



Dying to  
Understand



# FUNERALS

Written by  
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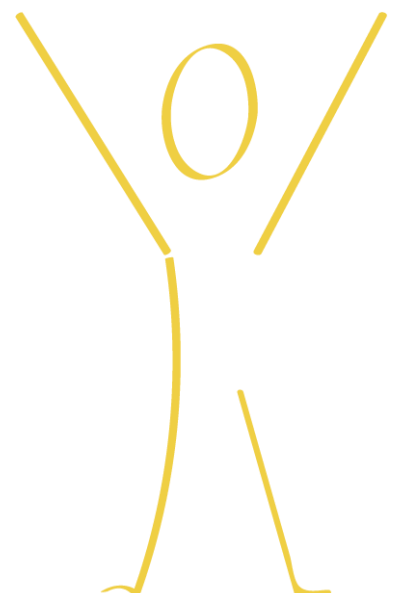
## Introduction

Funerals Are Not Fun. If you have ever been to a funeral, you will remember it being a place and time of loss, significant emotion and often an element of chaos. As a young child attending old people's funerals, there was always the risk of an outburst of laughter at an inopportune moment as the emotions were simply too loaded to sit still in solemn silence for long. The emotions are no different in adults and threaten to explode out of control at any moment, albeit, not always with laughter. Funerals are stressful, so the planning requires our attention.

There is far more to funerals than simply trying to avoid them. They can turn out to be very meaningful events and the best way to get meaning out of a funeral is to understand their important role in society.

A common myth about funerals is that they are bad. The reality is that a funeral, as much as it may be sad or solemn, is an event and it requires the mindset of event planning. Events are impersonal. It's up to us to give them personality and this is the first big secret about funerals - you may get to decide how you want it to run; you can choose the tone, colours, music, VIP guests and decide if the celebration of life should be a bit of a party or a dreary unbearable affair.

Everybody needs a funeral, but a good funeral requires good planning and hard work. They can also be a positive experience. This requires a different attitude; one that respects and mourns loss and grief but at the same time celebrates life. The best way is to start at the beginning.



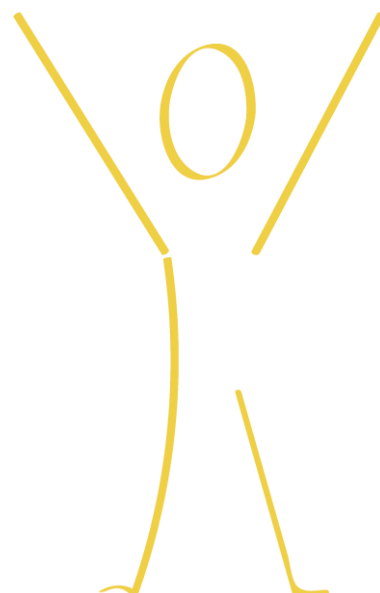
## The Importance of Funerals

Funerals cannot happen without a deceased body. The starting point for a funeral is that someone has to first die, and we know that death is unavoidable. It would be nice to just leave when someone has died, but apart from that possibly being rude, there is the problem of what to do with the body.

To be honest, after a person dies, no one wants the body after a while. The first consideration of why we need a funeral is so that we can dispose of the body of our loved ones (or us) in the best possible way. It is out of this journey of respect that funerals follow. Funerals are the end of a process of care and a final celebration of a life we respected, honour and mourn.

Funerals are also religious events; a reminder of faith and the recognition of a life beyond this life. They play an essential part of every believer's life, not only honouring the person who has died but also the God who has been instrumental in giving life and who has received the soul into eternity.

Funerals are also social events where friends and families reunite. As such, they are dangerous occasions where past injustices may threaten to explode onto the stage. They are events where the oneness of being human allows us to fold our arms around each other and comfort each other, protect each other's loss and celebrate the gift of life in those remaining. They are opportunities to excel in selfless love and care for those who are hurting. They remind us of our mortality, our frailty in life and may stir our deep need or desire to perhaps recognise a God. They allow us to bring closure on grief and act as a steppingstone towards the road of recovery from such a great loss.



## The Process Following Death

Once death has occurred, it needs to be confirmed. After the confirmation of death, the body is transferred to the morgue and subsequently transported to the Undertakers. Undertakers provide a vital service and it is recommended to be in touch with them *as soon as death becomes a consideration*. Funeral directors do not speed up dying and an early chat with them may be very useful. They may even smile at the occasional joke, and the long-held paradigm of stiff gentlemen in top hats and tails who are no warmer than the corpse in the box next door is far from the truth. They understand loss, grief and dying, and are an essential part of the team to make a funeral successful. They may even manage to put “fun” into funeral if that’s what you so desire.

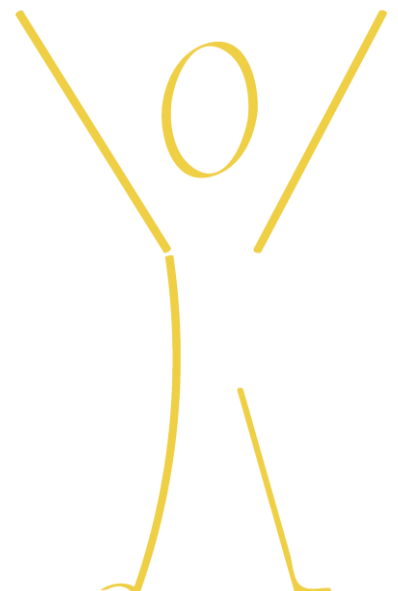
As with all service providers, some are good, some are bad, and some are indifferent. Shopping around is allowed until you find the team that suits you and exceeds your expectations.

## The Role of The Undertaker

The Undertaker has a number of very important roles. The first and most important role is to care for the body of the deceased. This is in the true sense of care with compassion, respect and honour for a life that was lived.

The second role is to assist in managing the funeral. In the period of loss and grief following a death, it is often a task too large for everyday mortals. Funeral directors are skilled in assisting with this event planning and they will have a range of solutions to make this difficult day as meaningful and stress-free as possible.

They are also responsible for the disposal of the body. This is traditionally by way of a burial or a cremation, but there are other possibilities.



### *Eleven roles of an Undertaker:*

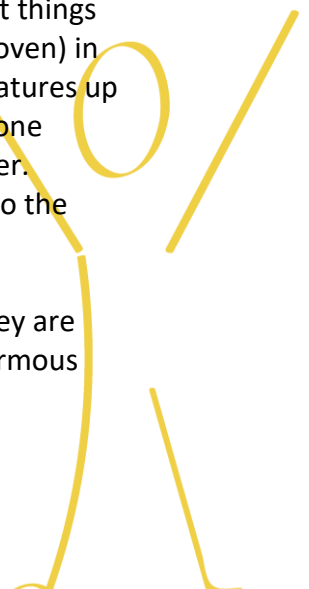
1. They take care of the body with respect and dignity
2. They have a list of documents that are statutory requirements prior to a funeral (the paperwork must be right)
3. They can assist with the funeral theme, whether this is religious or secular
4. They can arrange the place for the funeral whether it is at a funeral home, a church, or elsewhere
5. You can allow the Undertaker to help you choose a coffin and the best way to dispose of the body either by cremation or burial
6. It is important to discuss financial matters with the undertaker in terms of what it is going to cost and what is best for your budget
7. They will provide a checklist of things to do, assist with the timing of the funeral and attend to other matters that may not be considered by you
8. They will liaise with religious organisations/spiritual leaders in order to properly prepare the ceremony. They will then transport the body and discuss the options
9. They will advise on how to prepare the body for viewing, including what you will need in order for the body to be dressed and prepared
10. They are your biggest asset when it comes to a funeral
11. Surprisingly, they have done this all before and they won't require your assistance and advice to plan a great event

## Cremations vs Burials

When it comes to disposing the body, one of the options is a cremation. Cremations require regulatory paperwork. This can be quite a lengthy process to avoid the chances of eliminating evidence of an untimely demise before the police get there.

Prior to cremation, any implanted cardiac device will be removed, and the body is prepared for cremation. A suitable coffin is chosen for the cremation, and each coffin has to have a registered name plate associated with the coffin so that things cannot be muddled. At the crematorium, the coffin is placed in the retort (oven) in an automated procedure. The cremation lasts up to two hours and temperatures up to 1000 degrees Celsius are used to vaporize all body tissue. Some of the bone fragments may remain and are processed after cremation into a fine powder. Following the cremation, the ashes of the deceased person are presented to the family.

Cremations usually cost less and require less organisation and planning. They are increasingly popular and are particularly useful if there are going to be enormous costs in transporting the body elsewhere.



Burials are separate to cremations and these occur when the body is interred in the ground. The body is prepared appropriately and presented in a chosen coffin. It is important to note that a burial plot needs to be purchased and the price of this starts from \$3,000 in Australia (2014). Burials are defined to specific regions in society-cemeteries. It is possible for people to share a single burial plot. There are a range of options with burials including a 'green option'.

There are other innovative options such as being buried at sea, but there are extensive regulations and paperwork for these possibilities.

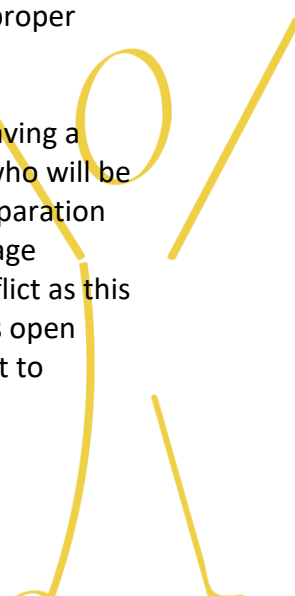
## The Funeral planning

The day of the funeral is a large event. There are many things to consider such as:

- Is it a religious or secular affair?
- Who should be invited and, equally important, who should not be invited?
- When should the funeral occur?
- Who is going to formally conduct the funeral?
- Who is going to speak and what is the role of each person?
- What is the order of speeches?
- Is there going to be music, photos, etc.?
- How do you want to celebrate the life - the theme of the funeral?
- Is it a full service or just a memorial service?
- If it is a burial, who will be invited to the interment/grave and who should remain at church?
- Does accommodation need to be provided?
- What are the costs?

Funerals are family affairs. The deceased is no longer part of the discussion and any input from the deceased needs to be done *before death* so that there is a proper will, testament, instructions and wishes of the deceased is adhered to.

It is important to have good communication at a funeral and to consider having a funeral run-sheet. The family is in charge and it is important to figure out who will be the main point of contact. Usually, all families have a 'black sheep' and preparation needs to be made for the 'black sheep' at the funeral and to properly manage difficult people in these trying circumstances. It is important to expect conflict as this is a normal response to loss and distress. Keeping communication channels open during times like this cannot be emphasised enough and is vitally important to keeping peace within the family.



Religious and cultural connections need to be considered. If religious and cultural views are important, it is essential to get advice from the religious leader. Make use of the leader's experience and involve them before finalising arrangements. Go with the flow. It is important to make the process as easy as possible.

Emotions at a funeral are extremely volatile. It is a place to express grief and, in a way, to celebrate life. Grief is a natural process involving loss. It is normal and there is nothing wrong with expressing grief. Funerals are often associated with an outpouring of strong emotion. These can be exaggerated by triggers such as photos, music, smells, or by a number of other unexpected memories.

Families may also be complex. Often the unexpected arrival of unknown or unwanted guests can make things complicated. There may be past lovers, past partners or estranged children and other family members. Consider what the plan is if this happens.

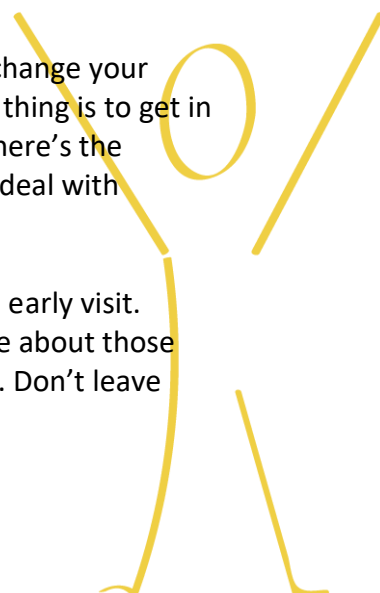
Another tendency in attempting to manage grief is to avoid the topic altogether, or change the subject. It is easy to hide from grief or from feeling responsible for grief by avoiding the person suffering grief. There is also a natural tendency to avoid showing any emotion, and an awkward tendency to say or do something quite stupid. The best thing you can do in these situations is to express sympathy and empathy. Be kind, be authentic, offer help if you can, be honest and embrace the emotion. Learn to manage emotion. There are no clear answers to managing grief but caring always helps.

## Funeral Planning before death

When it comes to funeral planning, decide what *you want* and discuss this with your loved ones. When the time is right, visit a funeral director and get their advice and help. If applicable, discuss it with a spiritual or cultural leader as appropriate. Give clear, unambiguous instructions about what you want.

Nothing is set in stone and a conversation is harmless. Have a chat, change your mind, get a second opinion; these are all permissible. The important thing is to get in early when there is time to change thoughts and opinions or while there's the opportunity to shop around. The worst that can happen is having to deal with funeral issues after death. If you don't say it, you don't get it.

Remember, funeral planning does not send death for an unexpected early visit. Think of it as life insurance - we all get life insurance because we care about those who will benefit from it. Your good funeral plan is for those you love. Don't leave them abandoned.



## After the funeral—Bereavement

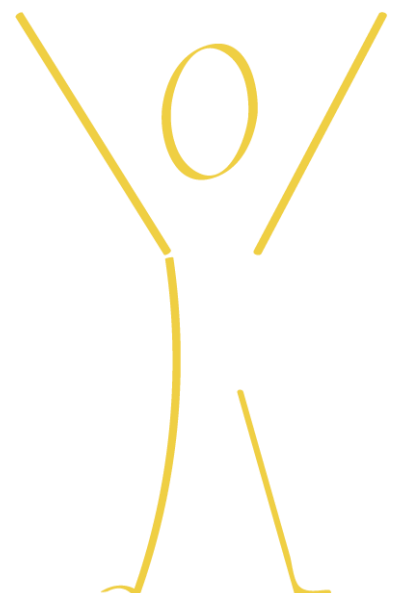
This is often the most difficult period for those left behind. Immediately after a death, there is a lot of activity; everyone is buzzing around busy making arrangements for the funeral and getting important things done. There is little time to think and to consider the changed life immediately after someone has died.

After the funeral, reality and loneliness set in. This is the most difficult part of the journey for those left behind. In our experience, we suggest joining a bereavement group or to get some counselling and support if required. Find comfort in close friends and confidants. Bring family members together. There are often many meaningful conversations about the past, but it is also important to plan for something fun in the future.

**DON'T GIVE UP.** This deep and dark phase of life will pass such as there will always be a spring after the harshest of winters.

This is a period of huge adjustment and with this comes the wisdom not to make any sudden changes. Don't get re-married or join an online dating service. Don't make financial decisions, such as investments or selling the house. Let everything settle first. It is easier in the day after the night has passed.

It does not mean that mourning or loss and grief are not important. They are important and a normal part of the journey, but the journey changes over time and this is a good thing. Good planning before death and the funeral itself helps to significantly reduce confusion and distress following.





## Conclusion

Funerals are distressing events. As with all events they have a start time and an ending. Careful planning and thought go a long way to making the event more bearable. There is always going to be the potential that something will go wrong at a funeral but really, who cares if it does.

On the day of my mum's funeral, my dad's pet dog caught and killed our neighbours beautiful peacock. In all this loss, chaos and getting to the funeral service on time we had another death, that of a peacock. Crying won't help, so you may as well laugh.

Sad things and bad things happen in life. Death and funerals are sometimes a bit of both. In no way do I wish to diminish the loss and sorrow felt at a bereavement but sometimes, when things are out of control, we may as well laugh. We are never fully in control of our lives and certainly not when it comes to life and death. We do however, have control of our choices and as much as we cannot control the storm, we can choose what to do before the storm and after the storm has passed.

Please consider a funeral plan and discuss bereavement and death with those who know about this. It may be a funeral director, spiritual leader, family doctor, social worker or community service provider. Do not struggle through this difficult time in life. Get help and someday you may be able provide help to others who need a hand.

Tell us about your story, we would love to hear and be part of it – [dyingtounderstand.com](http://dyingtounderstand.com)

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