

Chapter One: Responding to so many losses Special skills of the Port Augusta Aboriginal Community

Recently, there have been so many losses in our families and in our community. Some of these deaths have been particularly difficult as they have been deaths of young people, and death through suicide or violence. We have experienced so many losses, one after the other. It has been a real struggle to get through. There has been too much sadness. This document has been created from a discussion we had together in Port Augusta to talk about our grief, what is important to us, and the ways in which we have been responding to so many losses.

Asking Questions ~ When some deaths seem particularly unfair, when it seems so very wrong, it can make it harder to continue with life. When the person who has died should still be with us, this can leave us not knowing where to look, not knowing where to go, or who to turn to. At times like this, all we have left are questions: Why did this happen? What is going wrong if our young people are having such a hard time? How can we support other young people? What steps can be put in place to ensure this doesn't happen to others? These are important questions. They show respect for the person who has died. They show respect for all young people. They show respect for life.

Dreams ~ Some of us have dreams in which our loved ones visit us. Even though they have passed away they come to us in our dreams. We dream of walking together again across the land. These images sustain us, they convince us that we will walk together again one day. Sometimes we also have a sense that our lost loved one is communicating with us - telling us that everything is all right. On the anniversary of people's deaths, sometimes our loved one comes back to us in our dreams to tell us they are going now and not to worry about them. This can lift a weight from our shoulders. We know they are now okay. Sometimes our dreams have a different sort of message. One of us even dreamt that a lost loved one saw us at the pokies. He gave one of us a slap and then left! That seems a pretty clear message! Mostly though, our loved ones offer us comfort through dreams. Even though they are no longer with us here on earth they are still offering us comfort. Sometimes we also feel a touch on our shoulders and know it is our mother's touch. Or we feel her rubbing our back as she always did when we were children. Feeling the kindness of loved ones in our dreams or through their touch helps us to continue with our lives.

Spirituality ~ For some of us, spiritual beliefs and practices are what help us to get through. Faith that one day we will meet again with those who have passed away sustains us. Acts of prayer are also significant. Knowing that someone is listening and will answer our prayers can make a difference.

Crying together ~ When one of us is feeling low others feel it too. We have skills in feeling each other's pain and suffering. In this way we share grief. I remember one time, I was sitting in front of a photograph of my mother and I was crying when my relatives walked in. They sat down beside me, put their arms around me and they started to cry too. 'What are we crying about they said?' I told them and we sat in sadness together.

Honouring the contribution of key figures in the community ~ At times like these it is important to acknowledge the work done by key people in our community - people like Aunty Margaret and Uncle Ken. The police or counsellors can never be there 24 hours a day. But it is family members who are there for each other. Aunty Margaret and Uncle Ken have been there for so many people in our community, as have other elders. Whether it is the middle of the night or the middle of the day, they are always there to share stories, to take people in. They have shared stories of those who have passed away. During times of hardship it is important to acknowledge those in the community who support us, whom we can ring when we feel sad. Even if we just talk about the weather, there are key people in the community who keep us connected to each other and to our histories. We need to honour them. They offer us all so much.

Remembering and staying connected to those who have passed away ~ We have developed special skills in remembering and staying connected to those who have passed away. There are many ways in which we do this. We do not forget them. We honour and respect our loved ones. Here are some of the different ways that people spoke about remembering and staying connected to those who have passed away:

‘I have a nice big photograph. It is a photograph of my mother and father. Both faces look directly out at you. When my dad passed away I put a candle in front of this photo and then lit the candle. I was thinking about my father and I heard my mother say, ‘Don’t forget me!’ This ritual of lighting a candle in front of this photograph is one way that I remember and stay connected with my mother and father.

‘Certain smells always remind me. I seek out these smells sometimes and spend time to remember those who have passed.’

‘Some of us have also used writing to remember. Before one person’s funeral, I asked a whole lot of nieces and nephews and other relatives to tell me stories and memories about the person who had died. Some of these stories were very funny as he could be a cheeky man! I wrote all these stories down in a long letter that I then read out at the funeral. People were laughing at some of these stories. There was tenderness and laughter.’

We all have different ways of remembering those who have passed away, or carrying them with us. There is one story that has always been very significant to me. This is of a particular woman here in Port Augusta. When her brother died, she used to carry his suitcase everywhere she went. This case had all his belongings inside, his clothes and other possessions and she would carry this case with her throughout life – to the shops, to the pub, wherever she was walking. Wherever she went, this sister carried her brother with her. This was a way of honouring him. She also spent a lot of time at his grave site. We all have different ways of carrying our loved ones with us.

Young ones’ skills of remembering and staying connected ~ We pass on these skills of remembering and staying connected to our children. And we pass on the stories too. It’s our job to remind them of those who have passed on. Our four year old knows all the photographs. He sits down with them and can tell stories about those who have passed on. He has dreams of his grandfather and he lets us know when he has met with him in his dreams. When he visits the cemetery he says hello to all those whose stories he knows. We encourage our young people to know the stories and to remain connected to those who have passed away.

Unity ~ In times of grief we need a united stand, not a divided one. Sharing grief is important. Coming together makes a difference. Unity is healing. We must come together to find ways to offer more for our young people. They are our future.

Music ~ Some of us write and record songs and this is a way of responding to loss. These include songs such as: 'He's alive for evermore', 'Risen from dead' or songs about the land. We may even write and record songs about 'walking together again' with our lost loved ones. When we make up a song, and when we sing it, or listen to it, it helps us to cope. Painting on calico can make a difference too. As can listening to certain songs. Many people have particular songs by which they are remembered. Whenever a certain Slim Dusty song comes on the radio, we all say, 'that's Pop's song'. Even our young one's say this. Before we pass away, we might identify a certain song as 'our song'. This means when we are no longer here, whenever a certain song is played, we will be remembered.

Our families ~ The first people we turn to are our children, grandchildren, sisters, brothers, uncles, aunties, mothers, fathers, grandparents... it is our families who support each other the most. Turning to each other means a lot to us. Just hearing our mother's voice on the phone, just hearing that our relatives are okay, that they are with us, brings comfort. There are many ways in which we stay connected with each other. Sometimes we send kind messages over the radio... giving these and receiving them can make a difference to your day. Even if alcohol and drugs affect our families, there are still very significant connections. We talk together about everything. We can share secrets with the older generation... about our men for instance! We can laugh together. We trust each other and these relationships are sacred to us.

Remembering the good times ~ It helps us when we remember the good times of the past. For some of us, this means remembering certain times on the Missions when we used to go out with the whole family, camping and hunting. For others, we remember good times that we spent with the person who has died. These good memories are precious to us. We sit around together and talk about all the good things that we used to do together. Once we start talking, we all remember different things. This means we can put different stories together. We can put it all together when we are talking with each other.

Acknowledging that people react to grief in different ways ~ People respond to grief in many different ways. Some people drink, smoke, gamble. They do these things to escape from the pain. We can't criticize them for this. We need to find ways for them to be able to talk about what they have been going through. We need to help them, but without criticizing.

Tears and Laughter ~ For us, tears and laughter go together. As well as sharing sorrow together, we also re-tell the funny stories from a person's life. It's important we don't forget these funny stories. We talk about the good times, we laugh, this makes us feel sad, and then we laugh again. Sometimes looking at a particular photograph might bring tears, another time a burst of laughter! For us, tears and laughter go together. There are many very funny stories. For instance... when we asked one of our young ones if he could remember his grandfathers voice and what he used to say, this young one said, "Yes, sure, I remember him. I remember him

saying... Can you shut up you bastard!” It was very funny! Another time, we were coming back from a funeral on a bus and there was a lot of laughter as we hurried along. As the bus was going a little too fast one young guy yelled out, ‘I don’t think grandpa wants to see us again quite so soon... we only just said good bye to him!’. There are many ways in which we grieve with tears and laughter.

Young people caring for us ~ Sometimes it’s our young people who offer us comfort. They can feel when we are upset and they might say ‘Are you feeling okay? Can I come and camp with you? Can I come and sleep in your bed?’ Or our older kids might say, ‘Mum, have a rest. I’ll cook tonight’. These acts of care mean a lot to us.

They are with us forever ~ Because we love them so much, we may grieve forever for those who have died. But we will never forget them. They might not be here with us but we have them in our hearts and in our minds.

Responses to the people of Port Augusta from Yolngu Women

Their words speak for us. Their stories are so similar to what we experience. It is like they are talking for us as well. It’s like we are sharing the same problems under the one tent. We know now that these things are not just happening in Arnhem Land but also down south. We are thinking of them and now we would like to pass on something to them. We want to share our stories with them, just like they shared their stories with us. We will speak about our experiences and then link these together with the experiences of those from Port Augusta. Then we can translate this all into our language and share this through our community. This is about sharing knowledge and sharing stories together.

Hearing the stories of the people of Port Augusta talk about their losses and the deaths of their young people made me feel quite emotional. They have experienced so many losses, one after the other. It has been a real struggle for them to get through and there has been too much sadness. This has made me think of what I have gone through as a mother and what our people have gone through. The stories from Port Augusta made me realise that what is happening here, is happening in their country as well. It is not different. We have also been going through very hard times and this makes it difficult to work out what is happening around us, what is affecting us.