

What May Happen at Islamic Rituals of Mourning



Autism & Grief Project

Islamic rituals of mourning that take place following a death will vary depending on the deceased's wishes, family decisions, and religious and cultural traditions. The following events may occur after the death of someone of the Muslim faith.

Preparing the Body for Burial

- Immediately after death, the deceased's body is washed by family members or local mosque leaders. Men are bathed by men and women by women. Those who perform this important rite must be Muslim. The water used for bathing is often perfumed by flowers or herbs.
- The deceased person's hands are placed in the prayer position, and the body is wrapped in white cotton sheets, called *shrouds*. The body may be buried in shrouds without a casket. When a casket is used, it is usually a simple wood casket.
- The Islamic religion prohibits cremation, does not believe in embalming the deceased except when required by law, and believes in the resurrection of the body.
- Burial needs to occur as quickly as possible in a Muslim cemetery (or Muslim section of a general cemetery), preferably within 24 hours. There is usually no viewing of the body or visitation prior to burial.
- The body is moved inside a mosque or to other location (such as a mosque courtyard, cemetery chapel, or even the graveside) for the funeral service.

Funeral Service

- During a service in the Sunni tradition, the body and funeral attendees face Mecca, the holy center of Islam.
- Attendees traditionally form at least three rows: men in front, children in the middle, and women in back. The actual prayer ceremony (called *janaza*) is brief.

Those who are unfamiliar with Islam should follow the lead of those who are familiar with the ceremony.

- The funeral prayer is usually led by a local religious leader, although many Muslim scholars (both Sunni and Shiah) recommend a relative of the deceased who knows the regulations of the prayer lead instead, because the relative's supplication will be more heartfelt. Some parts of the prayer may be recited silently.
- After prayers, the body is carried by male leaders of the mosque or family members to the burial site in a silent walking procession. It is common for only men to attend, but some traditions also include women and children in this process.

Burial and Mourning

- Some cemeteries are completely dedicated to people of the Islamic faith, and others have specific areas set aside for Muslims.
- The body is buried lying on its right side, with the face turned toward Mecca.
- Many Muslim religious leaders recommend that each person throw three handfuls of earth (scooped with both hands) into the grave.
- After the burial, it is common for a religious scholar or leader to recite aloud passages from the *Quran* (the central religious text of Islam) and make supplications for forgiveness. Sometimes, people will pray for the forgiveness of the deceased silently as individuals.
- Later the same day, or a day or two after the burial, the family of the deceased often will be available, at home or in a mosque or other location (or virtually in the era of COVID-19), to others who wish to visit and offer condolences.
- The usual mourning period is three days, when it is customary for family and friends to visit and pay respects with food, and sometimes with flowers and gifts. Widows will typically observe a longer mourning period. Some Muslims observe an additional 40 days of mourning, although there is no religious requirement to do so.
- By tradition there should be no loud wailing at the burial service, nor hanging lights over the grave.