

Death and Dying Cultural Beliefs and Practices

Three Cardinal Rules

1. Ask the patient about cultural practices
2. Respect values and traditions
3. Accommodate requests whenever possible

Caucasians

Attempt to suppress emotion, remain strong

Funeral rituals 2 to 3 days following death is common practice

Actual service highly individualized, Cremation or burial acceptable

Gathering of friends and/or families after services completed

African Americans

Death described as passing from one realm of life to another

Death does not end the connection between people especially family

Express emotion openly either at time of death or at funeral

“Falling out” – response upon hearing of death of family or close member

Sudden collapse, paralysis and inability to see or speak; hearing and understanding is still intact.

Important to recognize as cultural response and not medical condition.

Many believe body must be kept intact after death

Eulogies are extremely important

Amish

Communal support for the individual in suffering, dying, and bereavement

Funeral ceremony is simple and unadorned; Verbal expression is muted.

Plain wooden coffin is built by local Amish cabinetmaker

Interment often in private plots on Amish farms, but emerging pattern is to bury in community cemetery.

Chinese Americans

Tradition centered on ancestor worship - Believe spirits can never rest unless living descendants provide care of the grave and worship their memory of the deceased.

Fear death, avoid references to it.

Avoid using the number ‘four’ – similar pronunciation to word ‘death’

Response to death – accepting; do not openly express emotions to strangers

Honor is given to the dead by placing objects around the coffin that signify the life of the deceased.

Cremation is preferred in China (lack of wood for coffins and space for burial)

Bereavement time – one day to one week

Cuban Americans

Large gathering of family and friends in dying person’s room with group prayers and religious artifacts
‘Santeria’ (300 year old African-Cuban religious system) believers may have ceremonial rituals including plants, foods, and animal sacrifices at bedside of the dying person.

After death, candles are lit to illuminate the path of the spirit to the afterlife.

Funeral wake held at funeral parlor, lasts 2 to 3 days until the funeral.

Bereavement expressed openly – loud crying acceptable.

Women must dress in black during period of mourning

Remember the dead on birthday and anniversary by lighting candles, bringing flowers to gravesite, offering prayers or masses

Filipino Americans

Emotional outburst, uncontrolled crying, fainting may be common bereavement practice, women < men.

Wake is planned 3 days to 1 week after death usually held in the home.

Filipino women wear black clothing for months to one year after death

Family and friends reunite on first year anniversary of the death, ends period of mourning

Many who die in the U.S. are returned to the Philippines for burial.

Greek Americans

Last rites are given by priests.

Close relatives are notified of death in person.

All friends/relatives expected to attend home or funeral parlor wake for at least a brief time – even those with considerable strife. Wake ends when the priest arrives and offers prayer.

Funeral is held the following day with interment in a cemetery. Reject cremation.

After death, pictures and mirrors may be turned over for 40 days.

Black color of mourning is worn for 40-day period; widows may be longer.

Memorial service held 40 days after burial, at 3 months, 6 months, and yearly thereafter.

Iranians

Strenuous efforts made to prolong life.

Some terminally ill Muslims request return to Iran to die or be buried.

Deathbed should be turned to face Mecca for religious Muslims.

After death, body washed in ritual manner by another Muslim, with all body orifices closed and slightly packed with cotton to prevent leakage of bodily fluids. Prayers and verses are read from the *Qur'an* during the procedure. A non-Muslim health care provider should only touch the body wearing gloves.

If buried in Iran, embalming is not practiced and the body is buried directly into the earth to facilitate “dust to dust”. During burial, the shroud is removed from the face and one side of the face is turned to be in contact with the earth.

Expressive, intense, and loud grieving over the loss of a loved one.

Jewish Americans

The dying person is not left alone.

Ultra Orthodox Jews will also not leave the dead alone until the funeral.

Period of time from death to burial is short (24-48 hours), delayed only if relatives must travel great distance or if it is the Sabbath or a holy day.

Wooden casket is used, the body is not embalmed, and the body is wrapped in a shroud so body and casket decay at same rate

‘Shiva’ – a seven-day period that begins with burial. While mourners are “sitting Shiva” they do not work, mirrors may be covered, and no activity is allowed that will divert attention from thinking about the deceased. Condolence calls are appropriate.

After Shiva, mourning for a relative is permitted only for 30 days, unless it was the death of a parent – then mourning lasts for 1 year. Considered wrong to mourn past this time.

Mourning is not required for a fetus that is miscarried or stillborn, or a preterm who dies before 30 days of age. Parents are required to mourn for a full term who dies at or soon after birth.

“Unveiling” - a tombstone is erected within one year of death, at which time a graveside service is held.

Mexican Americans

Family members arrive in large numbers at bedside of dying person

May take turns sitting vigil at the deathbed.

“Ataque de nervios”= a culture bound syndrome characterized by hyperkinetic shaking and seizure-like activity that releases strong emotions of grief; seen in traditional families.

May erect altars in their homes to honor deceased relatives on the anniversary of death

Native Americans

Death rituals vary among tribes.

The body must go to the afterlife as whole as possible.

If death took place in the home, a ceremony may be held to cleanse it.

Burial takes place approximately 4 days after death

Dead may be buried with shoes on the wrong feet and rings on their index fingers.

When talking with clients about fatal illness, may need to discuss in the third person.