

# Good Grief!

## How to Properly Prepare Your Family to Handle Your Death

By GINA M. BARRY, Esq.

Imagine that today you pass away. Your loved ones would be devastated, but they would, nonetheless, be called upon to tend to your final affairs — arranging your funeral, managing your final debts, and possibly even having to probate your estate. Will you have left your affairs in complete disarray, or will you have set in place a plan to ensure that your loved ones are able to carry out your last wishes with the least amount of effort?

When you pass away, your loved ones will be experiencing grief. It consists of the emotions and sensations that accompany the loss of someone or something dear to you. Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross categorized what has become known as the ‘five stages of grief,’ which are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. During these stages, your loved ones will also likely experience physical problems, which may include physical exhaustion, uncontrollable crying, sleep disruption, palpitations, shortness of breath, headaches, recurrent infections, high blood pressure, loss of appetite, upset stomach, hair loss, irritability, worsening of any chronic condition (such as eczema or asthma), and visual and auditory hallucinations. Sometimes grief reactions are so severe that they are mistaken for signs of dementia or severe psychiatric illness.

Given the intense effect that grief will have on your loved ones, it is imperative that you create a plan to facilitate the handling of your own final affairs. In addition to establishing an estate plan, it is important that you inform your loved ones of your plan. It is not necessary that you share the details, but at a minimum, the person you have chosen to carry out your affairs should be informed as to where to find important documents, such as your last will and testament and other financial documents. You should also be certain that they have the proper contact information for your attorney, accountant, and financial advisor. Your loved ones will face the task of compiling all your assets, and this task can seem nearly impossible when the information described above has not been provided.



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Sometimes, it is a good idea that you do discuss the details of your estate plan with your loved ones. If you have chosen to distribute your estate in unequal shares, but you do not discuss this plan with your loved ones, it is likely that your plan will cause hurt feelings and conflict within your family. We have all heard stories of outrageous behaviors at funerals and thereafter, regardless of whether your plan treats everyone equally. These behaviors emanate from grief, and grief puts everyone at a disadvantage with respect to coming to reasonable compromises.

You likely have very good reasons as to why you have chosen to benefit one of your heirs more than another. Right now, you have the opportunity to explain your reasoning and to deal with any negative emotions that may arise. After you have passed away, your grieving loved ones will not have the benefit of your explanation. They will be more apt to argue, and countless families have disintegrated from the stress of handling an estate that was not properly planned.

In addition to establishing an estate plan, including organizing and compiling your important documents in a known location, you might also choose to establish a pre-paid funeral. To do this, you should go to the funeral home of your choosing, where you will pick out all of the items for your funeral. You will choose your coffin or urn, and you will decide whether you will have a large, public funeral or a private ceremony with family only.

You will also plan the details of your memorial service. Perhaps you desire certain music to be played or for a bugler to play “Taps.” You will then pre-pay for your funeral, and the money will be held in trust to cover your final expenses when the time comes. When you pass away, your family will only need to call the funeral home, and your plan will be carried out with the least amount of effort required from your grieving loved ones.

The planning that you do today may prevent rifts in your family tomorrow. All too often, a person does not plan for their demise, and the task is left to their loved ones. This task is overwhelming when your loved ones are dealing with the emotional and physical aspects of grief. It can hardly be said that grief would ever be good, but by having a plan, you can allow your loved ones to move through the stages of grief while keeping the family intact. With a well-crafted plan in place, your loved ones will be able to support one another through the process, and your family may even be strengthened. That is good grief. ❖

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