



FUNERAL CHAPEL

Dedicated To Those We Serve

Dealing with Death: A Guide for Survivors

When There's Been a Sudden Death

Police officers routinely attend residences where a death has been reported or to notify family members that a death has occurred. This article tries to address the most common questions fielded by police officers and other professionals in an attempt to help survivors through a difficult time.

Of course, individual situations differ, but some of the most common advice provided by officers includes:

- Gather your support system around you (family members, friends, your faith, others - anyone you can talk to, anyone you can count on and anything that gives you strength and encouragement).
- Notify the people closest to you about the death, and ask them to notify others.
- If the scene of death (your home, car, etc.) Needs cleaning, you have a choice not to do it yourself - blood and bodily fluids can be hazardous to your health. As well, you may hinder the work of police investigators. Once the investigation is finished, you can make arrangements with a local biohazard recovery service to clean affected areas. Check with your insurance company before making arrangements. Know that the police may call upon you again to identify the deceased, answer questions or reclaim personal belongings.
- Call your insurance company to find out if they have specific procedures that you must follow.

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- Deal with legal matters (i.e., determine the number of copies you want of the death certificate, locate the will, begin filing insurance and other related claims).
- You may inquire with the police or Victim Crisis Unit about resources for you and your family to help you deal with the loss.
- Above all, get some rest and take care of your own health.

Making Funeral Arrangements

Funeral arrangements should be made soon. Burial, embalming or cremation is usually done with the assistance of a funeral home. Be prepared to discuss:

- suitable dates and times
- burial/cremation, visitation, and viewing
- types of services you would like (e.g., style of service, religious/non-religious, etc.)
- a designated charity for memorial donations
- financial arrangements

A funeral home is responsible for:

- transporting the deceased
- preparation and embalming
- organizing and staffing the service
- composing and releasing the obituary
- filing the death certificate and transmitting copies to you
- administrative and ceremonial arrangements, and
- courtesy referral to other services as needed.

All funeral homes and companies described as transfer services offer an inexpensive alternative known as direct disposition. This option includes the removal of the deceased from the place of death, the placement of the deceased to the cemetery or crematorium and the filing of necessary documentation. While there is no law requiring you to use a funeral home or transfer service, there are legal documents that need to be completed to register a death or arrange for cremation, embalming or burial. Cemeteries and crematoriums both require a casket or container to be used, and transporting a body can pose challenges. Ensure you are complying with the law.

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Costs depend entirely on the services selected by you. Every funeral director and transfer service operator is required by law to have price lists available to the public at no charge and without obligation.

Grieving

The death of a person close to you is always a very painful and difficult experience. You will probably have strong feelings over time, and sometimes they may seem overwhelming. You may experience shortness of breath, loss of appetite, feelings of vulnerability, guilt, lack of interest, forgetfulness and more. These are normal reactions. However, if they persist, seek professional help.

If you have lost someone and a crime is involved, the grieving process may be more complicated. There will be a police investigation. Criminal charges may be laid by the police, and charges may proceed to criminal court. Other people may be making decisions that affect you and your family. That can create additional frustration.

Be aware of how you and others around you are coping. Let others know that they are not alone, and remember that mourning for your loved one is a normal and important part of recovering. Give yourself time to heal and put off any major changes or decisions.

Pay particular attention to children - they need to grieve as much as adults. However, the grief may show itself in a different way. It's not unusual to see children acting out grief one minute, and then playing happily the next minute. Try not to limit their tears, feelings or even anger.

Above all, children need to feel safe, loved and cared for. Use simple, direct language to explain that a loved one has died.

Some guidelines for children include:

- answer their questions in a way that satisfies them and try not to give more information than required - give a brief explanation and answer in a language level that the child can easily understand
- don't be afraid to use words like dead and death
- never tell children anything they will have to unlearn later (e.g., "Grandma has gone away" or "Grandma is sleeping") - the child should understand that death is permanent, and the loved one will not be coming back
- let children know that it is okay to show their emotions, and reassure the child that he or she is loved and will be cared for by others.

When Police Investigations Are Involved

You have the right to expect regular updates from police investigators; they have a right to be allowed the opportunity to do their job. Some documents relating to ongoing investigations may not be released to you immediately.

According to the Victims' Bill of Rights, you have the right to be informed of services available to you, the progress of investigations that relate to the crime, any charges laid or why no charges were laid, the dates, places and outcomes of all court proceedings, and to make representations to the court by way of a victim impact statement.

When the police have finished collecting evidence involving a body, it is transported to the hospital if there will be an autopsy. Autopsies are generally done when there is a chance that something about the cause of death, or the underlying illness, may be uncovered. In some cases, a loved one has the right to refuse an autopsy. If there are any suspicious or uncertain aspects to the death the coroner may order an autopsy which cannot be refused.

When a Coroner is Involved

A coroner is an appointed public official. Cases that fall under the jurisdiction of the coroner include:

- sudden or unexpected deaths
- deaths from violence
- suicides, and
- those occurring in any suspicious, unusual or unnatural manner.

A coroner can order an autopsy. In addition to determining the cause of death, the purpose of the autopsy may be to identify the deceased or verify the time of death. Materials are collected for medical evidence (e.g., bullets, hair, fibers, semen, etc.) and for toxicology testing (e.g., blood, bodily fluids, etc.).

An autopsy will not generally affect the family's ability to view the body. However, be aware that an autopsy is a medical examination that can involve incisions and the examination of internal body organs and tissues - it may be emotionally difficult to see the after affects.

Information pertaining to the death may be obtained from the coroner. On written request, you can get a copy of the Coroner's Investigation Statement (it can take several months to complete). There is a cost, and insurance companies can sometimes reimburse that cost depending on the situation. Once the coroner releases the deceased to the family, transportation can be arranged with the funeral home or other service provider.

Dealing with the Media

Handling a traumatic event is difficult enough. Add the dimension of dealing with the media, and your task becomes even more challenging. In some cases, your cooperation with the media may help others. At the same time, it can be a very painful experience if not done correctly.

You have the right to choose whether or not to be interviewed at all by the media. So if a news person calls you from a newspaper, television or radio, you can agree to be interviewed, or you can decline.

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Some tips for dealing with the media include:

- select the time and location for media interviews - while the media is governed by deadlines, nobody should be subjected to a reporter arriving unannounced at your home know that you don't have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable or that you feel are inappropriate
- if an interview begins to feel hostile, slanted or too emotionally demanding, you have the right to stop the interview and walk away
- if applicable, request anonymity
- release a written statement instead of doing an interview
- you can select a spokesperson or advocate to do your talking for you (e.g., a family member or lawyer)
- know that a journalist can report anything you say - even "off the record" comments, and demand a correction if inaccurate information is reported.

Financial Assistance

If the cost of a funeral or burial is not affordable for you, speak to your provider (funeral home or transfer service) about potential death benefits available for the deceased. The most common benefits available are those provided by Canada Pension Plan (CPP), Veterans Affairs Canada and life insurance policies. As well, the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board can sometimes compensate you for your loss if it is due to a crime. They can be contacted at 1-800-372-7463.

The Estate

Consulting a lawyer is a good step. If the deceased does not have a will, the Court will appoint the Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee as estate trustee, and all property will be distributed according to a formula fixed by law. Any person claiming a share of the estate will have to establish that they are entitled to inherit.

<http://www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca>