

# Death & Mourning Rituals

*This document lays out basic information about the death, funeral rites, and post-death practices of eight major religious traditions, drawing from Tanenbaum's online resource, Religion at Work. Additionally, this resource has been updated to include anticipated adjustments due to social distancing on death and mourning rituals and their impact on the workplace. This is by no means an exhaustive resource but is intended to offer an introductory overview to this information. Please keep in mind that there is great diversity within and among religious communities, so colleagues may practice and believe in ways that are not covered in this resource.*

With additional information and knowledge comes opportunities for more informed decisions, policies, and communications. Therefore, this section provides introductory information about the death and mourning rituals traditionally associated with a number of religions. Each individual may observe death and mourning rituals in their own unique way. However, the information in this section can provide a foundational level of knowledge from which to begin respectful conversations with colleagues.

## **Afro-Caribbean**

**Death:** Given the importance of extended family and faith communities, an Afro-Caribbean individual is likely to receive a large number of visitors near the end of life. If an Afro-Caribbean employee has an extended family member who is sick or nearing death, they may request time off to visit their loved one. Some employees may also need to travel to the Caribbean to attend a loved one's funeral. In some Afro-Christian churches, this can include a wake lasting three or more days in addition to the funeral itself. Many families will delay a funeral for as long as two weeks to allow relatives to come from other countries. Afro-Caribbean employees may therefore need to take off about a week of work when a loved one has passed away.

**Funeral Rites and Post Death Practices:** There are extensive rituals in Afro-Caribbean religions surrounding death, many of which are not shared openly. One example of a private practice that has been made public is the Haitian Vodoun death ritual. Practitioners of Haitian Vodoun believe that the dead body can be separated from the various spiritual entities that animate it. Haitian Vodoun teaches that each human has both a *gwo bonanj* (big guardian angel) and a *lwa* (spirit). Shortly after death, the *gwo bonanj* must be removed from the person through the death ritual. During this ritual, the dead also speak to the living through spirit possession. The spirits of deceased ancestors often inquire about living family members and raise problems that they are able to observe within the community.

This is only one of the many rituals that may take place post death. Many are unknown to those who are not initiates of the particular tradition.

## **Buddhism**

**Death:** Buddhists believe that when one is nearing death, health care workers and companions should focus on helping the patient maintain a calm and peaceful mind, as this is crucial to their well-being and spiritual future. Many different practices, predominantly meditations, are employed to achieve this goal.

Buddhists also prefer to die at home, or at least in familiar surroundings, as what is familiar is likely to make them feel more comfortable. If someone has to die elsewhere, however, it's possible to make this environment more pleasing by bringing in photographs of loved ones, plants, flowers, music, and even home-cooked meals.

**Funeral Rites and Post Death Practices:** Funerary and mourning practices differ from one geographic region to the next, but they all have certain elements in common. The intercession of prayer, for example, is thought to be extremely important in influencing the form of the deceased's rebirth. Buddhists place a heavy emphasis on prayer for the deceased, and prayer cycles after a death may last anywhere from 3 to 100 days. The funeral rites, regardless of the country in which they are performed, are often elaborate, as death is the final and most significant rite of passage for the Buddhist.

The chanting of monks and nuns is also particularly powerful for a favorable rebirth, and their presence is considered beneficial at funerals (whether it is essential varies with tradition). Most (though not all) Buddhists are cremated, following the example of the Buddha.

Upon hearing of the death of a Buddhist associate, it's usually proper to wait to contact the family until the funeral. Visits to the home of the bereaved are not suggested until after the funeral. It is, however, appropriate to send cards or flowers to the funeral or a gift to a charity designated by the deceased or family of the deceased. It is not advisable to send food. At a Buddhist viewing, or open casket, it's appropriate for guests to view the body silently for a few moments and bow slightly. There may also be a specific ritual connected with the viewing, such as pouring water over the head of the deceased. In this case, you may simply follow suit if desired. No standard exists for how long it will take the bereaved to return to a usual work schedule. It's typical to take three months before returning to a full social schedule.

## Christianity

**Death:** Many Christian individuals and denominations view death, and the passage of the soul or spirit beyond this life, as one of the most important events of religious significance. Each denomination places a different emphasis on illness. In many Christian denominations, a church official performs a ritual before, during, and after the immediate death of an adherent.

**Funeral Rites and Post Death Practices:** Christians place particular emphasis on the assurance of resurrection and eternal life, and this shapes the fundamental Christian perspective on death. At funerals, themes of sorrow and rejoicing often stand side by side. Traditionally, Christians bury their dead as a sign of returning back to the earth after death and in hope of a final resurrection. Eastern Orthodoxy requires burial. It is common among many Christians to bury their dead in consecrated soil, often next to generations of their family. Some denominations may allow cremation if this was the wish of the deceased.

Funeral rites vary among Christian denominations. The main rites of the funeral for most Protestant denominations may be observed in a church, in a funeral home, during a graveside service, in the home of the deceased, or in a large auditorium if for a public figure. The body may or may not be present, and generally a minister performs the service with music, readings from the Bible, prayer, and remarks. The funeral rites for Catholics and Eastern Orthodox are more elaborate. For these denominations, the standard liturgy for burial or funeral mass is held at church. It is common across many Christian denominations to hold memorial services after the funeral and on annual anniversaries of the death.

Upon hearing of the death of a Christian associate, it's appropriate to contact the family either before or after the funeral. If you wish to send a gift, it's traditional to send flowers to the funeral home before the funeral or to bring food to the home after. Though Christians of many denominations allow the opportunity for

guests to view the body of the deceased before the funeral, this may be reserved for immediate family. An obituary or notice about the deceased will likely share details of what is appropriate for friends and colleagues to attend. The immediate family of a recently deceased loved one may choose to take some time off (days or weeks) and may avoid social gatherings for an indeterminate amount of time.

## **Hinduism**

**Death:** Hindus generally prefer to die at home surrounded by their family instead of in a hospital. The main goal for Hindus is to approach death with God's name on their lips or sipping sacred water. For this reason, many Hindus in India make a journey to the sacred water of the Ganges River to die there. It's believed that your last thoughts will influence your next life.

The Hindu death ritual involves the chanting of mantras. If a dying person is in a coma or incapable of chanting a mantra, a family member generally is called upon to repeat it in the patient's ear. A Hindu generally is cremated or buried within 24 hours of death.

**Funeral Rites and Post-Death Practices:** In Hindu tradition, ordinary people are cremated and holy men or children are buried. Cremation is only required for those who need purification at death to release the soul from the body through the sacrificial fire. Those who have already transcended this need, such as swamis or gurus, or those children who die at a very early age, may be buried.

Varying practices for funeral rites exist, but they share a twofold purpose. First, the rites enable the departing spirit to leave this world and attain the status of an ancestor so that it doesn't remain as a ghost but is able to move on to its next destination. Second, the rites counteract the pollution or impurities released at death, which affect members of the family of the deceased.

The funeral rites for those being cremated generally involve a procession to the crematorium led by a chief mourner, preferably the eldest son, carrying a torch. The procession loudly chants the name of God, Ram. Just before the body of the deceased is committed to the fire, the funeral procession circles the bier. The chief functionary at the funeral is usually the deceased's eldest son, though a funeral priest may help officiate. He lights the funeral pyre, and when the skull becomes red hot, he cracks it with a stick. To die and be cremated at the Ganges River, or at least to have one's ashes brought there after death and thrown into the sacred waters, is a special tradition.

After cremation, a period of 10 to 30 days of ritual restrictions begins for the relatives of the deceased, at the end of which offerings of milk and balls of rice or barley are made. The offerings are made at ceremonies called *shraddha*. The purpose of the *shraddha* is to help the departing spirit acquire a new spiritual body with which it can pass on. Depending on when the bereaved family performs the *shraddha* ceremony, a mourner generally returns to a normal work schedule within 10 to 30 days.

Upon hearing of the death of a Hindu, it's appropriate to telephone or visit the bereaved. Flowers may be personally brought to the home. It's generally not appropriate to bring or send food. If attending a Hindu funeral, it's important to wear white; black is inappropriate. Visiting the bereaved is best done after the funeral and, unlike before the funeral, it's customary to bring fruit to the home. Most Hindus are cremated with an open-casket viewing beforehand. Any guests are expected to view the deceased.

## **Islam**

**Death:** Muslims who are dying are encouraged to be aware of their impending death as part of the natural order of things, to repent, and to perform the ritual washing of the hands if possible. The drawing up of a will is also considered an important act because it is an obvious recognition of one's dying.

Companionship for the dying is also extremely important for Muslims. Family and friends don't leave the dying person alone in the last hours. Friends and relatives remind the dying person of all the good Allah has allowed them to experience, pray for them, and comfort them. Muslims are supposed to leave the world thankful.

The Islamic creed (the *shahada*) is generally to be recited into the dying person's ear, and the dying should repeat it, if possible. The creed is said nevertheless to help the dying remember it and other fundamentals of Islam on their journey into the afterlife, which holds in store for Muslims a test of faith. At the onset of death, a Qur'anic surah (usually chapter 36) is recited. Because death is viewed as natural, unnatural deaths, such as suicide, are thought to bear horrible consequences in the afterlife.

**Funeral Rites and Post Death Practices:** Muslims are to be buried as soon as possible after death, before nightfall on the day of death if possible, so notice of the death must be prompt. The responsibility for preparing the body for burial usually falls on friends or relatives.

The death or funeral service is then held in any clean space and sometimes in a mosque. The service begins with the funeral or death prayer, which is pronounced in Arabic by a relative of the deceased or by an imam. The person reciting it steps behind the deceased facing Mecca. The deceased, too, should face Mecca. The mourning community stands behind the prayer leader in rows of three. They repeat a brief confession of Allah's supremacy, punctuated by other blessings, petitions, and prayers. The prayer concludes with a peace greeting by the imam and all turn to the right and then the left.

As many bearers as possible then carry the corpse to the grave, and they all take turns honoring the dead by reciting the attestation of faith. After this, the body is immediately buried. A casket is not generally used, and the grave marker is a simple stone framing or pillar. The grave allows the deceased to face Mecca. Muslims, because of this, may have their own burial sections in cemeteries.

Women and men both participate in funeral rites in Iran, Africa, and Southeast Asia. In Arabia and South Asia, however, it's thought to be only the man's duty to bury the dead. Women in these regions are thus not allowed to take part either in the funeral ceremony or to visit the grave.

Mourning is also regulated in Islam. Visits to the grave are a reminder of one's own mortality and death rather than the occasion to mourn or intercede for those already dead. God's judgment is emphasized, so no intercession can be made for the dead. Wailing or any similar kind of loud lamentation is discouraged in traditional practice, though traditions vary from region to region. Mainstream Islam states that mourning should be limited to three days, or four months and ten days for a widow.

If you want to send a gift to a bereaved Muslim employee, either flowers or an assortment of food may be sent to the home. It's generally a good idea to make sure the food conforms to the Islamic dietary laws to avoid any possible offense being taken. Bakery goods, fruits, or salads are suggested. If attending a funeral, it's best to dress conservatively. Avoid open display of other religious symbols or showy jewelry. Muslim funerary services are brief and simple and don't incorporate a "viewing" of the deceased.

## Judaism

**Death:** In Judaism, death is part of the natural cycle of life and like our existence on earth, death has meaning. In addition, some Jewish traditions espouse belief in an afterlife, a world to come (not necessarily synonymous with traditional ideas of "heaven") where those who have lived a worthy life are rewarded. Most importantly, traditionally, Jews believe in the eternity of the soul, which lives on with G-d, in the memory and through the actions of loved ones, and/or in an eternal afterlife.

**Funeral Rites and Post-Death Practices:** Funeral and mourning practices in Judaism are extensive and have two purposes: to show respect for the dead and to comfort the living.

After a person dies, the eyes are closed (preferably by one of the children), the body may be laid on the floor and covered, candles may be lit next to the body, and a window may be opened for the soul to escape. Burial takes place as quickly as possible (traditionally within 24 hours) but not on the Sabbath or holidays. The body is not to be left alone until after burial as a sign of respect, though gathering around the corpse is not recommended. The people who sit with the dead body are called the “guards” or “keepers” (*shomerim*). Psalms or prayer might be recited until the funeral begins.

When a close relative (parent, sibling, spouse, or child) first hears of the death of a relative, and sometimes at the beginning of the funeral, it’s traditional to express initial grief by tearing one’s clothing. The tear is made over the heart if the deceased is a parent or over the right side of the chest for other relatives. Today, many tear a black ribbon pinned onto their jacket instead of their clothing. The mourner recites a blessing describing G-d as “the true Judge.”

Traditionally, in preparation for the burial, the body is thoroughly cleaned and wrapped in a simple, plain white shroud. A man may also be wrapped in his or her *tallit* (prayer shawl), with one of the corner fringes removed. Jewish tradition states that both the dress of the body and the coffin should be simple so that a poor person would not receive less honor in death than a rich person. No cosmetics are to be applied either.

Traditionally, the body must not be cremated, though some Jews do choose cremation and community responses to this issue differ. Generally, the corpse must be buried in the earth. It is customary outside of Israel to bury in a wooden coffin, with the expectation that such natural materials will decay easily. In Israel, the custom is to bury directly in the ground without a coffin.

The Jewish funeral is either held at the graveside, synagogue, or funeral home. The immediate family and friends generally have the responsibility of carrying the casket and helping to bury it. The simplest funerals consist only of prayers for mourners (*kaddish*), led by the officiating rabbi. The more traditional service includes each member of the immediate family in turn shoveling three spadefuls of earth onto the casket. Those present may then shovel if desired. If so, the traditional practice is to lay the shovel on the ground to pass it from one person to the next and not to pass it directly. The immediate family then passes by two lines of relatives and friends, and the focus of the funeral turns briefly from the deceased onto them.

No music or flowers are used at traditional Jewish funerals. The corpse is never displayed at funerals either, as Jewish law forbids open-casket ceremonies. Autopsies, in general, are discouraged as desecration of the body. They are permitted, however, where it may save a life or where local law requires it. When autopsies must be performed, they should be minimally intrusive and the entire body must be buried after the autopsy.

Jewish mourning practices are an integral part of post-death practice. They can be broken into several periods of decreasing intensity. These mourning periods allow the full expression of grief, while discouraging excesses of grief and allowing the mourner to gradually return to a normal life.

The next period of mourning is known as *shiva* (Hebrew for “seven,” because it lasts seven days). Traditionally observant Jews will sit *shiva* for the full seven days; some Jews may choose to do so for a shorter period of time. During *shiva*, the community takes care of the mourners’ needs. Visitors buy food and honor the dead with gifts to charity.

Parents, children, spouses, and siblings of the deceased observe shiva, preferably all together in the deceased's home. One "sits shiva" for seven days, beginning with the day of burial. During the seven days, mourners sit on low stools or the floor instead of chairs, and they do not wear leather shoes, shave or cut their hair, wear cosmetics, work, and do things for comfort or pleasure such as bathe, have sex, put on fresh clothing, or study Torah (except for Torah passages related to mourning and grief). Mourners wear the clothes that they tore when they learned of the death or at the funeral, and mirrors in the house are covered. Prayer services are held where the shiva is held, with friends, neighbors, and relatives making up the prayer group.

It's a gesture of kindness to visit the mourners during shiva. The most important thing to do when paying a "shiva call" is to simply be present and allow mourners to share their grief. This is the time for mourners to mourn, and it is not suggested that visitors try to cheer them up. Condolences, such as "I'm sorry for your loss," may be offered while waiting for a mourner to initiate conversation. When in the company of a mourner, grief should not be expressed with platitudes. The full expression of grief is the primary purpose of the mourning period.

The next period of mourning is known as *shloshim* ("30," because it lasts until the thirtieth day after burial). During this period, the mourners gradually resume their ordinary activities. They still refrain, however, from parties or celebrations, shaving or cutting their hair, and listening to music.

The final period of formal mourning is *avelut*, which is observed only for a parent. This period lasts for 12 months after the burial. During this period, mourners avoid parties, celebrations, the theater, and concerts. For 11 months of that period, starting at the time of burial, the child of the deceased recites the mourner's prayer every day. For other relatives, the mourner's prayer is recited only for the *shloshim*.

After this final period is complete, the family of the deceased is not permitted to continue formal mourning; however, a few continuing acknowledgments of the deceased occur. Every year, family members observe the anniversary of the death. On the anniversary, children recite the mourner's prayer and perform a blessing of the Torah reading, in the synagogue if possible. Other close family members may also light a candle and/or recite the mourner's prayer in the synagogue in remembrance of the deceased on certain traditional Jewish holidays.

A mourner usually requires one week before returning to a normal work schedule and at least 30 days before returning to a normal social schedule (depending on the relationship of the mourner to the deceased). It's important to be sensitive to the mourners who follow traditional practice, attend synagogue services daily, and recite the mourner's prayer for the deceased for this extended period of time. For the death of a child or a parent, the bereaved may mourn every day in synagogue for 11 months. Other family members mourn for 30 days.

## Sikhism

**Death:** It is customary for a large number of relatives and close friends to visit if death is imminent, because visiting the sick is a Sikh duty.

Most severely ill Sikhs will also be visited by a *granthi*, a ceremonial reader of the Guru Granth Sahib. The *granthi* will read from the scripture and pray with the patient to spiritually prepare him/her for death. Visitors may wish to place written hymns or prayers beside the patient. Traditionally, Sikhs wish to die with the name of Wehaguru whispered in their ears.

Sikhism teaches that the soul has departed, and the flesh is empty when neither the heartbeat nor breathing can be restored; most Sikhs accept brain death as the departure of the soul from the body.

**Funeral Rites and Post-Death Practices:** Birth and death are related in Sikhism, each a part of the cycle of life, which is but a path toward the ultimate goal of unity with God. Sikhs believe in reincarnation and mourning is therefore discouraged. Acts like lighting candles or erecting monuments for the deceased are especially frowned upon.

Funerary rites are carried out in two parts.

The first is the cremation. Sikhs are cremated, usually within 24 hours of death. The body is washed and dressed, and the “five Ks” worn. The Five Ks are physical symbols worn by Sikhs to indicate their dedication to their faith. They are: kesh (uncut hair), kara (a steel bracelet), kanga (a wooden comb), kaccha (cotton underwear), and kirpan (a small ceremonial sword). Just before the cremation, a prayer is offered and a short speech about the deceased may be made. After cremation, the ashes are collected and are deposited in a river or sea. Some families living outside India may wish to take the ashes to Punjab, birthplace of Sikhism. There may also be ceremonies at the gurdwara both before and after the cremation.

The second part of the funeral ceremony is the *Antim Ardas*, which includes a complete reading of Guru Granth Sahib either at home or in a Gurdwara; this typically takes place within 10 days of death. The reading is meant to provide support and consolation to family and friends. Generally, all the relatives and friends of the family gather together for the ceremony on the completion of the reading. Hymns are sung and special prayer recited. After the final prayer, there is a random reading of a portion of the Guru Granth Sahib and Karah Parshad is distributed to the attendees. Food from the langar may also be served.

While there isn't an emphasis on mourning rituals beyond the funeral in Sikhism, some Sikh employees may choose to take time off of their work and social schedule.

## Wicca

**Death:** Wiccans usually view death as a natural part of life. Wiccans try to visit and talk to members of their coven who are known to be dying; Wiccan employees may therefore request time off from work to visit sick coven members. Since Wiccans generally believe that after death the soul will briefly have a time of rest and joy, followed by reincarnation, many Wiccans try to face death with acceptance rather than fear.

**Funeral Rites and Post Death Practices:** Many Wiccans keep their faith and practice a secret from non-Wiccan family members. As a result, when a Wiccan has passed away there is often a standard memorial service and burial; afterwards, a coven may hold a “Crossing Over” ceremony in which coven members offer their memories of the deceased or pray for the deceased’s spirit to have an easy crossing. One of the eight Wiccan holidays, Samhain, celebrates the mystery of death, and a deceased Wiccan is honored at the next Samhain, which is specifically set aside as a mourning period.

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