



DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS: HOW TO HONOR THOSE THAT WE LOST AND DEAL WITH GRIEF?

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“The Day of the Dead is a time for celebrants to remember departed loved ones with positivity and festivity¹”

The context: What is Día de los Muertos?

According to the Smithsonian Latino Center¹, *Día de los Muertos* is celebrated on November 1st and 2nd by the people of Latin America, particularly in Mexico and Central America, and more recently for Mexican Americans. Rather than focusing on the pain caused by grieving the loss of a beloved family or friend, our communities choose to celebrate the lives of the dearly departed and welcome the return of their spirits. The holiday originated in ancient Mexico and northern Central America, amongst indigenous groups like the Aztec, Maya, and Toltec ².

The Aztecs developed the ritual some 3,000 years ago because they believed one should not grieve the loss of a beloved ancestor who passed. Instead, the Aztecs celebrated their lives and welcomed the return of their spirits to the land of the living once a year ³. According to Hayes Lavis, mourning was not allowed because it was believed the tears would make the spirit's path treacherous and slippery ³. That's where the food, drink and music *ofrendas*, or offerings, come in.

Ancient Mesoamericans believed that death was part of the journey of life. Rather than death ending life, they believed that new life came from death. This cycle is often associated with the cyclical nature of agriculture, whereby crops grow from the ground where the last crop lies buried ⁴.

The “Day of the Dead” might seem similar to Halloween in many ways, but it's a very different type of holiday. Given its rich and own symbology, rituals, and traditions.

What do the symbols mean?²

Ofrenda: The *ofrenda* is the central component of any Day of the Dead celebration, and it's one of the holiday's most recognized symbols. Every *ofrenda* contains gifts to represent the four elements: water, wind, earth, and fire:

Water: For the element of water, family members leave a pitcher of water at the *ofrenda* so the spirits can quench their thirst.

Wind: To represent wind, the family traditionally brings *papel picado*, a type of traditional paper banner, to the *ofrenda*.

Earth: Food traditionally represents the element of earth. In particular, it's common to bring bread for the spirits, in the form of *Pan de Muerto*. *Pan de Muerto* is a soft, round type of bread that's often decorated with bone-shaped designs.

Fire: This represents the cardinal directions and is thought to help the spirits find their way.

What do the symbols mean? (cont.)²



Skulls: Many people worldwide are familiar with sugar skulls. The brightly decorated *calaveras de azucar*, or sugar skulls, act as a lighthearted reminder of life's cyclical nature. Families often leave sugar skulls on the *ofrenda* of children who have passed.

Skeletons: Hand-crafted skeletons, or *calacas*, also take center-stage at most *Día de los Muertos* celebrations. The skeletons are funny and friendly, rather than scary. Families traditionally dress the skeletons to represent their departed loved ones.



Papel Picado: These brightly colored, delicately perforated paper banners decorate the *ofrenda altar*, and they may also be found in local businesses, homes, and marketplaces. The banners often feature carefully cut patterns to represent departed loved ones. They represent wind and serve as a reminder of the fragility of life.

Flowers: Flowers decorate most of the altars and serve as part of an *ofrenda*. Some flowers have meanings that are specific to their color or variety. For instance, a flower that's orange or yellow in color, known as *campesuchil* or *marigold*, represents the sun, love, and the shortness of life. Families often craft wreaths of flowers to place on their loved ones' graves.



Butterflies: In Mexico, the first monarch butterflies arrive for the winter each year on November 1st. Because this pattern coincides so closely with *Día de los Muertos*, the people of Mexico began to believe that monarch butterflies carry the souls of the departed.

Dogs: Dogs are an important symbol since they've long been thought to guide ancestral spirits to their final resting place. Other spirit animals are also known as *alebrijes*.



We invite you to try these out:
[Pan de Muerto Recipe](#)
[Papel Picado](#)

References

- 1 [Smithsonian Latino Center: Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos](#)
- 2 [Cake: List of 13 Popular Day of the Dead Symbols & Colors](#)
- 3 [NPR - Day Of The Dead, Decoded: A Joyful Celebration Of Life And Food](#)
- 4 [Smithsonian Latino Center: Five facts about Día de los Muertos \(The Day of the Dead\)](#)
- 5 Photos: all photos were purchased on iStock



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What is grief?

According to the dictionary, grief is a deep sorrow, especially that caused by someone's death. The CDC⁵ states that grief is a normal response to a loss during or after a disaster or other traumatic event. Changes to daily routines can also cause us to experience grief⁵. Go through grief can lead us to live different emotions, such as, anxiety, anger, sadness, we might lose sleep, our appetite and more⁵. Grief has many factors and also has stages. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross who is an icon when it comes to grief and grieving discovered the 5-stages of grief which are⁶:

- Denial
- Anger
- Depression
- Bargaining
- Acceptance

Who can help?

It is important to understand that grief is not linear, and it looks different to/for everyone. If you know someone who is grieving, be there for them, listen, make contact with them, offer help. If you are currently grieving, reach out, do not grieve alone, look into your feelings, look after your mental and physical health.

We also have certified professionals such as thanatologists who can help. Professionals in this career develop expertise on the subject of dying, death, grief, and loss, using that knowledge to support people who have experienced great loss and bereavement⁷. You may also seek help from a grief counselor and go through grief therapy. This will help you process the loss and move through the grief process in a healthy way⁸.

What happens if I do not seek help?

Unresolved or unaddressed grief has the potential to lead us to worsen mental health conditions and/or reliance on substances in an attempt to numb the pain, also known as self-medicating. Unresolved grief, or complex grief, is different from normal grief in various ways. First, it lasts much longer, at times for many years. Second, it's much more severe and intense, not lessening with time but worsening and

What happens if I do not seek help? (cont.)

lastly, it interferes with a person's ability to function normally in daily life⁸. Symptoms of unresolved grief in adults and teenagers may include, fond memories turn painful, avoiding getting close to people, keeping same routines out of fear of forgetting, obsession and preoccupation and yearning from the person they lost⁸. In children symptoms include: hostility, irritability, or agitation towards someone connected to the death, withdrawal and detachment from family, friends, or at school, lack of trust in others, problems sleeping (fear of being alone at night).⁸ It is important to note that these symptoms also manifest differently for each individual, regardless of age.

What If my child is grieving?

When a loved one dies, children feel and show their grief in different ways. How kids cope with the loss depends on things like their age, how close they felt to the person who died, and the support they receive⁹. Here are some tips to consider⁹:

- Use simple words
- Listen and comfort
- Put feelings into words
- Tell your child what to expect
- Explain events that that will happen
- Help your child remember the person
- Get more help

Tips to help you cope with grief



- Seek spiritual guidance
- Reach out to your natural supports
- Write a letter to your loved one
- Join a support group
- Say a prayer
- Stay connected with family and friends
- Honor and celebrate their birthday
- Process emotional pain with a therapist or spiritual advisor
- Name your emotions
- Cook a meal
- Talk to the person who has passed
- Identify transitions

References

- 5 [CDC: Grief and Loss](#)
- 6 [Elisabeth Kübler-Ross Foundation](#)
- 7 [Marian University Wisconsin: What is a thanatologist?](#)
- 8 [Eddins Counseling Group - Understanding Unresolved Grief](#)
- 9 [When a Loved One Dies: How to Help Your Child](#)
- 10 Photos: all photos were purchased on iStock

Click here to learn more about our centers:

[National Hispanic and Latino Addiction Technology Transfer Center](#)
[National Hispanic and Latino Prevention Technology Transfer Center](#)

You can visit the following websites for additional support and information.

SAMHSA: Coping Tips for Traumatic Events and Disasters

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/coping-tips>

SAMHSA's National Helpline

Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (24/7/365 Treatment Referral Information Service in English and Español)
 Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline

Toll Free: 1-800-985-5990 (español e inglés)
 Text in Spanish: Envíe "Háblanos" al 66746
 Text in English: "TalkWithUs" al 66746 (TTY): 1-800-846-8517
 English: <http://www.disasterdistress.samhsa.gov>
 Spanish: <https://www.samhsa.gov/disaster-distress-helpline/espanol>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Toll Free: 1-888-628-9454
 English: 1-800-273-TALK (8255) (TTY): 1-800-799-4TTY (4889)
 Spanish: <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/hel-p-yourself/en-espanol/>
 English: <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>
SAMHSA Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator
<https://findtreatment.gov>