

Why Funerals Matter

TIP SHEET 2

Funerals are for the living – we need to say our goodbyes, we need to grieve, we need to be with people to give and receive support.

We can underestimate just how much value a funeral can be to us. Since time began, all cultures have created rituals to honour their dead – they know that we have a need acknowledge what the person meant to us and know that they have been respectfully ‘laid to rest’.

- **FUNERALS ARE ABOUT SAYING GOODBYE - we need some kind of farewell to help us cope**

When someone dies, the funeral is not *for* them, it's *about* them. The funeral is for *us* - everyone who knew, loved and was connected to that person. This is a simple fact but sometimes we don't consider it this way.

The look and feel of funerals is changing. These days we find people want to have their say in how the funeral will look. There's no one size fits all. We're learning that people want more involvement, more about the person, more creativity with personal touches – they want the funeral to be meaningful, relevant and true to the life that was lived. They want it to be authentic.

Funerals can be relaxed, not stiff or formal; funny not just serious; colourful, not sombre; filled with music, not just words; outdoors or in a favourite place; themed around hobbies or achievements; held at dusk or dawn - the important element is that the funeral reflects the life that was lived and how that life mattered to others.

For some people, the word ‘funeral’ sounds too solemn or gloomy. You don't have to call it a funeral – call it a gathering, a tribute, a farewell, a ceremony, a send-off, a get-together, a muster – whatever suits you best.

- **FUNERALS ARE ABOUT ‘GOOD GRIEF’ - they help to get the grief moving so that it doesn't get stuck inside**

Researchers and psychologists are very clear in their message about funerals and grief – participating in a funeral helps to counter the initial effects of grief like shock, numbness and disbelief. Funerals underpin a necessary part of grieving – they reinforce the reality that the death has actually happened.

We need to allow our grief to surface - a funeral provides a safe and appropriate place to show and share our feelings with others. We should not underestimate how helpful this can be in setting the foundations for ‘good grief’ or healthy grieving. The reality is this – you cannot avoid grief just because you don't want to experience it, or you don't want others to see you upset. As human beings, we need to grieve.

Whilst we are often grateful for someone's life, funerals can't just be one sided - you can't just celebrate the person's life – we need to mourn their death as well and be honest about how we feel. Farewells of any sort are legitimately an emotional time – so why shouldn't we be upset when we are never going to see each other again? Funerals can help us say: *Thank you. I love you. I'm lonely without you. I'll always remember you. You meant a lot to me.*

- **FUNERALS ARE FOR SUPPORT – it's seen as the right time and place for people to be together**

We can undervalue how important it is for people to gather together when someone has died – to talk, to support each other, to reminisce and tell stories, to pay their respects, to let you know that they care about you.

Sometimes, a relative will have said, “I don't want a funeral, don't cry for me when I'm gone.” What they need to realise is that those who are left behind may indeed want to say their goodbyes and friends often want to turn up to show the family that this person mattered to them too. Remember, the funeral is for the living, and this includes children who also need to be considered.

Without a funeral, people often don't know if it's alright to contact you or to bring up the subject of what's happened. The funeral is seen as the ‘right’ time and the ‘right’ place to approach you and to offer their support to you – our friends have a need to reach out to us and say: I'm here for you. Having this kind of support is vital in the weeks and months after the funeral when the reality of the loss really starts to sink in, and we have to adapt to a life without someone who mattered to us.