



Guide to

First Steps After a Death

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What to Do Now

After losing a loved one, it's natural to feel overwhelmed. A clear plan for the next steps can provide steadiness during this emotional time. Here are a few actions to consider.

If Death Occurs in a Hospital, Nursing Home, or Hospice Facility:

- The facility's medical staff will typically handle the pronouncement of death.
- The staff will handle the required paperwork, which generally includes the death certificate. However, this may vary depending on the doctor, facility, or state laws, in which case they will provide guidance on next steps.
- If you have funeral plans already in place, give the medical staff the name and phone number of your chosen funeral provider.
- If no arrangements are in place, ask about the process for releasing your loved one to the funeral or cremation provider and discuss any plans for organ donation, if applicable.

If Death Occurs at Home Under Hospice Care:

- The attending hospice nurse can legally pronounce death.
- Hospice staff will guide you through contacting a funeral provider and handling necessary paperwork.
- The hospice team will also assist with any directives regarding organ donation.

If Death Occurs Unexpectedly at Home or Elsewhere:

- Call 911. Emergency services will assess the situation and pronounce death if needed.
- If the death is unexpected, police may get involved to rule out foul play and document the case. The body may be taken to the coroner or medical examiner.
- Once death is pronounced, discuss body transport with authorities. Inform responders immediately if organ donation is desired.
- If the deceased was under medical care, contact their primary doctor. In some cases, the doctor may be able to pronounce death.

Honoring the Moment and Navigating Goodbye

In the quiet moments after a loss, emotions can be overwhelming. Here, you'll find gentle guidance to help you navigate the first steps, allowing space for both practical needs and personal reflection.

Saying Goodbye

Before the transfer attendants gently transport your loved one, take a moment to say goodbye in a way that feels meaningful to you. Whether it's a word, a touch, a prayer, or a moment of silence, this small gesture can provide a sense of closure in the midst of your loss.

Even in difficult or unexpected circumstances, pausing for this brief goodbye allows you to honor your loved one and begin the emotional journey of grief. It doesn't take long but can be a comforting step in the process of saying farewell.

Coordinating Care and Notifications

Ensure that children, pets, and loved ones are taken care of, and begin reaching out to family, friends, and support networks to share the necessary news. If this feels too overwhelming to you, find a trusted friend or relative to help.

- **Arrange Care for Dependents:** Ensure children and pets are with trusted family or friends.
- **Notify Family and Friends:** Start with the closest relationships and ask for help with notifying others. You can ask them to start a "phone tree" to ensure everyone who should know receives a call.
- **Establish Immediate Support Networks:** Reach out to chaplains, community support groups, and close friends for emotional support.

What to Expect in the First Days After a Passing

Key Tasks for the First Week

- **Plan the End-of-Life Service:** The funeral is an opportunity for loved ones to honor and remember the deceased, so consider their wishes along with those of close family and friends. If there are prearranged plans, follow them, or work with a trusted provider to create a meaningful service that reflects what you think your loved one would have wanted.
- **Secure the Deceased's Property:** Make sure the deceased's home, vehicles, and valuables are safely locked, monitored, and protected from theft or damage.
- **Write and Share the Obituary:** Collaborate with your funeral provider or trusted person to write and share the obituary.
- **Notify Employers and Organizations:** Contact the deceased's employer, volunteer groups, and any organizations they were actively involved with to inform them of the passing and to understand any necessary next steps regarding benefits, final pay, or ongoing commitments.
- **Seek Legal and Financial Guidance:** Consult an attorney to review wills, trusts, and estate plans, and understand the legal steps like probate and asset distribution. A financial advisor can assist with managing accounts, benefits, and other financial matters.
- **Explore Financial Assistance Options:** If needed, ask a family member to help set up a fundraising page to cover immediate costs. Additionally, speak with your funeral provider about any payment plan options that may be available to ease financial strain.
- **Ask for Household Help:** Ask a friend or family member to assist with meals or household tasks—they'll likely want to help. There are many apps and websites available to make organizing support easier.

The Weeks Ahead

Tasks for Weeks 2-3

- **Request Death Certificates:** You'll need multiple copies to close bank accounts and other transactions. The funeral home can assist, or you can request them from the county records office. It may take several weeks to receive them, as the timeline depends on how busy the government office is
- **Contact Financial and Public Institutions:** Notify Social Security (if your funeral home has not done so), banks, insurance companies, the Department of Veteran Affairs (if applicable), and other relevant organizations of the death.
- **Adjust or Cancel Services:** Manage utilities, subscriptions, social media, and other services as needed.

Ongoing and Long-Term Considerations

- **Determine Future of Property:** If your loved one owned their home and did not list a beneficiary, discuss with other decision-makers whether to sell or rent it. Likewise, determine what to do with their car, boat, and other real properties.
- **File Their Last Tax Return:** Talk to a tax professional about filing the deceased's final federal and state (if applicable) tax return.
- **Complete the Probate Process:** Probating the will or determining assets and debts may take several weeks or months for the court to complete. Debts are paid from the estate before beneficiaries may receive an inheritance, if applicable.
- **Explore Memorialization Options:** There are many ways to remember a loved one. Whether you donate to a charity they support or buy or make something to honor them, honoring their memory can be an essential part of the healing process.
- **Find More Support:** If you find that grief is overwhelming, consider reaching out to an experienced therapist or counselor in your community for professional guidance.



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