

A memorial service is a commemorative event without the body present. Unlike a funeral, the service can be held weeks or months after the death, allowing the family time to plan and then gather at a convenient time and place. It is typically less expensive and simpler to arrange than a traditional funeral.

1 Choose your style

The service can be as informal as a picnic in a park, or as formal as a wedding, with ushers, caterers, flowers and reception line. Decide if the gathering will be small and intimate or wide open to the larger community. Consider any wishes of the deceased, and especially the preferences and finances of family members. Decide if children will be welcome and accommodated too.

You might prefer a virtual memorial service, conducted fully or partially online. These have soared in popularity recently, and are ideal if family and friends are widely scattered and would find it difficult to attend in person. The service could be livestreamed from any location, and even recorded for future viewing. A funeral home or virtual funeral planning company can help arrange this for you.

2 Decide on a venue

A memorial service can be celebrated almost anywhere—church, private home, funeral home, hotel, public meeting space, beach, or park—the possibilities are endless. You will want to choose a place both meaningful and convenient. Consider such practical matters as cost, availability, number of attendees, and accessibility.

A place of worship is an ideal place to celebrate the life of someone with ties to a religious community. The setting, prayers, music, and community support will provide solace to family and friends. If the house of worship serves a large community, you may have to reserve the space (and clergy person) months in advance. In some cases, the officiant may charge a fee or expect an honorarium, so be sure to ask.

If the deceased had no religious affiliation, a service could be held at the funeral home that prepared the body for burial or cremation. The price for a memorial service will be listed on the funeral home's General Price List. You will be charged for use of the staff and the facility.

Holding a service in the comfort of your own home can allow more flexibility and plenty of time for visiting, grieving, and sharing stories. You could welcome family and friends to a day-long celebration of the life of the loved one, surrounded by his or her favorite and familiar belongings. But take into account the size of your house, its accessibility, availability of parking, and other practical matters.

3 Choose the participants

Clergy will likely be involved with any service in a church, temple, synagogue, or mosque—with the program determined by religious practice and protocol. They are often happy to officiate at a service held elsewhere too. Ideally, the clergy person should be familiar with the deceased, and be able choose meaningful readings or speak from the heart if asked to give a eulogy.

As an alternative to clergy, you could use a "secular celebrant," easily found by searching online. Or you might designate a family member or friend to lead the service. Others close to the person might wish to do the readings, share personal testimonials, or act as greeters or ushers. Even young children or grandchildren could hand out flowers or programs.

Designate only one person to coordinate all details with the venue staff, officiant, musicians, etc., to avoid confusion and duplication of effort.

4 Finalize the date

Once you have checked the availability of the venue and participants, you can schedule the service. Remember that a long lead time may be necessary to accommodate any out-of-town guests who must make travel plans.

5 Invite the guests

You will want to issue invitations as soon as you have settled on the date, time and place. A public announcement in the newspaper or a Facebook posting can reach a large number of people quickly. Individual phone calls, letters and emails are more personal, and a "telephone tree" can save time. Don't forget to check the address book or cell phone contacts of the deceased when drawing up the invitation list.

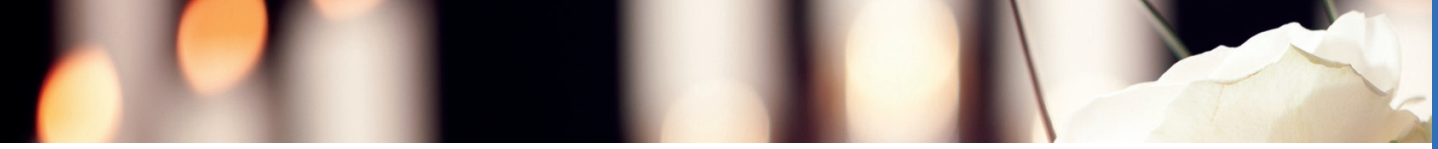
6 Arrange the details

■ Programs

A printed program listing the order of the service, music, readings and participants is helpful to the guests and makes a wonderful memento to be kept for years. Often the cover will feature the name, photo and dates of the deceased, with details of the service inside. You may wish to include a few tributes to the person, or a brief biography. If the service is held at a place of worship or funeral home, they may offer to print these for you.

■ Spoken words

A eulogy celebrates the life of the person who died, and is often the most meaningful and fondly remembered



part of the ceremony. The eulogist might offer a brief summary of the person's life—pivotal events, important relationships, achievements and interests—then add a few favorite memories. For maximum impact the eulogy should last no more than 15 minutes; often ten minutes are plenty. Clergy can provide valuable advice to anyone taking on this role.

Quotes from scripture, spiritual leaders or poets make popular readings. Choose some special favorites of the deceased, or check the internet for compilations of appropriate selections. You could also include excerpts from the person's own inspirational writings or letters.

Often the most moving part of the ceremony is a sharing of memories by the guests. These stories can illuminate new facets of the person that even the family might not know. It can be a wonderful inducement to laugh and cry together while remembering the loved one.

■ Music

Music can create a powerful emotional experience that can unify the community in shared loss, and provide comfort to the bereaved. Almost any type of music can be appropriate: traditional hymns, classical pieces, or contemporary songs; consider incorporating some music that was special to the deceased. You may want to play soft background music while guests arrive and depart, and intersperse musical interludes among the readings.

Clergy and funeral directors can connect you with musicians if you wish. Be sure to invite them well in advance, and determine what honorarium is expected. If you plan to use a digital playlist or downloaded music, be sure to check the quality of the sound system, and line up someone tech-savvy to handle the electronics.

■ Photographs and guest books

You could ask friends and relatives to contribute photos, clippings, awards, or other special mementos that you can display at the service, assemble in a memory book, or combine into a slide show. Young children can contribute by drawing pictures or helping to find photos. A book for guests to sign with thoughts and wishes for the family is a nice touch, too.

■ Flowers

Flowers add beauty and fragrance to the venue, and remind the guests of the abundance of life. You could decorate the speaker's podium with a spray of flowers, or have floral centerpieces on the tables at the reception. If the flowers will be delivered to a church, be sure someone will be on-site to receive them. Think about giving the flowers to special guests after the service, or taking them to a local hospital or nursing home, where they will continue to bring joy to others.

■ Refreshments

Sharing food during a bereavement gathering is a popular tradition. Sometimes church members will offer to provide finger food and punch in the church reception hall. Or you might offer iced tea and cookies at home, have a catered reception, or plan a gathering at a favorite restaurant. Some states do not allow funeral homes to serve food, so if your service is held there, you might have to go elsewhere for refreshments.

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