

# REVITALIZING

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# Aftercare in an Age of MINIMIZED RITUAL

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by Beth L. Hewett, PhD, CT

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Americans are a multicultural and diverse blend of people whose familial and social backgrounds help shape the ways that they grieve. People who have not experienced much death in their lives may use television and other media as a point of reference for how to address death rather than a history of family exposure to rituals and ceremonies. Certainly, the media tends to downplay the effects of death and grief, suggesting that the bereaved should do well shortly after a death and that a funeral—if one is had at all—provides “closure” rather than being the venue for acknowledging the new grief and changed family situation that naturally occurs following death.

Additionally, as a society, Americans are changing how they use rituals and ceremonies to commemorate death and to mourn those they love. Funeral professionals know that these changes affect families’ perceptions of what a funeral or memorial service should look like. Sometime, to their own detriment, families elect not to have healing services that enable the community to offer them the support they so badly need in times of grief. Or they may choose minimalist approaches to the funeral or memorial service.

One way that funeral homes are making sure that they remain relevant to a changing clientele is to offer aftercare services such as check-in phone calls, resources for grief support, and annual memorial services with a personalized gift such as a Christmas tree ornament. These types of services are helpful for remaining connected with bereaved people who otherwise may be uncertain who really cares about their ongoing feelings of loss in a society that insists on a quick fix and rapid recovery. Such connections are important to the people I work with individually and in grief support groups; I often hear them say that “their” funeral home offered them this or that kind of help (and “you should go there, too”). Indeed, I strongly recommend additional aftercare provisions such as personalized, handwritten thank-you notes to the family; non-sales oriented empathy cards expressing solidarity with the bereaved; a book or other gift that might help with the mourning; free grief-focused educational seminars; and even hosting or subsidizing local grief support groups.

## One-Year Anniversary Aftercare

I also advocate an approach to aftercare that might help to revitalize the funeral industry’s relevance to the bereaved. As part of the services that people might purchase at the time of a death—or even later as an add-on—the funeral home can offer a one-year anniversary memorial option. The idea is to connect ritual specialists from the funeral home with the bereaved family, enabling the family to mark the difficult first anniversary in a social setting that feels right to them. Such an action recognizes the essential difference between grief (a passive,

internal emotional experience) and mourning (the active, outward expression of that grief that leads to healing over time). Setting up an anniversary ceremony would benefit the bereaved and promote healing through active mourning. The one-year mark can become a part of the funeral package where the traditional funeral trappings may be changed to something less traditional and more in keeping with the space that bereaved people inhabit at this new time in life.

## Let's Do the Anniversary Together

First, a planned anniversary ceremony assures a bereaved person or family that professional ritual specialists are standing by to help them mark that first anniversary. Grieving people often express that they dread the upcoming anniversary of the death (or of a birthday, wedding anniversary, holiday, or other significant date such as the date of illness onset) more than anything else. Although the anticipation of such dates may be worse than the actual days themselves, I have observed that people who have healing mourning activities planned seem to do better than those who have no idea what to do or even that they can, in fact, do something to honor that date. When funeral professionals help families through anniversary events, they support the healing of mourning rather than leaving people alone to navigate the stark pain of grief.

We'll Help You Personalize the Anniversary Ceremony  
Second, when people have funeral ceremonies (or alternative memorial ceremonies weeks or months after the death), they benefit in myriad ways, but they may later think of things they wish they had done differently or in addition to their planned ceremony. An anniversary ritual enables people to do some of the memorializing they may have wanted to do earlier but weren't feeling able to do. For example, the family may have chosen to do a formal funeral and church service to satisfy elements of faith, family need and/or desire, and to invite others to support them. But perhaps they also wanted to honor their loved one in a less-formal outdoor spot to commemorate the deceased person's life goals or favorite activities. Perhaps the deceased was an ardent fisherman, swimmer, or a gardener. A funeral home ritual specialist can help the family plan a highly personalized service in the woods, at the beach, or in an arboretum where the deceased had been the happiest. A funeral professional—stepping outside the confines of the funeral home campus—can do much to educate the family about healing symbols that might have natural inclusion in such settings.

## We'll Do the Heavy Lifting

Third, planning anything can be exhausting for some bereaved people. Although some family members experience healing drive and vigor in planning and carrying out ceremonial moments, others have less emotional and physical energy for the effort and welcome help. Professional funeral ritualists can assist by hosting and planning the logistics of such a memorial ceremony. They can talk with the family about what has worked for them this first year and

what remains especially challenging. Then, they can develop a ceremony that uses elements of healing ritual as well as to assist with the logistics of carrying out the ceremony: determining where to purchase plaques, helping with tree planting, building a stone cairn, conducting a candle-lighting ceremony, working a charitable run or walk with the family, and the like. Funeral professionals who are familiar with grief and mourning are a natural choice for helping the family to find its way through a difficult anniversary. They can engage the family in the planning while guiding them with elements of ritual and symbol that may be especially healing.

## If We Don't Have the Information You Need, We'll Find It for You

Fourth, funeral home directors serve as many peoples' first connection to the challenging legal issues involved in preparing a loved one's body for appropriate disposition. In a shift that more families are adopting, some people are choosing not to inter a loved one but to cremate the body and keep the remains in their home. Keeping such remains may feel right for the time being, but the anniversary ceremony offers opportunity for a professional check-in with the family, who might have decided for religious purposes that interment is right or that they want to scatter the remains. For example, when families have kept cremated remains, they may be ready to talk about what it would be like to inter them in some manner and the challenges that may occur over the years if no one wants to keep these precious remains as the generations that revered them die out. This anniversary period enables the funeral professional to offer additional advice in how to dispose of the cremated remains in legal, spiritually uplifting (or religiously appropriate), and healing ways that honor the life once lived.

## A New Comfort Zone for Funeral Professionals

People know to go to a funeral home for their immediate needs after a death has occurred—they know to go, but doing so is certainly out of their comfort zone. By including healing options such as anniversary ceremonies in the funeral home's offered services, funeral directors can teach the grieving public that they are invested in their clients' needs long beyond those initial days of bereavement. Although some of these memorial ceremony ideas require funeral professionals to leave their own comfort zone and explore outdoor and other nontraditional venues for healing, they can become and remain more relevant in this age of minimized ritualization by offering nontraditional anniversary services that people need as part of their mourning experiences. An added bonus is that everyone may find divine sparks of joy in the anniversary memorial, reinvigorating the funeral professionals relationship with the bereaved and providing everyone with a sense of progress over the past year's grief journey. 