

WHAT ABOUT THE FUNERAL?

TEENS AND MEMORIAL EVENTS

One of the first questions families or caregivers might ask when someone dies is whether a teen should attend the funeral, visitation, wake, or other memorial event. This can be a complicated decision depending on expectations of what the memorial event will involve (both scheduled events and reactions from people who are expected to attend), the circumstances surrounding the death, and the teen's personality and predicted needs. Families have to consider both the need for closure and the developmental needs of their teen.

CONVERSATIONS TO CONSIDER

Teens may have strong feelings about their desire to attend or not attend a memorial event, or may be apprehensive or uncertain about what will happen. The following are good questions to consider or discuss with a teen while deciding how they should participate in events honoring the person who died.

- **What will happen to the person's body?**

If your person's body will be present and visible at the memorial event, talk to the teen about what this may be like. For example, "The funeral will be open casket, which means that our person's body will be visible throughout the visitation/service. The people who have been caring for our person's body (funeral home, etc) have worked to make them look normal and at peace. However, bodies go through changes after people die. You might notice that their skin looks a little different, or their facial expression is not what you are used to, or just that they look different because they are so still. Some people choose to look at or speak to their person's body, often because they want to see them a final time, or in order to make their death feel more real. Others choose not to look at their body, and would rather remember them as they saw them before they died. Would you like to see our person's body, have alone time, or not see them?" If their body will not be visible, you could say something like, "The funeral will be closed casket, which means that our person's body will be present but not visible. We will place a picture of them on top of the casket, and people may place flowers or other important items there as well. You have a choice about whether you get close to the coffin and look at the items or place something there yourself, or want to stay further away."

- **What will happen at the memorial event?**

Depending on the age and desire of the teen, they may be involved in the planning of the funeral or other memorial, or they may not. Regardless of this, consider whether or not they have attended memorials previously and discuss with them what typically happens and what they might expect if they attend, such as when they will come in, where they will sit, and who will speak. If there are expectations of the teen, such as being a part of a receiving line, talk about these and give as many choices as possible about how they want to be involved.

- **What will happen after the memorial?**

Many times, other events happen following a funeral or memorial, such as a graveside service, entombment service, funeral lunch or supper, or other smaller gathering involving family or close friends. Let your teen know what will likely take place during this time. For example, if your person will be buried, you could say, "After the funeral, our immediate family (or close friends, etc.) will go to the cemetery. We will follow the hearse, which holds our person's body, to the place where they will be buried. We will have another, shorter service where the pastor will talk to our family and read scripture, then our person's body will be placed in their grave."



CONVERSATIONS TO CONSIDER

(CONT'D)

- **Who will attend the memorial, and how will they act?**

Teens may be unsure who typically attends memorial events, and if they should invite or inform others. As much as possible, help them understand who is likely to come and behavior they might see, such as people they may not know well wanting to hug them, questions others might ask or things people often say, and more intense expressions of grief if these are likely to occur, such as loud crying or wailing. Talk with them about whether or not there are specific people they would like to contact or ask to be present.

If your teen wants to attend the memorial event, consider these questions with them:

- **Do they want to attend the entire event?**

Depending on your traditions, some memorial events can last a long time. Consider the teen's attention span, physical and emotional stamina, and desires. Remember, it is okay for a teen to attend part of an event, to come in late, or leave early. They may want to have time with family or friends without attending the entire event. If you or the teen are concerned about how long they could manage a memorial event, consider planning what parts they will attend, how they can let you know if they need to leave or need a break, and where they could go if needed.

- **Will they be involved in the memorial?**

Sometimes teens want to participate in the funeral or other memorial event. They might want to read scripture, a poem, or a letter they have written, light a candle, be involved in music, or give a eulogy. Talk about whether they want to participate, letting them know that it's okay if they want to do or say something in front of others, and it's also okay if they don't.

- **Who can support them?**

Teens may need different support than adults do during a memorial event. Consider talking with your teen about choosing someone to be with them if they need or want additional support. Ask your teen who would be most helpful to them, including family members or friends who are likely to attend. Identify a space they could go without disturbing others if they need a break during any part of the memorial event. Teens may be hesitant to ask for support from primary adults, who are also close to the person who died, and adults may want to or feel responsible to attend all parts of a memorial event. For this reason, it can be helpful to identify outside supports who have more flexibility.

If the teen does not want to attend the memorial event, or there are other reasons they should not, consider the following:

- **What will they do during the memorial?**

Even if teens choose not to participate in memorial events, they should not be left alone during this time. Consider who could be present with them and able to hold active space for their grief. Who can be a positive support during this time? It is important to identify people who know what is going on and can support the teen's decision not to attend, answer questions, and provide care and distraction as needed.

- **What other opportunities for closure will they need?**

Whether or not a teen attends a memorial event, they will need to engage in some way as they process the death of their person. Talk with the teen about what they would like to do to say goodbye or honor the person who died. It may also be important to talk through the reasons why the teen does not want to attend, as these may help you and your teen figure out how they can honor the person in their own way, and if they need additional support.