

Steps to follow after the demise of loved ones

October 31, 2018 | UPDATED 23:40 IST



As quoted in epic Hindu scripture Bhagavad Gita, Death is Inevitable and Certain. It is at this critical time in ones life that one has to develop the necessary strength and courage to face the situation and do what is expected in the age old cycle of human life – the funeral process of disposing the human body.

In our lifetime, we face this situation many times in the community we live in. Unlike in India where the necessary infrastructure is readily available conducive to the Indian life conditions, it is not so easy in overseas.

The local customs and infrastructure to handle such situations are present but may not be amenable for Indian way of funeral services.

Checklist- documents needed

Death Certificates (around 20)

Social Security Card

Marriage Certificate

Birth Certificate of the deceased

Birth Certificates of any children

Insurance Policies

Property Deeds & Titles

Vehicle title and registration documents

Stock Certificates

Bank Passbooks / Documents

Legal Status documents including Passport, Visa

Recent Income tax return documents and W-2 forms

Mortgage documents, payments related information or documents

Any contract documents

To do before funeral:

Contact the immediate family: Inform all key family members about the death and discuss the funeral arrangements as per the deceased's wishes if any.

Notify close friends and extended family: Notify as many people as you can by finding out contacts through email accounts and personal phone contact lists of the deceased, if needed take any help from friends and family.

Secure property: Lock up the deceased's home and park the vehicle in a secured area. If home is going to be vacant for a while notify the police, landlord or property manager. If there are pets, have someone care them until permanent arrangements being made.

Organ or body donation instructions: If you know your spouse's last wish was to donate the body or organ(s) – inform the hospital authorities immediately to make proper arrangements. If you are not certain, always check the deceased's driver's license, any living will or health care proxy for any details exist.

Choose a funeral home: If the deceased has no choice of funeral home or haven't made prepaid funeral services, it will be family's choice to decide a funeral home.

Contact funeral home director: Use instructions that your loved one might have left or the earlier family discussion to guide many decisions to be made. The director can help in answering the below questions –

Get 20 to 25 copies of your spouse's death certificates in original. The funeral director can help with getting copies of death certificate (many financial institutions require original death certificates)

Will the body be embalmed?

Will there be a casket? Will it be open or closed?

Will there be viewing for family and friends? Or only for family? Eulogy from family and friends?

Will body be buried or cremated? If cremated - will the ashes be scattered? If the ashes are deposited in an urn, will it be placed in a mausoleum?

Where is the burial or cremation site?

Deceased Photo with a frame on an aisle stand? Flower arrangements? Sign-in Guest book?

Do religious traditions need to be respected and followed?

Will there be contributions to charities in lieu of flowers?

Any financial assistance needed for the final rites? Churches, temples, mosques, employer(s), non-profit organizations, trusts, foundation etc. may help financially

Arrange for headstone: Depending on the family traditions and customs if headstone is needed, you can purchase it through the cemetery or from an outside vendor. Consult the cemetery about rules, regulations and specifications such as color, size etc.

Prepare an obituary: The funeral home may help with this service or you may want to write an obituary by yourself. If you want to publish the information in a newspaper, check on rates, deadlines and submission guidelines. Don't include exact date of birth due to identity theft issues.

Any ethical will? An ethical will isn't a legal document, but rather a letter of sorts written to your family and friends that shares your values, life lessons and hopes for the future. If the deceased left one, arrange to share it, may be even have it printed.

Organize a post-funeral gathering: Depending on your tradition, it's called a repast or a wake. It can be held at a church, temple, banquet hall, restaurant or someone's house etc.

Send thank-you notes: Acknowledge all the people who helped you in this tough situation

To do after funeral

Notify local Social Security office: Typically, the funeral director will notify Social Security of your loved one's death. If not, you can call the main#: 1-800-772-1213 or contact your local social security office. If your loved one was receiving benefits, social security payments must stop because overpayments will require complicated repayment penalties. Even a payment received for the month of death may need to be returned. If the deceased has a surviving spouse or dependents, ask Social Security office about their eligibility for increased personal benefits and about a one-time payment to the survivor.

Handle Medicare: If the deceased had been enrolled in Medicare Prescription Drug Coverage (Part D), Medicare Advantage plan or had a Medigap policy, inform concerned authorities at the phone numbers provided on each plan membership card to cancel the insurance.

Look into employment benefits: If the deceased was working, contact the employer for information about pension plan, credit unions and union death benefits. You will need a death certificate for each claim. If your spouse was employed at the time of his/her death, call the benefits administrator to ask about benefits due to you. Besides life insurance, these can include unpaid salary and bonuses, accrued vacation and sick pay, leftover funds in a medical flexible spending account, stock options etc. You'll also need to check on pension benefits. Assuming your spouse was retired and you were both receiving monthly pension benefits in the form of a joint and survivor annuity, notify the plan administrator immediately.

Stop health insurance: Notify the health insurance company or the deceased's employer. End coverage for the deceased, but be sure coverage for any dependents continues if needed. If you were receiving health coverage under your spouse's employer plan, you may be able to continue on the group plan for 36 months through COBRA coverage. (An employer with fewer than 20 employees is not required to provide COBRA coverage.) Ask the plan administrator if the company will continue picking up the employer's premium subsidy.

Notify life insurance companies: If your loved one had life insurance, appropriate claim forms need to be filed. You will need to provide the policy numbers and a death certificate. If the deceased was listed as a beneficiary on a policy, arrange to have the name removed.

Terminate other insurance policies: Contact insurance providers such as homeowner's, automobile and so forth. Claim forms will require a copy of the death certificate.

Meet with a probate attorney: The executor should choose the attorney. If there is a Will, the executor named in it and the attorney will have the document admitted into probate court. If there isn't a Will, the probate court judge will name an administrator in place of an executor. The probate process starts with an inventory of all assets (personal property, bank accounts, house, car, brokerage account, furniture, jewelry, etc.) which will need to be filed in the probate court.

Make a list of important bills: Share the list with the executor or estate administrator so that bills can be paid promptly.

Contact financial advisers, stockbrokers: Determine the beneficiary listed on these accounts. Depending on the type of asset, the beneficiary may get access to the account or benefit by simply filling out appropriate forms and providing a copy of the death certificate. If that's the case, the executor wouldn't need to be involved. If there are complications, the executor could be called upon to help out.

Notify mortgage companies and banks: It helps if your loved one left a list of accounts, including online passwords. Otherwise, take a death certificate to the bank for assistance. Change ownership of joint bank accounts. Did the deceased have a safe deposit box? If a password or key isn't available, the executor would most likely need a court order to open

and inventory the safe deposit box. Most probate courts have administrative rules about steps to access the box of any decedent.

Close credit card accounts: For each account, call the customer service phone number on the credit card, monthly statement or issuer's website and close the deceased's account. Upon request, submit a copy of the death certificate by fax or email. If that's not possible, send the document by registered mail with return receipt requested. Once the credit card company receives the certificate, it will close the account as of the date of death. If an agent doesn't offer to waive interest or fees after that date, be sure to ask. Keep records of the accounts you close and notify the executor of the estate about outstanding debts.

Notify credit reporting agencies: To minimize the chance of identity theft, provide copies of the death certificate to the three major firms — Equifax, Experian and TransUnion — as soon as possible so that the account is flagged. Four to six weeks later, check the deceased's credit history to ensure no fraudulent accounts have been opened.

Cancel driver's license: To prevent identity theft, contact the department of motor vehicles and get the deceased's name removed from the records. You may need to provide the death certificate.

Cancel email and Website accounts: It's a good idea to close social media and other online accounts to avoid fraud or identity theft. The procedures for each website will vary. For instance, Google Mail (Gmail) will ask you to provide a death certificate, a photocopy of your driver's license and any other detailed information.

Notify the post office: Inform your local post office and use the forward mail option.

Cancel memberships in organizations: Reach out to all organizations that the deceased belonged to and cancel membership status.

Contact a tax preparer: A tax return need to be filed for the individual, as well as for an estate return. Keep monthly bank statements on all individual and joint accounts that show the account balance on the day of death. You have nine months from the date of your spouse's death to file a federal estate-tax return. (Some States have earlier deadlines for filing tax returns for state estate and inheritance taxes).

Notify the election board: Immediately notify the election board about the death. (According to a 2012 Pew Center report, almost 2 million people on voter registration rolls are dead.)

Retirement Accounts: If your spouse had a 401(k), it makes the most sense to roll the account into an IRA — assuming you get the go-ahead from your estate lawyer. If your spouse still had accounts from former employers, consolidate them into one IRA. The custodial firm that holds your IRA can help with the paperwork.

Prepare the estate: Until you meet with your estate lawyer, hold off on placing your spouse's assets in your own name. If you touch those assets in your spouse's name, you'll lose any opportunity to "disclaim" the property — that is, allowing those assets to go directly to your children or other heirs. If you forgo these assets, they will not count against your federal or state estate-tax exemption when you pass away. You need to save all receipts related to the estate, especially if the estate's value is close to or exceeds the estate-tax exemption. The funeral and post-funeral expenses are legitimate expenses for tax-deduction.

Delegation of your decisions: Assuming you had named your spouse to make financial and health-care decisions on your behalf in the event you become incapacitated, you need to designate a new agent for your financial power of attorney, health-care power of attorney and health-care directive.

Collect needed documents

It would be great if the deceased left behind needed documents, if not dig through the piles and extract the information like...

Passwords to access computer file.

Banking, bills, credit-card statements, taxes, life insurance policies and estate documents, Social Security numbers, birth and marriage certificates, company benefit booklets, car titles, powers of attorney, brokerage and retirement accounts.

Create a "financial support team." The group could include an accountant, a lawyer, a financial planner, and a trusted friend or family member who has good financial skills.

While you should postpone big financial decisions, assess your cash flow.

Make a list of your income sources such as - Social Security, pension payments, dividends, interest, job earnings, IRA distributions etc.

Make a list of your fixed expenses such as - groceries, mortgage payments, recurring payments, utilities, gifts, travel, insurance etc.

You should build a reserve for at least one to two years of expenses in a liquid account, such as a bank or money-market account.

Collect life insurance benefits. If you can't find the life insurance policy and you don't have an agent, go through checkbook registers and canceled checks to see if there were any checks written to an insurance company. You may find this information for a fee from many locator service companies. For example, access www.policylocator.com.

Precautions:

When you file a claim, you may have choices regarding how you want to receive the money. Read the fine print carefully. In some cases, an insurance company will place your funds into its own money-market funds and send you a checkbook. Turn down this option, and then place the money in a federally insured bank account or a money-market fund. If you're instead considering guaranteed monthly payments for life, seek the advice of your lawyer or financial adviser.

Disclaimer: This document will provide an overall view to follow in such grief moments. All this information may not be relevant to you or you may not have answers for all of the questions in the above document. It is advisable to contact concerned authorities to get appropriate information depending on your circumstances. For more information, please visit www.prasadhotakura.com