



# Mental Wellness During COVID-19

## Funerals and Wakes

COVID-19 has created a lot of uncertainty and changing circumstances that makes for very difficult times in First Nation communities. We are especially vulnerable with the threat of this virus. It is likely that we may experience some mental distress at some point during this crisis which can take a toll on your mental health. We have a strong history of resilience and strength as First Nations people. Many nations look to take care of self by ensuring all aspects of body, mind, spirit and emotions are attended to for overall health. We have many cultural strengths to draw upon to stay connected and keep well, even while we practice social distancing. In First Nations culture, we have traditionally supported each other by sharing stress collectively. We often carry the stress of relatives in our bodies so that they do not need to carry their stresses alone. Through connecting this way, we thrive in the best of times and survive in the worst of times. Sharing stress collectively also means we may experience increased feelings of fear, worry, anger, shame and other challenging emotions.

With Covid-19 and the current physical distancing requirements in place, funerals and wakes have become challenging. Traditional practices of how community gathered at this time of mourning are different. Communities now have to adapt to our new environment to ensure the health and safety of community members. We must seek new and innovative ways to adapt our practices to ensure physical distancing is maintained. Although these suggestions have come out of a pandemic time, they will still be helpful in the future for our communities who will still need to practice Public Health Guidelines into the future. Below are some suggested activities for Mental Wellness Teams to support families through funerals and wakes during Covid-19 Pandemic.

**First and foremost is to connect with the family in mourning to ensure their needs and wants are met throughout this time.**

### **Supporting the family through the Funeral and Wake:**

- Coordinate a contact person for donations from community, preferably virtual monetary donations. Public Health Guidelines are discouraging buffet style meals at this time and this may include food donations. Check with your public health guidelines for your community.
- Assist with the organization of virtual technology for virtual connection for funeral and memorial services, such as ZOOM meetings, teleconference, video calls to reduce burden on the family to access and organize alternative funeral/, memorial options.
- Organize alternative support services to family such as virtual care, telephone calls, online meetings, as required.
- Provide suggestions for alternatives and creative ways to acknowledge community grief outside of technology. It ensures those without technology are able to participate and promotes social connection for family and community.
- Assist with plans for memorial for when community can safely gather.
- Ensure community health protocol is followed and maintained.

## **Suggestions to give to community to support the family:**

- Light a candle in their homes.
- Ceremonies in the home for the families and loss loved ones.
- Be a point of contact for notes and cards to coordinate a porch drop off.
- Coordinate video notes of condolences.
- Suggest community members who have a drum, sing for the loved ones.
- Suggest having talking circles with those in your home about the loss.
- Reach out to other family members, close friends of the loved one by phone, Facetime or other virtual gathering sites/platforms.
- Suggest families go out on the land for comfort, guidance and healing.
- Give tobacco offerings to the land.
- Offer virtual times with an elder at a convenient time through phone or video.
- When the procession to burial grounds begins ask community members to stand in the driveway, can sing songs or just stand in unity with grieving family.
- Ask community to place a candle in windows during a certain time of the wake.
- Plant a tree or flowers honoring the loved one.
- Pick cedar for families in need
- Organize a central drop off location for unprepared donations for the families.
- Procession within the community honoring the loss of the community member with songs they loved playing, honor the loved one with favorite items they loved to do, such as wearing a shirt of their favorite sports team.
- Donate traditional foods to the family in mourning in accordance with Public Health Guidelines.
- Cook traditional foods and offer to the land in honor of the loved one.

## **Please keep in consideration:**

Do not video or record any ceremony without communication with family or elders.

Do not gather of more than 10 or in accordance with Public Health Guidelines.

Always practice the safety protocols initiated by community.

There are many ways that funerals and wakes within community can send the loved one on their journey in a loving beautiful way. Even though we cannot gather as we once did, community can support, offer prayers and love in their own home and families. These are suggested ways and there are many more that are unique to your community. Mental Wellness workers can be a strong link for the family to the community at large during this time of Covid-19.

## **References and Acknowledgment**

1. A special Thank You to Perry McLeod-Shabogesic who shared his knowledge on April 17, 2020 during our Promoting Wellness & Providing Support virtual gathering.
2. April 17, 2020, Anishnawbek Nation-COVID-19 Funeral Protocol.PDF
3. Feedback from participants during our Promoting Wellness & Providing Support National Virtual Meeting April 17,2020

First Peoples Wellness Circle

[www.fpwc.ca](http://www.fpwc.ca)

Nipissing First Nation, 857 Yellek Trail North Bay, ON P1B 8G5

Tele: (705) 313-4942 Toll Free: 1-833-311-fpwc