

Creating Communities of Care with Aboriginal Families: A Relational and Shared-values Approach

**P. Gaye Hanson, RN, BScN, MPA
Michael Aherne, M.Ed., CMC**

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Session Overview

- Introduction
- Aboriginal and family context
- The Relational Approach
- Unique considerations in loss related to SIDS
- Responding to challenges and maintaining a relational approach
- Traditional approaches and supports for grief and bereavement

Introduction

- A child is a gift from the Creator
- Metaphor of the web – trauma and grief
- A dual focus
 - Sensibility of impact of trauma and loss
 - Sensitivity to building supportive environments
- Aboriginal peoples – Profound, complicated and complex grief context

Aboriginal and Family Context Diversity and Pluralism

- Aboriginal people live in a world of diverse realities.
- Many individuals and families have become part of mainstream society with similar views and values.
- Others have remained tied to traditional ways of life, closely tied with their socio-cultural past.
- The reality – we just don't know as providers what we are dealing with – not wise to prejudge!

Food for Thought

*Prejudging people makes you wrong
about most things most of the time...*

Ludlow Perry

Aboriginal and Family Context Provider Role

- The responsibility of care providers is to develop sensitivity and skills to accurately assess the needs and discuss the desires of aboriginal families facing bereavement.
- There is a further diversity of traditional beliefs systems and cultural practices across western Canada.

Aboriginal and Family Context

Typology of Losses

- Loss complicated by historical context.
- Types of losses:
 - Recognized historical losses
 - Recognized contemporary losses
 - Embedded unrecognized emotional losses
- Community losses compound, interact and can amplify personal and family losses.

Aboriginal and Family Context

Aboriginal Community Dynamics

- Death and illness rates in aboriginal communities are higher due to many reasons.
- Individuals and families have experience with death although they may not have fully resolved previous deaths.
- “Loss” in all forms is also a common experience (loss of culture, language, land base, extended family connections etc.).

Aboriginal and Family Context

Aboriginal Community Dynamics

- The “loss” burden also effects the degree of complexity of the grief and bereavement process.
- The history of trauma in families and communities dates back to colonization and residential school and continues with high rates of violence, alcohol and drug abuse, child welfare intervention, poverty and family breakdown.

Aboriginal and Family Context Grief & Bereavement Dynamics

- Patterns among some aboriginal people that may require special consideration or intervention are:
 - Extreme withdrawal or shutdown
 - Avoidance of the painful situation
 - Anger and fear which may be directed toward the “institution” or professional staff members

Aboriginal and Family Context Traditional Belief Characteristics

- Cleansing ceremonies including sweat lodge, smudging and fasting.
- Birth and death as the “greatest ceremonies”.
- Keeping the “energy clean” around the dying person in order to welcome the ancestors coming to guide the person “across”.
- Spiritual helpers trained in guiding people across.

Aboriginal and Family Context Traditional Values Considerations

- Traditional values to be taken into consideration:
 - Interconnectedness
 - Four aspects of self
 - Caring and sharing
 - Culture and language
 - Respect
 - “Safe” passage in balance guided by the ancestors

Aboriginal and Family Context Constructive Engagement

- Thoughtful use of “cultural brokerage.”
- Sensibility about the impact of the “dominant culture” and how it might be interpreted (e.g., procedural due process in Child Welfare).
- Sensitivity to a common and universal human condition (i.e., impact of profound trauma in loss of a child).
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood...

Aboriginal and Family Context Sources of Cultural Brokerage

- In larger health organizations, a staff person may be assigned to provide support.
- In rural and remote settings, it may be difficult to identify the appropriate person to suggest to a family as people practicing in the traditional way are often “invisible”, not talking about or promoting what they do as this is the “humble way”.

Aboriginal and Family Context

Some considerations....

- There may be reluctance in linking health professionals with traditional helpers.
- Helpers can support individuals and family members in working through their fears, connecting with their own unique belief system and seeking comfort and peace in the grieving process.

The Relational and Shared Values Approach

- Focus is on building and maintaining a functional and caring relationship with client.
- Orientation is one of “constructive engagement”
- Heightened and deliberate awareness of “self” in response to relationship with “other.”
- Shared values derived from identification of mutual interests.

The Relational and Shared Values Approach

- Remain in a position of curiosity.
- Seek to understand, rather than to be understood.
- Go “easy on the person” and “hard on the problem.”
- Be sensitive and sensible to the social, community and family context “in the moment.”
- Seek to appreciate sources of hidden and accumulated grief in the family history.

The Relational and Shared Values Approach

- Other considerations....
 - History of other birth complications.
 - Cues leading to appropriate family member support.
 - Resiliency in parent's relationship and compatibility of their grief approaches.
 - Nature and role of extended family and elders in supporting parents and other children in grief processing.
 - Disposition for suicide for any affected by loss.
 - Emotional health issues that might complicate grief and bereavement.

The Relational and Shared Values Approach

- “Constructive engagement” strategy:
 - Respect the individual
 - Practice conscious communication
 - Use interpreters
 - Recognize alternative approaches to truth telling
 - Practice non-interference
 - Allow for co-existence of western and traditional practices (e.g., Aboriginal medicine).
 - Acknowledge diversity and pluralism as realities

Challenges and Maintaining a Relational Approach

- Anger directed toward institutionalized power is due to the history of abuse of power by schools, hospitals, and the justice system – avoid the trap of taking it personally!
- The involvement of extended family and community leaders, helpers and elders in care and decision-making may require special consultation and decision-making processes requiring brokerage.

Challenges and Maintaining a Relational Approach

- One can be relational while still discharging legal obligations and duties (e.g., child welfare).
- Appreciate and acknowledge the impact of the dominant culture's "due process" in amplifying trauma, confusion and uncertainty.
- Expect distrust of authority figures, low self-esteem and difficulty in engaging many Aboriginal clients.

Unique Considerations with SIDS

- The death is sudden and unexplained
- Children are highly-valued in an Aboriginal family and parenting as a “stewardship responsibility.”
- Immediate response may be one of “acute trauma.”
- There is often a “backlog” of unresolved grief due to the high death rates, large extended families and the many other losses experienced in aboriginal families and communities.

Unique Considerations with SIDS

- Responding to loss may trigger a process that sees old, unresolved grief along with “new” grief from the current situation being expressed together.
- Risk of isolation and fear of inability to relate to other parent’s deep pain and grief.
- Support for grieving, teaching people about the grieving process, ensuring that the process is moving and productive are all involved in comprehensive care.

Unique Considerations with SIDS

- Appreciate the dynamics of trauma – well intended interventions can easily result in added stress when their wishes are inadvertently discounted, minimized or ignored.

Traditional Approaches and Supports – Key Questions

- Helpful questions that assist others in expressing themselves and sharing their experience are key. Examples:
 - What is the hardest part?
 - What is the most fearful part?
 - What would make it less fearful?
 - Who is it that you want to talk to or spend time with?

Traditional Approaches and Supports - Communication Patterns

- Traditional aboriginal communication patterns may include long periods of silence and pauses in sentences, as individuals reach deep inside themselves to find what they want to say.
- It is important to become comfortable with the silences and familiar with the “sitting with” interpersonal space and dynamic.

Traditional Approaches and Supports – Protocol Understanding

- Cultural rules exist within some aboriginal groups which may inhibit “talking about death” or speaking of a person who has recently dies by name for “fear of calling the spirit back”.
- Local and relevant cultural traditions need to be researched in your area by talking with “those who know”.

Traditional Approaches and Supports - Personal Perspectives

- Aboriginal people are usually more open and trusting if they are connecting with caregivers at a personal level.
- They are generally more comfortable with someone who shares themselves and their personal perspectives and experiences.
- The sense of “appropriate professional distance” is often different.

Traditional Approaches and Supports - Local Conflict

- Aboriginal communities are divided along family and socio-cultural groupings.
- These dynamics may become barriers to good quality support for the dying person.
- The caregiver may be in a good position to assist the family to identify a process and a person that may be able to help in resolving the conflict.

Traditional Approaches and Supports - Self-Awareness

- Your own culture and life experience is the lens through which you see the world and others.
- An essential part of becoming a skilled cross-cultural communicator is to become self-aware.
- Personal balance, or imbalance affects your ability to connect with others.

Traditional Approaches and Supports – Self-care

- Opportunities to debrief and find support in colleagues, friends and family is essential to maintaining balance.
- From an aboriginal perspective, a person who fails to process their own losses and grief risks retreating into detachment, making them emotionally unavailable to “be fully present” for others.

Traditional Approaches and Supports – Proactive Identification of Resources

- Both predictable and unpredictable problems arise during the grieving process.
- Care providers need an understanding of “how the aboriginal world works” and what relevant resources are available within the community before the problems arise.

Conclusion

- Individuals and families are unique and through communication and relationship building, a plan can be developed to best support them during bereavement.
- Use local resource people and cultural elders and helpers as sources of information and advice.

Conclusion

- Work through your own fears to become fully available and present to talk about death and supporting the bereaved.
- Develop self awareness and capacity in your life for using support systems and keeping your life in “dynamic balance”.

Pallium Project - Contact Info

P. Gaye Hanson (President, Hanson & Associates)
Pallium Project – Aboriginal Relations Advisor
Phone 1-867-633-6753, Fax 1-867-633-6777
Email ghanson@yt.sympatico.ca

Michael Aherne, Director, Initiative Development
Pallium Project Management & Development
Phone 1-888-475-4933, Fax 1-877-428-3187
Email michael.aherne@pallium.ca