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## What to do after someone dies

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### Summary

- An expected death at home is not urgent but a doctor needs to provide death certification.
- If the death happens in a hospital or care facility, staff will assist you.
- Grief support services can help you and your family with the loss of your family member or friend.
- There is support available for those affected by the suicide of another person.
- You may need to make decisions about organ and tissue donation.
- An autopsy may be requested for an unexpected death.
- An unexpected death must be reported to police and is dealt with by the coroner.
- A doctor must sign the death certificate before funeral arrangements can be made.
- The funeral director may register the death with Births, Deaths and Marriages.
- The funeral may be already organised and prepaid or you may have to organise it yourself.
- You must notify various organisations when someone has died.
- There may be financial issues that affect you that you need to deal with after a person has died.
- You are entitled to compassionate leave from work or school when someone from your immediate family or household dies.

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### Practical things to do after someone dies

When someone dies, it may help to have a written plan of what you need to do including who you will need to contact. Keeping members of the immediate family and close friends informed in the time leading up to a person's death will help you to support one another at this distressing time. You, and other family members and friends may just want to sit with the person if they have just died. For more information about a person dying, visit [\*\*At the end – dying explained\*\*](#).

#### Death at home

An expected death is not an emergency. You don't need to call for the police or an ambulance. Following the death, at a time when the family, carer or support person is ready, you will need to notify your palliative care service (if one was involved in the person's care) or your doctor, or you can directly contact a funeral director of your choice.

The doctor or nurse does not need to visit the home to verify the death, although it is usual practice for a nurse from the palliative care service to visit the home to support the family and carer following the person's death.

The palliative care team providing care can give you more guidance on what to do.

Any doctor can complete the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death as long as he/she knows the person's medical history and is prepared to certify the cause and manner of death. The Medical Certificate Cause of Death must be completed within 48 hours of a person's death.

An unexpected death needs to be reported to the police and coroner. For more information see the **Unexpected deaths** section on this page.

#### Death in hospital or a residential care facility

If the death happens in a hospital or care facility, the staff will help you through the process and help you understand what you need to do. Staff are there to support you and are always available to answer your questions if you are unsure.

For more information see the page [Death in hospital](#).

If brain death has occurred after a person was placed on life support, a difficult decision may need to be made to switch off life support systems. For more information see the page on [Brain death](#).

### **Organ and tissue donation**

You may be asked to donate the person's organs for eligible organ transplant patients. The person may have already decided to donate their organs and this may already be documented in an advance care plan. If not, this is a decision you may need to make immediately after they die.

For more information see the page on [Organ and tissue donation](#).

### **Autopsy**

A post-mortem, or autopsy, is the medical examination of a body after death. A hospital (or non-coronial) post mortem may be performed if the immediate family of the deceased person gives their consent. An autopsy is usually not necessary for most expected deaths.

When an autopsy is required on a baby, the parents must provide their consent for this to occur. In some instances, the baby's death must be reported to the coroner.

A coroner's autopsy is only performed if the coroner or police need information about the cause of death or if the death was suspicious. A funeral can take place after an autopsy has been completed.

For more information, including different levels of consent, see the page on [Autopsy](#).

### **Death certificate and registering the death**

A doctor must sign the death certificate before funeral arrangements can be made. Once this has been signed, the funeral director can take charge of the body and start making the funeral arrangements. This includes registering the death with the Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages and sending the death certificate to the registry.

If the funeral director does not do this, the family member who organises the final arrangements for the person who has died must register the death with the Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages.

For more information see [Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria – Register a death](#).

### **Notify organisations**

When a person dies, you will need to contact various organisations to tell them what has happened.

If the person received assistance from Centrelink you need to call **132 300** or visit a Centrelink service centre. You will need to complete the [advice of death form](#) and return it to Centrelink.

Organisations you may need to contact include:

- Centrelink
- Australian Tax Office
- banks where the person held accounts
- insurance companies
- the superannuation fund of the deceased person
- healthcare professionals
- utility companies
- the workplace of the deceased person
- VicRoads.

The Australian Government Department of Human Services has further information on [what to do following a death](#).

## **Dealing with grief after someone dies**

When a family member or close friend dies, it is normal to grieve the loss in your own way. The death of someone they love can be difficult for many people. Grief can affect adults, children and teenagers in different ways.

### **Grief, bereavement and cultural support**

Support services can help you and your family with the loss of your relative or friend by providing bereavement counselling, support and education. The opportunity to talk things over with a trained grief counsellor can help you make sense of your feelings.

For more information see the pages on [\*\*Grief\*\*](#) and [\*\*Grief – support services\*\*](#).

For more information on support if you are caring for someone at the end of life see the page [\*\*Emotional, spiritual and cultural care\*\*](#).

### **Children and grief**

Children have their own ways of grieving and can grieve from a very young age. It is important to recognise your child has feelings of grief and help them to express those feelings. Children need the opportunity to ask questions and be given clear information.

For more information see the page on [\*\*Grief and children\*\*](#). There is more information on the [\*\*National Centre for Childhood Grief\*\*](#) website.

### **Teenagers and young adults and grief**

Teenagers and young adults experiencing grief have unique needs, due to dealing with the issues of developing independence and forming their own life. Peer support is very important and peers may be deeply affected by the death of a sibling or friend.

Teenagers and young adults need an honest adult approach, respect for their privacy and information to help them feel in control. Some services have a specific health professional such as a Key Worker to assist with care for adolescents and young adults.

There is more information on the pages [\*\*Trauma and teenagers – tips for parents\*\*](#) and [\*\*Trauma and teenagers – common reactions\*\*](#).

For more information on grief and loss related to children and teenagers visit the [\*\*Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network\*\*](#).

### **Death of a baby**

When a baby dies, it can be a very traumatic event for the parents and families. This can be a result of miscarriages, babies being stillborn or neonatal death including sudden unexpected death in infants (SUDI), sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and fatal sleeping accidents.

There are many reasons why a baby dies. Each is unique and often a medical examination and investigation is required to work out why this has happened. When an autopsy is required, the parents must provide their consent for this to occur. You may need to consider how this may make you feel, before you decide to give consent. Talk further with a palliative care team member if you are unsure.

For more information see:

- [\*\*Death of a baby\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Sudden unexpected death in infants – SUDI and SIDS\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Royal Women’s Hospital – Learning why a baby has died\*\*](#)

### **Death of a child, teenager or young adult**

It has been said that there is no more devastating loss than the death of a child. Parental grief can be intensified

and last longer as losing a child to death seems to go against the natural order of things.

Parental grief can also be intensified after the death of a teenager or young adult. The death can be a significant loss to parents and other close adults, creating more intense emotions than if the person had lived a longer life.

For more information see the pages on [Grief](#) and [Grief – support services](#).

## **Funerals**

The deceased person may have already organised and prepaid their funeral. In this case, there should be detailed information about who to contact and the deceased person will have been given a receipt for payment and a prepaid funeral contract.

If the funeral has not been prepaid, then it will be left to the executor named in the will or to family members to organise the funeral.

For more information, see [Consumer Affairs Victoria – Prepaid funerals](#).

For more detailed information see the page on [Funerals](#).

## **Funeral costs**

If you do not have the money to pay for the deceased person's funeral, you might be able to access their bank account to cover the funeral expenses. If your spouse or a dependent is the one who has died and you are unable to pay for the funeral, you may be able to apply for part of your superannuation on the basis of compassionate grounds, through the Australian Government Department of Human Services. See [Early release of superannuation on the Department of Human Services website](#).

## **Financial issues**

If the deceased person contributed to your household income, their death can have a major impact on your financial situation. Even though you may still be grieving, it is important to work out where you stand financially and seek support and financial advice if you need it.

When someone in the family dies, other family members are not liable for their debts unless the debts are jointly held. Debts are paid out of the deceased person's estate.

For more information see [Money Smart – Losing a partner](#).

## **Time away from work**

If you are working, you may need to take time away from work. You are entitled to compassionate leave when someone from your immediate family dies.

Immediate family includes your spouse (husband or wife) or partner, child, parent, grandparent, grandchild, sibling. 'Immediate family' also includes the child, parent, grandparent, grandchild, or sibling of your spouse or partner.

For more information talk to your employer or see [Fair Work Ombudsman – Compassionate Leave](#).

## **Unexpected deaths**

An unexpected death happens when a person who appears to be healthy dies unexpectedly. The coroner will try and determine how and why the person died. One of the roles of the coroner is to reduce preventable deaths. To do this, the coroner will investigate unexpected deaths.

To report an unexpected death contact the police immediately, or for further advice (24 hours, seven days a week), call 1300 309 519 and ask for Coronial Admissions and Enquiries.

For more information see [Coroners Court of Victoria – Reportable deaths FAQs](#).

The most common causes of an unexpected death are a traffic accident or [work-related fatality](#). For more

information on these topics visit [Transport Accident Commission](#) and [Worksafe Victoria](#).

### **Grief after suicide**

If you are dealing with the suicide of a family member or close friend, it is important to seek support to make sense of what has happened and to deal with the grief and loss. There are things you can do that will help, such as:

- Give yourself time to come to terms with your loss.
- Try not to deny your feelings.
- Remember that grief is a normal reaction, even when your feelings seem too intense to be normal.
- Work through your feelings, alone and with others.
- Support other family members.
- Be vigilant about signs of depression or suicidal thoughts in yourself and other family members and seek help from a doctor if these occur.
- Be honest with children and explain the suicide in language appropriate to their age.
- If friends seem awkward or don't know what to say, tell them what you need.
- Accept that some friends won't be able to give you the kind of emotional support you need. Consider joining a support group in your area.
- Anticipate that important events, such as birthdays, anniversaries and some religious or cultural events will provoke strong feelings – particularly those that involve a gathering.
- Seek professional bereavement counselling.
- Join a bereavement support group and find support from others who have experienced similar situations.

### **Suicide counselling services**

Telephone counselling is available for people who have lost someone to suicide, and is provided by:

- **SuicideLine** – a 24-hour, Victoria-wide professional telephone counselling service where qualified counsellors are always available to listen and support you. Call **1300 651 251**
- **Hope for Life** – a support and referral service specifically for people bereaved by suicide.
- **Suicide Call Back Service** – provides eligible callers with up to six 50-minute counselling sessions with a professional counsellor. Call **1300 659 467**.
- **GriefLine** – a confidential and free telephone counselling service for anyone experiencing grief. Call **(03) 9935 7400**

For further information and other options you can contact:

- your **GP**, who can refer you to counselling services or suggest appropriate services in your area for you to contact in your own time
- the **Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement**. Tel. **(03) 9265 2100**
- your workplace, for counselling through their employee assistance programs
- Living is for Everyone – information and support pack for those bereaved by suicide or other sudden death
- **Lifeline** – for crisis support and suicide prevention services, including suicide bereavement support Tel. **13 11 14**.

For more information see the page [Suicide – family and friends](#).

### **Suicide**

If you or someone you know is in a situation that is urgent or you're concerned someone is in immediate danger, do not leave the person alone, unless you are concerned for your own safety.

Call 000 and say that the person's life is at risk, or call the person's doctor or a mental health crisis service. If the person agrees, you could go together to the local hospital emergency department for assessment.

**If you are thinking about ending your life, [tell someone](#). Let them know you are thinking about hurting**

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**[betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://betterhealth.vic.gov.au)**

**yourself, and that you are worried. Ask for help.**

If you are in immediate danger call:

- triple zero (000)
- **Lifeline**. Tel **13 11 14**
- **SuicideLine Victoria**. Tel **1300 651 251**
- **Suicide Call Back Service**. Tel **1300 659 467**

If you just need to talk:

- **beyondblue**. Tel. **1300 22 4636**
- your **GP** – when you book, explain that you need a longer appointment
- Victorian mental health services in your area
- **headspace**. Tel **1800 650 890**
- **MensLine**. Tel **1300 78 99 78**
- **Kids Helpline**. Tel **1800 55 1800**
- **WIRE Women's Support Line**. Tel **1300 134 130**

**This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:**

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