

Coronavirus Media Interviews:

8 Talking Points for Funeral Directors, Crematory Staff, Cemeterians, and Other Death-Care Workers

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

As the coronavirus pandemic sweeps the globe, the media spotlight is shining on funeral homes, mortuaries, crematoriums, cemeteries, and other death-care organizations. Reporters are calling with all kinds of questions, ranging from the legal and practical to the ethical and esoteric.

It's a challenging time, and I know that some of you are working around-the-clock to serve hard-hit communities. In the midst of the chaos, if you are contacted by a reporter, this tip sheet will help you emphasize the enduring importance of your work to help families at their time of need.

1. We serve families.

We take great pride in caring for bodies with respect, yet our most important mission is to help families at a time when they are shocked, grieving, and vulnerable. We are accustomed to working with families in crisis, and we are prepared to help them now.

2. We follow health guidelines scrupulously.

We are experts in managing all health considerations for the families we serve. We have experience with infectious disease, and as always, we carefully follow all codes and regulations.

3. Spending time with the body helps people mourn.

We know that it's hard to truly acknowledge the death of a loved one and begin mourning if we don't see and spend time with the body. And this is especially true of families that couldn't be by the dying person's side at the hospital or nursing home. So even though there may be restrictions right now, and in some parts of the country it is not possible right now, we are working within those restrictions to ensure that as many close loved ones as possible have the opportunity to view the body and say their final goodbyes.

4. Spending time with the body before cremation helps people mourn.

More and more families are choosing cremation. It's important to understand that whether you choose cremation or body burial, it's helpful to spend at least a few minutes with the body before cremation or closed casketing.

5. Humans have always had funerals.

We know that funerals date to at least 60,000 BC, and every culture and civilization has had funerals ever since. Why? Because funerals help us acknowledge the death, honor the person who died, and support one another. In other words, funerals help us mourn well and set us on a healthy path to healing.

6. Delaying funerals delays the natural mourning process.

You can't push pause on grief. Anything that delays a funeral delays the natural mourning process. If restrictions prevent a big gathering right now, it is best to have a small but immediate ceremony (or several ceremonies if needed to accommodate all primary mourners) followed by an all-inclusive, larger memorial service in the future. Online funerals are also helping many families.

7. We can help families creatively meet their mourning needs.

We serve grieving families. With so many restrictions in place, we are finding creative ways to help them honor the person who died support one another in the days right after the death. We are helping families honor and connect with technology, and we are helping them plan future gatherings.

8. The pandemic is reminding us all about what is truly important.

Relationships matter. Togetherness matters. Honoring the life of each unique individual matters. Supporting one another matters. These are the reasons we do what we do. And in this difficult time, we are here to help families, to the best of our ability, with what is most important to them.

About the Author

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author, educator and grief counselor. Recipient of the Association of Death Education and Counseling's Death Educator Award, he presents workshops to bereaved families, funeral home staffs and other caregivers, and teaches courses for bereavement caregivers at the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado, for which he serves as director. He provides training to cemeterians and funeral directors on the "WHY" of both meaningful funerals and permanent placement. To contact Dr. Wolfelt, email him at drwolfelt@centerforloss.com or phone him at 970-217-7069. To explore additional resources related to meaningful funerals, go to his website at www.centerforloss.com