



GRIEF AND LOSS IN HISPANIC AND LATINO COMMUNITIES

August, 2022

INTRODUCTION

While Hispanic and Latino cultures are very similar, there are also many differences that exist related to grief and loss regardless of the country or region of origin. Grief can be expressed differently based on a variety of factors, including age, gender, regional practices, and religion or spirituality.

GRIEF EXPRESSIONS

The existence of Hispanic and Latino subcultures makes the experience of grief and loss unique. While there are common threads throughout and across regions, the expression of grief varies greatly from one region to another. The way grief manifests itself at the individual level is based on everyone's cultural beliefs. ¹

Some of the similarities across subgroups within the Hispanic and Latino communities include the cultural values of support and *familismo*, the commitment to one's family. These cultural values serve as cultural strengths with families supporting one another through the difficult process of grieving ². This support is invaluable because Hispanic and Latino culture is a relationship-oriented culture with a focus on family and loved ones, which makes experiences of grief felt very deeply. Crying or wailing usually is an expression of grief amongst Hispanic and Latino women as a sign of deep love and respect for the loss of their loved one. Conversely, men, are expected to remain reserved in their grief which often means relying on their *machismo*, or a set of values, attitudes, and beliefs about masculinity ³.

Spirituality is a core value in the lives of many Latino and Hispanic individuals ⁴. Many of the different regional rituals that take place across Latin America are influenced by religion and spiritual beliefs ⁶. Catholicism is the dominant religion within Hispanic and Latino cultures and many rituals around death, dying, and grief come (or stem) from religious traditions ⁵. In many Hispanic and Latino religious ceremonies, white is worn during funerals, a practice (or norm) that differs from the US custom of wearing black which symbolize mourning.

REGIONAL RITUALS ASSOCIATED WITH GRIEF AND LOSS

While there are many rituals that exist within and across countries and regions, some are highlighted to show the differences that exist across Hispanic and Latino communities. Many of these rituals are brought with people as they travel throughout Latin America to the United States and Europe.

- In Spain, rituals such as the last rites and communion are offered to individuals when death is near. After a loved one dies, the *rosario*, or rosary-based prayers, are done for nine days after the death. This is a practice that is also done on the anniversary of the death of a loved one ⁵.
- In Mexican culture, loved ones who have passed are remembered during a time of community and family bonding with the celebration of *Día de Los Muertos*. During this celebration, families are reminded to make the most of their time together. Families come together to build altars, cook, and share cultural foods while sharing memories of those who have passed ⁵.
- In Honduras, a drum party is held in honor of the loved one following their death, typically held one year and one day after their passing. It is meant to help elevate the loved one's spirit and allows spiritual evolution to take place ⁵.
- In Puerto Rico, "standing funerals" are held. Loved ones who have passed are posed in ways that reflect the lives they lived. Some poses include riding motorcycles, playing games, etc. ⁵.
- In the Dominican Republic after a loved one dies a period of mourning takes place for nine days. Three days to grieve, three days of silence, and three days for release ⁵. Also, in the Dominican Republic and many other Caribbean communities, a tradition of "Nine Nights" take place. On the ninth night a service is held, the coffin is lowered into the ground, and the loved ones of the deceased throw handfuls of earth onto the casket. The men complete the burial by covering the coffin with the remainder of earth and the women then cover the grave with flowers. Traditionally, the song "good night" is sung while this takes place ⁶.
- In Cuba, families take shifts staying with the deceased person. Not leaving the body alone and refusing to consume food by the body shows the depth of the grief ⁷.

References

1. [Toward Cultural Assessment of Grief and Grief-Related Psychopathology](#)
2. [Grief Through the Lens: Latino Culture](#)
3. [Death and Dying Latino/a Cultural View of Death](#)
4. [Complicated Grief: Cultural Considerations When Working with Loss in Hispanic and Latino Students and Their Families](#)
5. [Culture and Death: Hispanic Heritage Month](#)
6. [Bereavement Practices in Different Religions and Cultures](#)



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Many cultural rituals have a focus on the ninth day, which is based on *Novena* in Catholicism. It is believed that on the ninth day after death the spirit passes through. The number “nine” is also linked with suffering. Much of the cultural views on the nine days are based on their foundation of catholic beliefs ⁸.

GRIEF IN HISPANIC AND LATINO CHILDREN

Children are often exposed to death, dying, and grief at early ages within Hispanic and Latino cultures. With family as a core value, many families choose to care for their loved ones when they are dying. In Spain, it is common for death to occur at home. In South America, children learn about and understand death at an early age. In Mexico, there are community celebrations of bonding and remembrance for *Día de Los Muertos*, further exposing children to the realities of death, grief, and loss. In Cuba, children attend the wakes and the act of “taking care of the body” often is done by the children who are in attendance ⁵. Often children struggle with accepting the death of someone they love and show it in a variety of expressional responses including physically, psychologically, and emotionally ⁴. Often children have difficulties sharing their emotions due to cultural and social norms based on the belief that by not showing their emotions they are helping their families ⁴. Parents oftentimes are so consumed by their own grief that it becomes hard for them to recognize the signs of grief in their children ². Children, unlike adults need help and guidance with their emotions to help them cope with the loss ⁴.

SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE

As a clinician or mental health provider, it is crucial to be culturally and spiritually competent when assisting families through the grief and loss processes, especially when working with families of Latino and Hispanic origins.

A thorough cultural assessment and a comprehensive evaluation to better understand cultural traditions around death, bereavement, and mourning, as well as a spiritual assessment to understand the role that spirituality plays in grief and loss is extremely important information to have and to incorporate into treatment ⁴.

Being able to recognize and incorporate cultural values and rituals will help build *confianza*, trust, with clients ⁹. Understanding other important cultural values such as the role of the family in Hispanic and Latino cultures in addition to *confianza*, will help build an engaging therapeutic relationship and can be incorporated into treatment ².

Faith and spirituality are also core values for many Latino and Hispanic individuals. Understanding the relationship an individual has with their spirituality as well as with their cultural heritage will help you better understand how they express their grief ¹.

Click here to visit our website to access more information

[National Hispanic and Latino Prevention Technology Transfer Center](#)

References

7. [The Cuban-American Grieving Process](#)
8. [Nine Days of Focused Prayer: What is a Novena?](#)
9. [Grief, Loss, and Bereavement Fact Sheet #4: Cultural Responsiveness](#)

Also, you can visit the following websites for additional information.

SAMHSA's National Helpline

Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (24/7/365)
Treatment Referral Information Service
in English and Español)
Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline

Toll Free: 1-800-985-5990 (español e inglés)
Text in Spanish: Envíe “Háblanos” al 66746
Text in English: “TalkWithUs” al 66746
(TTY): 1-800-846-8517
English:
<http://www.disasterdistress.samhsa.gov>
Spanish:
<https://www.samhsa.gov/disaster-distress-helpline/espanol>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Toll Free: 1-888-628-9454
English: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
(TTY): 1-800-799-4TTY (4889)
Spanish:
<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/help-yourself/en-espanol/>
English:
<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

SAMHSA Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator Sitio

Web: <https://findtreatment.gov>

Marijuana Anonymous

<https://marijuana-anonymous.org/find-a-meeting/>

National Latino Behavioral Health Association **NLBHA**