Spiritual Norms and Other Cultural Considerations for Tohono O’odham Elders
(information received from person communication *)

- For Tohono O’odham elders, the day begins before sunrise. Even as early as 3am, elders may be up and praying/chanting in their rooms. This time of day is considered ideal and sacred for such practices. This behavior is not symptomatic of insomnia (early waking) and doesn’t require medication.

- Tohono O’odham traditionally eat only two meals a day.

- The elders like to spend time alone in their rooms or take walks alone to connect with spirit/nature. This is not a symptom of depression. They appreciate having their privacy respected at these times.

- Being outdoors much of the time is normal for Tohono O’odham people and elders will be more comfortable having access to the outdoors, especially a garden. Also, sunlight is considered medicinal, something that cleanses you. The elders therefore enjoy time outside in the sun or having windows open to the outdoors.

- The elders and others practicing traditional ways pray frequently and for many things. For example, they may say prayers of appreciation and gratitude regarding food, plants, and animals, as well as prayers regarding people.

- It is normal in Tohono O’odham culture to see and/or speak to people in the spirit world including family members who have passed. Although they may appear to be “talking to themselves”, it is not a symptom of psychosis.

- Medication is not considered useful or necessary.

- There are times when the communication with or from the spirit realm is problematic and the elder may need help from a traditional medicine man or medicine woman. The elders themselves know when they need assistance in this area and staff should support them in getting traditional help when needed. In
cases like this, the medicine person’s role may be one of interpreter: the family member who has passed may have a message for the elder or may be unhappy about something. The traditional healer can clarify what’s going on and how to set things right.

- The Tohono O'odham traditionally see life in circular terms: we are born babies who need to be cared for and in our old age we return to a similar state. Traditionally, the elders would be cared for by their children or grandchildren or nieces and nephews who are considered like one’s own children. However, because families are more dispersed these days, the traditional arrangements don’t always happen.

- “Family” is much broader than a nuclear family. Extended family is very important and most elders live in homes with many family members. Also, the children and grandchildren of one’s siblings are essentially considered your own children as well.

- Children grow up with a sense of having many parent figures. However, many families are now spread out off the reservation and therefore no one may be available to take the elder into their home requiring the elder to be in a nursing home. Being in a nursing home can be a very big culture shock and frightening for some and especially those who spent their lives on the reservation.

    The differences in language, food, and cultural norms can be overwhelming and having interpreters for those who speak limited English is very important. This is especially true when discussing medical issues and other areas in which miscommunication could have serious consequences.

- Many Tohono O'odham practice both traditional and Christian/Catholic spirituality. For generations, many TO have made an annual pilgrimage to Magdalena, Mexico. This takes place on October 4th, celebrated as St. Francis’ Day, and is a ritual that many Catholics of Mexican descent also engage in.

    Many Tohono O'odham choose to walk to Magdalena from Nogales, which is about fifty miles away. This is considered a sacrifice offered as a healing ritual for oneself or for others and is also a form of prayer and/or meditation. Upon arrival at the church in Magdalena, it is customary to kiss the head of the St. Francis statue. This pilgrimage is very important to many Tohono O’odham. It is planned
far in advance and elders should not be prevented from participating. If staff do not allow them to go the elder may go against medical advice. Instead, the staff should work with the family on making the trip as safe as possible.

- Another ritual that is important to the Tohono O’odham are the annual Saguaro Harvest in the beginning of June which is traditionally the start of their year. Also planting rituals and All Soul’s Day are also of importance.

**Things That May Help Elders Feel More Comfortable:**

- Respect for their independence and privacy.
- Access to the outdoors including gardens, open windows, and walks outside.
- Access to traditional music which is available on CDs. Traditional music often tell stories about nature such as mountains, animals, and creation which reflect the importance of the spiritual connection to nature.
- Beds should face any direction except East, as that is considered to be the door between the physical and spiritual realms.
- Having a small table available to be used as an altar on which to place food and other offerings to ancestors. Archie Hendricks has begun setting this up twice a month.

**Considerations Before and After an Elder Passes:**

- The body should never be moved before the family comes.
- Traditional Medicine Men/Women know the proper, traditional ways of preparing and burying and should be consulted along with the family as needed.
- Tohono O’odham do not traditionally use cremation, though some may choose to. This can be a source of family conflict.

*This information was gained from an interview at the Archie Hendricks, Sr. Skilled Nursing Facility in Sells, AZ. Much appreciation to: Dorothy Low, Hospice Nurse Manager; Bernice Belin, Cultural Coordinator; Charlene Conde, Home Health Aide; and Deacon Alfred M. Gonzales, Hospice Chaplain.*
From personal communication with Vina, a social worker at a Native American long-term care facility in Arizona:

According to Vina, the staff relies on the family and the resident to express spiritual or religious wishes because the initial intake at the nursing home does ask about religion. However, after knowing the resident over time, the staff may learn about their spiritual beliefs. The nursing home is relatively close to the reservation and the facility transports residents to the yearly elderly festival on the reservation.

Some suggested questions to ask include:

- What religion do you practice?
- Do you speak a native language?
- Do you have a traditional name?
- Have you lived on the reservation your entire life?