

Opinion

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Does viewing your loved one before the funeral aid the bereavement process?

As a director of a 146-year-old firm of funeral directors responsible for conducting more than a thousand funerals a year, with 60 years' experience in the profession, I think it's time for a debate within the profession on the benefits of families viewing their loved ones prior to the funeral. The debate is made necessary by the growing trend for direct cremations, which often dispense with viewings, along with the traditional funeral service. I believe this is detrimental to the bereavement process.

This article was written after several months' in-depth research into the post-funeral experiences of hundreds of our clients. It is also the fruit of my six decades in the funeral profession, during which I have conducted thousands of funerals and dealt with thousands of bereaved people, observing how they cope with their grief. A view I've firmly come to, as a result, is that people who view their loved one after their death have better psychological outcomes than those who don't.

Statistics are hard to collect. At what stage do you ask the question "Did you view your loved one and did it help? Or did you decide not to view, and later regretted it?" The answer, just a week after the funeral, might be different a year later and, perhaps, different again after another five years. Also, how do we calculate how well an individual is coping with their bereavement? Is it whether they are referred for counselling,

take anti-depressants, drink more alcohol, cry more, cry less, suffer relationship break-ups? And could these things be solely attributed to the bereavement?

The important thing is that everyone should have the choice of whether to view or not. Some old people who die of natural causes can be prepared to look just as they always looked in their old age, and to be peacefully at rest. This can be a source of great comfort to their loved ones. Others who have died in a serious car accident, or after extensive surgery, clearly won't look exactly the same as they did before, but I still think their loved ones should have the opportunity to view them after death.

From an emotional perspective, should people view? This is entirely their decision. I've walked people to the chapel door only for them to change their mind, offered them the option of a closed coffin first to see how they feel, and sometimes watched them sit outside the door and say what they needed to say to their loved one from a distance. Ultimately, the individuals do what feels right to them. For many, this is the opportunity to say the things they didn't say before the death occurred - to say they love them, to say sorry, to tell them off for leaving. These things are more important than seeing them in order to come to terms with the reality that they have died - the reason most often given for viewing.

My view is strengthened by the fact that our funeral company—Rowland Brothers of Croydon - over the years has arranged many funerals for several generations of the same family. This means I'm frequently reunited with former clients and can catch up on their experiences and gain a long term perspective of how they have coped with bereavement.

This gives me confidence in my judgment that viewing is almost always a positive experience for the bereaved. Those occasions when it has proved otherwise are usually due to the viewer not being adequately prepared for the experience.

To test my belief, I asked the funeral arrangers, funeral directors and counsellors at our firm's nine branches for their view on the question: is viewing a helpful factor in the grief process? Without exception they agreed that, overwhelmingly, it is. For the small minority of family members who found it a negative experience (around 8%), this was often due to them not being adequately prepared for the experience.

Our company's two in-house counsellors gave me information about a representative forty clients who requested in-depth counselling. Of these, thirty-three viewed their loved ones and seven chose not to. Most of those who chose to view found it to be a helpful experience. The forty clients comprised twenty-six females and fourteen males, aged from 8 to 80. The cause of



death varied from natural causes to cancer, a road accident, a murder and seven who took their own life. Of the thirty-three who viewed, thirty found the viewing a positive experience, most often describing it as "helpful". Three said it was a negative experience.

There is a limited amount of academic research into the subject, including a study by Oxford University's Department of Primary Care Health Services published in the *British Medical Journal*, based on interviews with people suddenly bereaved, focusing on their experience of viewing or not viewing their loved one. It concluded that many bereaved people think it is

important to see the body of their loved one, though a small number found the experience distressing. Research specifically into the effect of viewing loved ones killed traumatically in a disaster - such as the Zeebrugge ferry sinking, the Lockerbie plane explosion and a serious train crash in Australia - revealed that those who viewed coped better with their bereavement experience in the long run.

Over the process of time, the way death is approached in this country has changed and is still changing. Historically a person would die at home and be kept at home until the funeral, which would usually take place within a few days. Nowadays

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there seems to be a matter of urgency for a funeral director to come and collect the deceased from home, and a huge element of shielding families from the realities of death. Whether or not this is a healthy 'progression' is arguable.

Some psychiatrists, and many funeral directors, argue that viewing the body helps to bring home the reality of loss, and that viewing helps in the grieving process. The research is interesting but, in the end, my gut reaction, based on my long experience, remains - the process of grieving in bereavement is usually helped by viewing the body, and loved ones should always have the choice.



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