



# Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) is part of the Department of Psychiatry, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

## FUNERALS AND MEMORIALS *A Part of Recovery*

A memorial service is an important step in the chain of events that occurs after a death. For many, it may be difficult because it brings reminders of the loss and fears of the future. Funerals and memorials provide an opportunity to show appreciation for the person, to grieve together, and to make a new beginning. At funerals and memorials, attendees will encounter families as well as the religious and patriotic symbols, music, ritual, and ceremony, the personal effects and the history of the deceased, and will hear about the deceased's place in the family, community, organization, and nation.

*The following are important elements in most funerals and memorials.*

- Leaders should not be afraid to show their humanity through some displays of emotion and providing comfort to others. It is helpful to not worry about having the right words as much as just being yourself.
- Funerals and memorials bring powerful reminders of the humanity of the deceased. Sadness, tearfulness, and anxiety are common feelings.
- Pictures and remembrances from the person's life and favorite objects may be displayed. They are powerful symbols.
- Pictures and personal possessions may be passed on and an individual's history recounted by survivors.
- Family, friends, or co-workers may provide details of the person's history, the last time they were together, or their favorite memory.
- When due to violent death, remains are seldom viewable.

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- Saying goodbye may be more difficult for many in this setting. The presence of pictures and remembrances may be particularly important.
- Families may request an object from the location where the person died as a remembrance.
- Leaders should actively support family, friends, and coworkers of the deceased.
- Communities (such as the, police, firefighters, or a corporation or business) often extend beyond local geography and encompass vast numbers of people of all faiths, races, ages, and personal histories
- It is important for leaders to remember that they provide support to a diverse audience.
- This support network often provides hope that people are remembered and that they left a legacy of family, friends and associates.
- The many differences within and between faiths on how funerals and memorials are conducted need to be recognized and respected.
- If the attendee is not familiar with the type of service being conducted or different ways of expressing grief, it is wise to inquire beforehand what to expect.
- It is helpful to ask the person who conducts the ceremony to give an explanation of the ceremony for others who are not familiar with that faith or its rituals.
- Leaders who are asked to officiate or speak at such events are likely to fear faltering and failing to say the right words. Often, there are no right words; the human presence speaks for itself. Sometimes presence is all we have to offer, but presence is powerful.

