

# Grief and Getting Fit: Dealing with One Comes Before Doing the Other

By Barbara Mora  
(Paiute/Diné)

GETTING FIT doesn't just happen. There are steps to take. I have found the first step is not going to the gym. It is not eating a spinach salad. It is not even walking around the block. Often the first step for a Native person to get fit is to deal with grief.

**Barbara Mora regularly takes time out for herself.**



## A significant grief

I'm not talking about the grief of losing a job, or the grief of getting a divorce, or even the grief of losing a loved one. I'm talking about the grief of losing language, culture, pride, and all things dear to us for generation after generation.

As a Native person with

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diabetes, I know that dealing with past grief is the key to my being healthy with diabetes today. Grief robs us of energy. It robs us of hope. It robs us of the reason to be healthy and happy. A question I used to ask myself whenever faced with a hopeful thought was, "Why bother?"

That was grief talking. Grief was a sad, defeated me, sitting on my shoulder saying, "You know what's going to happen. This will not work. It will end in failure. It will end in tragedy."

## Small steps to joy

So if dealing with and overcoming grief is the first step in getting fit, how do we do that? There are many ways Native people have dealt with grief: prayer, ceremonies, talking to spiritual advisors, getting support from loved ones.

I think the first step

is to realize almost every Native person carries multi-generational grief with him/her. The first step is to ask ourselves, "What can I do today to recognize my grief? How can I let it out? What small step can I take today to be joyful?"

Many people look to

churches or their faith for comfort from grief. Many tribes have ceremonies that help people deal with grief.

I would like to share with you our traditional Paiute funeral custom. It is a way we experience grief, let it pass on.

It is with much thought and prayer that I am sharing this. It is with hope that it will help other Native people deal with their grief.

## A Paiute ceremony for healing

Imagine a cold night with a huge fire in the center of an enclosed area and the vast dark sky above. All the stars are

twinkling, witnesses to the beauty of the ceremony.

Men with deep, resonant voices sing ancestral songs, songs that can only be sung during this ceremony. Family of the deceased and community members are welcomed and encouraged to dance a specific funeral dance. In their hands they tenderly hold items of clothing worn by the deceased.

At a specific point in this dance, the clothing is held up to the sky, the stars, the universe, held up to show all creation that our loved one is journeying to the spirit world. We ask, "Please welcome our departed."

Many people dance this dance of grieving, helping, healing, this dance whose steps are the same as those danced by our ancestors.

During this time, my heart overflows with pride and love for all who take part. They will help the grieving family to heal. They help us all be stronger to overcome our own sorrow and begin our own healing.

Paiute healing ceremony illustration  
by Barbara Mora.



## A prayer for you

For all those with diabetes, all those with grief, may you lift up your sorrows to the stars and universe. I pray that the universe accepts your grief, lifts it from your shoulders. May you find your path to wellness. May your grief fade away and be replaced with peace and joy. ❖

Barbara Mora is a diabetes wellness presenter and author of the IHS book, *Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes*. She can be reached at (760) 872-4229 or send an email to [dinee49@earthlink.net](mailto:dinee49@earthlink.net).

Barbara's book can be ordered free from the IHS online catalog at <http://www.ihs.gov/MedicalPrograms/Diabetes/RESOURCES/Catalog/rde/index.cfm>.



Barbara's husband, Bob, joins her in ceremonies to release grief.

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# Exercise your spirit.

**Paige Burgess (Comanche) dances and sings. "The dancing is good exercise. Knowing a powwow is coming up gives me a reason to stay physically fit. And after I dance, I feel at peace. Dancing is like my cure-all."**