

Dealing with Families During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Acknowledging the Current Reality – Implications for Families

As you consider how to approach funeral planning during this global pandemic, don't forget:

1. Anything that delays a funeral delays the natural mourning and healing process.
2. You can't push "pause" on grief. People will continue to feel their grief but will have fewer options to express it and be supported.

For many people, it can be disorienting to be separated from the body of a loved one who has died. We naturally benefit from spending time with the body and having a chance to pay respects and say hello on the path to goodbye. The forced need to separate loved ones and friends from each other at a time of death makes it much more difficult for individuals to experience the forward movement that funerals are intended to meet – reality, recall, support, expression and meaning.

As you know, meaningful funerals are "rites of initiation." They help survivors start the process of taking their grief, the "internal response to loss," and allowing it to become mourning, the "shared response to loss." When people cannot participate in ceremony they often feel as if their mourning is "on hold."

We live in a culture that is de-ritualizing around death. Many people, through no fault of their

own, have never been taught why funerals are so important. So, some people who experience a death in their family at this time will find the coronavirus as good reason to take the path of least resistance – a direct disposition. Obviously, this makes your role in providing them a meaningful funeral even more challenging.

Implications for You: Potential Actions You Can Take

- In the midst of these incredible challenges, stay calm and assure families you are there to help them at this difficult time. If they sense anxiety from you, they will have an instinct to want to distance themselves from you and the services you are able to offer.
- This is an ideal time to teach families why funerals are so important. I suggest you theme everything you do with education.
 - ◆ Assure families that while this is a challenging time, you are able to help them have an initial service (even though limited in scope and the number of participants who can attend).
 - ◆ Help them understand that a service will help them acknowledge the significance of the death and remember the life.
 - ◆ Gently help them realize that if they do nothing it will impact their ability get the needed support from family and friends.

- ◆ Don't hesitate to supportively challenge those who project... "Well, in this situation we just won't do anything." Step into your role as a gatekeeper surrounding the importance of meaningful funerals.
- If you have the technical capability, offer to stream the service. If not (or in addition), offer to record the service to enable people who cannot attend an opportunity to view it later.
- This is a unique time. It may be wise to consider offering the family the opportunity to hold an additional service after the current restrictions are lifted. In doing this, I assure you they will be forever grateful. Does this mean more work for you and your staff? Yes, but it will also help secure your future and the future of funeral service.
- Encourage families to realize that despite the current challenges with the COVID-19 virus, they need and deserve support at this time. Encourage them to talk to other people impacted by their loved one's death on the phone or via text. Help them know how to access and use Facetime or Skype-type apps so they can see facial expressions and approximate physical closeness. Invite them to consider writing old-fashioned letters, to share memories, express feelings, and offer condolences to each other.
- If the family has carried out a small, private service (and feel that is all they want to do

related to ceremony), still encourage them to plan a get-together (particularly with those who were unable to attend) as soon as the restrictions are lifted. Help them understand that this additional gathering is an excellent way to honor the life of their loved one and activate their longer-term support systems.

- Those who cannot attend the funeral can be encouraged to still hold a small ceremony in their own place of residence. Something as simple as having a candle-lighting and sharing some memories will help them begin to allow their grief to become mourning.

Remember that right now you are the key! You and your funeral home staff are in the position to help families do at least some form of ceremony, despite the current challenges secondary to the virus. Through education and by you modeling calm in the midst of this storm, you can – and will – help families make decisions that are good for them.



I hope my reflections have been helpful to you. If you have any questions or unique challenges I can help with, do not hesitate to email me (DrWolfelt@CenterforLoss.com) or phone me on my direct line at 970.217.7069.



Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of creating meaningful funeral experiences. He has created a practical model that interfaces six essential functions of funerals with the elements of ceremony. In addition, he serves as a consultant on the application of the 'experience economy' to cemeteries. He is the recipient of the Death Educator Award from the Association of Death Education and Counseling. Dr. Wolfelt is director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty of the University of Colorado Medical School's Department of Family Medicine.