

How Death Scene Investigators, Coroners, and Medical Examiners Can Support Newly Bereaved People

The death of a child is a life-altering event. Individuals who interact with bereaved parents, siblings, caregivers, and other family members in the aftermath of tragedy have a unique opportunity to provide meaningful support during this crucial time. This fact sheet provides tips for death scene investigators, coroners, and medical examiners when connecting with newly bereaved families.

Death Scene Investigators Can Make All the Difference

Death scene investigators are among the first professionals to come face-to-face with families after a child's death. Your interactions will have a powerful and lasting impact on families. Whether this investigation is your fifth or 500th, it is important to remember it may be the family's first, and you have a unique opportunity—and responsibility—to manage the interaction with compassion and respect.

Impact of Grief on Cognition and Understanding

Grief, particularly traumatic grief such as the death of a child, significantly affects brain functioning. Newly bereaved individuals are not just sad; their ability to understand, process, and comprehend information is impaired.

Grief negatively impacts short-term memory. Parents, siblings, caregivers, and other family members may not be able to access information as basic as their child's date of birth or middle name. They also may not be able to provide a linear account of the events leading up to the child's death.



Written Guidance

Providing written information is critical to help newly bereaved people who may not be able to accurately recall or recount details after the fact.



Repeat Information

Repeating yourself at least 2-3 times will help newly bereaved people remember facts.



Sleep Cycle

Allowing the brain to rest for a 24-hour period (or at least one sleep cycle) will help reduce, not solve, neurological distress.

Practical Tips

- 1 Use the child's name.** Confirm with the family that you are saying the name correctly and ask if there is another name they would prefer you use (i.e., a nickname or other term of endearment). Using the child's name honors the child and their importance to the family. While in the family's home, always avoid clinical terms such as "decedent."
- 2 Understand that every interaction is a hallmark memory.** Be mindful that every interaction with death investigators has the potential to create lasting memories, both loving and painful, and has the potential to support both short- and long-term coping.
- 3 Approach investigations with compassion and seek to reduce harm.** Help families learn what to expect from a death investigation and answer questions as thoroughly and honestly as possible. Respectful and compassionate care must be taken when death investigations require scene reenactment.



- 4 Allow people to say goodbye.** Provide the family with an opportunity to spend time with their child's body and say goodbye in a way that does not compromise the death scene. Also, gently remind family members they will have another opportunity to see their child's body at the funeral home, which may ease some of the concern that this will be the last time they can see their child.
- 5 Care for the child's body.** Thoroughly explain what steps are being taken to care for the child's body and explain when they may see their child again.
- 6 Provide clear and concise information about the autopsy process.** Explaining that "an autopsy is a medical examination in which a physician examines your child's body to determine the cause of death and notes any injuries found" provides necessary and factual information. Additional information may be necessary. Share contact information for the individual(s) the family can contact to check on the status of the autopsy.
- 7 Help the family understand what is expected of them.** Provide the family with information—preferably written—about next steps, such as working with a funeral home, to help them recall critical information after you have left.
- 8 Recognize that culture matters.** Whenever possible, adhere to familial and cultural traditions related to the timing of burial or cremation. Death and religious rituals are extremely important in the context of grief, including the aftercare of the body.
- 9 Refer to resources and support.** Provide a list of mental health professionals who have experience and expertise in grief and trauma (including providers who specialize in child and adolescent grief) and other resources families can utilize when they are ready. Most people are not ready for long-term mental health support for 6-9 months following a death, but adult family members may benefit from short-term (1-3) sessions.
- 10 Use intention when releasing the autopsy report.** Notifying families when an autopsy report is available provides them with an opportunity to engage on their own terms and timeline.
- 11 Peripheral conversations.** Avoid collegial side conversations—such as lunch plans, weekend plans, or how the team played—when overheard, this disvalues the life of the child who has died.



Importance of Self-Care

Death investigators often experience a higher level of stress than other professionals. Support may be required to cope with the continual exposure to stress, death, and trauma. Restorative time away from the job is important. Simple steps such as taking a walk, getting enough sleep, drinking water, and spending time with the people you care about can be powerful preventative acts, as can reaching out to a professional to support your mental health. Taking care of yourself is fundamental to serving your community.

Resources

- **988: Free Mental Health Hotline.** If you or someone you know is in crisis, call or text **988** to be connected to crisis intervention and suicide prevention resources. Learn more at 988lifeline.org/get-help/.
- **The Collaborating Office for Medical Examiners and Coroners (COMEC)** supports the work of professionals who conduct medicolegal death investigations. For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/comec/index.html.
- **The National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME)** is the national professional organization of physician medical examiners, medicolegal death investigators and death investigation system administrators. For more information and resources, visit www.thename.org.
- **The National Center for Fatality Review and Prevention (NCFRP)** is the technical support and data center serving Child Death Review (CDR) and Fetal and Infant Mortality Review (FIMR) programs throughout the United States. For more information, visit ncfrp.org.
- **Evermore** is dedicated to improving the lives of bereaved people. For more information, visit evermore.org. To access a national free Grief Support Directory, visit evermore.org/grief-support-directory/.