

Non-Religious, Spiritual, and Secular Death Care and Funeral Guidebook

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Death Care Guidebook Overview

Regardless of one's religious or spiritual beliefs, death holds a great deal of significance for all people and is practiced diversely in the United States. Ways to care for and honor the dead depend on family traditions, personal wishes, and situational circumstances. It is important that those who are practicing death care feel empowered to hold a funeral that reflects the wishes of the deceased and the family. Death care is highly personal and individualistic, and the diversity of the traditions are apparent in community death practices. It can be helpful to consult a spiritual religious chaplain who can help connect those close to death and their families to resources for those experiencing loss. Chaplains are available to consult and assist people with any non-religious, spiritual, or religious background. A chaplain or funeral director can also help the family determine what kinds of personal elements they would like to include or not include in a funeral.

This guide is intended to be an overview of potential options and resources to help non-religious and spiritual people prepare for death, care for the body, plan a funeral, and process their grief and mourning. It is not comprehensive and is not intended to be followed exactly. Please feel free to take any parts that feel meaningful and helpful and leave behind those that do not serve you. The process of death can be an overwhelming and difficult time, and this guide is one resource intended to help people navigate it.

For more information on how to hold an independent or home funeral, please visit the Home Funeral Alliance at <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>.

Non-Religious and Spiritual Beliefs Surrounding Death

People who identify as “Nones”, describe themselves as agnostics, atheists, or not religiously affiliated when asked about their religious beliefs. Some may believe in God, while others do not, and some may be committed to a personal spiritual practice, while others do not practice at all. Today, about 28% of the United States identify as spiritual Nones.

Considering the diversity of beliefs that falls under the category of Nones, their ideas about death are also varied. Some believe that death is a purely biological process with no afterlife component, while others believe that there is some kind of spiritual afterlife, whether it be reincarnation or a continuation of some other kind. Many claim to not know one way or the other, although they have a personal feeling that death is not the end. Regardless of what someone believes happens after death, it is important for people to engage in a practice called “meaning-making” at the end of life. Meaning making is done in all religious and spiritual traditions and is how all people derive meaning and value from their experiences. Creating a meaning-making practice around death is a way for those who do not hold any particular beliefs to find peace at the end of their lives. Additionally, family, friends, and care-takers may also wish to find a meaning-making practice that helps them to process the death of a person and cope with their grief.

Resources For Beliefs on Death:

- <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-the-y-are-and-what-they-believe/>
- <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/facing-death-without-religion/>
- <https://www.ncronline.org/news/they-dont-identify-religion-they-often-believe-god-after-life>
- <https://religionnews.com/2016/07/15/why-do-many-nones-believe-in-life-after-death/>
- <https://globalioc.com/making-sense-of-meaning-making/>
- <https://schoolcrisishealing.org/making-meaning-what-does-that-actuallymean/>
- <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/secular-death/>

Preparing For Death

When someone is preparing for death, they may experience a range of emotions. It is normal to feel sorrow, fear, anger, relief, regret, or peace. Some may wish to have some privacy for mediation and reflection, while others will want to be surrounded by family and loved ones. Many people want to talk about their lives and share special memories or impart valuable lessons. Leaving a legacy through writing final letters to family and friends or making requests regarding funeral arrangements and a final will may be important to someone close to death. Some people will find comfort in thinking about death while other people will prefer to direct their attention to something else.

Often, at the end of life, people feel more connected to nature and the world around them. Sometimes, they develop a more spiritual or religious outlook than they have had throughout their lifetime. They may wish to speak to a chaplain or religious professional about their feelings to help them find peace and clarity. This is normal, and can help people express their feelings while processing the transition from life to death. The end of life is often a time when people will wish to make final amends, share life lessons and wisdom, and get final affairs in order. Families, close friends, and caretakers might assist them in creating a meaning-making practice to help them prepare for the end of life.

Some possibilities for meaning-making rituals are:

- Lighting candles
- Sitting in silence or meditating
- Writing letters to loved ones
- Preparing and eating comfort foods
- Spending time outdoors or opening windows
- Telling stories and sharing memories
- Listening to music
- Reading quotes or poems
- Displaying photos of family and loved ones

All of these are simply options that can be adapted to provide support to those facing death. Oftentimes, spending time with a person who is dying and providing comfort, empathy, and a listening ear are the best ways to support them through the transition.

Resources on How to Prepare for Death and Provide Spiritual Comfort:

- Home Funeral Alliance Guidebook at <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>
- <https://www.nikkithedeathdoulas.com/blog/personalized-rituals-for-the-dying-and-their-families>
- https://www.virtualhospice.ca/en_US/Article/Spiritual+Health/Rituals+to+Comfort+Families.aspx

Caring for the Body

Following the Death

After the final breath, those who are present might wish to observe a period of silence to honor the moment of death. A close family member or friend might then close the eyes and mouth of the deceased. It is normal to feel a range of emotions during this time, and allowing whatever feelings arise is an important part of processing the death.

The person who has died might have already had wishes regarding funeral arrangements and body care. They may have expressed preferences to have a funeral at home, out in nature, at a funeral home, or somewhere else. Carrying out their final requests should be honored if possible. If they did not leave behind specific instructions, the family or caretakers may decide to have a funeral based on what they know about the person.

Having a home funeral is becoming a popular option as it can be more affordable, environmentally friendly, and intimate. Rituals for body care at home can include: washing and preparing the body, holding ceremonies that honor the person and the life they lived, decorating a casket or shroud, or making an altar/memory table with the person's belongings.

For more general information about how to care for the body in a private residence and to learn of other rituals that can honor the death of a loved one, consult the Home Funeral Alliance Guidebook which can be accessed at <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>.

Disposition

Non-religious, spiritual, and secular disposition can include many different methods of burial, cremation, and other kinds of disposition. Conventional burial and cremation are still very popular choices, however, alternative kinds of disposition are becoming more mainstream options. Consult the Home Funeral Alliance Guidebook for a full overview of methods of disposition.

Environmentally Friendly Disposition

If the body is not embalmed, they are able to choose a variety of environmentally friendly disposition options. Green burials are a form of burial where the body is laid to rest in a way that allows for natural decomposition. Options like human composting and water cremation allow the body of the deceased to be converted into nutrient rich fertilizer. The fertilizer can then be used to grow trees, plants, and gardens or donated to conservation projects. Organ donation and the donation of a body to science are also meaningful ways for people to give to humanist causes. For more information on how to hold funerals that are environmentally friendly, consult the resources below on human composing and water cremation. Eco-friendly disposition practices can be meaningful ways to honor a person who was fond of the environment and nature.

Resources on Body Care and Disposition Practices:

- <https://www.bethcavenaugh.com/blog/the-moment-of-death>
- <https://www.thenaturalfuneral.com/reverent-body-care/>
- https://www.virtualhospice.ca/en_US/Main+Site+Navigation/Home/Topics/Topics/Final+Days/Care+of+the+Body+After+Death.aspx
- Human Composting and Water Cremation
 - <https://recompose.life/our-model/>
 - <https://www.webmd.com/balance/what-is-human-composting>
 - <https://www.cremationassociation.org/alkalinehydrolysis.html>
 - <https://us-funerals.com/aquamation-or-resomation/>
- Green Burials
 - <https://www.serenityridgemd.com/comparing-natural-burial-traditions-across-different-religions/>
 - <https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/plan-a-green-burial/>

Non-Religious/Spiritual Funerals and Memorials

Families of spiritual Nones might hold any kind of funeral or memorial that best serves the wishes of the deceased and their personal circumstances. They may or may not want the body to be present, and the size of the funeral could range from extremely intimate to very large. Many rituals that happen in religiously affiliated funerals may still be practiced, such as reading eulogies or poems, singing songs, creating altars and tables of remembrance, observing moments of silence, and paying respects to the body.

Some may wish to hold a kind of celebration as opposed to a funeral, which celebrates the life of a person in a non-traditional manner. This might include dressing in bright colors, holding a service outside, playing music that the person loved during their life, offering words of hope and love, and openly expressing the complexity of emotions that arise around death.

Anyone can officiate a non-religious or spiritual service, and they can happen within whatever timeline works best for the family. Often the purpose of the funeral will be to remember and honor the person who has died and to focus on the life they lived, rather than on a potential afterlife. It can include elements that people consider to be universal like love, gratitude, humor, grief, regret, and admiration.

Consulting a religious chaplain about how to hold a funeral that best serves your family and circumstances can be helpful. The Home Funeral Alliance Guidebook also offers a variety of ways to create a funeral practice that feels meaningful.

Resources on Funerals and Memorials:

- <https://www.memorialplanning.com/resources/religious-funerals-guide/non-religious-funerals-guide/>
- <https://www.dignityfunerals.co.uk/advice/non-religious-funerals/>
- <https://funeral.com/blogs/the-journal/how-to-plan-a-secular-celebration-of-life-non-religious-service-ideas?srsId=AfmBOooO0idpgElzxZ9xaoEGllcw9vqOijup-teOv-cxZwfnbMxjRUwr>

Mourning and Grief

Mourning practices for non-religious and spiritual communities are incredibly diverse in the United States. Some may want to spend time surrounded by family and loved ones, while others might prefer private meditation and spiritual reflection. There is no right or wrong way for Nones to mourn their dead, and it is important to remember that grief is not linear, and can evolve and change.

Some people may want to continue gathering and performing rituals to express their grief and honor their dead. Listening to music, dancing, making art, talking to loved ones, telling stories and sharing memories, meditation, and spending time with pets are all ways that a person can mourn their loss.

For those wishing to support the family during mourning, they can offer support by helping out with childcare and household chores, bringing food and meals to the family home, and being available to chat on the phone or visit. Sending flowers and donating to a charity are also nice gestures to let someone know you are thinking of them.

To express condolences for the family, phone calls and visits are appropriate. Empathic gestures, small acts of kindness, and a willingness to listen are all ways in which people can express support for a grieving family.

Resources Grieving and Mourning:

- <https://www.helpguide.org/mental-health/grief/bereavement-grieving-the-death-of-a-loved-one>
- <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/grief-and-mourning/coping-grief-and-loss>
- <https://www.friedrichjones.com/grief-library/the-early-stages-of-grief-the-first-seven-days>
- <https://www.bgcarenav.org/6-ways-to-process-grief-after-the-loss-of-a-loved-one>

Complete List of Online Resources

National Home Funeral Alliance

- <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>
- State Laws:
 - <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/state-laws>

Resources For Beliefs on Death:

- <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-the-y-are-and-what-they-believe/>
- <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/facing-death-without-religion/>
- <https://www.ncronline.org/news/they-dont-identify-religion-they-often-believe-god-after-life>
- <https://religionnews.com/2016/07/15/why-do-many-nones-believe-in-life-after-death/>
- <https://globalioc.com/making-sense-of-meaning-making/>
- <https://schoolcrisishealing.org/making-meaning-what-does-that-actually-mean/>
- <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/secular-death/>

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- <https://www.nikkithedeathdoulas.com/blog/personalized-rituals-for-the-dying-and-their-families>
- https://www.virtualhospice.ca/en_US/Article/Spiritual+Health/Rituals+to+Comfort+Families.aspx

Resources on Body Care and Disposition Practices:

- <https://www.bethcavanaugh.com/blog/the-moment-of-death>
- <https://www.thenaturalfuneral.com/reverent-body-care/>
- https://www.virtualhospice.ca/en_US/Main+Site+Navigation/Home/Topics/Topics/Final+Days/Care+of+the+Body+After+Death.aspx
- Human Composting and Water Cremation
 - <https://recompose.life/our-model/>
 - <https://www.webmd.com/balance/what-is-human-composting>
 - <https://www.cremationassociation.org/alkalinehydrolysis.html>
 - <https://us-funerals.com/aquamation-or-resomation/>
- Green Burials
 - <https://www.serenityridgemd.com/comparing-natural-burial-traditions-across-different-religions/>
 - <https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/plan-a-green-burial/>

Resources on Funerals and Memorials:

- <https://www.memorialplanning.com/resources/religious-funerals-guide/non-religious-funerals-guide/>
- <https://www.dignityfunerals.co.uk/advice/non-religious-funerals/>
- <https://funeral.com/blogs/the-journal/how-to-plan-a-secular-celebration-of-life-non-religious-service-ideas?srsId=AfmBOooO0idpgElzxZ9xaoEGllcw9vqOijup-teOv-cxZwfnbMxjRUwr>
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- <https://www.helpguide.org/mental-health/grief/bereavement-grieving-the-death-of-a-loved-one>
- <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/grief-and-mourning/coping-grief-and-loss>
- <https://www.friedrichjones.com/grief-library/the-early-stages-of-grief-the-first-seven-days>
- <https://www.bgcarenav.org/6-ways-to-process-grief-after-the-loss-of-a-loved-one>