

Ideas for Bereavement Rituals

Rituals are an important part of helping both residents and nursing home staff with the grief and bereavement (G&B) they experience when someone they live with, work with or care for dies. Unaddressed G&B can result in physical and mental health issues, including substance use and misuse, dementia, PTSD, burnout, compassion fatigue, suicide, increased frailty, and even death.

Listed below are actionable and, in many cases, no or low-cost ways to help residents and staff process grief.

LEGACY PLANNING helps residents to provide the foundation of support for the future bereaved, to know they will not be forgotten, as well as know what will happen when they die. It also helps the staff with the grief process by ensuring they feel confident they are acting on the residents' wishes, which can be comforting. These are some activities residents can participate in to proactively decide what will happen after they die:

- Obituary writing.
- Preparing a video or recorded message or story to give to family/friends.
- Choosing song(s) they would like played as they depart the home for the final time or at their memorial.
- Choosing a prayer or poem they would like read as they depart the home for the final time, or choosing an impromptu remembrance session.
- Writing letters to friends/family. Writing things to share with others.

RITUALS BEFORE AND DURING DEATH help both residents and staff to begin to prepare mentally. These can occur at any time during a resident's stay, but specific emphasis may be placed as the resident begins the process of dying.

- Bedside vigils. To be held by volunteers or staff if no family or friends are available.
 - Provide support to those participating in bedside vigils.
 - Provide snacks, poetry, and care items for those sitting vigil.
 - Relieve those who are sitting vigil so that they may get a more robust meal, shower, nap, etc.
- Read (favorite book, scripture, poems) to the resident
- Be a quiet presence for them.
- Be a listening ear for them.
- Provide physical comfort by holding their hand.
- Play music/instrument(s) for them to listen to.
- Stop in the room to pay respect before the person dies.



RITUALS AFTER DEATH help the living process the death and provide comfort. They provide order to the chaos of grief. They also create a sense of closure, intellectually telling us someone is really dead.

Prepare the body in according to nursing practice guidelines and honoring culturally appropriate steps/actions (e.g., anointing the body in essential oils).

Huddle/gather in room/hall or other room to debrief the staff and begin the notification process.

- Create a protocol to notify family/friends, internal, and external staff to ensure that all are informed.
- Share a memory, prayer, or poem.
- Remind staff how to access grief support.

Final Escort/Dignity Walk.

- Play a specific song or sounding chimes or a prayer bell as part of the procession.
- Provide overhead announcement, prayer, or music for the entire building.
- Drape the body with a special covering, e.g., a handmade quilt, or a flag for Veterans.
- Accompany the body to the hearse, wait until the hearse is out of sight before returning to the building.
- Pause for a prayer, poem, or impromptu sharing of stories/memories after the hearse pulls away.

Prepare their empty room.

- Place a quilt and/or rose on their bed for a day or two post death and encourage people to use the room to visit, reminisce, or as a quiet place to process their grief.
- Place a butterfly on the door or bed and/or at their empty place in the dining room.
- Pack the deceased's belongings thoughtfully and carefully as a reflection of how the deceased was valued by the home. Refrain from packing these items in trash bags.
- Have the room blessed to honor the departed and to support the incoming resident.

Individual actions on behalf of the care team for the family, roommate/best friend, and/or staff who were especially close with the departed.

- Sympathy cards and/or flowers.
- Attend the service and help residents attend the service.
- A friendship box that has relaxation or spiritual CD/memory stick, grief book, poems, sympathy card, invite to a special event (like the memorial), ways to reach out for support, etc.

Memorials.

- Prepare a remembrance table with an electric candle, photo, flowers, and guest book/memory book to give to family or for the home to keep.
- Create a bulletin board with the obituary, photo(s), and expressions of remembrance, etc.
- Decorate a tree inside the home, like an "Angel Tree", with personalized ornaments that will be given to the resident's family.
- Display memorial plaques indoors or outside.
- Sponsor memorial plants, trees, bushes, benches, etc. on the grounds/memorial garden.
- Hold memorial services at an interval of the community's choosing (annually, quarterly, etc.).
 - Play a song/music/hymn.
 - Recite a prayer, poem, and/or responsive reading.
 - Share special memories/stories.
 - Take time for reflection.
 - Have a friend or family member light an electric candle(s).
 - Share a photo montage video or collection of videos created by the deceased.
- Release butterflies*

These are just some things communities do as a part of the support process for their staff and community members when a death occurs. Given the freedom to brainstorm and be creative, your community may come up with their own ideas for rituals to help preserve the mental and physical health of its members.

Altarum.org/WellbeingTREE



**Only release butterflies during appropriate time of year. Also, be aware that releasing balloons can be dangerous for animals, and releasing lanterns with flames can cause wildfires.*