



## Wakes, Funerals, and Celebrations of Life: After the Pandemic

As we adjust to the pandemic, celebrations and rituals are changing, including graduations, senior proms, and weddings. As difficult as it is to see those celebrations change, nothing is so profound as the rituals of death and dying.

It is very unsettling to realize that we can't say goodbye to a loved one, either in person at a bedside or later in a funeral ritual. On-line Shivas have replaced casual drop in times. Family and friends are Face Timing from a gravesite when attendees are limited. How will other rituals change and what will that do to our grieving?

In every way, the grieving process is being interrupted. When someone is departing this world, we want to physically hold them and be held. We want to connect with people who knew the deceased and hold them as well. We want to share meals, drinks, tears and laughter while we recall and re-tell stories about our shared loved one or friend. We want to lean on clergy, funeral directors, and pall bearers while we go through the process, as we have all of our lives. How can we do this on-line? If we cry alone in front of a computer, will it help us to heal? No one has answers yet because we are just now identifying the questions.

Funeral homes and crematoriums have adjusted to new COVID-19 regulations governing everything from face masks, to meeting with families to how to handle bodies. If services are not delayed, attendee numbers are limited and may be live streamed to others. Formal military burials are limited to a handful of people while others observe over Facetime. Ancient traditions such as throwing dirt on top of caskets are being replaced by a new "bring your own shovel" rule. Graves may be filled in before mourners arrive. It may be the USPS worker who passes you the boxed remains and says "I'm sorry for your loss."

In these days, calling hours and services are mostly electronic. Funeral homes are mailing out programs and cards instead of handing them out at a service. Kneelers have been removed in funeral homes while on-line guest books are gaining popularity. There are fewer flowers decorating the funeral home or the casket because the flower shops are closed.

Rituals of death help to structure the grief process. The new normal calls for new ways to comfort ourselves during times of loss. The only choices we may have to get comfort is to create new rituals to get us through these times. Social distancing does not have to equal emotional distancing.

Those who are bereaved need comfort from each other. In lieu of a healing hug, extra effort needs to be made to reach out by phone, Zoom, email and text. Families can record their stories and share them with others. Services can take place with live streaming,

while people keep their distance. Shivas can go on all week, with people from afar dropping in and out of Zoom meetings.

Psychologists know that grief takes time and usually begins with a good-bye and the honoring of the deceased. From there, people take a variety of unpredictable paths to mourn a loved one. These private journeys often involve the interaction with a community of people who also mourn the deceased and the pandemic makes that harder to do.

All that said, there may be a silver lining to the disruption of our rituals.

- More of us will have video and/or audio remembrances that we can re-visit long after our initial grief process.
- Since grieving usually takes a roller coaster path, re-visiting remembrances can be a perfect way to pause and do a little grief work at a time.
- Since most burials will be replaced with cremation, there will be less emphasis on the body and more on our memories.
- Because of technology, we will have a far wider range of people participating and glimpses into someone's life.
- We will most likely take more responsibility for planning and orchestrating a personalized remembrance, rather than relying on funeral directors or clergy.
- When we need assistance, we will have greater access to on-line grief groups and access to tele-health counseling.
- Social media will gain importance as a way to honor the dead.
- With more work-at-home options, we will have more time to grieve without having to return to work after 3 days and face our co-workers.

Silver linings aside, grief is painful and takes a long time, usually years to get through. Until we settle on new traditions, the old ones will be missed and mourners will need more support. Your employee assistance program (EAP) will be a good resource for planning out your journey and getting good referrals. Fortunately, you can now access your EAP counseling through chat, video, and phone.