

Counseling Solutions at St. Matthew's Institute for Healing & Intentional Growth

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Learn to be Your Best

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Funeral Etiquette

Funerals are difficult on everyone. You're not always sure what to say and how to act, especially when you might not have been close to the deceased. When a co-worker or someone close to a co-worker passes on, you might want to express your sorrow for their loss, but you want to follow proper etiquette to remain respectful.

Cell phones etc. should be shut off at all times and no photos or recordings should be made.

Sympathy Cards and Flowers

- Whether you attend the funeral or not, a sympathy card can offer the bereaved your condolences. Purchase a blank card or one with a respectful poem or short piece of prose. You can also make your own with fine stationery. But if you didn't know the person well, keep your message short. Use phrases like, "With deepest sympathy," "Please accept my condolences," or "Our thoughts and prayers are with you." Sign your first and last name after the simple line.

It is also appropriate to send sympathy flowers or plants to the funeral home and most churches. If you're unsure, you can call the location before sending flowers.

Attire

- Funeral dress codes are not as strict as they once were, but the more conservative the better. You don't have to wear a black dress with a veil or a black suit, but do wear subdued or darker hues. Avoid wearing t-shirts, shorts, or sneakers. If you plan on bringing your children, the same rules apply. Think twice before you bring children. If your company has a strict dress code, adhere to the policy. You will be representing the company with your presence.

Black is Always in

- Black is the standard color for funeral clothing. Women can wear a black dress or black skirt with a dark or neutral color top. Other colors are acceptable for funerals, such as navy blue or charcoal gray. Women's clothing should be subdued and not accented with bright or bold details. Sequins, sheer clothing and beading should be avoided. Your shoes should complement your outfit and should be comfortable. Sky-high stiletto heels aren't conservative or modest. Instead, choose low-heeled shoes or flats in a dark, neutral color.

When Pants are Appropriate

- Some women prefer wearing pants. This may be acceptable, depending on the funeral venue. Some houses of worship frown on women wearing pants, so you may need to check with clergy or religious personnel first. If you choose to wear pants or a pantsuit to a funeral, keep it black or navy blue. Your shirt should be neutral or dark. Again, your shoes should be complementary without being ostentatious.

Consider the Overall Style

- When attending a funeral that's in a place of worship, women should wear something that keeps their shoulders covered as a sign of respect. Your dress or pants should be modest and show respect for the deceased as well as the venue. Choosing conservative styles is the best way to be respectful.

Hats and Head Coverings

- Depending on where the funeral is held, women may be required or strongly advised to wear hats, veils or other head coverings. This custom is based on the religion or ethnic group of the deceased. Many houses of worship allow women to wear hats inside. If you're unsure if a head covering is necessary, carry along a dark scarf in case you need it.

What to Say

- It is perfectly acceptable to approach the family and express your sympathy for their loss. You can share one of your memories of the deceased. It could be related to work or something outside the office, but keep it brief and respectful. Most times it's not appropriate to ask how the person died.

If you knew the deceased but not the family, you should introduce yourself. Tell them your name and how you knew the person who died. If there is a viewing and you feel comfortable, approach the casket where you can offer a prayer or short meditation. You may be escorted by a family member or other designee, or you may be expected to approach on your own.

How Long to Stay

- The length of time is at your discretion. If you have to get back to the office, 15 minutes can be enough to offer your condolences. After visiting with the family and the deceased, it is appropriate to converse with others, such as fellow employees. But keep conversations discreet and respectful. Normally the family or funeral home will set out a register for visitors to sign. Write your first and last name. After the service, the family might ask guests to join them at their home or another location for food. Ask other co-workers if they will be attending and follow their lead.

What else should I know?

What is a visitation?

A formal visitation provides a time and place for you to offer the family your expression of sorrow and sympathy. Visitation is typically held at the funeral home, and the deceased is typically present so that you can pay your last respects.

How do I know when visitation hours are?

It may be listed in the newspaper obituary, or you may call the funeral home holding the visitation. It is appropriate to visit any time during the established visiting hours. If prayer services are to be held, it is important to be prompt.

What other expressions of sympathy are appropriate?

Notes, cards and e-mails to the family are always appreciated, especially if you were unable to attend the funeral.

If the deceased was Catholic, a mass card or arranging for a mass to be said for the deceased is also appropriate. The Mass offering card or envelope is available from any Catholic parish.

What is the difference between a Memorial Service and a Funeral Service?

A memorial service is a service without the deceased present. The deceased is present at a funeral service. The same rules of etiquette apply.

Should children attend the visitation and funeral?

Children who were intimate with the deceased should be given the option to attend visitation and the funeral service. Think twice before you bring your children.

What do I do when I arrive at the funeral/memorial service?

When you arrive, quietly take a seat if the service is being held in a church or chapel. The first few rows are usually reserved for the immediate family and the casket bearers. There may be an opportunity during the service for you to share some words about the deceased. If the ceremony is being held at the interment site, seating is usually only available for the immediate family

Funeral Gift Etiquette

When you are notified that someone has passed away, it's natural to want to give a gift to the deceased's family in their time of grief, but make sure you follow proper funeral gift etiquette. You can present a variety of gifts to the grieving family that will ease their suffering and send the message that your thoughts are with them in their time of hardship.

Flowers: The most common funeral gift is flowers, but, before you send any, find out if there are certain conditions for funeral flowers depending on the religious affiliation of the deceased

Food: Perhaps the most welcome gift during a time of mourning is that of food. Whether you have meals delivered or drop by with a casserole, the message is that you are considerate of the family's loss. However, be sensitive about intruding on the family's time when delivering the gift. A brief visit of about 15 minutes is appropriate to deliver the food and express condolences. Funeral gift etiquette for food is to offer meals that require little preparation, such as a gift card for takeout food or an entrée that just needs to be heated up. If you think that many people will bring food, you might want to go with the gift card in case the family winds up with more than they can eat.

Gifts to Charity: Memorial gifts are a popular tradition that allows money that would normally be spent on expensive floral arrangements to be designated for a specific organization, charity or event. Generally, the family will announce a preferred charity in the funeral announcement and request donations in lieu of flowers. Don't breach funeral gift etiquette by sending flowers if the family has specifically asked not to. If you choose to make a charitable donation, be sure to supply the organization with the family name and address so they can send notification of the donation. These notifications usually don't reveal the amount of the donation just that it was made by you on behalf of the deceased.

After the Funeral: Funeral gift etiquette also allows friends and family members to send gifts in the days and years following a funeral. A sincere card or memento on the anniversary of the funeral sends the message that you care about family members and remember their loss. Even following up with family members a few weeks after the funeral with a meal or a potted plant can have a big impact on the grieving heart.

While funeral gift etiquette recommends that family members send thank you cards for any gifts or services received during a time of mourning, don't be offended if you don't receive one at all or if it arrives several weeks or months after the funeral. When someone is dealing with grief, time can slip by quickly.

Some other questions

Religious Belief - is it appropriate to attend if I am not of the same religious belief?

Funeral service etiquette is not about your personal belief, it is a time when friends and family come together to lay a loved one to rest. Funeral services differ depending upon the religion and personal beliefs of the family.

The funeral service can be held at a church, temple, funeral home, or even the residence. No matter where the funeral service is held, dress appropriately, enter quietly and be seated. The first few rows are usually reserved for family members.

If the service is held in a church or temple not of your religion, just follow what the family is doing if you wish to participate

Protestant funerals

Protestants are members of any of a large number of non-Catholic Christian denominations, including Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Baptist, among others. Protestant funerals may incorporate a variety of customs according to the wishes of the deceased and the family. The funeral is held at a funeral home or at a church, typically within three days following the death. Appropriate expressions of sympathy include writing a note of condolence, attending the viewing of the body or the funeral itself, sending flowers, making a donation to the church or a favorite charity of the deceased, or bringing food to the family's home. Funeral guests should dress in a respectable manner, although black clothing is no longer considered essential.

Roman Catholic funerals

Most Catholic funerals include a wake, a funeral service, and prayers at the graveside where the body will be laid to rest. On the day of burial, a brief funeral service may be held at the funeral home, or the body may be transported to the church, where a Mass known as the Rite of Christian Burial is offered. At both the wake and the funeral, non-Catholics are welcome to participate or to sit and witness the ceremonies silently; only Catholics are invited to receive communion at Mass, however.

Floral arrangements sent to the funeral home or to the family's residence and donations for Masses to be offered in memory of the deceased are fitting expressions of condolence at a Catholic funeral.

This material was taken and edited from various sources.