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## **Rituals After a Death**

A common way to honor a person who has died is by having a ceremony to honor their life. Funerals and memorial services are two traditional ways that people do this. These services are known as death rituals.

Some people feel great comfort from attending rituals. Relatives, friends, and co-workers gather to remember the life of the person and share memories about them. You may or may not find these events comforting or meaningful. Often, you can decide if you want to attend and how you want to be involved.

Some of the events might include:

- funeral service,
- memorial service,
- burial service, or
- faith-specific rituals such as a wake or shiva.

### **Formal Events**

These traditional events are often arranged with help from religious leaders and staff at funeral homes and cemeteries. These professionals will help with planning and preparation for services that will be held at:

- a place of worship, such as a church, synagogue, or mosque,
- a funeral home,
- a cemetery, or
- a public hall.

### **Informal Events**

Many people choose to hold small, private remembrances to honor their loved one's memory, beliefs, or wishes. These types of events can be held at any location, such as:

- someone's home,



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- a restaurant,
  - a park, or
  - a place that was meaningful to the person who died.

## **Faith Rituals**

Different religious faiths have different ways of conducting rituals. Depending on the person's faith and cultural traditions, there are various ways of conducting rituals:

- some services take place a few days after the death,
- others may take place a week or two after the death, and
- some are not performed until significantly after the death.

## **Examples of What Might Happen at a Funeral or Memorial Service**

Here are some examples of what you may experience when you go to a funeral or memorial service.

- **Clothing.** Some people who attend will dress up, and many people will wear dark clothes, which is traditional for funerals. The important thing is to dress in a comfortable way that also shows respect for the person who died and for their family.
- **Flowers.** There are usually flowers, and sometimes their scent can be strong.
- **Guest Book.** There may be a book for you to sign your name. This book is given to the family after the funeral so they can see the names of everyone who attended.
- **Usher.** Someone, usually called an usher, may greet you at the door and guide or direct you to a seat. If you are planning to meet someone there or sit with someone, you can let the usher know your plan. The usher may also give you a printed program, which lists the things that will happen during the service.
- **Printed program.** A printed program lists the events that will happen at the service. It will include a schedule of what will happen when, such as who will speak, which songs will be sung, or which prayers will be read. It may include the names of people who will speak and the words to songs or prayers. Some people choose to sing or pray and some do not, which is fine. You are free to do either.



- **Casket or coffin.** The body of the person who died might be in a casket or coffin. The lid could be open or closed. If it is open, the person who died will look like they are sleeping. Many people find looking at a dead body distressing. If you're uncomfortable looking at the body, you don't have to. People who choose to view the body may also choose to gently touch the body, casket, or coffin.
- **Urn.** Instead of a casket or coffin, there might be a small container called an urn. An urn holds the ashes of the person who died if they were cremated. You can look at the urn, but do not touch it or open it.
- **Pictures.** There may be photos of the person who died or other special items on display near the casket, coffin, or urn.
- **Stories and emotions from people.** People often share their emotions and stories about the person who died. You might see and hear people cry. You might see people hug each other or shake hands. Sometimes when stories are shared, people might smile or laugh at a funny story or memory. Other people may sit quietly. Sharing stories is a way to honor the person and the life they lived, and to bring comfort those at the service. You may wish to share a story. If you do, it should be an uplifting story and not be embarrassing for the family or critical of the person who died.
- **Music and singing.** Many funerals have music and singing, much like at any place of worship. You can choose to sing or not.
- **A reception event.** After the service, there may be a reception with food and drinks for people to gather and talk to each other. You can choose whether to attend and how long you will stay.

## **Deciding Whether to Attend a Funeral or Memorial Service**

Attending a funeral or memorial service requires some planning. The events may be stressful, especially if you are feeling grief.

- It may be helpful to communicate with a family member, friend, or support person about where the services will be held and what you will see, hear, and do at the events.
- You may wish to visit the location prior to the event to see where it will be held. Visiting ahead of time may ease anxiety.
- Many services are streamed virtually and can be viewed online. This may be an



option, if you are uncomfortable attending in person or are unable to travel to the service.

## **Visiting a Cemetery**

After a funeral, bodies are usually transported in a casket or coffin to the cemetery or crematorium by a hearse. Family and friends may follow the hearse in other cars to attend a small service at the cemetery. If there is an urn, it is usually brought to a memorial service, which may be held at a later time. The urn is then buried, placed in a vault at the columbarium or mausoleum, or kept at home with loved ones.

- The cemetery has grassy areas with headstones where caskets and urns are buried.
- There may also be a building called a columbarium or mausoleum where caskets and urns are kept above ground instead of being buried.

You can choose to visit the cemetery with other mourners after the funeral to see where your loved one's remains will be kept. You can also choose not to go.

For some people, visiting the cemetery in the months or years after the death helps them feel connected to the person who died. Sometimes people visit on special days, such as a birthday or anniversary and put flowers, flags, or other meaningful items on or near the headstone.

## **What Might Happen at a Funeral or Burial Service at a Cemetery**

Here are examples of what you might see if you go to a cemetery for a funeral or burial service.

- There will be a hole that has been dug in the ground for the casket or urn to be buried in. The hole for the casket is usually six feet deep. The hole for an urn would be smaller.
- The casket or urn is placed in the hole, and some people may gently place a handful of dirt in the hole. This is a religious or cultural tradition symbolizing the death is final.
- In some cases, the casket or urn isn't buried. The casket might be placed inside a mausoleum. The urn might be placed inside a wall in the columbarium.
- After the service is over and everyone leaves, cemetery workers fill the hole with dirt

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or seal the wall in the columbarium. Grass will eventually grow on the hole that is filled with dirt.

- Later, a stone with the person's name carved on it, called a headstone may be placed on the ground where the casket is buried. A nameplate or plaque is placed in the
- columbarium or mausoleum. This lets people know where the person's remains are and is one way to help remember the person who has died. In the years ahead the headstones may be decorated with flowers or flags by family or friends.

You can choose to visit the cemetery days, weeks, months, or years after the service if it provides comfort to you.