

Funeral Etiquette

Funerals serve several purposes. In addition to commemorating the life of the deceased, a funeral offers emotional support to the bereaved and an opportunity for friends and family to pay tribute to their loved one. The process of going through the planning and final disposition helps the family come to terms with the fact that a death has occurred. This is a necessary part of the grieving process. It is common for people to enter a period of denial when a family member or loved one has died.

Friends offering fond remembrances are often helpful during this time. Customs for expressing sympathy vary according to religious and ethnic customs. The following information is offered merely as a guideline for what is generally accepted in various circumstances during a funeral.

General guidelines for guests:

Expressing Sympathy: Simple, brief expressions of sympathy are usually best. While most people find themselves at a loss for words, the family will appreciate a sincere expression of condolence-however brief. "I'm sorry," or, "I'm so sorry to hear of your loss," are the most commonly used expressions, and they are perfectly adequate when said in a sincere, sympathetic voice. If you knew the deceased well enough, it is often helpful to say so; "I always counted Bob as a good friend," or, "Jane will be missed by everyone." Kind words are always welcomed. Follow the lead of the family member. If they want to talk about the deceased, lend an ear and a few minutes of your time. Being a good listener may be the best solace you can provide for them.

When attending calling hours, do not feel you have to stay for a lengthy period of time. Follow your instincts as to how long to stay. If the deceased was a good friend, you may feel it necessary to stay longer, to tend to your own grief at the same time as paying your respects to the family. If you have never met the family, introduce yourself and let them know how you are connected to their loved one. Colleagues and co-workers of the deceased may attend calling hours together, but try not to descend on the bereaved all together. Offer individual sympathy and a word or two of support; "I am so sorry for your loss," and/or, "Let me know if there is anything I can do to help."

If, indeed, you are able to offer assistance with childcare, or food gifts, or picking up out-of-town relatives, by all means, do so. These thoughtful gestures are invaluable. Sudden, or tragic deaths, may be so emotionally draining, your ability to assist the bereaved will be long remembered and appreciated. In the case of the elderly woman or man who has lost a spouse and may not have children close by to attend to their needs, a lending hand with transportation or running errands can make the ordeal so much easier on them.

Many times funerals become a place to share memories. Visitors are encouraged to talk about their memories of the deceased. Sometimes the family learns new things about their loved one that they didn't know before! While we all accept the somber atmosphere

of a funeral setting, sharing stories and laughter can personalize the occasion and actually help ease the pain. Sorrow is an individual suffering, but joyful stories shared freely can make the grief easier to bear.

DRESS:

Subdued colors are most appropriate for funerals. It is becoming more acceptable to wear brighter colors today, to celebrate the life of the deceased, but the truth is, etiquette requires modesty and somberness. Out of respect for the family, try to keep your dress simple but not too casual. Many orthodox cultures still adhere to the traditional black attire, and if you opt for that choice, you will never go wrong.

VIEWING THE BODY:

If the funeral is open casket, you are welcome to view the deceased and/or pray for them. This is not required. If there are calling hours but the family is not present, you may still view the body. If you wish to have a family member escort you to the casket, don't be afraid to ask. Regardless of your religious affiliation, a few moments of silence is always appreciated.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR THE BEREAVED:

Cause of death can be a difficult subject. While most people will have read the obituary or may ask others how the death occurred, you should be prepared to answer this question. Especially in the event of a sudden death brought on by tragic or unexplained circumstances.

Specifying the cause of death in the obituary will help allay the "What happened?" questions. How you approach the inquisitiveness of visitors to the funeral is a purely personal decision. If the deceased has passed on due to an illness you do not care to discuss, such as cancer or HIV, or suicide, prepare an honest answer to the "What happened?" question, but don't feel the need to elaborate. Visitors may merely be making conversation and hoping to give you a venue to express your grief.

It's standard practice to greet callers during calling hours. You do not have to keep track of visitors as they will approach you during their visits, but always welcome them with kindness and express your appreciation at their attendance.

In the event someone attends calling hours that you particularly do not like, be polite. In rare instances, an altercation may occur causing you to ask the funeral director to escort a visitor out. Your attitude will do much to keep disruptions from happening. Treat everyone with respect and let them know you are touched by their effort to pay their respects. A funeral is not the place to air grievances or foster rudeness.

You will likely see people you have not seen in years! As with any gathering, you are the host or hostess and must make an effort to speak to each person who attends. While it is not your responsibility to seek them out, it is your responsibility to make sure there is a guest sign-in book. This enables you to know who attended in order to write

the thank-you card. Try not to spend an inordinate amount of time with only one or two people. If you have a lot to catch up on, invite them to visit you after the funeral, or make plans for a luncheon date. This will help both of you in dealing with the effects of the death.

THANK YOU NOTES

Anyone who presented or sent a gift or card to the family, deserves a thank you note. Examples would be to thank anyone who has sent in a memorial contribution, brought food to the house of the grieving family, sent flowers, or in some other tangible way acknowledged the death. Those visitors who attend the calling hours do not require a thank you card.

It is suggested that thank you notes be sent within two weeks of the death. In the past, thank you notes included a personal letter from the grieving family, but today a simple thank you card with a signature, is accepted. Many people still include a personal note or a hand written thank you, but that is a personal choice.

THANKING CLERGY

A personal note is recommended for thanking your clergy person. If an honorarium or offering is sent, send it in a separate envelope. Do not include it with the thank you note.

PALLBEARERS

A separate note to each pallbearer is recommended. Personal messages of thanks will be appreciated by each individual who graciously assisted in this important task.

FLOWERS

For individuals, you may wish to include a personal word or two of thanks on the acknowledgement card. For groups or organizations, send the note to the leader of the group and remember to include all the members of the group in your note. If individual member names appear on the floral card, a separate note should be sent to each one. You do not have to include a personal message in this instance.

Flowers that were sent from a group of neighbors or employees require a separate thank you to each name included on the floral card. You may or may not include a hand written message of thanks.

FRIENDS WHO HAVE HELPED OUT

Friends who have volunteered their help in any way-such as driving a car in the funeral procession, helping the family with arrangements or food, etc. deserve a separate written thank you.

As stated earlier, it is not necessary to send thank you cards to friends or visitors that stop in at the home of the grieving family or that attend the calling hours at the funeral home.

If the neighbors or friends who have volunteered their help are close to the family, you may feel better thanking them in person. In this instance, use your own judgment to determine if a written note is necessary.