family ties and history is shared and strengthened.

Most of the family go to the funeral. Many of the children go to funerals with their families, as there often isn't anyone available to take care of them. This is where and when the children learn about their family ties and relationships.

Aboriginal families often do not have savings available to pay for funerals. If they are travelling they often stay away from home for at least a month (especially the families that are on benefit payments). Aboriginal Corporations that have a bus usually hire the bus to family members if they need to go out of town. People are asked to contribute towards the trip to assist with the running costs of the bus.

It is an honour to be asked to be a pallbearer at the funeral. This is saying that you are highly respected by the family. If you are unsure of what to do, talk to a family member.

Many Aboriginal families request other Aboriginal people to sing at the funeral and once again this is a great honour to be asked.

Sometimes there are family feuds happening and, if there is going to be any sign of trouble, the family requests a Police presence.

**If you work with Aboriginal people and they have had a death in their family then as a work colleague you need to go and shake their hand. Depending on how well you know that person then it is within reason to attend the Church service and proceed onto the graveside ceremony. Once again if you are unsure of what to do please ask a family member.**

Sometimes when family members meet up in a public place they use sign language to tell other family members if someone has died. Using sign language allows for the family to hug and shake hands, acknowledging the death of their loved one in a public place. With many of the different Aboriginal language groups throughout Australia, everyone is very familiar with the sign that signals someone has died and the body language of that person/people. In all communities use the local Aboriginal contacts especially your Aboriginal Islander Education Officers (AIEO's) to learn more about this custom.

Remote areas have a far more complex way and you will need to consult with your local Aboriginal community for further information on their local traditional customs.