

Remembering a young person: Memorials and important events in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities



Death and the deceased are sacred to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There is well established cultural beliefs, protocols, customs and practices in relation to death. Australia is a large nation and therefore the beliefs and customs associated with death are quite diverse, with the hundreds of different traditional groups having their own local languages and customs.

Some of these traditional groups share similarities regarding ceremonies, language, names, images and other possessions but often the ceremonies differ between communities.

Adhering to cultural practices and traditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is an important part of grieving and can reduce further anger and distress for family, friends and communities affected by grief.

Sorry Business is the term used to refer to the period of mourning, activities and cultural practices after the loss of a loved one in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Sorry Business is different for both cultures and varies depending on the communities' location.

Safe and respectful Sorry Business - memorials

Memorials give friends, families and communities the chance to mourn together and to share the significance of their grief and loss of a loved one. When it's a young person who has passed on unexpectedly, the urge to create a memorial can be particularly strong. Memorials should adhere to the strict cultural protocols around language, names, images and other possessions.

There are many ways to create a respectful and meaningful memorial. Including friends and family in the planning of a memorial is a good way of making sure that those closest to the person who has passed away

are not caused any further distress. It's important that friends, fellow students and school staff are given the opportunity to attend the memorials. Services can be extremely upsetting for young people, so parents should be encouraged to attend with their children and support people should be available before and after the service.

Spontaneous memorials

It's not unusual for young people to create spontaneous memorials. They may leave messages, flowers, photos or other items at the site where the person passed on or another significant place. While there may be little harm in the creation of spontaneous memorials, it's important that such sites don't inadvertently 'normalise' the death or cause distress to others who may see it. Setting some limits around the location and the length of time it remains in place can reduce potential distress; however, this must be done with respect and sensitivity for those who are grieving. Consider involving

the community Elders and family in this conversation around memorials ensuring that plans are in accordance with the cultural and traditional practices. Online memorials – on social networking sites, blogs or a dedicated website – may occur.

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**How to avoid
sensationalising suicide**

Excessive or exaggerated outpouring of admiration and love of someone who has passed on by suicide may influence vulnerable young people to consider suicide as an option if they are going through a tough time.

Important events

Funerals in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities may be delayed pending the arrival of family from afar to attend. The time between the death and the funeral can be difficult; the funeral can mark a culmination of grief but also a time of coming together and healing. This is a time that can be very difficult for individuals particularly when there is a delay between these two distressing events. Ensure additional support is offered and available at this time to students and staff.

The anniversary of a person's death, and events such as their birthday or school graduation, are often difficult times for friends and family. These dates serve as reminders that the person they were close to is no longer with them. Occasions like these can bring up old feelings of grief, sadness and loss. Anniversaries and important events can also be a time of increased risk for vulnerable young people and may trigger suicidal thoughts or behaviours.



headspace acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of Australia and we pay our respects to their Elders past, present and future.

Acknowledgements

Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory. (2012). *Gone too Soon: A Report into Youth Suicide in the Northern Territory*. Accessed at http://www.nt.gov.au/lant/parliamentary-business/committees/ctc/youth-suicides/Final_Report_on_Youth_Suicides.pdf

Mental Health First Aid Training and Research Program (2008) *Trauma and loss: guidelines for providing mental health first aid to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person*. Melbourne: Mental Health First Aid

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Recommended
Treat the death as you would any other- This is a better way of ensuring suicide is not glamorised in any way.
Acknowledge that any death is tragic, painful and worthy of acknowledgement.
At a memorial discuss the connection between suicide and social and emotional wellbeing problems.
At a memorial discuss strategies aimed at preventing suicide and encourage help-seeking messages and activities that can help the grieving process.

Not Recommended
Do not stop memorials! This may stigmatise family and friends of the person who has passed on and result in further anger and distress for those affected by grief.
Do not normalise a suicide.
Do not mention the method and the location of death. Provide factual information without the unnecessary detail.
Do not make assumptions, be cautious when using names or displaying photographs of loved ones who have passed away. Family permission is required as well as an understanding of local cultural protocols.

You can support young people through these times by normalising the grieving process and any thoughts or feelings of sadness, anger and stress. Remind them that everyone will remember the anniversary differently and encourage them to use their support network during this time.

Organised memorials to mark an anniversary or event can help provide a focus and acknowledge the event's significance. Ideally, these should be arranged with small groups of close friends and family, and always with the permission of parents. Having trusted community members, Elders or teachers available to provide support following the memorial is a good way to manage any distress experienced by those attending.

Remembering a young person who has died within an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community can occur in many different ways. What underpins the customs and rituals for death in these communities is the belief that death is sacred.

With respect, care and in collaboration with the family, friends, community and Elders a memorial can play an important role in the grieving process.

Other fact sheets that may be of interest:

Grief: How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people might respond to suicide, Suicide in Schools: Information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

For more information on suicide or support and assistance visit headspace.org.au/schoolsupport or headspace.org.au

