

Cross Cultural: Death & Bereavement

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Law enforcement officers have a great deal of contact with people dealing with death & bereavement. Law enforcement personnel need to identify what is culturally expected or required. This may play a role in your interactions with people experiencing grief from a loss.

Law enforcement agencies interact with various cultures on a daily basis. Some of the more common cultural issues that may be misunderstood or even not accepted by some officers.

Chinese-American: The Chinese tradition is rooted in ancestor worship. It is accepted that Chinese people have a fear of death and will avoid any reference to death. Chinese people do not show their emotions openly.

Japanese-American: The principle religion found is Buddhism. The family plays a significant role in preparing the body. For the next two days, the family enters into a period of prayer and burning of incense.

Filipino-American: The principle religion found is Catholic. The family may hold a "wake" for up to a week in length before the burial or cremation. Filipino's may express emotional outbursts of uncontrolled crying.

Jewish-Americans: The Judaism faith believes in the afterlife and it is not acceptable to leave a dying person alone. Immediately after death, the deceased's face is covered with a cloth and the body must be treated with respect. Autopsies are allowed under some conditions. Cremation is also acceptable. Starting after the burial, people will enter into a seven-day period that they will not work or allow any activity that would deflect any attention from the deceased.

Mexican-Americans: The principle religion is Catholic. The family may hold a wake and funeral in accordance with the Catholic faith. The bereaved will often avoid social activities to demonstrate a showing of grieving for a loss. The grief period can last for up to two years.

Native Americans: Early American Indians talked about the evil spirits in the deceased body and would shoot arrows into the air in an effort to rid the evil spirit. They do not generally bury the deceased until four days after the death. Native Americans do not generally express their emotions openly, they avoid touching the deceased body, and it is customary not to use the deceased name in conversation.

Final Thought

The aforementioned cultural groups outlined are not all inclusive religious practices or cultural groups. There are differences across cultures and that law enforcement personnel need to be culturally sensitive to the differences. The differences will have an effect on how law enforcement will perform their work and most importantly how the bereaved will process the interaction with the police. Experts in the field recommend that officers be given specialized training on grief, stages of grief, and both normal and pathological grief responses. Additional training and education needs to address the area of death and bereavement across cultures. Law enforcement officers will need to develop various approaches and methods in accordance to the geographic area served. In the end, the goal should be to have a law enforcement agency that understands, honors, and respects the cultures, beliefs, traditions and history of the people they serve.

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