

Tips for support workers when caring for a person who is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

This factsheet is for support workers or health workers who are caring for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person with a life-limiting and terminal illness and their family.

You may find it helpful to talk to a hospital Aboriginal Liaison Officer, an Aboriginal Health Worker, or someone from their community. They will be able to give you advice about important cultural considerations.

CarerHelp has outlined some general tips, however, each community may have their own practices, so it is important to ask when you feel you need more support.

Cultural awareness

- It is important to explore the person's view and previous experience of the health system and hospitals.
- Ask if the patient is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. Be aware that the person does not have to disclose this information.
- The definition of family can be broad – the next of kin could be anyone within the community where the person lives.
- Remember when asking family history that the person will not name any deceased person; it is not within their culture to do so.
- Many Indigenous communities will have their own health remedies that the person may be using, for example bush medicines.

Clinical awareness

- It is important that you gain trust. Spend time with the person and encourage them to tell their story. Listen without interrupting. Talk about your own family.
- If you have an Aboriginal Health Worker (or Aboriginal Liaison Officer) within your place of employment, ask the person if they would like the Aboriginal Health Worker to visit.
- Please ensure you show the person around the area, so they know where everything is.
- If the person is alone, check if they would like you to call anyone.
- Often the person will only speak with someone of the same gender.
- Offer the person and their family a private space to use when visitors come.
- When describing medical terms, use plain language.
- If the person is going home from hospital, offer as best you are able, access to Aboriginal Community Services.
- Ensure there is understanding of the medications and follow up appointments if needed.



Just before and after death

- Talking about death and dying can be an uncomfortable topic for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.
- Culturally for some communities, talking about death may be seen as tempting fate.
- On the other hand, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a strong narrative about dying and returning to the Dreaming. They are often willing to discuss it and be involved in making decisions and getting their business handed over.
- Viewing images of a person who has died or using their name is thought to hinder the person's journey. This is why warnings are often included on media that include Aboriginal people.
- Death and dying are often referred to as Sorry Business, finishing up or sad business. Passing away or journey to Dreaming, are also used in some communities.
- The times before and after death may contain many cultural practices that need to be adhered to including art, dance, ceremonies, and returning to country. It is important to support these cultural practices.
- There may be a large gathering of people as death approaches, to prepare the person for the next stage of their journey. This is a mark of respect.



- The time of passing can be traumatic for the family; there are many cultural aspects that will need to be fulfilled. Be visible and supportive, understanding, and respectful.
- Please remember not to use the deceased person's name.
- It is culturally inappropriate for a non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person to contact the family after death – it may cause significant distress to the families. If possible, request that an Aboriginal Health Worker make contact.
- Following the death, eye contact should be avoided. This is a mark of respect.
- Staff may wish to give their condolences – a handshake without eye contact is preferred.
- Many groups believe that life is only a part of the journey and therefore the spirit must be sent on its journey as well – this may be in the form of a smoking ceremony.

For excellent online resources to learn more about providing support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, please see the [CarerHelp Library](#).

Visit the [Gwandalan eLearning Modules](#).

