Death: Help for Survivors

Contents:
- Spiritual: queries, how to help the bereaved, resources about grieving, spiritual resources, help from the Meeting, other resources
- Essential Practical Matters: disposition of the body (including cremation or burial), life-commemorating ceremonies, resources
- Property disposition: basic provisions for distribution, resources for probate or other issues (including lawyer referral services), computer passwords

Related form: Checklist for Survivors When Death Occurs (in pocket)

This is the third of the three documents in Langley Hill Friends Meeting’s Decline and Death packet. The first document was about planning for decline and death, and the second was about meeting the challenges during a decline in capacities leading to death. This document is aimed at helping the loved ones of a person who has died to meet the spiritual, physical, mental and property-related challenges due to the death. As with the other documents, this one is available online at www.quaker.org/langleyhill/, and additional resources about recovery from a death, marked in this document with an asterisk (°), are available in Langley Hill’s library for consultation.

Everyone who survives the death of a loved one faces a sense of loss, of a gap in his or her life because the dead person is no longer there. The advice and resources offered here can help to mitigate that sense of loss, but not eliminate it. In the pocket following this document is a check-list for survivors, starting at the moment of death.

Additional challenges arise when death is sudden and unanticipated, especially when the death comes from violence, suicide, or accident. Death of a young person also raises additional challenges. In these situations one may feel guilt or anger as well as grief, for which professional counseling may be appropriate, supported by the acceptance and comfort of friends and family, including those in the Meeting.

1. Spiritual:
   a. Queries on Recovering from Another's Decline or Death

§ How shall I honor the life of someone I love? How can I live best with the consequences of the rough edges of my relationship with the person who died? How am I going to remember him or her? What will I cherish about the spirit of that person? Can I picture the essential goodness of the person? Can I accept the features of that life with which I disagreed?
Anyone who depended emotionally on someone who died will grieve. Grief can take months or years to subside, and it may last longer if suppressed. Can I allow myself to vent my grief? How, and with whom? Whom shall I call upon to help me to survive and emerge from the depressing times ahead? How can I help others who are going through this same process with me? Is professional counseling needed?

How can I arrange my life to give myself timely opportunities to work through my grief? How do I accept that others may need a different amount of time, or different conditions to work through their grief? How can I get others to understand my grieving needs, and how can I learn to understand theirs? How can I make asking for help more comfortable, after others appear to have resumed their normal lives?

How shall I help myself and others live with the loss of someone very close?

Whom can I ask to help fill the gaps left by the loss? In practical matters? In spiritual guidance? In being with me and with others affected by the loss? What can I take on myself?

Is my support for someone who grieves confined to conventional comforting? How can I persist in my support for someone whose grief does not subside for an extended period of time, or whose grief returns? How can I communicate a real willingness to be available for help, or sympathy when I feel I cannot help?

How can I best be supportive if I feel I can’t or won’t take on much of the responsibility to help another work through grief?

b. How to Help the Bereaved After a Loved One’s Death

People who have suffered a death of someone close to them need support. Such comforting often includes help with the immediate care of family and planning for the funeral or memorial service, as well as a spiritual or psychological dimension. After religious services, the bereaved continue to need to feel loved by listening, caring friends. Then they can better work through the grieving process.

Immediate help may be in the form of food for the family and offers to take children for a visit or to a movie. An important service is for someone to answer the telephone and to call others who need to be notified, to accompany the bereaved to a funeral home, or to house-sit during absences for the memorial service.

The presence of a caring friend is most important. If you want to say something, the simplest expression is best: "I am sorry." DO NOT say "I know how you feel." or "It is God’s will."
Become a listener. If the bereaved person finds it difficult to talk, you may ask very careful and gentle questions, starting perhaps with less important details of the memorial service.

If the person asks "Why?" you do not have to answer. No one knows the answer to this question.
Be reassuring: "It's good to cry. Crying is healing."

Familiarize yourself with the various stages of grief so you can help your friend to know what to expect.

Another later approach can be "Many people normally feel anger mixed with grief at this time. This is not bad. You need to understand it."

Make it clear that you accept whatever your friend says or feels. Be prepared to recommend against the inappropriate use of alcohol or other drugs, which only mask and postpone emotional pain.

If thoughts of suicide are expressed, do not show shock or rejection. Suggest counseling or support groups where one can get sympathetic support and understanding.

Suggest postponing moving or other major decisions, and encourage exercise that helps with relaxation and sleep.

Remember that grief can last for years, and that thoughtful notes, calls, invitations and little gifts will be very welcome until it lets up. All too often there is an abundance of help right after a death, but it tapers off very quickly and the resulting feelings of abandonment are intensified.

c. **Resources about grieving:**


*Fuller, Dorothy Mason, 1971, *Light in Hours of Darkness*, New York & Nashville: Abingdon Press, 80 pp. *This anthology provides passages of comfort for the grief-stricken. E.g., "Death is but Crossing the World, as Friends do the Seas; They live in one another, still." William Penn:*

preparation, and emotional sensitivity. "Grieving is a growth process." They give specific steps, to be explored with a partner, to get beyond debilitating grief.


[http://www.griefsupportservices.org/newgrief/index.php](http://www.griefsupportservices.org/newgrief/index.php), National Grief Support Services, offers a variety of services and publications to help those who are grieving.

The Compassionate Friends, P.O. Box 3696, Oak Brook, IL 60521; [www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org), provides peer support for bereaved parents.

International Theos Foundation, 322 Boulevard of the Allies, Suite 105, Pittsburgh, PA 15222, provides peer support for widowed persons and their families.

Widowed Persons, 1909 K. St., NW, Washington, DC 20049, provides peer support to widowed persons.

Crossings: Caring for Our Own At Death, P.O. Box 721, Silver Spring, MD 20918, (301) 593-5451, crossingcare@earthlink.net, [http://www.crossings.net/](http://www.crossings.net/). *This organization helps families at the time of death and afterwards, working to “integrate dying and after-death care back into our family and community life”, creating “opportunities for families to complement the loss and grief of death with healing and love”.*


Wendt Center for Grief and Loss, [http://wendtcenter.org](http://wendtcenter.org), 4201 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20008 | Tel 202.624.0010 | Fax 202.624.0062 *is perhaps the oldest and best-equipped center in the DC area for counseling people suffering grief from any cause, especially death.*

**d. Spiritual Resources following death:**

**i. Meeting Services**

The clerk of the Committee for Care and Clearness will contact the family concerning immediate needs. If requested, she or he will appoint one or more persons to assist the family with such matters as registering the death, notifying friends, notifying newspapers, banks, pensions, insurance companies, etc., answering the telephone, and helping the living to continue.

The Ministry and Worship Committee will work with the family and the Building Use Committee on planning a memorial service in line with the wishes of the family and the deceased. The Ministry and Worship Committee will help prepare a memorial minute in consultation with the family.
If requested, the Clerk of the Committee for Care and Clearness will appoint a clearness or support committee to meet with family members faced with difficult questions, such as grief or the logistical, practical and emotional problems of life without the person who died.

If the next of kin are stretched thin financially by the expenses of the last illness or of the burial or funeral expenses, or otherwise because of the death, they might approach the Care and Clearness committee for help from the Family Emergency Fund.

Related Resources:
* Langley Hill Friends Meeting. 1993. Visitor's Packet in Case of Death. This includes the Meeting's procedures following an attender's death, and advice to visitors to the family.

ii. Other Resources
* Child Center and Adult Services. Telling Children About Death. (Brochure)
* Lyman, Mary Ely, 1960, Death and the Christian Answer, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pamphlet No. 107, 16 pp. In the face of our society's general denial about death, hers is an appreciation of mortality, an explanation of Christ's holistic life-giving assurances based on faith and God's love. "...The Christian view of the human spirit makes growth in love the central and crucial principle of its life."


2. Essential Practical Matters
   The main practical problems that arise after a person’s death generally concern the disposition of the person’s body, the ceremonies and other observances to hold, and the distribution of the person’s property. All of these issues are more easily addressed when the person leaves detailed written or otherwise recorded indications of his or her wishes about these topics. Problems still can arise when one or more of the surviving family of the deceased person disagrees with the wishes as expressed.

   When survivors feel neglected by the deceased person in those wishes or by other survivors in making decisions about these issues, bitter disputes can arise. The Meeting’s Care and Clearness Committee can respond to requests for help in reaching amicable solutions to these disputes, but we cannot prevent them from festering when one or more parties is unwilling to consider the
others’ points of view. We can support those engaged in such disputes emotionally and spiritually, in the light of the life of the deceased person.

a. Disposition of the body: donation, cremation, burial
   
   If the deceased person is an organ donor or has left instructions giving his or her body for medical purposes, the designated organization should be notified as soon as possible after the death, as well as any funeral director or crematorium.

   Quaker practices may help in these decisions as they relate to Friends. Our Testimony of Simplicity would indicate that wakes, viewings, formal funerals and receptions, burial ceremonies, embalming, coffins, large tombstones, etc., are not common among Friends. The Funeral Consumer organizations described below as related resources can help survivors find suitable, relatively inexpensive arrangements to honor the decedent’s wishes and complete the cremation or burial process.

Related resources:
*Morgan, E., 1971 [14th Edition, 2010], Dealing Creatively with Death: A Manual of Simple Burial. Hinesburg, VT, Upper Access, Inc. 157 pp. This classic book goes into specifics about providing simple ceremonies and procedures following a loved one’s death to honor the life and cherish the memory, without undue cost or frills. Anatomical gifts are also discussed. (4 copies)


Funeral Consumers’ Alliance, Inc.; 33 Patchen Rd., S. Burlington, VT 05403; (802) 865-2626; fca@funerals.org; www.funerals.org; This organization offers through its local affiliates and website a large number and variety of very useful resources, including funeral price surveys, advice on what to ask for when seeking a simple burial or cremation, and other consumer rights relating to dealing with physical remains. Its local affiliates, which charge modest dues for membership and materials, include:

   Memorial Society of Metropolitan Washington, 1500 Harvard St., NW, Washington, DC 20009; (202) 234-7777; MemSocDC@hotmail.com; www.funerals.org/DC/;

   Funeral Consumers Alliance of Maryland and Environs (FCAME), 9601 Cedar Lane, Bethesda, MD 20814; (301) 564-0006; info@mdfunerals.org, www.mdfunerals.org

*FCAME, Facts to File about Funerals: A Question and Answer Guide. (2 copies)

Memorial Society of Northern Virginia; 4444 Arlington Blvd., Arlington, VA 22204; (703) 271-9240.
Virginia State Anatomical Program, 400 E. Jackson St., Richmond, VA 23219, (800) 786-2479; has a form, to be executed in triplicate, to be signed by two witnesses as well as a person wishing to donate his or her body to medical science.

Virginia Dept. of Motor Vehicles and Virginia Transplant Center 1987. Something Important is Hiding in Your Driver’s License (brochure)

(Also see Planning Ahead document for information on organ or body donations)

b. Life-commemorating Ceremonies:

Within Langley Hill Monthly Meeting, the Care and Clearness Committee will work with others to ensure that attenders and other Friends who knew the person are notified of his or her death, and the Committee for Care and Clearness often helps the survivors in notifying those outside the Meeting of the death. Friends customarily hold a memorial meeting for worship for a deceased friend, at a time convenient for the friend’s close family and friends. At the meeting a memorial minute usually is read, and at Langley Hill a copy of the minute usually is placed in the Meeting’s Memorial Minute Book. The minute also may be communicated to Friends Journal for its Milestones Department.

Related resources:
*The Conduct of Funerals for Friends, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, a small, 6-fold pamphlet on this topic.
*A Friends Memorial Service, Friends General Conference, a small, 3-page handout for memorial services.

http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2004/afamilyundertaking/resources_03.html. This website, a summary of a PBS program in 2004, provides resources relating to funerals conducted at home. See Crossings, above.

c. Obituaries, notifications, etc.

If the deceased does not want to have a formal obituary, that desire should be honored. If the deceased did not prepare a draft of his or her obituary, family members, friends and professional colleagues can be called upon to help with the process. Elements from the resulting obituary can be incorporated into the Meeting’s memorial minute, which usually is forwarded to Friends Journal.

Related resources:

The Washington Post, a typical newspaper, offers survivors a chance to post a death notice, with details about funeral arrangements, etc., as an advertisement. Copy for the notice should be sent to deathnotices@washpost.com. For a news obituary, a
request must be submitted online at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/local/obituaries/submit/, meeting the Post’s guidelines for these news articles.

3. Property

a. Basic provisions for property distribution

Other main documents in this packet deal with the choices a person makes before death about the disposition of his or her property through a will or other documents. If there is not a will and there is substantial property, the laws of intestate succession for the jurisdiction of residence will dictate its distribution in terms of the people to receive fractions of the net estate after payment of debts.

Once the death has taken place, the dead person cannot be consulted for further instructions. This places a burden especially on those who did not get detailed expressions of the dead person’s wishes, about how to use or transfer the personal property that may not have high market value but has strong sentimental value for more than one of his or her survivors. Other problems can arise when one or more of the surviving family of the deceased person disagrees with the wishes as expressed or required by law.

When survivors feel neglected by the deceased person in those wishes or by other survivors in making decisions about these issues, bitter disputes can arise. The Meeting’s Care and Clearness Committee can respond to requests for help in reaching amicable solutions to these disputes, but we cannot prevent them from festering if one or more parties is unwilling to consider the others’ points of view. We can support those engaged in such disputes emotionally and spiritually, in the light of the life of the deceased person.

Paragraphs 2 and 7-10 of the Checklist for Survivors When Death Occurs that is in the pocket following this document have detailed recommendations relating to the procedures to be followed concerning the distribution of the dead person’s property. It is best to have the help of a qualified estate lawyer in the jurisdiction where the dead person resided to guide you through these processes.

Even before you consult an estate lawyer, you may want to try to assemble such property records as are available to you, including life insurance policies, bank and other financial statements, deeds, notes and mortgages or deeds of trust, etc. Credit card issuers and other official or financial offices should be informed about the death. Bank officials will secure any safe deposit boxes belonging to a person who has died upon learning of the death, and may limit access to his or her bank or other financial accounts, although the rules about this may vary between jurisdictions.
b. Resources for probate and other issues about property:

i. Legal Services
Virginia State Bar, Virginia Lawyer Referral Service, (804) 775-0808, will refer you to a lawyer in Virginia who specializes in wills, estates, and trusts. The initial consultation will cost you $35 for up to ½ hour.

DC Lawyer Referral Service of the Bar Association of the District of Columbia provides referrals by telephone for DC lawyers with a specialty in estates and trusts. Call (202) 296-7845 between 8:30 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. M-F. See www.badc.org/html/lawref.htm.

District of Columbia Bar has a free advice and referral clinic every Saturday morning from 10-12 a.m. at Bread for the City, 1525 7th St., NW, and Max Robertson center, 2301 Martin Luther King, Jr. Ave., SE. with services as described in http://www.dcbar.org/for_the_public/programs_and_services/advice.cfm.

The Maryland State Bar Association provides a County-by-County list of phone numbers for local bar association lawyer referral services, at http://www.msba.org/public/referral.htm. The number for Montgomery County is (301) 279-9100.

ii. Help with Social Security death benefits
U. S. Social Security Administration Offices:
Phone (800) 772-1213; www.socialsecurity.gov. (open M-F, 9 a.m. – 4 p.m.):
6295 Edsall Rd., Alexandria, VA
2300 S. 9th St., Arlington, VA
11212 Waples Mill Rd., Fairfax, VA
8700 Centreville Rd., Manassas, VA
333 Hawaii Ave., NE, Washington, DC
2100 M Street, NW, Washington, DC
3244 Pennsylvania Ave., SE, Washington, DC
1905-B 9th St., SE, Washington, DC
6400 Old Branch Rd., Camp Springs, MD
337 Brightseat Rd., Landover, MD
7701 Greenbelt Rd., Greenbelt, MD
51 Monroe St., Rockville, MD
Wheaton Plaza, 11160 Viers Mill Rd., Wheaton, MD

iii. Computer Passwords:
Apple’s Macintosh computers have Safari as an Internet browser. In the Safari menu, if one clicks on “Preferences”, then in that box clicks on “Passwords”, a list of all the user names and passwords used on Safari will pop up. If one enters the password for computer updates, etc., these passwords with letters instead of asterisks (*) will show up. Many of these passwords will be outdated, but the list will include all in Safari’s history, even if the list of
websites visited has had its history cleared. One may clear the list of user names and passwords by clicking the appropriate button.