

Healing - The Benefits of Having a Funeral

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The death of a family member or friend is something everyone faces at some point in life. Emotions such as grief and love are the most universal feelings that cross ethnic and political boundaries. Although different cultures and religions have unique customs and traditions, funeral ceremonies all share common goals.

A funeral is not about caskets, flowers or rituals. The entire purpose of a funeral is to provide closure for the survivors as well as a chance to heal and say good-bye. The funeral honors the life of the deceased and brings peace of mind to those affected by the death.

Like any traumatic experience, a death is an event that causes people to contemplate their own mortality. When bad things happen, people feel a need to establish the significance of the event. Many people need to talk about it, to examine the impact it had on their lives and often look within themselves at the value of their own life.

This introspection can be seen in the recent death of John F. Kennedy, Jr., his wife Carolyn and her sister Lauren Bessette. The tragedy of their deaths caused nation-wide mourning and public grieving. News programs discussed the tragic consequences of the "American character flaw" of invincibility. This self-probing is a reflex action people feel after losing someone they care about.

The funeral process establishes significance on a personal level and on a societal level, as witnessed by the Kennedy-Bessette tragedy. First, the bereaved must explore feelings and

establish what the loved one meant to them. Often family members find it difficult to cope without the loved one. At Porter Loring Family Care Services, we often hear people talk about all the little things they will miss about the deceased. The smallest of details, something never realized or seen before becomes the most cherished memory.

The societal significance comes into play with the gathering of family members and friends at the funeral. It is designed to celebrate the life that touched others. It serves as a time to grieve. As in the Kennedy-Bessette tragedy, the funeral at sea and religious ceremonies in communities across the country gave closure not only to the immediate family, but to thousands of people world-wide.

Planning a funeral is an act of love. Families often choose to present personal eulogies or play meaningful songs creating an environment to openly express feelings that bring closure to the death. Choosing caskets that fit the personality of the loved one, selecting the person's favorite flowers and picking music that had a personal meaning all give significance and peace to those attending the funeral. Mementos such as photo albums and videos help people share memories and celebrate the life of the loved one.

At funerals, viewing the deceased, the casket in a closed-casket ceremony or the urn, in a cremation ceremony, may give closure to the death. Seeing the loved one, touching the casket or urn, or merely placing a flower on top of the casket can give a sense of relief and elation. The mere act of visiting the Kennedy's home in New York, gave peace-of-mind to the public saddened by the tragedy.

A funeral provides an opportunity for those grieving to gather and discuss feelings. Personal and group counseling, a community outreach program of Porter Loring Family Services, can help people through the grieving process and the months following the funeral. Talking to

people who understand the grief process can help get one through the rough times such as holidays or special occasions.

A funeral gives us permission to be sad and to cry, an emotion often ostracized in our society. Denying grief only prolongs the healing process. Those that openly express grief find they work through the process more rapidly, ultimately benefiting their overall physical and mental health.

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