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Loss and Grief: “Closing the Gap” for Aboriginal People

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The *Ways forward* report of 1994 (Swan & Raphael) recognised the multiple sources of grief for Australia’s Aboriginal peoples, Torres Strait Islanders and First Nation peoples across the world. Such grief in terms of loss of culture, land, kinship ties, way of life have been profound, and continue to have their impact on social and emotional wellbeing. Nowhere is this more profound than with the loss of loved ones. The taking away of children is one such form of tragic loss with its effects across generations, as indicated in the *Bringing them home* report of 1997, and in the *Western Australian Aboriginal child health survey* (2005) where the effects for children in such families are a significant contribution to problems.

There is also the loss of life: the high level of premature deaths in Indigenous communities, across the life span. And the nature of these deaths; the way the loved one died, for instance, frequently in motor vehicle accidents, suicide and violence, or lack of access to health care resources.

In the period since Volume 1 of *Grief Matters* in 1998, there have been many policy initiatives, and programs attempting to mitigate negative trajectories of distress; mental health, social and emotional wellbeing problems; and health inequalities, including, most recently, *Closing the gap*. What is clear is that those programs developed by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people, whether as Indigenous-driven response to need, or in partnership with governments or others where Aboriginal voices are predominant, are likely to be most effective.

With these themes in view it is useful to look at some of the excellent resources that contribute by “speaking” in the Indigenous voice, to Indigenous peoples. Some, of course dealing with loss and grief, also deal with the trauma that so frequently accompanies this.

Some of the resources developed by Aboriginal people include *Grieving Aboriginal way* (Westerman, 2001) through the Indigenous Psychological Services in Perth. This booklet and resource is linked to the Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet¹. It includes common feelings, “what to do straight away”, “suicide of a loved one”, “during sorry and funeral time”, and after this is over.

Atkinson (2002) in her work *Trauma trails*, identifies how frequently grief is linked to trauma, for the losses of self with abuse, the experience of violence and the diminishment that may result, and the rage and grief that are frequent consequences. Here, as in many other areas, telling one’s story or giving witness validates people’s distress and is a major part of healing journeys.

Aboriginal Family and Community Counselling Services also address loss and grief, such as the Let the River Run program to help with “Sorry Business”.

Other online resources have been developed in different jurisdictions, some in partnership or funded by governments, others stand-alone or as a section of other programs for the general population dealing with grief and bereavement. Many healing programs deal with loss, often in terms of the healing journey, and deal with transgenerational, past and current losses. Healing groups, days and other gatherings, including camps for young people, have been utilised to support grieving and going forward, with “yarning” and the narrative gathering support (NALAG [NSW], 2011). The multiple resources developed by, and with, Aboriginal people, attest to the importance in this field, and the profound and multiple sources of grief.

Understanding cultural practice for dealing with loss and grief is important across all groups of all cultures and peoples. The capacity to enact the cultural requirements may make a significant difference. A study addressing those issues in the Northern Territory is reported by McGrath et al. (2008). These health workers found that it was important to recognise the emotional pain of grief; the traditional ways of dealing with loss; the importance of sharing grief; and the longer-term kin and community networks; viewing the body; and opportunities for overt expression of emotion through crying, singing and storytelling. A recent thesis by Hampshire (2011) explores a “shared understanding of grief and loss” in Dunghutti land. She found that grief had a much broader meaning than for non-Aboriginal people, that this was influenced by their unique history; that they held strong beliefs and practiced rituals in reaction to death, dying and loss and grief. This is one of a number of research approaches attempting to give a better understanding of cultural differences and their implications, for instance for health care workers. Some of this work has focused on palliative care (McGrath et al., 2004), others on suicide deaths (LIFE: Living Is For Everyone²), on children³ and on problems such as prolonged grief and/or complicated grief. Many of these resources are provided by and for Aboriginal people, while others have been a partnership process. This awareness and productivity has resulted in many resources, but the majority have not been evaluated for their accessibility and value for Indigenous people.

Important other initiatives include reports such as those addressing social and emotional wellbeing from an Aboriginal point of view, reflected in resources such as the recent publication *Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice* (Purdie et al., 2010). This valuable volume includes chapters dealing with a Cultural and Structural Model of Wellbeing and the importance of the need for sensitivity in these issues, including those relating to men’s and women’s ways of doing business and roles, the different experiences

of communities, including the degree to which there is cultural safety (Roe, 2010), and the importance of community-owned response and engagement to promote community wellbeing (Morgan & Drew, 2010). Such themes are relevant to building community resilience that can be protective for individuals and communities in the face of adversity.

There is valuable discussion and a model for dealing with loss, grief and trauma by Wanganeen (2010) which deals with both the historical aspects related to colonial impacts and the multiple contemporary sources related to violence and traumatic premature deaths. She describes a seven-stage healing model for loss and grief. This deals with: The Contemporary, present grief reaction; Identifying childhood and adolescent multiple losses and unresolved grief; Ancestral losses; Ancient grieving ceremonies for physical and spiritual expression; Contemporary loss and grieving centres for physical and spiritual expression. These themes provide a valuable model to address the complex and multifaceted loss and grief experienced by indigenous peoples, with a strong cultural sensitivity.

Another program of demonstrated value has been in place for more than a decade, the Marumalli Program, an Aboriginal model of healing. The Circles of Healing program sees "reconnecting with Aboriginal spirituality is a core healing tool to overcome the grief and loss experienced by Aboriginal people" (p. 286). It has a five-day workshop built on cultural and psychological understandings and addressed healing and recovery for the stolen generations. The aims were to provide and facilitate "reconnections", building the skills of Aboriginal counsellors and others, for healing. This program has been evaluated positively and is a valued example of the extensive development of programs for loss and grief driven by Aboriginal people themselves.

The story of loss and grief is universal. But for Aboriginal people, and for First Nation peoples, everywhere there are a great many additional sources of loss, of grief: loss of personhood, identity, history, country, home, loved ones, love of life. We see the courage with which Aboriginal people have responded to such loss and grief, such trauma and pain, the "fighting spirit", and the spirit of culture and connectedness with which these adversities are addressed. We also see resilience as defined from an Aboriginal perspective (Merritt, 2007). The healing programs they have built, the research "mapped", the Aboriginal agency for the future, have all contributed to the programs and initiatives developed over the past 13 years and all those involved, as above and many others, are to be congratulated.

However, there is still much more to be achieved. The culture of ritual, the evolving challenges to people, place, children, families, future; the many unresolved problems of violence, chronic disease, premature death, mental illness and the like, continue. The health impacts of grief and loss have been broadly recognised, but the physical and psychological dimensions as they effect physical health and mental wellbeing need much further examination, and stronger research support, if we are to "close the gap" for the future.

As Wanganeen's model identifies, and studies in Western contexts also discuss, grief is looking after the past, and looking to the future. "We know we cannot live in the past but the past lives with us" (Charles Perkins).

Notes

¹ Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet, <http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au>

² LIFE: Living Is For Everyone, <http://www.livingisforeverone.com.au>

³ Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network, The Australian National University, <http://www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au>

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