

## Beliefs about Death and Mourning (Teacher Notes)

1. **Even after death, the human body is sacred and should be treated with respect.**

*Lakota family members will sit with a body for a period after death, keeping it company. It's acceptable to talk with the body and tend it for several days.*

2. **Autopsies are disrespectful to the human body.**

*Lakota families almost never give permission to perform autopsies. Respecting the sacred wholeness of the body is more important than learning more about the cause of death. Autopsies alter a body such that a traditional burial can't be performed.*

3. **Burial is preferable over cremation.**

*Burning a body is not respectful. The Lakota believe that a person's body should be returned to the earth which sustained and held the person during life.*

4. **It's possible that the dead send us messages through nature.**

*The Lakota believe that animals can be spirit messengers from the Shadow World beyond death. Years ago, when a Red Lake village in MN lost four children in a house fire, the mother had been with her children that morning and her sons had noticed four eagles flying together overhead. Eagles rarely hunt in groups so the mother and children thought it strange. After her children's tragic death in the house fire, the mother recognized the eagles as messengers from the world of the ancestors.*

5. **If I knew I were going to die soon, I would give my possessions to friends and families as tokens of my love and memory.**

*Lakota elders and others who anticipate death give their possessions away to loved ones in gratitude for their friendship and love.*

6. **If an elder told me that he or she dreamt often of dead relatives visiting, I would assume that death was near for that elder.**

*Dreams of the dead are a commonly accepted sign of imminent death among the Lakota. If an elder has seen or heard an owl, this is also a sign that death is near.*

7. **People who are dying deserve to eat their favorite foods and hear their favorite songs.**

*As an elder nears death, he or she will often request traditional Lakota foods, whether or not these have been part of the daily diet. It is a sign of love for family members and tribal leaders to gather at the deathbed to sing and chant Lakota songs.*

**8. A dying person should be surrounded by as many family and friends as possible.**

*The Lakota feel a person should never face death alone. The more company the better. Often, hospitals must make exceptions to their visitor limit in order to honor the requests of Lakota families to welcome two or three dozen people to a dying person's bedside.*

**9. It's important for mourners to view the body of the deceased, even if it is damaged or disfigured in death.**

*This is an important part of the grieving process for Lakota people. It is rare to have a closed casket or a cremation.*

**10. At a funeral, it's okay for mourners to touch the body of the deceased.**

*Lakota family members show love and respect by touching and holding the body.*

**11. Friends who attend someone's funeral should give money to help the grieving family cover the expense of the funeral service.**

*Members of a tribe usually help cover the funeral and meals for the bereaved family.*

**12. The more obviously upset a mourning person is (crying loudly, calling the dead loved one's name, wailing) the more the mourner must have cared for the person who died.**

*There are specific moments at which friends are permitted to grieve openly. Immediate family members can be recognized by their wailing so that others can offer them the most comfort.*

**13. It's appropriate to place mementos or parting gifts in the casket of a loved one at the time of burial.**

*In the past, loved ones placed helpful tools or mementos for the person to have on their journey to the land of shadows, but a spirit can make the journey without any objects.*

**14. Each family member should participate in filling in the grave.**

*No matter the weather, a Lakota family will stay at the graveside until the burial is complete. Modern families often have to explain this to cemetery staff. Lakota families will not wait until spring in the case of winter deaths. They will not allow a body to be held temporarily in a mausoleum until the ground thaws. Completing the burial as a family is a sign of care and respect.*

**15. After the burial, family should give away all the deceased person's remaining personal belongings.**

*Every possession still in the home after the death must be given away. This has two purposes: it shows gratitude and generosity for the blessings that came to the person during his or her life, and it is a first step in acknowledging the physical absence of the deceased.*

**16. Sometimes, disturbed or angry souls return to bother the living.**

*This is rare, but can result from improper burial or disrespect in death. Souls can also return from the land of shadows to help the living if they are called on for aid.*

**17. It is NOT okay to drink alcohol at a funeral.**

*It is utterly unseemly for people to consume intoxicants. Sometimes, tobacco will be included in cleansing rituals.*

**18. Young children should start attending family funerals at an early age.**

*No Lakota child is considered too young to attend a funeral. Death is a part of the cycle of life.*

**19. After death, our souls go to a place where all the souls of our ancestors dwell.**

*The Lakota believe that their spirits join the spirits of all the Lakota dead in the northern skies. If a person has been mean or cowardly, the Spirit of the North will trip him on a narrow spot along the path to the shadow land, and the person's soul will fall into the water. The Spirit of the Water can do with the soul what he will.*

**20. The afterlife is a place or experience of peace and contentment, free of sorrow and pain.**

*In the land of shadows, there is no sickness. There are ample buffalo and people hunt and visit and sing at their leisure.*