

Cremation is here to stay. Are you?

By Alan D. Wolfelt, PH.D.

Recent data from industry sources confirms what funeral professionals across the country are already experiencing: cremation has become the predominant form of disposition in Australia.

Nationally, cremation rates are estimated to be around 70% with the rate continuing to rise year on year. Several factors are contributing to this ongoing shift. Cost considerations remain influential, as do environmental concerns, urbanisation and cemetery space constraints. Australia's increasingly mobile population, changing religious and cultural practices, and evolving consumer preferences including interest in simpler, less ritualised services also play a role.

At the same time, the number of deaths in Australia is projected to increase steadily as the population ages, meaning the absolute number of cremations will continue to grow even if the proportion stabilises.

Cremation is also becoming more socially normalised in Australian funeral practice with more families attending cremation based services for loved ones, making it a familiar choice for many. Cremation is clearly here to stay. The question is: Can your funeral home strategically respond to this reality?

Cremation and the six needs of mourning

In this article Dr Alan Wolfelt explores the ways in which meaningful funeral ceremonies that include cremation help bereaved individuals meet their mourning needs.

Because cremation is increasingly a given, it is more essential than ever that funeral home staff educate families about the purposes of funerals and help create ceremonies that set the bereaved individuals on a path to healthy mourning. Cremation is simply a form of disposition, and families need help understanding that funerals are essential rites of passage, regardless of the means of disposition.

With compassionate education, you can discourage families that choose cremation from skipping a funeral ceremony altogether, which many are wont to do.

Mourning need 1: Acknowledge the reality of the death

When someone dies, we must openly acknowledge the reality and finality of the death. Typically, we embrace this reality in two phases. First, we acknowledge the death with our minds. We are told that someone has died, and we understand the fact of the death, at last intellectually. Next, throughout the following days and weeks, with the gentle understanding of those around us, we begin to acknowledge the reality of the death in our hearts.

You have the opportunity to help families that choose cremation understand the importance of confronting the reality of the death. Encourage them to spend time with the body before cremation. Offer them the option of a public or private viewing of the body, as well as a full ceremony followed by cremation. In the funeral process, sequence is important, and the last thing we generally do is dispose of the body. (Of course, be sensitive to cultural

differences regarding the meaning and appropriateness of viewing the body.)

In addition, offer to have family members accompany the body to the crematorium. Many people do not associate cremation with a funeral that has a viewing, but every day is an opportunity to change that. Ask yourself: "Can I, with sensitivity, articulate to families the value of a visitation?"

Mourning need 2: Move toward the pain of the loss

Healthy grief involves expressing our painful thoughts and feelings, and healthy funeral ceremonies allow us to do just that. People tend to cry – even sob and wail – at funerals because funerals force us to concentrate on the fact of the death and our often excruciatingly painful feelings surrounding that death.

To their credit, funerals provide us with an accepted venue for our painful feelings. They are perhaps the only time and place where we, as a society, condone such openly outward expressions of sadness.

With compassionate education, you can discourage families that choose cremation from skipping a funeral ceremony altogether, which many are wont to do. Explain the importance of having some type of ceremony, particularly one that allows them to confront their pain.

Fortunately, meaningful rituals can hold contradictions. Thus, it's okay to celebrate life while also embracing sadness. The capacity to experience a wide range of emotions, including sadness, is more accessible when a loved one is present. Some families need help

understanding that a major purpose of funerals is to allow for sadness.

Mourning need 3: Remember the person who died

To integrate grief into our lives, we must shift our relationship with the person who died from one of physical presence to one of memory. A meaningful funeral encourages us to begin this shift because it provides a natural time and place to think about the moments we shared – good and bad with the person who died. Like no other time before or after the death, the funeral invites us to focus on our relationship with that specific individual and share those memories with others.

At a meaningful funeral, the eulogy (or remembrance) highlights the major events in the life of the person who died and the characteristics they most prominently displayed. At the visitation and the reception that follows the ceremony, many mourners informally share memories of the person who died. Throughout our grief journeys, the more we are able to tell the “story” of the death itself and our memories of the person who died, the more likely we are to integrate our grief.

In addition to incorporating opportunities for remembrance into the ceremony, you can help families that choose cremation commemorate the person who died by encouraging them to create a permanent memorial. Unfortunately, many families don’t realise they can get a niche in a columbarium or hold a traditional burial for the cremated remains. Often, families need to be educated about these options.

And if the family chooses to perform a



scattering, they still need guidance on their options for a permanent memorial. There are various creative ways to help families meet this mourning need, and the more that are integrated into a funeral or memorial ceremony, the better.

Mourning need 4: Develop a new self-identity

We are all social beings whose lives are given meaning in relation to the lives of those around us. I am not just Alan Wolfelt; I am also a son, brother, husband, father and friend. When someone close to me dies, my self-identity – as defined in that way – changes.

The funeral helps us begin the difficult process of developing a new self-identity. It provides a venue for public acknowledgment of our amended roles. If you are a parent and your child dies, the funeral marks the beginning of your life as a “former” parent – in the physical sense. (You will always have that relationship through memory.) Others attending the funeral are, in effect,

saying, “We acknowledge your changed identity, and we want you to know we still care about you.”

On the other hand, in situations where there is no funeral (most commonly in conjunction with cremation), the social group does not know how to relate to the person whose identity has changed, so that person is often at higher risk of being socially abandoned.

The very existence of funerals demonstrates that death is important to us.

Mourning need 5: Search for meaning

When a loved one dies, we naturally question the meaning of life and death. Why did this person die? Why now? Why this way? What happens after death?

We must explore these types of questions if we are to reconcile our grief. The funeral provides us with such an opportunity. For those who adhere to a specific religious faith, a meaningful funeral might reinforce that faith and provide comfort. Alternately, it might prompt us to question our faith or worldview.

Funerals are a way for us, as individuals and as a community, to convey our values and beliefs about life and death. The very existence of funerals demonstrates that death is important to us. For the living to go on living as fully and healthily as possible, this is as it should be.





Mourning need 6: Receive ongoing support from others

Funerals are a means of publicly expressing our beliefs and feelings about the death of someone loved. In fact, funerals are a public venue for offering and receiving grief support, both at the time of the ceremony and into the future. Funerals make a social statement that says, "Come support me." Whether they realise it or not, those who choose not to have a funeral are saying, "Don't come support me."

Today's families need you to educate them about the social-support function of funerals, regardless of the means of disposition.

Funerals also let us demonstrate our support physically. At meaningful funerals, we are encouraged to embrace, touch and comfort one another. This physical show of support is one of the most healing aspects of a meaningful funeral ceremony.

Another is the establishment of helping relationships. Friends often seek ways to help the primary mourners: "May I bring the flowers back to your house?" or "Would you like someone to watch little Susie for a few afternoons this week?" Friends helping friends – and strengthened relationships among the living – are additional benefits of a meaningful funeral.

Finally, and most simply, a funeral serves as the central gathering place for mourners. When we care about someone who died or their family members, we attend the funeral if possible. Our physical presence is our most important show of support for the living. By attending the funeral, we let everyone there know that they are not alone in their grief.

Today's families need you to educate them about the social-support function of funerals, regardless of the means of disposition. Please help them understand that not only do they need and deserve the support of others but also those others need and deserve support, too.

Most everyone who cares about a person who died, or their family will feel a natural impulse to gather. They need a time and place to get together. Cremation does not change this essential truth.

When someone dies, if we are to fully love and live again, we must mourn. Yet, when the need to mourn is greatest, some people are inclined to run from it.

Please don't let the families that choose cremation as a means of disposition run from their painful yet necessary encounter with grief. The body of the person who died is essential to this encounter, and spending time in the body's presence helps activate all six of the aforementioned mourning needs. Cremation is not the problem; cremating immediately or prematurely is.

Your role is to offer information and choices. I challenge you to consider these mourning needs each time you sit down with a family to plan a funeral. I hope you will be among the gatekeepers of the funerals, who ensure that meaningful funerals are here to stay, even though cremation has become a popular choice for many. Let's dedicate ourselves to educating families in a way that promises full, element-rich, personalised funerals continue now and forevermore.

About the author

Dr Alan Wolfelt is founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado. He speaks on grief-related topics, offers training sessions and has written many resources and bestselling books on grief for both caregivers and the grieving. For more information visit www.centerforloss.com or email drwolfelt@centerforloss.com.