

The Difference between “Viewing” and “Visitation”

Few people go to a viewing to peek at a dead body; they are there to support the family and to show they care. Some are uncomfortable with a dead person in the room and will stay as far away from the casket as possible.

Whether in quiet banter, surprised laughter, or tender tears, spontaneous sharing is comforting. There certainly is value for the family to hear friends and colleagues freely talk about the significance of their relationship with the deceased. It is this visiting that people comment on the most.

Therefore, planning a visitation may be more appropriate for your situation. The casket is either closed or not there at all. A visitation without the casket present can be scheduled anywhere, anytime—without the cost or formality of a funeral home involved. Those who have opted for visitation—not viewing—have found it to be intimate and personal, some would say more comfortable.

In the case of an expected death, people have begun to say their “good-byes,” and there is less need to see the body to accept the reality of death. When the end comes, it even may be seen as a blessing. Many undertakers insist, however, that a viewing is necessary for “closure.” You

will probably pick a more expensive casket, too.

In the past, it was usual to have three days of viewing or visitation. With busy working families, industry reports indicate that only one day of viewing or visitation is now being planned for most funerals. For those who wish to cut expenses even more, a viewing or visitation immediately prior to the funeral service can be scheduled—at the church or at the funeral home.

In the case of an unexpected death—when a family is grappling with the reality of what has happened—there is a strong need to see the body of the person who died and to hold or touch the person. In most of these situations, the body will have been taken to a hospital for rescue efforts or to determine the cause of death.

Some hospitals will be very cooperative in letting the family spend time with the body over many hours, especially with an infant or child's death. Others may have limited space and will expect the body to be moved quickly. When you have out-of-town family that will not arrive for 24 hours or more, another opportunity for “good-bye time” will need to be arranged. If you are not taking the body home and will be using a mortuary, you may want to ask for private family viewing.¹ Only occasionally is this listed on a General Price List, so there may not be a charge. Sometimes the GPL will limit this to “no more than one hour.” No one else can decide for you how long or short your grieving time should be! You

may certainly demand the time you need but be willing to pay any additional fees for extended use of the facilities.

There is less formality with a private family viewing, and the body is often laid out on a covered table. A casket is distancing, making it more difficult to get close—to cradle one's arms around the dead person.

Whether you choose to have the body embalmed for this private time will be a personal decision. There is no legal reason that would require embalming for such a viewing, and the funeral home may not impose embalming if it is not required by state law. The FTC does permit the funeral home to set a policy of requiring embalming for public viewing, however.

If death occurs at home—as is often the case with the support of Hospice, you may keep the body there for an extended time while family members gather. If room temperature is no more than 70°, a day or so can be managed without problems. This was the tradition in early America and is the practice in most other countries.

Suggestions for Personalizing A Visitation Gathering

Location

- An “Open House” at your own home or that of a close friend
- In the social hall of your church, temple, or synagogue
- At a fraternal organization's location such as the VFW
- At the family's summer place
- At a local restaurant or hotel that has facilities for private functions
- At the local library or art gallery (be sure to offer a donation for use of meeting space if a fee is not already set)
- At a botanical garden or park, if the weather is nice

Memorabilia

- Display photos, awards, honors

- Pass out flowers, photos, poetry, special prayers or writings

- Ask others to bring stories or photos for a family scrapbook

- Solicit donations “in memory of” for selected causes that were important to the deceased

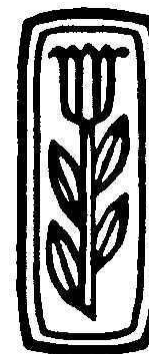
- Or ask others to bring books for library donation and share why a particular book seemed the appropriate gift

- When planning music, choose that which was significant to the individual. (It need not be funereal).

Many of these suggestions would also be appropriate for a memorial gathering, in lieu of a formal funeral service.

Viewing and Visitation —

The Difference



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