

Even though common sense and good discretion are always the best guides to proper funeral etiquette, a few principles still apply.

It is a common gesture for close friends of the bereaving family to visit the family's home to offer sympathy and assistance - this is sometimes referred to as a condolence visit. With the bereaving family having to ensure that all the arrangements are looked after, a close friend(s) may become very helpful with food preparation and childcare. The visit can take place any time within the first few weeks of death, and may be followed with one or more additional visits, depending on the circumstances and your relationship with the family.

In addition to expressing sympathy it is appropriate, if desired, to relate to family members your fond memories of the deceased. In some cases family members may simply want you to be a good listener to their expressions of grief or memories of the deceased. In most circumstances it is not appropriate to inquire as to the cause of death.

If you attend a wake you should approach the family and express your sympathy. As with the condolence visit it is appropriate to relate your memories of the deceased. If you were only acquainted with the deceased (and not the family) you should introduce yourself.

It is customary to show your respects by viewing the deceased if the body is present and the casket is open. You may wish to say a silent prayer for, or meditate about, the deceased at this time. In some cases the family may escort you to the casket.

The length of your visit at the wake is a matter of discretion. After visiting with the family and viewing the deceased you can visit with others in attendance. Normally there is a register for visitors to sign.

As with other aspects of modern day society funeral dress codes have relaxed somewhat. Black dress is no longer required. Instead subdued or darker hues should be selected, the more conservative the better. After the funeral the family often receives invited visitors to their home for pleasant conversation and refreshments.

You can send flowers to the funeral home prior to the funeral, or to the family residence at any time. In some cases flowers may also be sent to Protestant churches. (Flowers generally are not sent to Jewish synagogues and Catholic churches.) Florists know what is appropriate to send in the funeral context.

Gifts in memory of the deceased are often made, particularly when the family has requested gifts in lieu of flowers. The family is notified of the gifts by personal note from the donor or through the donee, if the donee is a charity or other organization. In the latter case the donor provides the family's name and address to the charity at the time the gift is made.

Even if you don't make a gift, a note or card to the deceased's family expressing your thoughts of the deceased is a welcome gesture, especially if you weren't able to attend the funeral.

FUNERAL ETIQUETTE

The funeral is a ceremony of proven worth and value for those who mourn. It provides an opportunity for the survivors and others who share in the loss to express their love, respect, grief and appreciation for a life that has been lived. It permits facing openly and realistically the crisis the death presents. Through the funeral the bereaved take that first step toward emotional adjustment to their loss. This information has been prepared as a convenient reference for modern funeral practices and customs.

THE FUNERAL SERVICE

The family specifies the type of service conducted for the deceased. Funeral directors are trained to assist families in arranging whatever type of service they desire. The service held either at a place of worship or at the funeral home with the deceased present, varies in ritual according to denomination. The presence of friends at this time is an acknowledgement of friendship and support. It is helpful to friends and the community to have an obituary notice published announcing the death and type of service to be held.

PRIVATE SERVICE...

This service is by invitation only and may be held at a place of worship, a funeral home or a family home. Usually, selected relatives and a few close friends attend the funeral service. Often public visitation is held, condolences are sent, and the body is viewed.

MEMORIAL SERVICE...

A memorial service is a service without the body present and can vary in ceremony and procedures according to the community and religious affiliations. Some families prefer public visitations followed by a private or graveside service with a memorial service later at the church or funeral home.

PALLBEARERS...

Friends, relatives, church members or business associates may be asked to serve as pallbearers. The funeral director will secure pallbearers if requested to do so by the family.

HONORARY PALLBEARERS...

When the deceased has been active in political, business, church or civic circles, it may be appropriate for the family to request close associates of the deceased to serve as honorary pallbearers. They do not actively carry the casket.

EULOGY...

A member of the family, clergy, a close personal friend or a business associate of the deceased, may give a eulogy. The eulogy is not to be lengthy, but should offer praise and commendation and reflect the life of the person who has died.

DRESS...

Wearing colorful clothing is no longer inappropriate for relatives and friends. Persons attending a funeral should be dressed in good taste so as to show dignity and respect for the family and the occasion.

FUNERAL PROCESSION / CORTEGE...

When the funeral ceremony and the burial are both held within the local area, friends and relatives might accompany the family to the cemetery. The procession is formed at the funeral home or place of worship. The funeral director can advise you of the traffic regulations and procedures to follow while driving in a funeral procession.

CONDOLENCES

The time of death is a very confusing time for family members. No matter what your means of expressing your sympathy, it is important to clearly identify yourself to the family.

FLOWERS...

Sending a floral tribute is a very appropriate way of expressing sympathy to the family of the deceased. Flowers express a feeling of life and beauty and offer much comfort to the family. A floral tribute can either be sent to the funeral home or the residence. If sent to the residence, usually a planter or a small vase of flowers indicating a person's continued sympathy for the family is suggested. The florist places an identification card on the floral tribute. At the funeral home the cards are removed from the floral tributes and given to the family so they may acknowledge the tributes sent.

MASS CARDS...

Mass cards can be sent either by Catholic or non-Catholic friends. The offering of prayers is a valued expression of sympathy to a Catholic family. A card indicating that a Mass for the deceased has been arranged may be obtained from any Catholic parish. In some areas it is possible to obtain Mass cards at the funeral home. The Mass offering card or envelope is given to the family as an indication of understanding, faith and compassion. Make sure that your name and address is legible and that you list your postal code. This will make it easier for the family to acknowledge your gift.

MEMORIAL DONATIONS...

A memorial contribution, to a specific cause or charity, can be appreciated as flowers. A large number of memorial funds are available, however the family may have expressed a preference. Memorial donations provide financial support for various projects. If recognized as a charitable institution, some gifts may be deductible for tax purposes. Your funeral director is familiar with them and can explain each option, as well as furnish the donor with "In Memoriam" cards, which are given to the family.

SYMPATHY CARDS...

Sending a card of sympathy, even if you are only an acquaintance, is appropriate. It means so much to the family members to know they are in good thoughts. The card should be in good taste and in keeping with your relationship to the family of the deceased.

PERSONAL NOTE...

A personal note of sympathy is very meaningful. Express yourself openly and sincerely. An expression such as "I'm sorry to learn of your personal loss" is welcomed by the family and can be kept with other messages.

TELEPHONE CALL...

Speaking to a family member gives you an opportunity to offer your services and make them feel you really care. If they wish to discuss their recent loss, don't hesitate to talk to the person about the deceased. Be a good listener. Sending a telegram expressing your sympathy is also appropriate.

VISITATION...

Your presence at the visitation demonstrates that although someone has died, friends still remain. Your presence is an eloquent statement that you care.

Visitation provides a time and place for friends to offer their expression of sorrow and sympathy, rather than awkwardly approaching the subject at the office, supermarket or social activities. The obituary/death notice will designate the hours of visitation when the family will be present and will also designate the times when special services such as lodge services or prayer services may be held. Persons may call at the funeral home at any time during suggested hours of the day or evening to pay respects, even though the family is not present. Friends and relatives are requested to sign the register book. A person's full name should be listed e.g. "Mrs. John Doe". If the person is a business associate, it is proper to list their affiliation, as the family may not be familiar with their relationship to the deceased.

Friends should use their own judgment on how long they should remain at the funeral home or place of visitation. If they feel their presence is needed, they should offer to stay.

When the funeral service is over, the survivors often feel very alone in dealing with their feelings. It is important that they know you are still there. Keep in touch.

SYMPATHY EXPRESSIONS...

When a person calls at the funeral home, clasping hands, an embrace, or a simple statement of condolence can express sympathy, such as:

"I'm sorry."
"My sympathy to you."
"It was good to know John."
"John was a fine person and a friend of mine. He will be missed."
"My sympathy to your mother."

The family member in return may say:

"Thanks for coming."
"John talked about you often."
"I didn't realize so many people cared."
"Come see me when you can."

Encourage the bereaved to express their feelings and thoughts, but don't overwhelm them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS...

The family should acknowledge the flowers and messages sent by relatives and friends. When food and personal services are donated, these thoughtful acts also should be acknowledged, as should the services of the pallbearers. The funeral director may have available printed acknowledgement cards that can be used by the family. When the sender is well known to the family, a short personal note should be written on the acknowledgement card expressing appreciation for a contribution or personal service received. The note can be short, such as:

"Thank you for the beautiful roses. The arrangement was lovely."
"The food you sent was so enjoyed by our family. Your kindness is deeply appreciated."

In some communities it is a practice to insert a public thank you in the newspaper. The funeral director can assist you with this.

CHILDREN AT FUNERALS

At a very early age, children have an awareness of and a response to death. Children should be given the option to attend visitation and the funeral service. The funeral director can advise you on how to assist children at the time of a funeral and can provide you with additional information and literature.

GRIEF RECOVERY

It is healthy to recognize death and discuss it realistically with friends and relatives. When a person dies, there is grief that needs to be shared. Expressions of sympathy and the offering of yourself to help others following the funeral are welcomed. It is important that we share our grief with one another. Your local funeral director can help family and friends locate available resources and grief recovery programs in your area.