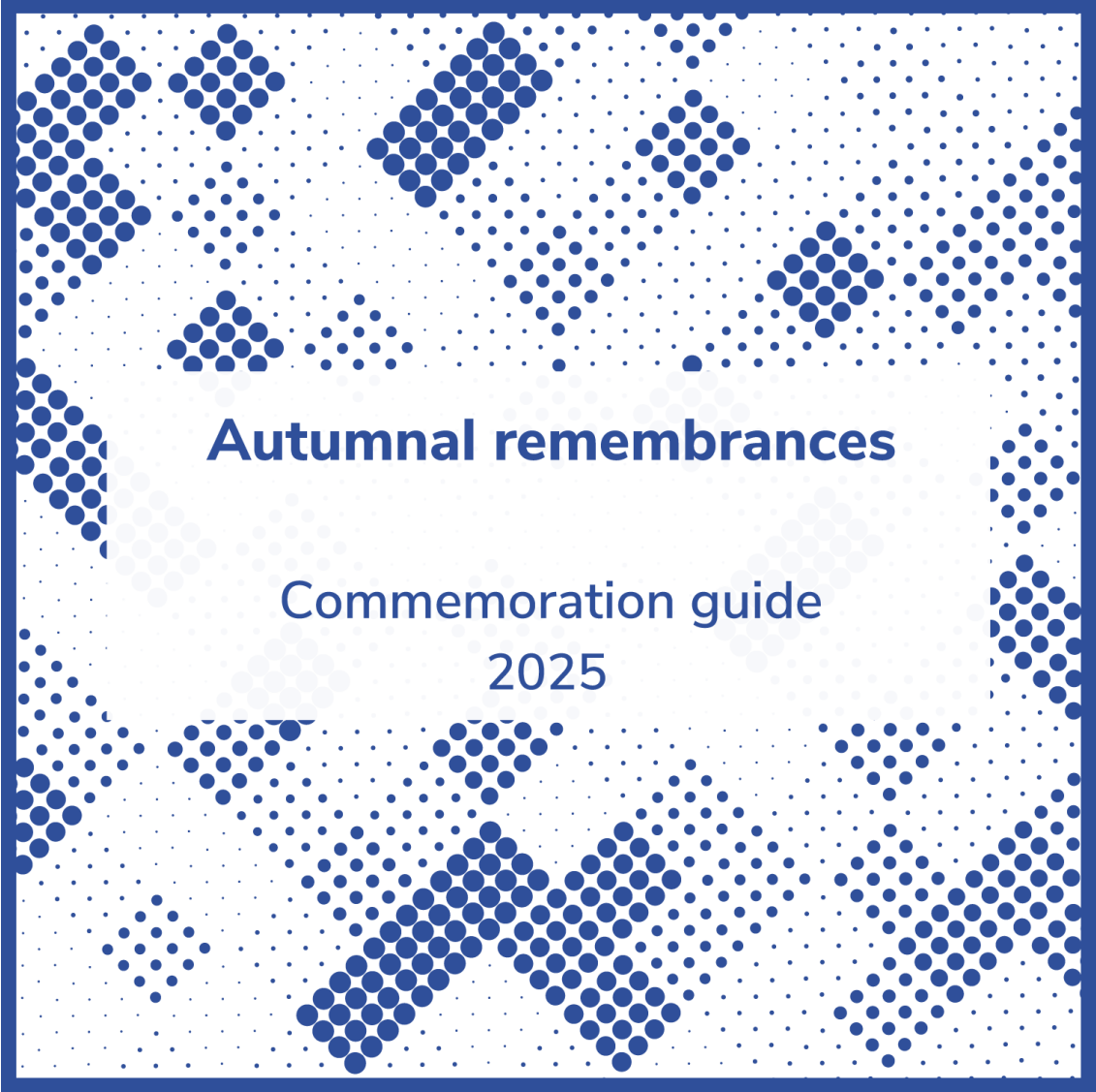




Autumnal remembrances

Commemoration guide
2025



Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion
Centre canadien pour la diversité et l'inclusion

ccdi.ca

Autumnal remembrances – Commemoration guide

Around the world, communities observe a variety of traditions that honour ancestors, mark seasonal transitions, and celebrate the cycles of life and death. These observances include:

Halloween (October 31)

Halloween is a holiday observed on October 31 and noted for its pagan and religious roots, as well as its secular traditions. It originated in the Celtic festival of Samhain, when the souls of the dead were believed to return to their homes, and people lit bonfires and wore masks to ward off spirits. After the Romans conquered the Celts, they added their own festivals, and in the 7th century CE Pope Boniface IV established All Saints' Day. The evening before became "All Hallows Eve" or Halloween. In much of Europe and most of North America today, Halloween is largely nonreligious and celebrated with costumes, trick-or-treating, jack-o-lanterns, and parties, though it still marks the beginning of Allhallowtide, a three-day Christian observance that includes Halloween (All Hallows' Eve), All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day. In the workplace, it's important to acknowledge its diverse roots and ensure costumes and imagery remain respectful and inclusive.

Día de los Muertos (November 1–2) in Mexico and Latin America

Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, is a joyful Mexican tradition with Indigenous and Catholic roots, celebrated across Latin America and increasingly around the world. Families create altars (or *ofrendas*) decorated with marigolds, candles, foods, and photos to welcome the spirits of loved ones. It's a time of music, remembrance, and storytelling. In the workplace, recognizing the cultural and spiritual meaning of this celebration is important in offering a space for employees to share stories or art.

All Saints' Day (November 1)

All Saints' Day is a Christian observance commemorating all saints, known and unknown, who are believed to have attained heaven. In Western churches it is celebrated on November 1, while Eastern churches observe it on the first Sunday after Pentecost. Its origins date back to early Christian feasts honoring martyrs, with the November 1 date established in the 8th century by Pope Gregory III. In Roman Catholicism it is a holy day of obligation and part of the three-day Allhallowtide, beginning with Halloween and continues with All Souls' Day. Workplaces can support observances by acknowledging it as a solemn day and being mindful that some employees may attend church services, or even request time off.

All Souls' Day (November 2)

All Souls' Day is dedicated to the commemoration of all the faithful departed, focusing particularly on those believed to be in purgatory, with the prayers of the faithful offered to aid their journey to heaven. The day is marked with requiem masses, prayers, and visits to cemeteries where families may decorate graves. Instituted by Abbot Odilo of Cluny in the 11th century, it quickly became a widespread tradition and today forms part of the Allhallowtide triduum alongside Halloween and All Saints' Day. In the workplace, recognition can take the form of

cultural education and sensitivity to employees who may wish to observe through family rituals, reflection, and prayer.

Oktoberfest

Oktoberfest is an annual festival held in Munich, Germany, over a two-week period ending on the first Sunday in October. It began on October 12, 1810, as a celebration of the marriage of Crown Prince Ludwig of Bavaria (later King Louis I) to Princess Therese von Sachsen-Hildburghausen, marked by horse races and community festivals. Over time, agricultural fairs, food booths, and large beer halls were added, until the event grew into the world's largest folk festival, drawing more than six million visitors each year. Today, Oktoberfest is celebrated not only in Munich but around the world, especially in cities with German heritage, featuring parades, folk music, traditional dress, food, and conviviality known as *Gemütlichkeit* (cordiality and good cheer). In the workplace, Oktoberfest can be acknowledged with cultural spotlights, themed lunches, or team activities that highlight Bavarian traditions, without relying solely on beer or alcohol.

Diwali

Diwali, or the festival of lights, is a festival celebrated by Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists around the world. Across South Asia and the diaspora, homes are decorated with lamps and candles, families share sweets, and fireworks fill the skies. While the traditions vary, Diwali is widely seen as a celebration of light over darkness, hope, and renewal. Traditions vary across communities and regions. For Hindus, it marks the return of Prince Rama to Ayodhya after exile and victory over evil. For Jains, it commemorates the nirvana (enlightenment) of Lord Mahavira, the last Tirthankara. For Sikhs, it recalls the release of Guru Hargobind and 52 princes from imprisonment in 1619. Though its meanings differ across religions, Diwali unites people in joy and community and is celebrated by millions worldwide as both a religious and cultural festival. Workplaces can celebrate by providing a space for Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists to celebrate.

Mid-Autumn Festival

The Mid-Autumn Festival is a major harvest celebration across East Asia, especially in China, Vietnam, and Korea. It is associated with the full moon, family reunions, mooncakes, lanterns, and folktales like that of the moon goddess Chang'e. The festival emphasizes gratitude and togetherness. Workplaces can honor it with cultural storytelling and providing a space that reflects the festivals' values of reunion and appreciation.

Despite their differences, these traditions share common themes: honoring ancestors and loved ones, acknowledging mortality and the passage of time, celebrating seasonal change, and strengthening bonds through community gatherings, symbolic imagery, and shared meals.

In the workplace, these observances can enrich community spirit and promote cultural learning. At the same time, they may present sensitivities, such as the use of sacred symbols, dietary needs, or balancing festive and solemn tones, that require careful attention. This guide offers practical suggestions to help organizations recognize and respect diverse autumnal traditions while ensuring that all employees feel welcome, whether they choose to participate in activities or not.

Respectful autumnal observances

Workplace celebrations offer more than just a day of fun. Autumn observances in the workplace can provide meaningful opportunities to build community, share cultural traditions, and support diversity.

1. **Fostering team spirit:** Celebrations can provide an opportunity for employees to come together in a fun and relaxed atmosphere, fostering camaraderie and team spirit.
2. **Building relationships:** Informal gatherings provide opportunities for networking and building relationships across different departments or teams.
3. **Celebrating diversity:** Workplace celebrations provide a platform for employees to showcase their individuality and cultural richness, fostering an inclusive environment where diversity is celebrated and appreciated.

Whether hosting a Diwali lunch, acknowledging Día de los Muertos altars, or offering Halloween festivities, respectful participation is key. To support this, organizations can follow some guiding practices. The table below outlines Do's and Don'ts that help ensure celebrations are inclusive, respectful, and considerate of different cultural and personal perspectives.

Workplace guidance table

Do's	Don'ts
Set clear intentions, such as "our workplace recognizes a variety of autumn traditions. Participation is optional."	Make events mandatory or pressure employees to join.
Provide advance notice of celebrations (dates, activities, expectations).	Assume everyone celebrates in the same way.
Offer context and education (e.g., short info sheets, posters, or team presentations).	Mix solemn and festive tones without context. For example, treating All Souls' Day (solemn) the same as Oktoberfest (festive).
Accommodate dietary needs (vegetarian, halal, kosher, allergy-friendly, etc.).	Provide food without clear labeling or cultural sensitivity.
Encourage opt-in creative sharing (recipes, art, decorations, stories).	Use sacred religious or cultural symbols as decorations without understanding their significance.
Remind employees of existing workplace policies (harassment, dress code, equity policies).	Rely on costumes, caricatures, or stereotypes without sensitivity to cultural or historical meaning.

Case example: Halloween and cultural appropriation

While the principles above apply to all autumnal observances, some traditions raise particular workplace challenges. Halloween, for example, often involves costumes and symbolic imagery that can easily cross into stereotypes or cultural appropriation if handled without care. Highlighting Halloween as a case example allows us to explore these issues in more detail and provide practical guidance for fostering respect and inclusion.

Offensive costumes may...

- **Reinforce stereotypes:** Costumes that depict exaggerated or simplified characteristics of a particular group can reinforce harmful stereotypes. For example, dressing as a "drunk Irishman" perpetuates stereotypes about Irish people.
- **Mock or belittle:** Costumes that mock or belittle a culture, religion, or identity are offensive. This includes costumes that turn serious cultural symbols or attire into jokes, such as dressing as a "sexy nun" or "mental patient".
- **Include insensitive historical references:** Costumes that reference traumatic historical events or figures, like dressing as a Nazi or a slave, trivialize real atrocities and are deeply offensive.
- **Reference racial caricatures:** Blackface, yellowface, and brownface involve using makeup or accessories to change your skin colour or facial features to look more like a certain race and are blatant forms of racism that should never be done. These resources provide more information about this form of racism:
 - [Blackface](#)
 - [Brownface. Blackface. They're all offensive. And here's why](#)
 - [The Historical Harm of Blackface](#)

Understanding cultural appropriation

Cultural appropriation, as defined in CCDI's Glossary of DEIA terms, is "the theft of cultural elements or objects from equity-seeking groups for use, commodification, or profit without understanding the cultural significance and historical context."

On Halloween, this might look like...

- **Using sacred or cultural symbols:** Wearing items that have deep cultural, religious, or spiritual significance, such as headdresses, bindis, or hijabs, are considered cultural appropriation when worn as a costume. These items are not just fashion accessories but hold significant meaning and importance in their respective cultures.

- **Commodification of culture:** Turning cultural attire or symbols into a costume for entertainment purposes can be seen as reducing an entire culture to a novelty. For example, wearing a kimono or sari as part of a costume.
- **Reinforcement of power dynamics:** When members of a dominant culture appropriate elements of an equity-deserving group, it can reinforce power imbalances and historical oppression. This is particularly true when the dominant group has a history of oppressing the culture being appropriated.
- **Inaccurate replicas:** Wearing costumes that inaccurately or poorly replicate cultural attire can perpetuate misinformation and misunderstandings about that culture. This includes “gypsy” costumes, which misrepresent and stigmatize the Romani people.

Because these issues often surface in subtle or unintended ways, it is important to create opportunities for self-reflection before celebrations take place. This guided activity below can help employees think critically about costume choices and understand the difference between intent (what you mean) and impact (how others feel).

Costume choice reflection activity

Instruction

1. Review the reflection questions below.
2. Choose one costume or decoration idea.
3. In pairs or small groups, apply the questions to assess whether it is respectful or problematic.
4. Share your reasoning with the group.

Reflection questions

Cultural significance	• Does this costume or decoration represent a race, culture, or religion that is not my own? Do I understand its meaning or significance?
Stereotyping	• Does the costume or décor rely on caricatures or exaggerated portrayals? Would displaying or wearing it reinforce harmful stereotypes?
Respect	• Would people from that community view this as respectful, or could it be seen as mocking or trivializing?
Intent and impact	• Even if my intent is playful, could others perceive it as harmful?

Consultation	Have I sought input from individuals who belong to the culture or group I am considering portraying or referencing, either through costumes or decorations?
Historical context	Does this costume or decoration reflect past uses that were derogatory, oppressive, or rooted in colonial or racist traditions?
Personal reflection	How would I feel if someone used elements of my own culture or identity in a costume or decoration in a way that felt inaccurate or disrespectful?

Further resources

These resources provide further information about cultural appropriation and selecting respectful Halloween costumes:

English resources:

- [CCDI Webinar: Understanding power and privilege: An intersectional lens](#) (Knowledge Repository login required)
- [#IAmNotACostume](#)
- [Appropriate Costumes vs. Cultural Appropriation: A Halloween Guide for Employers](#)
- [How To Avoid Wearing A Racist Halloween Costume](#)
- [My Culture is Not A Costume: Cultural Appropriation vs Cultural Appreciation](#)
- [Why Cultural Appropriation is Disrespectful](#)
- [Avoiding Cultural Appropriation and Discrimination at Halloween](#)

French resources:

- [Webinaire du CCDI : Comprendre le pouvoir et le privilège : une optique intersectionnelle](#) (Knowledge Repository login required)
- [Petits conseils pour choisir un costume d'Halloween respectueux](#)
- [Comment se déguiser à l'Halloween sans appropriation culturelle?](#)
- [Un costume d'Halloween peut-il être blessant?](#)
- [Guide réflexif pour parents inquiets : Halloween et appropriation culturelle](#)
- [Halloween et appropriation culturelle](#)
- [Halloween et appropriation culturelle : tout ce que tu dois savoir!](#)
- [Quoi NE PAS faire à l'Halloween](#)