

What to Do When a Loved One Dies

When someone you love dies, there are a lot of things that need to be considered including planning the funeral and settling their estate. This job usually becomes the responsibility of a close family member or the executor (if they had a will). You may be the one who has to deal with all of this while at the same time grieving the loss of someone very dear to you.

You can't do it alone. Settling a deceased family member's affairs is not a one-person task. You'll need the help of others, ranging from professionals like lawyers or CPAs, who can advise you on financial matters, to a network of friends and relatives, to whom you can delegate tasks or lean on for emotional support. You may take the lead in planning the funeral and then hand off the financial details to the executor. Or you may be the executor, which means you'll oversee settling the estate and spend months, maybe even years, dealing with paperwork.

The amount of paperwork may surprise you. If you have never been through an experience like this, you will quickly learn that there are a lot of documents to collect and assets to protect. So, give yourself time to go through everything. You may be surprised at some of the history you will find.

While you are dealing with the process of going through all of your loved one's belongings, you will be asked by a lot of people that want to help or take you out to dinner etc. Enjoy that time with them because they are reliving memories and hurting as well, and it's their way of coping through this like you are.

But, if you are asked to invest in anything, stay away from them. They may be genuine, but it is probably something that you should be either saying "no" to or dealing with later. You may want to even stay away from those people all together. Remember! People do crazy things to get money.

The following is a list that you might want to use to guide you through the process.

To Do Immediately After Someone Dies

Get a legal pronouncement of death

If your loved one died in a hospital or nursing home where a doctor was present, the staff will handle this. But if your relative died at home, especially if it was unexpected, you will need to get a medical professional to declare him or her dead.

To do this, call 911 as soon as possible after he/she passes and have him/her transported to an emergency room where he/she can be declared dead and moved to a funeral home. If your family member died at home under hospice care, a hospice nurse can declare him or her dead. Without a declaration of death, you can't plan a funeral, much less handle the deceased's legal affairs.

Notify family and close friends

Make individual phone calls to let people know their loved one has died. Ask the closest people to spread the word by notifying others connected to the deceased.

Secure the property

One of the first steps after a loved one passes is to make sure that their home is secure so nobody can get in. Lock up the deceased's home and vehicle. If there are valuables, such as jewelry or cash, in the home, lock them up. Protecting their assets is key, so lock their house up and keep people from going there. If anyone says they want to help, kindly say "I need to know their wishes and understand what might be needing to be paid before anything else happens."

Make sure pets have caretakers until there is a permanent plan for them. Send them to stay with a relative who likes animals or board them at a kennel.

Within a Few Days of Death

Make funeral, burial, or cremation arrangements

Initial Planning - If he or she had an attorney, you will need to find out if he or she had a will stating what their wishes were. If he or she did not have a will, search the paperwork in the house to find out if there was a prepaid burial plan. If not, you may want to call a family meeting to have a conversation about what the funeral will look like. This is critical if he or she did not leave any instructions. You need to discuss what the person may have wanted in terms of a funeral, what you can afford, and what the family wants. You will need to choose a funeral home and decide on specifics like where the service will be held, whether to cremate, where the body or ashes will be interred, and what type of tombstone or urn to order. It's a good idea to research funeral prices to help you make informed decisions. Line up relatives and friends to help plan the service, to keep a list of well-wishers, to write thank-you notes, and to arrange the post-funeral gathering.

Choose a Funeral Home - The funeral home will be able to help you on setting up the service the deceased wanted. They also can work with the medical examiner on the cause of death and anything else needed for the death certificate. Once that is done, then you can get the death certificates.

Military or Other Memberships - If the person was in the military or belonged to a fraternal or religious group, contact the Veterans Administration or the specific organization to see if it offers burial benefits or conducts funeral services.

Eulogy - If it doesn't say anything specific in their will about their wishes for a service, find a close friend that knew your loved one and ask him or her to speak at the memorial service. I had a financial advisor that knew the family well that I asked to speak at my mother's service.

Pictures - If you are a family member and you are in charge like I was, go through any pictures you can find. I made a collage of them through the years. I placed the pictures on an 8 ft folding table from the early days up to present and had an area where everyone could walk through and see all the different memories. Priceless!

Obituary - Getting the obituary together can be a chore. If they have anything written out, use that. If not, try to think about their accomplishments. Get a friend or relative to help. You will want to show them in a good light. Build them up. For example, my brother was a computer guy. He built computers – really powerful ones. Once he put a game in a computer and was able to have 13 people play it on the internet back in 1994. I thought that was impressive, so I put on his obituary that he was a computer engineer.

Contact their attorney

Call their attorney or get one if they don't have one already. He/she will be able to handle all the issues that will come up. Also, they can help let the credit world know that a person is deceased.

Contact their financial advisor

If you know their financial advisor, call him/her. Their financial advisor is one of the most important people to contact, because he/she can arrange for any money that will be needed.

Notify your family member's employer

Ask for information about benefits and any paychecks that may be due. Also inquire about whether there is a company-wide life insurance policy.

Within Ten Days After Death

Secure certified copies of death certificates

You will need to get 10 copies of the death certificates (both the long and short forms). You are going to need death certificates to close bank and brokerage accounts, to file insurance claims, to register the death with government agencies, and many other things. The funeral home you're working with can get copies on your behalf, or you can order them from the vital statistics office in the state in which the person died.

Find the will and the executor

It needs to be determined where your loved one's money, property or belongings will go. First, try contacting his or her attorney to see if they have a copy of the will. If not, look for the document in a desk, a safety deposit box, or wherever he or she kept important papers. People usually name an executor (the person who will manage the settling of the estate) in their will. The executor needs to be involved in most of the steps going forward.

While you don't need an attorney to settle an estate, but having one makes things easier. If the deceased did not have an attorney, the executor should pick the attorney. If the estate is worth more than \$50,000, an attorney is important to help facilitate the process of distributing assets.

If there isn't a will, the probate court judge will name an administrator in place of an executor. If the deceased did not have a will in the state of Florida and the property does not have a proper beneficiary designation, then the property will need to get probated. Probate is a legal process that is supervised by the court. The main purpose of the probate system is to satisfy any of the deceased debts, pay taxes, and distribute their property to the rightful beneficiaries.

The will needs be taken to the appropriate county or city office to have it accepted for probate. Your attorney will be able to do this for you. Check your state's laws, which may require you to file the will within a set period of time.

Make an inventory of all assets

Laws vary by state, but the probate process usually starts with an inventory of all assets (personal property, bank accounts, house, car, brokerage account, personal property, furniture, jewelry, etc.), which will need to be filed in the court. Once you have gone through the funeral or memorial service and things have slowed down, you will need to start researching to find out about all your loved one's assets and liabilities. You will probably need to look through their filing cabinets, desk, drawers, etc. First, you probably will be looking for things that may be listed in the will. You should also be looking for life insurance policies. But mostly you probably will be looking for things that they were involved with. In my case, my father had estate documents back five generations. In your situation, if your loved one was into cars, you may find paperwork on the titles. They could have paperwork on the houses or property they owned. It may be any kind of investment. It could be anything. I found that my father owned mineral rights in another state. Once you find information about something, research it, and talk to your attorney about it.

Locate all of the assets

Part of the work of making that inventory of assets is locating everything. The task, called marshalling the assets, can be a big job. Look through your family member's tax returns, mail, brokerage and bank accounts, deeds, and titles to find assets. Don't leave any safety deposit box or filing cabinet unopened.

Get assets appraised

About this time, you will need to have an appraisal done on everything in the house and any property the deceased owned - whatever that maybe. Reason? Uncle Sam. The US Government wants their share. Everything needs to be appraised, and a dollar value will be placed on it. Either your financial advisor or your attorney can help you with that. This is especially important if your loved one owes taxes, or a family is fighting over the items they had.

Make a list of bills

Share the list with the executor so that important expenses like the mortgage, taxes and utilities are taken care of while the estate is settled. After the creditors and anyone else who has a claim to the estate are paid, then a tax return for the estate will need to be filed to pay taxes on the value of the estate. Then the estate can be closed.

Also contact the following...

- **Police**, to have them periodically check the deceased's house if vacant.
- An **accountant** or a tax preparer, to find out whether an estate-tax return or final income-tax return should be filed.
- **Banks**, to find accounts and safe deposit box.
- **Life insurance agent**, to get claim forms.
- The **Social Security Administration** (800-772-1213; ssa.gov) and other agencies from which the deceased received benefits, such as **Veterans Affairs** (800-827-1000; va.gov), to stop payments and ask about applicable survivor benefits. The SSA, like the VA, recommends immediately reporting the person's death, though in many cases the funeral home will handle this.
- Agency providing **pension services**, to stop monthly checks and get claim forms.
- **Credit card companies** to close the account on behalf of a deceased relative. You'll need to provide a copy of the death certificate to do this, too. Keep records of accounts you close and inform the executor of any outstanding balances on the cards
- **Utility companies**, to change or stop service
- **Postal Service**, to stop or forward mail.
- Reach out to other companies to stop **recurring bills and subscriptions**.
- If **home** is vacant, contact the **insurer** to switch to a vacant policy.
- If home is under a **mortgage**, contact the lender.
- The **IRS**, **credit-reporting agencies**, and the **DMV** to prevent identity theft.
- **Social media** companies, such as Facebook or LinkedIn, to memorialize or remove an account.

Close email accounts

To prevent identity theft and fraud, it's a good idea to shut down the deceased's email account. If the person set up a funeral plan or a will, she may have included log-in information so you can do this yourself. If not, you'll need copies of the death certificate to cancel an email account. The specifics vary by company, but most require a death certificate and verification that you are kin or the executor