



Memorials & Grief

A Guide for Humanists and Non-Religious People in BC



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Introduction

Welcome to the *Memorials & Grief: A Guide for Humanists and Non-Religious People in BC*. This guide is for anyone non-religious (humanist, atheist, agnostic) and living with the death of a loved one, or simply interested in learning more about the humanist perspective of life & death. For more information about end of life, including healthcare, advance care planning, legacy projects and emotional support, please see our first guide *End of Life: A Guide for Humanists and Non-Religious People in BC*. This is available for free on our website.

We will begin with discussing death rituals and ways to commemorate and memorialize a loved one's death, the experience of grief and supportive resources.

We hope that this guide provides you with support, advice and comfort after the loss of a loved one.

This guide is also available in an audiobook format which can be found on our podcast on Spotify, or on our website.

“What we often think about when we think about death is not our own death but the death of those we love.

So this is not really about death. It is about loss, and indeed our sense of loss at such times can be overwhelming.

But the feeling of grief is the price of love. Which would you rather have? Would you rather never have any love in your life – or would you rather love, even though this means you will inevitably experience loss and grief as a result? [...]

And yet, for us left behind, the traces of their lives persists in a myriad of ways, from their descendants, to the deeds they have done, and in our memories of them. We can still speak with them in our own minds and – quite often – we know exactly how they would reply to us.

We carry their legacy forward in the human story – just as the people coming after us will do when we are gone.”

-Andrew Copson & Alice Roberts, The Little Book of Humanism



Death Rituals

It is believed that for humanists, rituals focusing on the personal component of death, including sharing stories or memories are more beneficial than witnessing religiously led prayers or ceremonies. This is the freedom of a humanist ceremony; the event is focused and held to centre the individual's life, not a ceremony that centres the person's relationship with a God, as many religious funerals do. Because there are no set rules or requirements for humanist death rituals, they can be planned completely according to the person's beliefs and wishes. The person can even choose to pre-plan their memorial, the options to commemorate a loved one's passing are endless. Depending on certain circumstances of death and plans for the body, such as body donation to a medical school, open-casket funeral or cremation, this may affect the celebration of life options.

As science-believing people who care deeply for the environment and the flourishing of living beings on our planet, some humanists may wish to have their body 'returned to earth' in a symbolic and eco-friendly way. Green Burials involve wrapping the body (without using any embalming chemicals) in a biodegradable shroud and casket. BC is a leader in green burials. Victoria's Woodlands at Royal Oak Burial Site is Canada's first urban green burial site, opened in 2008. Denman Island is home to the very first all-natural burial ground in Canada, since 2009.

If the individual selects cremation for their end-of-life, ashes will be returned to the family and friends. There are

so many creative ways of keeping or dispersing the ashes of a loved one, ranging from sentimental to functional. A few examples include placing them in a biodegradable urn with seeds to grow a plant or tree (BiosUrn), glass jewellery, into a painting or pressed into a vinyl record of their favourite song. (There are no regulations in BC regarding scattering ashes, so they may be dispersed anywhere on land, sea or air. Be aware that if on private property, it is best practice to receive permission from the landowner and consider the long-term effects as future generations may wish to travel to this place. The scattering of ashes in a special place and creating a landmark in a separate place could also be considered. A humanist celebrant, non-religious pastoral carer or end-of-life doula can help plan and carry out a memorial or funeral service. BC Humanists has a list of celebrants on our website.

During the long-term process of grief, there are so many ways to honour the lasting memory of a loved one, such as: creating a legacy project (see the previous page), planting a tree or garden in your backyard with their favourite plants, making a donation to a cause that mattered to them, keeping a symbol or token of their memory and love (such as stone, origami animal, clay with their thumbprint or jewellery), or learning an activity or dish that connects you to them.

Whatever way you decide to commemorate their life, is valid.

Grief & Bereavement

People who grieve non-religiously may experience it differently from those who are religious and believe in an afterlife. No matter the religion or spiritual beliefs of the loved one who has died, your grief is a personal experience that deserves to align with your beliefs. Some people say things like “God has a plan for them”, “I’m praying for you”, “They are in a better place”, “You’ll see them again soon”, “God was calling them home”. Many people don’t know what to say after the death of a loved one, and the Christian origins of Canadian society have told us that these provide hope, optimism and comfort in the face of death. But this is not true for humanists, and can actually be detrimental to the grief process as it may place the beliefs of the person expressing their sorrow over the experience of the person or their family and friends. Some religious friends and family may have believed non-believers were damned to hell if they did not ‘find god’ before their death. Therefore, loved ones may feel that their religion would have condemned this person’s life, rendering their sentiments of comfort empty. It can even be emotional manipulation if a person uses religion as a promise of comfort in grief. Comments like this divide religious and non-religious people, especially in a time where support is most needed. Know that where you are at with grief is your experience alone, and only you know what can make it a little bit less horrible. The saying “there are no atheists in fox holes” is wrong. You don’t need faith to carry through in grief, you need others.

Responding to these comments can be challenging, but your response should be measured based on the intentions

behind religious expressions towards you. You could say “thank you for your kind thoughts”. More often than not, their comments are well-meaning, and ideally, the feeling they are offering is what stays with you.

Belief and non-belief can be shaken after someone’s death. This is okay. You may find your way back to your previous beliefs, they may become stronger, or they may fall away. All experiences are valid. You are not alone in your feelings, there is a huge amount of support for non-religious people who are grieving.

There are even books written on specific types of loss, like anticipatory grief, miscarriage, grief for children, drug-related deaths, pet loss, providing support, science, video & movies and much more. You can find a compilation of these in the “resources section”.

While many grief groups are associated with religious institutions, there are support groups and hotlines for us. The Lower Mainland Grief Recovery Society explicitly states that their programs are non-religious. Hospices, the Vancouver bereavement hotline and family service groups can also connect you with groups that support your beliefs as availability changes regularly. There is even a Facebook group “Grief Beyond Belief”.

The Arts

No matter the time, place or circumstances, no two experiences of grief are the same. But some people find it helpful to witness how others experience grief. We can do this by listening to music, watching TV or movies or looking at art that resonates with us. It may be something that the person loved, and a way to connect with them, or a way to connect to your own feelings. When watching or listening to art about grief, remember that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. That one person's experiences are not necessarily yours, but that witnessing the diversity of experience can be helpful for accepting your own. In the resources section, you can find a list of movies and TV shows to watch that take different perspectives on non-religious grief and loss, and how their characters react to it. Two of our favourites are “Captain Fantastic” and “After Life”.

Resources

The opinions expressed in these resources are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the British Columbia Humanist Association.

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Many of these resources overlap between sections but are only listed once for brevity.

Death Rituals

<i>Title</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Funeral ceremony ideas and inspirations</i>	Ideas on planning a humanist funeral, memorial or celebration of life.
Humanist Ceremonies	
Funerals Without God	A comprehensive guide to humanist and non-religious funerals, memorials and celebrations of life, written by Humanists UK.

Grief & Bereavement

<i>Title</i>	<i>Description</i>
When Someone dies... Vancouver Coastal Health	A helpful guide on step-by-step process after the death of a loved one.
Grief Beyond Belief	A fantastic peer-to-peer website for grieving non-religious people. Offers a variety of resources for both general and specific experiences of grief.
<i>After Tragedy, Nonbelievers Find Other Ways To Cope</i> Barbara Bradley Hagerty NPR Morning Edition	Personal stories of non-religious grieving experiences.
<i>Secular Condolences and Non-Religious Sentiments to Write in Sympathy Cards</i> Holidappy	Suggestions for what to write in a non-religious sympathy card, or things to say to (or as) a humanist during grief.

Music, Movies, TV and Art

<i>Title</i>	<i>Description</i>
Captain Fantastic	A family living off-the-grid is forced back into society after experiencing a loss and embark on a journey to resist the strict death rituals of their religious extended family and go to great lengths to fulfill the wishes of their loved one.
After Life	Written, produced, directed and starred in by atheist Ricky Gervais. A dark comedy series about a cynical journalist struggling to cope with the death of his wife.
Everything's Gonna Be Ok	A comedy series about the lives of three young siblings learning to care for each other (and navigate their own unique grief experiences) after the unexpected death of their father.
Midnight Diner	A Japanese anthology series, each episode centres on one person's connection to a certain dish at their favourite diner. Many episodes stem from the loss of a loved one, and how the dish reminds them of them.

This guide was written by Sophie Burk, and peer reviewed by Elaine Macdonald and Jennifer Mallmes. With special thanks to Antonio Kim for making the audiobook version of this guide possible.

We hope that this guide has been helpful for you, and we would love to hear your feedback. Please send your comments to info@bchumanist.ca

This guide was made possible by the
generous contributions of BC
Humanist Association members and
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