

The Bedside Vigil (Part 2): After Death Arrives

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The bedside vigil is the act of sitting by a dying person during their final hours or days, holding space for them with a loving presence, and tending to their needs.

The vigil can provide comfort and companionship to the dying person. It can offer meaning and peace to all involved. The undertaking, however, does not end with the loved one's last breath.

Immediately following the death, the vigil enters a new stage, one that allows time to honor the moment but also attend to the practical steps that must follow.

Note: This guidance applies to an expected death which occurs in the home in which the person was receiving hospice care or was in the final stages of a diagnosed terminal illness.

Take a moment

Although you will need to call trained professionals to verify the death and arrange to move the body, there is no need to rush.

An expected death is not an emergency. Rather it is a time to slow down and feel the peace and sadness of the moment. It is an opportunity to remember your loved one. It is a moment to feel your loved one's spirit one last time and say goodbye.

Family members sometimes want to stay in the room with the body; others prefer to leave. Every death and family is unique.

If you sit with your loved one, or invite others to do so, try to create a calm space. Turn off unnecessary equipment (e.g., oxygen concentrator or pressure relief mattress). Remove nasal cannulas or facemasks.

Light a candle or lower the lights. Arrange the bedding to create a peaceful look. You might want to open a window slightly to let in fresh air.

Feel free to talk quietly to your loved one and others present. Share stories and memories. Play music, read prayers, or recite a poem.

Or just sit quietly and reflect on how the loved one enriched your life.

It is okay to touch your loved one's body, hold their hand, or stroke their face. You might even be moved to lie in bed with your loved one and hold their body.

Help prepare the body for transport

Hospice nurses will prepare the body for transport and invite the family to help. If the loved one was not under hospice care, the funeral directors will prepare the body.

If you initiate the process of preparing the body, take steps to protect the deceased person's dignity.

Gently close your loved one's eyes and hold them closed for a few minutes. If their eyes do not stay closed, close them again and place an eye mask or soft, smooth cloth over them with a small weight (e.g., a small plastic bag filled with uncooked rice or beans) on top.

Close your loved one's mouth. If the mouth does not stay closed, place a small, rolled towel or scarf under their chin.

Lay your loved one's body flat with their arms alongside their torso and their legs straight. Elevate their head with pillows or by raising the head of the bed to prevent pooling of blood and discoloration of the face.

If the body is in *rigor mortis* (i.e., the stiffening of a body's muscles that occurs after death), let the funeral directors handle it as they know how to soften the joints.

To manage body fluids that are sometimes released from the bladder or bowel, place a clean absorbent waterproof pad under your loved one's body.

Hospice nurses will offer to bathe and dress the body and invite those present to join. It is a symbolic gesture of love and respect. Few bodies need more than ritual cleaning. (See sidebar.)

Legal pronouncement of death

The death will need to be verified (i.e., pronounced) by a trained professional so that a death certificate and medical, legal, and funeral processes can be initiated.

If the person is under hospice care, call the hospice office. Do not call 911 as it can trigger an unwanted, disruptive emergency response.

If the death was expected but the deceased was not under the care of hospice, call 911. The dispatcher will help assess the acuity of the situation, determine if the patient had a Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) order, and dispatch emergency medical responders.

If the deceased completed a POLST (Portable Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment) form, be sure to provide it upon arrival of emergency medical responders to prevent undesired attempts at resuscitation.

Unless a home funeral is planned, the family will need to contact a funeral home to pick up the body and prepare it for disposition. Hospice staff will make the call if the family prefers.

Funeral home staff are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and will pick up the body as soon as the family is ready. Knowing your loved one's wishes for what happens after death and connecting with a funeral home ahead of time can ease the decisions and arrangements that follow.

Donation of organs for transplant is not usually possible following an in-home death. Whole body donation to science and donation of tissues (e.g., corneas) may still be possible but usually require pre-death registration with the donation program. If such arrangements have been made, the family should notify the donation program as soon as possible.

Even when a death is expected, it can be difficult to prepare for the actual moment of death. Remember, you do not need to rush. It is a precious time during which you can honor your loved one, be with them, and touch their body one last time. It can also help you begin to process your loss and say goodbye.

Jeanette Stehr-Green and Astrid Raffinpeyloz join a host of volunteers and staff at Volunteer Hospice of Clallam County who provide person-centered compassionate care, respite care, grief support, and access to free medical equipment to community members during their end-of-life journey.

SIDEBAR

Bathing the Body after Death

Washing the body of a loved one after death is an ancient tradition practiced across many cultures and religions. It is not about the cleanliness of the body but is a symbolic gesture that demonstrates respect for those who have passed and provides a hands-on way to say goodbye.

To wash your loved one

- 1) Put lukewarm water into a basin and, if desired, add a few drops of essential oil, herbs, or lavender.
- 2) Gently wash the entire body or focus on the hands, feet, and face. Thoroughly dry the body part you are washing before moving to another.
- 3) Keep areas of the body that are not being washed covered to maintain privacy and dignity.
- 4) After washing, dress or cover the body according to personal wishes or cultural practices. Some may want to lay a memento of personal or spiritual significance with the body.
- 5) Position the arms alongside the body and straighten the legs. Lower the head if it was elevated.