

The First 24 Hours

The first 24 hours after the loss of a loved one can be very difficult. The appropriate steps to take depend on the circumstances surrounding the death. What is the first thing you should do when a family member or a close friend dies?

0-1 Hours After Death: Report the Death

1. If a death occurs at home:

Death under hospice care: If your loved one has endured a prolonged illness at home under hospice care, contact their primary medical professional, who will follow all proper procedures, including making a legal pronouncement of death. Hospice professionals may also advise you in this circumstance.

Sudden, unexpected death: For an unexpected or unattended death, call 911 to notify the police and emergency medical personnel, who will attempt resuscitation, if they are authorized to do so. The body of your loved one may need to be moved to the hospital where a doctor can make a legal pronouncement of death.

Arrangements for organ donation: If your loved one's driver's license or Advance Healthcare Directive gives authorization for organ donation, immediately inform the medical staff so that they can determine if organ or tissue donation is a viable option.

Note: If your loved one has signed a Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) document, or is wearing a "DNR" or "Comfort Care Only" bracelet, medical personnel will not attempt resuscitation.

2. If a death occurs in a nursing home, assisted living facility, or hospital:

Alert the staff, nurse or physician if you are the first to be aware of the death.

Note: Calling 911 is not necessary if the person is under hospice, nursing home, or hospital care.

3. If a death takes place out of state:

If your deceased loved one is out of state and you are notified of the death, you may need to travel to where your loved one is. Speak to the local authorities or medical professionals to determine what actions are needed.

4. If a death occurs out of country:

Contact the U.S. Embassy or call 1-888-407-4747 for the Office of Overseas Citizen Services in the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs.

1-4 Hours After Death: Who to Contact

1. Contact loved ones:

Contact immediate family members and ask them to contact others. In addition to making direct contact by telephone, use social media to notify friends and others of your loved one's death.

2. Choose a funeral director or service provider:

Hopefully, your loved one planned for their funeral by completing in a Will, Estate Plan, or AHD. If not, talk to a trusted friend, relative, or faith-based support person for help locating a funeral director. A funeral director will know the state and local laws that apply to the circumstance and death of your loved one, and will provide appropriate guidance throughout the planning process.

3. Contact clergy, a minister, or a spiritual advisor:

If your loved one was active in a faith-based community or held religious or spiritual values, contact the leader of that community to notify them of the death. This is an important time to honor the spiritual or religious values of your loved one.

4. Contact other key support people:

Managing the details surrounding the death of a loved one can be physically and emotionally exhausting. Reach out to your support network for help. Consider choosing a few close friends or family members to help you make funeral preparations. Ask a trusted friend to field calls, help run errands, care for children, and to act as your advocate. Be sure to give yourself the care you need to get through the challenging process of losing and grieving for a friend or loved one.

4-12 Hours After Death: Prepare for Funeral Arrangement Conference

1. Locate important documents:

If your loved one made advance plans for funeral arrangements, locate any insurance policies, pre-paid funeral contracts, or written plans. If you are unfamiliar with your loved one's wishes for funeral arrangements, speak to your family members or contact your loved one's lawyer or health care provider to ask if your loved one has a Will, Estate Plan, or AHD.

2. Gather vital statistics:

- Full name of the deceased
- Marital status, including Marriage Certificate, if available
- Parents' full names
- Children's full names
- Immediate family member names
- Place of birth
- Date of birth
- Social Security Number
- Veteran's discharge papers (DD-214)

12-24+ Hours After Death: Rest and Prepare

1. Rest and nourish yourself:

Try to sleep as much as you can to help prepare for the events to come. The next several days will be filled with activity, plans, phone calls, visitors, and emotion. Even short naps will help you manage the details, events, and sentiments that follow the death of a friend or a loved one. Remember proper nutrition, even if it may seem challenging. Taking time to care for yourself is as important as the final planning for your loved one.

2. Gather meaningful remembrances of your loved one:

Gather items to create a meaningful tribute for your loved one. These may include pictures, articles, personal effects, and other memorabilia that were an integral part of your loved one's life. Select items that are genuine reflections of your loved one. This step can also be an important part of the grieving process.

3. Determine how the funeral will be paid for:

Funeral and cemetery, or crematory charges, will typically need to be paid for before the services are performed. If the service is not paid for in advance, consider an alternate ways to address costs:

- Cash, personal check, or money order
- Prepaid funeral contract
- Life insurance policy – your funeral director can help you assign the benefits to the funeral home to cover the funeral expenses
- Personal credit card
- Loan from a lending institution
- Establishing a memorial fund

4. Allow yourself to grieve:

You may experience moments of intense grief throughout the day. Some people are afraid that if they start to cry they may not be able to stop. Usually people cry in bursts of 5-10 minutes. It is important to give yourself this time to release some of the emotion you are feeling. Accept your feelings, and allow them to come. Surround yourself with people who will not minimize or judge your emotions, and who will comfort and accept you as you are.