

What May Happen at Secular Rituals of Mourning



Autism & Grief Project

Secular mourning rituals do not follow the traditions of a particular religion. The events may include some religious components that were part of the deceased's cultural heritage—which often differs from believing in or following a particular faith tradition.

The deceased person may have planned the services and activities before death. If family and loved ones plan the ritual events, they will decide the type and style based on both what they find meaningful and what they believe the deceased would have wanted. The following activities may occur at secular rituals.

Wake or Visitation

- There may or may not be a wake or visitation hours. Friends and family may invite people who knew the deceased to a funeral home or another location prior to the burial. People attend the wake to express their sadness, share memories, and communicate their condolences to the family.
- The deceased's body may lie in a casket in the room where the wake or visitation is held. The casket may or may not be open, depending on the family's wishes.
- Visitors may approach the casket to pay their respects to the person who has died. Sometimes people touch the body. Sometimes people talk to the deceased. These are all ways of communicating their love for the person.
- If the person was cremated, the urn holding the deceased's ashes may be displayed.
- There may be photos of the deceased person, a video of the person when alive, flowers that have been sent by friends and family, or a book that guests can sign which is given to the family later.

Funeral or Memorial Service

- A secular funeral or memorial service is often referred to as a “celebration of life” and its purpose is to provide an occasion for the deceased's loved ones to gather, recognize the deceased person's life, acknowledge their death, and grieve together.
- The service may include tributes, eulogies (talks about the person who has died and their life by family members or friends), and music or readings that have been specially selected by the deceased before death or by family and friends.
- Guests may share stories about the deceased, such as what the person meant to them, what they learned from them, or how grateful they are to have known them.

- The person leading the funeral or ceremony, usually called the “celebrant,” can be designated by the deceased prior to their death or by the family after the death. The celebrant may be a close friend, a community leader, or a clergy person who leads the service in a secular capacity. A funeral director often can assist with identifying a celebrant if one has not already been selected.
- While some people may choose to hold a secular funeral or memorial service in a religious setting or in a funeral home, there are many other places the service may be held. A place that was meaningful to the deceased can be a special location to hold a celebration of life, such as a garden, a beach, or a park. The family may also choose to hold the ceremony in a private home.
- The casket or urn may or may not be displayed. The casket may or may not be open.
- The family or loved ones may designate an organization to which people can make donations in honor of the deceased, instead of sending flowers or other memorial gifts. Information about this may be announced in the obituary, on a memorial website, or on social media.
- If the death was of someone in an agency program, such as a day program or group home, sometimes a memorial service is held at the agency in addition to the service held by family. This service gives everyone connected to the agency an occasion to reflect on the person who died, share stories about them, celebrate their life, and participate in rituals of remembrance.

Burial or Disposition of Ashes

- In secular ceremonies, choices around burial or how ashes from cremation should be handled are made by family, friends, or the deceased prior to death.
- Arrangements may vary, depending on preference. The casket containing the deceased may be buried in a memorial park, cemetery, or mausoleum. The burial may be private, with only family in attendance, or it may be open to all funeral attendees. Sometimes, instead of a funeral, a memorial service is held at the graveside and includes the burial ceremony.
- If the body is cremated, loved ones will decide whether to bury the urn or ashes in the ground or place them in a columbarium. They may choose to scatter ashes in a special place or keep some or all of them in a box or urn in their home.

Other Events

- After a funeral or memorial service, a family may host a social gathering, which often includes food and beverages, so family and friends can continue to be together and exchange memories of the deceased.

With thanks to the [Mount Pleasant Group](#).