



Rituals to Comfort Families

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The death of a family member may be one of the most significant experiences of your life. Witnessing the end of someone's life is extraordinary and possibly life-changing, no matter what the relationship has been. Rituals are one way to mark the end of life with the kind of special attention that death seems to deserve.

When we think of rituals, we tend to think of religious rituals. Rituals from a faith tradition can and do play an important role at the end of life, but ordinary acts of caring are also rituals, providing spiritual depth and meaning.

You may find that rituals can be a source of comfort for you, your family and the one who is dying.

Rituals when death is near

Simple acts of caring are rituals. In difficult times, these ritualistic acts may take on extra significance. They can become ways of ordering and calming the feelings that arise; they provide a way to express the love you may hold for the person who is dying. You might consider these:

- sitting with the dying person while gentle music plays in the background;
- quietly humming or singing a song;
- reading a favourite story, scripture or poem;
- reading cards or notes sent by friends, colleagues or neighbours;
- holding or stroking the person's hand or arm;
- brushing the person's hair or wiping the person's face;
- giving mouth care or giving small sips of water or ice chips (with guidance from the health care team);
- rubbing the person's feet or legs;
- reminding the person that he or she is loved and will be remembered;
- thanking the person for the ways he or she has touched your life.

Such activities are comforting not only for the person who is dying, but also for family members. They calm the feelings of helplessness and uselessness that arise as the person grows weaker and perhaps less alert. They provide avenues for you and your family to express what the person means to you.

See also: [Providing Care](#) and [When Death is Near](#)

Remember also to include rituals of self-care in this intense time of concern and caregiving. For example:

- Take breaks to exercise, relax, sleep and eat.
- Make times for reflecting on what you are experiencing. Write journal notes if this helps you to express your feelings.
- Remember any spiritual practices that are normally part of your life.
- Keep in contact with concerned family members or friends.

See also: [Caring for Yourself](#)

If you belong to a spiritual tradition, you will be able to find rituals in the tradition that highlight the spiritual significance of your experience and offer comfort to you and to the person who is dying. For

spiritual significance of your experience and offer comfort to you and to the person who is dying. For assistance in arranging for such rituals, contact your spiritual leader or a spiritual care provider on the health care team.

You cannot prevent death's arrival. However, you can nourish yourself physically, spiritually and socially so that you have the stamina you need to cope with its impact.

Rituals at the time of death

The moments before and after death are full of feeling and sometimes wonder. No matter what you believe about an afterlife, you may have a sense of the person slipping from one world to another. These moments may feel sacred.

If your family is religious, you may want to acknowledge this sense of sacredness with a prayer. You may want your spiritual leader or a spiritual care provider from the health care team to be with you during prayer and to commend the one who has just died to the care of a higher entity. Such a ritual can comfort you through a sense that you are cared for as you suffer this loss.

If your religious or cultural tradition has certain prescribed rituals that must be followed after death, you will need to make sure that the health care team knows about them and is prepared to support you in doing them. Making arrangements for these rituals prior to the death can be a great comfort to you and your family when death occurs.

Whether you are religious or not, there is no need to rush following the death of a family member. Some family members who were not present for the death may want to join those of you who were. The minutes and hours immediately following the death are a time for:

- openly grieving;
- saying final goodbyes to the one who has died;
- providing support to each other;
- arranging for the care of the body;
- planning for a funeral or memorial service.

It takes time to attend to these agendas and they sometimes compete with each other. They are the rituals of grief and there can be comfort in observing them.

There is no one right way for you as family to act in the room of a person who just died. You may find that you spontaneously begin to reminisce together about times you have shared with the one who has died. The sharing of memories may bring more tears, but they may also cause laughter. This is the beginning of memorializing the person.

Your family may want a fair bit of privacy during this time. On the other hand, you may appreciate support from health care providers, neighbours or members of the extended family. Some family members may need special attention. Maybe they have been overwhelmed by a series of losses or maybe they have mental health problems. Try to be aware of what your needs are in this special, yet sometimes confusing, time. Check with other family members about their needs. If conflicting needs arise, you may want to get help from a member of the health care team.

Rituals after death

Through the ages funeral ceremonies have helped families and communities to mourn a person's death. They provide a public way for people to:

- acknowledge a death and express their grief;
- remember and honour the person who has died;
- ponder the meaning of death and affirm religious beliefs or a philosophy of life;
- provide a community of support for those most affected by the death.

The terms 'funeral' and 'memorial service' are often used to refer to the public ceremony for mourning a death. The ceremony usually reflects the family's spiritual or cultural tradition and local customs. Your spiritual leader, a funeral home, or a spiritual care provider from the patient's health care team can be helpful in arranging a ritual that suits your family.

See also: [Planning a Funeral](#)

As a family, you will likely want to consider the location, the style and leadership, and the timing of the funeral or memorial service.

Place

The following questions may be helpful to you in choosing a place for a funeral or memorial service:

- Who do you hope will attend? Are they people from the neighbourhood in which your family member died, or from some other area?
- What place would reflect who your family member was?
- What kind of ritual do you want? Does the setting suit it?
- Who do you want to lead the ritual? Is the person willing to do it in the setting you choose?
- How much responsibility do you want to take for planning and leading the ritual? Do you need a setting in which others will take primary responsibility for this (for example, a place of worship or a funeral home)? Or do you want a place that will give you a lot of freedom to create a very personalized ritual (for example, an outdoor setting, a community centre or a family residence)?
- How important is the music for the ritual? Can you arrange for the music you want in this setting?
- What are the costs associated with using this setting?
- Is this a setting in which those who gather can comfort each other, celebrate the person's life in a fitting way, and experience a sense of community?

In some cultural or religious traditions, the place of worship is the usual place for a funeral. Often the funeral service has two parts – one at the place of worship, and the other at the cemetery or crematorium, with a procession connecting the two. Today, many people, both religious and non-religious, choose to have their funeral or memorial service in a funeral home. Sometimes the entire service occurs at the place of burial. Others plan for ceremonies that are in a home, a long-term care centre where the person lived, or outdoors.

Style and Leadership

The ritual can be as formal or informal as you wish. You may wish to have a memorial service or funeral that is in keeping with established traditions. In this case you can contact a spiritual leader from the deceased person's tradition or from your own tradition. On the other hand, you may ask a spiritual care provider who has supported you and the dying person before death to help you organize and lead the service. If you do not know a spiritual leader, contact a funeral home for help.

Spiritual leaders will usually use formats for funerals approved by their religious tradition. Discuss with the spiritual leader or spiritual care provider how best to include any suggestion you have for the service. Share memories of your family member that are important to you and ways that you hope this person's life will be celebrated in the service. If possible, write a brief description of how your family remembers the person who died and arrange with the leader for a family member or friend to read this. Usually families and friends find services that include honest and loving references to the life of the deceased most meaningful.

There is no right or wrong way to handle a death ceremony. You can fashion a ritual of remembrance in non-traditional ways that are meaningful to you. If you or your family is taking primary responsibility for planning and leading, you may want to include some or all of the following:

- words that speak to the reality and emotions of the event;
- personal tributes in words, pictures, videos or music;
- simple actions like lighting candles or placing a flower in a bouquet;
- playing or singing music the deceased person enjoyed;
- readings that speak to deep emotions and affirm life in the midst of loss and death;
- fellowship with refreshments.

Timing

Your cultural or religious tradition or the customs of your community may dictate when the funeral or memorial service will occur. In many communities, there is an expectation that it will happen within several days of the death. This opportunity for public mourning soon after the death seems helpful for healthy grieving. However, depending on circumstances, a memorial ritual can take place weeks or months after death, and become an important step for family and friends in their ongoing grieving.

When cremation occurs after the death, families often choose to place or scatter the ashes at a later date. The placement or scattering of the ashes, which often is done in a smaller, intimate circle of family or friends, can provide fresh opportunities for remembering the person and supporting each other. When ashes are buried or placed in a niche, you will need to make arrangements with a cemetery, memorial garden or mausoleum. However, you may choose instead to scatter the ashes in a location that held special meaning for the deceased.

Rituals after a death in the home

Many Canadians choose to die at home. When this is possible, the families and friends who provide care and support usually carry satisfying memories of this intimate time. However, sometimes this extraordinary experience of death and dying in the home can make a return to the normal activities of daily living difficult. If you are experiencing this difficulty, a ritual in the home that marks your loss and provides a transition to life without the person in that space can be helpful.

The ritual could take the form of a brief service of remembrance and dedication. Three elements are important in such a ritual.

Opportunity to remember and give thanks for the person who died

Those who gather can share favourite memories of the person who died and of caring for him or her during the illness. Having pictures or mementoes of the person visible can be helpful in getting this started. Whether your reminiscing brings laughter or tears, it is likely to create a spirit of thanksgiving for what you have shared with the person. This celebration of the life of the one who died does not replace or duplicate a funeral or memorial service with the wider community. Rather it allows those closest to the person to take another step in their grieving in a more informal and intimate setting.

Release of the person into the care of a higher entity, or to the wider expanses of the universe

The task of those who have provided care for the person in the home is now complete. Although you may not feel ready for them, you may have to return to other responsibilities and opportunities. You may feel that to return to the normal activities of life is a betrayal of your relationship with the one who died. Entrusting him or her to the care of a higher entity or to the wider expanses of the universe can be a way to express your ongoing concern for the person. You could do this act of entrusting by:

- offering a prayer (informal or formal, silently or aloud, by all repeating a familiar prayer or by one person leading);
- a reading;
- sharing your wishes or hopes for the person in death.

Dedication of the room in which the person died for use by others

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The spaces occupied by the deceased person will bear strong reminders of him or her. You may feel that these spaces are sacred because of what you shared in them. You may find it hard to imagine them without the one who died. However, you and your family or friends need to fill these spaces with new life. You can prepare yourself for this by dedicating the spaces to the safety, welcome and well-being of all who enter and leave them. You could consider using one or more of the following for this act of dedication:

- a prayer of dedication;
- singing or listening to a piece of music that conveys the kind of spirit you hope will fill this space or home;
- a symbolic action that affirms the space as welcoming and comfortable. For example:
 - marking a doorpost with oil (a traditional sign of blessing);
 - lighting a candle or burning incense (traditional ways of acknowledging sacred space);
 - hanging a piece of origami or a sun catcher;
 - sprinkling salt or water (traditional signs of cleansing and healing);
 - placing a plant, picture, painting, sculpture or religious artifact in the space.

A ritual like this can help you in your grieving by honouring the deceased person and the spaces where the deceased person lived and died. It can encourage those who will continue to live in these spaces without him or her. Even if the patient died in a hospital or hospice, you may feel a need for such a ritual as you try to cope with the empty spaces left in your home after death.

Staff in nursing homes can also use such a ritual to help both staff and residents grieve the death of a resident. A ritual adapted for this setting can provide a meaningful way to mark one resident's death and to prepare for the arrival of another.

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Human beings need ritual to express the meaning we find in life. Rituals give a rhythm to life, create a sense of order, connect us to those who have come before us and to those who will come after us, point to the wonder, joy and sorrow we experience in living, and speak to the questions that sometimes disturb us. Rituals are especially important in times of distress – those times when life seems out of control or out of kilter. Dying and death are such times. In the face of them, we need ritual.

Sometimes we assume that only those with special education or character can create or lead rituals. In times of distress, many of us look to those who know the rituals that have sustained people through the ages for guidance and leadership. However, anybody who knows the power of the human heart and the creativity of the human mind can create a ritual to strengthen and comfort.

For more information about caregiving when death is near and after a death has occurred, see the Caregiving Module Series and other available resources at [CaregiversCAN](https://www.caregiverscan.ca).

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