

Culture and Customs

Poles as a group tend to share thoughts and ideas freely and are very friendly. A guest in a Polish home is warmly welcomed and may be overwhelmed by the outpouring of generosity. Most Poles enjoy a robust conversation and have a keen sense of humour. Poles talk of their jobs, politics, health problems and misfortunes as an Australian would of footy. They are very fond of music and joke telling.

Touch as a form of caring is common among family members and friends, but Poles may be quite formal with strangers. In formal situations a handshake is considered polite. For some Poles, alcohol can serve a culturally important function, particularly during social occasions, such as name day or birthday celebrations. The amount and strength of drinks consumed at such occasions may be seen as excessive by non-Poles.

Punctuality is important to Poles. To be late is a sign of bad manners. Depending on the status of the person for whom they are waiting, Poles may be intolerant of lateness in others. Even in social situations, people are expected to arrive on time.

Traditional family values and loyalty are strong in most Polish households. The elderly play an active role in helping grandchildren learn Polish customs and in helping adult children in their daily routine with families. Extended family, consisting of aunts, uncles, and godparents, is very important to Poles.

Some Polish people believe in the special properties of prayer books, rosary beads and medals. Pictures of the Pope John Paul II, Virgin Mary, Jesus and various saints can be found in many Polish homes, some people carry them in their wallets.

Many Polish people enjoy taking part in senior citizens club activities which allow the Polish elderly to communicate their thoughts, feelings and ideas on a deeper level. The Polish community in Victoria has 24 elderly groups which meet regularly – usually on a weekly basis – and provide a very valuable social support service to approximately 4000 Polish older persons, the majority of whom are in their mid 70's and 80's.

Many Polish elderly people have lost their ability to speak English due to dementia, and a significant number have never learned to communicate in this language. The Polish elderly are very practically minded. They would not take part in activities just for the sake of 'killing time'. They want to be involved in creating something useful, slightly challenging and with a defined purpose.

Burial and rituals associated with death

Funeral customs are determined by the Church and wishes of the family. For Polish Catholics, religious rituals include the administration of Holy Communion and the Last Rites. After the burial, mourners are invited for a wake, or *stypa*, where drinks and food are served in memory of the person. Most Poles have a stoic acceptance of death as part of the life process, and a strong sense of loyalty and respect for their loved ones. Family and friends stay with the dying person so that the dying do not feel abandoned. Graves of loved ones are visited for years to come, particularly on All Souls Day (1st November), when flowers and candles are placed on the graves.

