

Coping during COVID: Viral emergency changes funeral practices

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Saying goodbye is an important step in grieving, but the COVID-19 emergency has put traditional funerals on hold, which can affect the grieving process.

The state's transition from a stay-home order to the slightly looser safer at home order does not change the restrictions on large gatherings: there can be no more than 10 people, including for funeral services.

"Our concern is protecting the community, but we will plan on doing what the state guidelines (say), in keeping groups down to 10 or less for any type of burial or memorial, and we encourage people to have a memorial service that everyone can attend when the ban is lifted," director Daryl Pridy of Crippin Funeral Home said.

Taylor Funeral Home in Delta is also going by the state guidelines, director Chalmer Swain said. That mortuary also encourages people to plan memorials at a later date.

"If we have a graveside service, we hold it to 10 or fewer, or immediate family only," Swain said.

Both funeral homes conduct burials by setting the services up in a way that does not require staff to be close by. Instead, critical staff remain at a distance to observe and then complete burials after the mourners have gone.

"The ban isn't necessarily because of the deceased person. It's because of everyone else," Pridy said.

The state is limiting gatherings to reduce the opportunity for spreading the coronavirus, which causes a potentially deadly respiratory ailment. People can have the virus, but not yet show signs. Events like funerals also tend to attract people from many locations, which further increases the possibility of contact with an as-yet asymptomatic person.

Survivors do seem to understand the limitations, Pridy said.

"This has been in the front of everyone's mind so much. Everyone we've dealt with knows about the ban. I think they're mentally adjusted, for the most part. We're not breaking a surprise to them. Everyone has been pretty good to work with in that way," Pridy said.

"I do think it has an effect on the family, where not all the close friends and relatives can attend. I do think it is a more emotional experience for the family."

People may experience feelings of guilt or lack of closure and isolation because of the changes, said Amanda Jones, chief clinical officer for The Center for Mental Health.

"Individuals who are experiencing the loss of a loved one during this time are not only managing a personal loss, but also the loss of rituals and traditions that help us with the grieving process," Jones said.

“Ways in which some individuals honor someone who has died, such as funerals or other gatherings, have been limited or simply not organized because of health-mandated restrictions.” “Despite these challenging circumstances, there are ways that we can support ourselves and others during this difficult time.”

The situation is not the fault of the bereaved, nor does it lie in their control, Jones said, adding there is no right or wrong way to experience loss. People can still reach out to others and connect with others who are grieving. They can take time to share memories.

“There will be a time that you will be able to come together with friends and family to celebrate the life of your loved one, so allow time to think about how that might be in the future,” Jones said.

Those who are grieving also need to take care of themselves, by eating a healthy diet, getting enough sleep, and physical activity.

“Take time for yourself to do these things that also make you happy and allow opportunity for pushing forward in your life,” Jones said.

The funeral homes continue following universal precautions when they take charge of bodies, regardless of how the person died. Pridy said Crippin staff treat all remains as though the person might have had a virus, and wear protective gear to protect themselves, as well as people living in the residences or facilities where staff arrive.

In instances when the deceased is believed to have had COVID-19, mortuary workers place a mask on that person’s face, too, in case air expels from their lungs as they are moved.

“We don’t want to be carriers and spreaders of it. That’s why we are maintaining our distance and doing everything by phone or email,” Pridy said.

Crippin and Taylor have been conducting much of their business by phone and email, as well. The relaxation of state restrictions may allow them to have a few more in-person meetings, but with social distancing and other precautions in place.

“I think we’re all ready to get back to normal, if that can ever happen again. It’s very hard when you see the families and you can’t help them,” Swain said.

“We may be able to meet with people on more of a one-to-one basis,” Pridy said. “We’re looking forward to everything being over and the state being opened up, but business will remain (as is) until they raise the group ban, as far as funerals.”

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