

# Funeral Etiquette

## What to Do When a Colleague or Client Dies

By Jo Myers

*A colleague, client, or coworker dies.  
You don't know his family well, if at all.  
Should you attend his memorial service?*

**M**y estate lawyer passed away last year. I attended his funeral. Before the service, I signed the guestbook and found myself standing beside his widow, whom I had never met. She noticed me and our eyes locked. Confusion briefly replaced the sadness in her face. Of course, she did not recognize me and appeared frustrated when she could not come up with my name. So I introduced myself and told her that my husband and I were clients of her husband's firm, and that we were sorry for her loss. She smiled faintly and said, "Thank you." It was an awkward moment. After the service, I did not go to the cemetery for the interment because I felt it would have been inappropriate. On the way home, I wondered if perhaps I should have refrained from paying my respects in person. Maybe I should have just sent a card. My mind reeled from paranoid second guesses made in hindsight.

### A Daughter's Perspective

When my son was in high school, his friend Molly became my friend as well, and we have since kept in touch. Before we met—when Molly was fifteen years old—her father died suddenly of a heart attack. Five years later, on a sunny morning during her summer break from college, we got together for coffee and she candidly shared with me what it was like to deal with people she barely knew—or did not know at all—at his funeral. Her sentiments helped me understand how it might feel when people, albeit unwittingly, intrude on a loved one's send-off ceremony.

"It seemed like some people were there to gawk," Molly recalled. "It was too difficult to acknowledge them. And their presence took away from spending time with those who had been closer to him."

Reflecting on meeting some of her dad's coworkers for the first time at his memorial, Molly furrowed her brow as she experienced a flashback and offered advice. "People feel like they have to say something to the family. But don't, if you are not close to them. Just be there for yourself."

"The best people to talk with were those who were as upset as we were," Molly remembered. "Those who were grieving too, like Dad's friends. Their grief was real." Her grief seemed still new and painfully raw as she continued. "I wish fringe friends had not said anything. People who don't know the deceased should stay away."

Molly's next statement gave me pause: "If you were not there on a regular basis before the death, you will not be needed." I stopped myself short of passing judgment on this young woman for not appreciating the condolences extended by others. Then I realized that *her* father had died; this was *her* grief. The opinions of unfamiliar others were not important or of any consequence in this matter. It appeared that Molly was reading my thoughts, for she gazed at me and proceeded with her impromptu dissertation. "There is a big stigma when someone is grieving," she informed. "The people around them act differently. When my dad died, people said things like, 'He's in a better place' and 'You should be happy that he's with God' and 'Can't you be happy for him?' When you are grieving, words don't make you feel better."

Molly was on a roll. "Don't address how I feel. Don't tell me how I feel," she said with a touch of anger. "Instead, relate how you feel about my

dad not being in your life anymore. One man typed up his memories of my dad spending time with his granddaughter. It was sweet to have that. It was comforting to know that other people were upset. It validated our pain.”

As our conversation closed, it was evident that, while she might have preferred to have no interaction with strangers on the day of her father's funeral, Molly would welcome hearing from them now. “I would like to hear from people who knew him, those who worked with him. We miss out on the information and updates about the stories he shared. I think about them and wonder how they are. I would like to know.”

The insightful, tell-it-like-it-is chat with Molly would have been more helpful had it happened before my lawyer died. I would have known better how to be present at his funeral. I might not have even attended the service. My presence was not needed, truth be told; I could easily have been considered an unwelcome distraction and, therefore, a comfort to no one. Thank goodness I did not say anything inappropriate or insensitive when speaking with his widow (at least, I don't *think* I did).

## A Professional Perspective


A grief counselor once told me that following a funeral service, when people are in a queue to greet family members, she can sense how anxious they are to say something really meaningful and helpful to the survivors. “If you could take the ‘collective blood pressure’ of those in line, it would be really high,” said Jennifer McBride, director of grief support and community education for Horan and McConaty, a funeral-service business in Denver, Colorado. “It helps to alleviate some of that anxiety to let folks know there isn't a ‘right thing’ to say, but to show up and show you care means more than any words could express.”

Many people are uncertain about how to offer condolences. They worry that whatever they say or do will not be appropriate. More than once I have left a funeral smacking myself on the forehead over something I said or did.

## What to Do?

If you are unsure about extending sympathy to the deceased's family, the following guidelines may help:

- A memorial service is probably not the best place to get acquainted with a deceased person's family, whom you don't know. This does not necessarily mean you should not attend. Be sensitive to the situation and know that, while the survivors are probably comforted by the sight of a large turnout, the stress of having to meet new people could add to their grief.
- If there is a guestbook to sign, you can provide brief information next to your name on how you know the person. That should suffice in making your presence known. Later, you might send a note complimenting the family on the tribute they held for the deceased and also relate a nice memory you have of the person.
- Use only the smallest amount of the family's time at a memorial service or visitation. If you do not know the family, there is no need to say much more than “I'm sorry for your loss.”
- As you decide whether to attend a funeral, understand that there is no wrong decision. In addition to the death, birthdays and other pertinent celebratory occasions having to do with the deceased are perfect opportunities for reaching out later.

When attending the funeral of a friend—someone whose family members you do not know—relax and recognize that your only responsibility is simply to be there. Your presence alone will let family members know that their loved one lives on in your heart. 



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