

Autism & Grief Project

Fact Sheet



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.

In addition to honoring the person who died, 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. You might be the person doing all the planning, especially if the person who died was a parent or sibling, or you may be helping to plan it with a funeral director or family members. If you are participating, it may be helpful to plan for these events by creating a calendar that includes dates, times, and places for the different activities. See the sample schedules and things to think in the section below called “Making a Plan for Attending.”

You might also decide to make plans for smaller or more private services or ceremonies that are not held at a place of worship or funeral home.

Funerals and Memorial Services

Depending on the person’s faith and cultural traditions, 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.

These services often take place at a funeral home. They can also be held at a:

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

Funeral homes are designed to comfortably accommodate the people attending and have rooms that often resemble the inside of a place of worship. Services at a cemetery are usually held outside, with chairs arranged at the burial site.

If you plan to attend a service, it may be helpful to prepare by visiting the location prior to the event, so you can see where it is and what it looks like. If you are feeling anxious or worried, it can be helpful to communicate with a support person, family, friends, or the professional staff at the location about your questions or concerns.

Examples of What Might Happen at a 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. You may want to plan what you will wear. 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 guides people through the events that happen at the service. It will have a schedule of what will happen when, such as who will speak, what songs will be sung, or what prayers will be read. It might include the names of people who will speak and the words to songs or prayers. Some people choose to sing or pray and some will not, which is fine. You are free to do either.
- **Casket or coffin.** The person who died might be in a casket or a coffin, which is what a dead body is usually buried in. 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 choose to gently touch the body, casket, or coffin.
- **Urn.** Instead of a coffin or casket, 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 pictures 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. You can choose to share stories or not.
- **Music and singing.** Many funerals have music and singing, much like at a 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

Attending a funeral or memorial service requires some planning. It can be helpful for you 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.

Preparing for funerals can be stressful, especially if you are feeling grief. This can be especially true if you will be attending a service that has different rituals than your own religion or if you have never attended a funeral. Even if the funeral is held in a place of worship that is not the same faith belief as you, you are welcome to attend.

Sometimes feelings of grief, stress, or anxiety may arise during the funeral. It can be helpful to think about how you will respond to those feelings before you're at the service. You may want to ask if there will be a safe, quiet place that you can go to if you begin to feel overwhelmed.

If you're unsure about whether to attend, thinking about these questions and coming up with a plan ahead of time may help you feel more comfortable about attending:

- What will you do if you need a break? Who will be there to support you if you need a break? How will you let that person know you need to take a break? Where will you go to take a break?
- What can you do to be involved in or help with the service?
- Will you tell people about your memories of the person who died?
- If you want to leave the funeral before it ends, what is the best way to do that while still being respectful for those who choose to stay? Who will you communicate with to let them know you're ready to leave?
- Where and with whom would you like to sit?
- How will you respond to people who talk to you?
- If the casket will be open, will you want to view the body of the person who has died?
- What will you wear?
- Will you shake hands or hug people at the funeral? What will you do if you don't want people to hug you? You could put your hand out to shake hands or show them a card telling people you'd prefer not to hug.
- Would it be helpful to bring a soothing object or a quiet fidget to hold?
- Will you attend other activities associated with the funeral or memorial service, such as a reception or dinner?

What to Do at a Funeral or Memorial Service

You can make choices about what you are comfortable doing at funerals and memorial services or other activities that are planned. If the person who died was especially close to you, you might want to be involved in planning the service. Some options are:

- sit at the front of the room to take part with others who loved the person,

- create a drawing or poem to include in the program,
- read a remembrance (sometimes called a eulogy) you have written, or
- watch and listen but not be directly a part of the service, or you might do a little of both.

It is important to communicate with those who support you about what your preferences are and how they can assist you.

What to Say at a Funeral or Memorial Service

Sometimes the language that people use at a service can be confusing. Many expressions around death are unclear. For example, someone could say that they are “sorry for the loss” when the person is not lost but has died. Or someone could say that the person who died is now “in a better place,” but the person is actually in a coffin.

Generally, people have a hard time talking about death but want to make you feel better, and they rely on phrases like these that are commonly used. You can respond to these kinds of comments, even if they seem odd, by saying, “Thank you” or “Thank you for being here.”

If you will be attending a funeral for someone who is not part of your family and feel unsure of what to say to others, it is always safe to say, “You have my condolences.” This shows that you understand the sadness they are likely to be feeling about their family member’s or friend’s death.

Insider jokes you may have enjoyed with the person who died while they were still living would not be understood or accepted at a funeral or memorial service. It would be more acceptable to only share them with people who also enjoyed the insider jokes when the person who died was still alive.

Making a Plan for Attending a Funeral or Memorial Service

After making the decision to attend, you may find it helpful think through the day and make a written plan for what will happen. You may also want to plan for how you will respond if changes have to be made to the plan. Making a plan before attending ritual events may reduce feelings that could become overwhelming such as stress, anxiety, frustration, or anger. It will also let your support person know when and how they can help you.

You will need to know the date, time, place, and have transportation. Letting family, friends or support people know you want to attend the funeral or memorial service is important because they may be able to provide transportation, guidance, and companionship if you need or want it.

The questions you considered in deciding whether to attend are a useful guide for developing a written plan for attending. On your own or with a support person or trusted family member or friend who can help, make a written plan for:

- Where and when the event will take place and visiting the location ahead of time so you know what to expect.

- How you might want to dress and what objects you might want to bring with you for comfort.
- A schedule of the day so you will know what will happen and when, including when you will leave the event. It can also include which parts of the event will you participate in and how.
- How you will respond to others who express their sympathy to you. Or what you will say to someone who is grieving the death of their loved one. You may want to practice your responses before you are at the event.
- Will you have a support person at the event? Who is that person?
- What you will do and where will you go if you need a break and how will you let your support person know.
- What you will do if you become overwhelmed by the event. If you need to leave, where will you go? If you have a support person, how will you let them know you need to leave?
- An alternate plan for what to do if things don't go as you planned.

Once you have your plan, you may want to bring it with you as a reminder of what will happen and what to do if you become uncomfortable. While at the event, it will be important for you to know when you begin to feel overwhelmed so you can let your support person know it's time to follow your plan.

Things You May Want to Do if You Don't Attend

If you decide not to go, or if you are prevented from going to a funeral or memorial service, you may want to:

- Ask if you can watch a livestream so you can see what is happening from a computer or phone.
- Consider attending some of the other events that might take place, such as a meal or reception.
- Hold your own small, private service to honor the person with a few close friends.
- Visit the church after the service is over.

You may decide about whether to attend the funeral on your own. However, if making the decision is difficult, communicate with your family or support people about making a choice that feels right for you. Use some of the questions above as a guide.

If it is important to your family or support people that you attend the funeral, even if you aren't sure you want to go, ask them to help you make a plan using the suggestions above so you'll know when to step out, take a break, or leave at certain time, if you need to.