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Social Media Grief Etiquette and Death in the Age of Social Media

The digital age has drastically changed how we communicate and share information, including how we grieve and handle death. Social media has become a platform for people to express their condolences and share their feelings, but it also comes with its own set of rules and etiquette that must be followed to avoid causing unintentional harm.

The Hierarchy of Grief

The first and most important thing to remember is the hierarchy of grief. This refers to a system in which people or groups are ranked above one another according to status or authority, or a classification of things according to relative importance or inclusiveness. In practical terms, when someone passes away, certain individuals take precedence over others in terms of who should post the news first on social media.

If the person who has passed away is married, in a defacto or longstanding relationship, it is best to let the partner post first. If the person is young and single, let their parents or siblings post first. If the person is older and single, let the children post first. If you are unsure who the closest individuals are, it is best not to post anything at all.

The most important thing to remember is that this is not about you.

It is important to be patient and to have no expectations of a response from the family involved. Wait until the family has made an announcement before posting anything, and be considerate of the number of things they may need to organise and process. Posting about a death too fast runs the risk of distant loved ones not being reached first.

Is It Your Story to Tell?

NEVER post anything until the family does. Let the individuals closest to the person who has passed tell the story or an individual they have nominated to do so. If you are going to post, replicate the information that has been shared and do not embellish or add details the family may not want shared.

This also applies to funeral announcements. Some families choose these arrangements to be private, and a mass announcement on Facebook may attract a potentially unwelcome crowd or a feeling of resentment amongst individuals who may feel they should have been included.

Make Sure You Get Your Facts Straight

If there is any doubt in your mind that information you have heard is lacking genuine confirmation, do not post it. Before posting anything, make sure you get your facts straight and double-check the information you are sharing.

Think Before You Post

It is important to keep in mind that children view social media, so if the manner of death may have been a suicide or an unfortunate accident, limit what you choose to share. Gruesome details are unnecessary and inappropriate.

Don't Be Mysterious or Cryptic

If the family has not released a statement, or it may not have reached the wider circle of friends, a post along the lines of "Thinking of the Smith family today" or "Sending my love to the Smith family on this difficult day" will invite questions. And then you will end up announcing the death possibly to others who have not been informed. Be straightforward if the death has been announced or be silent.

Consider Your Relationship with the Individual Who Has Died

If you were not a close friend, a response in the comments of an announcement is appropriate. Making an entire post about your loss when you were at best a peripheral member of the person's friends or family is more about you than the deceased. People can become very angry when a person's social media postings imply a stronger relationship with the deceased than what it was in real life.

Be Patient and Have No Expectations of a Response from the Family Involved

It is also important to be patient and have no expectations of a response from the family involved. If the family has not made an announcement, it is important to give them time and space to process their grief before reaching out. When making an announcement, it can be helpful to provide a warning in the initial sentences of the post that what people are about to read contains sad news.

During the funeral, it is important to keep off social media entirely. Posting about the funeral, checking in at the cemetery or funeral home, or location tagging can all be seen as inappropriate and disrespectful to the family and the memory of the deceased. It is important to turn off your phone and refrain from taking any photos or selfies at the funeral.

It is also important to remember that not everyone is technologically savvy and that traditional methods of expressing condolences, such as cards or flowers, are still appropriate and appreciated. For families of the deceased, it is important to consider their social media presence and whether they would have wanted their profiles to continue as a memorial or be deleted.

When it comes to teens and death, social media can be a positive forum for them to express and process their emotions. However, parents and others should be aware of the potential risks and monitor their child's online activity to identify those who may be struggling or expressing distress. The language used and the ideas, they are expressing may not come through in ordinary life yet be expressed on social media. This can offer a parent a chance to seek additional help for their child should this be necessary.

Australia:

Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636

Lifeline Australia: 13 11 14

GriefLine: 1300 845 745

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement: 1800 642 066

Hong Kong:

The Samaritans Hong Kong: 2896 0000

St. James' Settlement: 2523 3061

The Hong Kong Society for Rehabilitation: 2811 2779

UK:

Cruse Bereavement Care: 0808 808 1677

Samaritans UK: 116 123

Child Bereavement UK: 0800 02 888 40

The Compassionate Friends UK: 0345 123 2304

New Zealand:

Grief Support Services: 0800 787 797

Skylight Trust: 0800 299 100

The Grief Centre: 09 418 1457

Hospice New Zealand: 0800 477 874

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