That's why I'm always encouraging you to be the best funeral director you can be, as I truly believe your profession is among the most important in the world.

But maybe you've never considered the fact that sometimes, one funeral—no matter how you've strived to make it personalized, elements-rich and meaningful to family and friends—is simply not enough.

CERTAIN LOSS CIRCUMSTANCES ARE PARTICULARLY CHALLENGING TO COME TO TERMS WITH, AND IN THESE CASES, SEVERAL CEREMONIES SPACED OUT OVER TIME WILL OFTEN GIVE MOMENTUM TO MOURNERS WHO ARE OTHERWISE AT RISK FOR GETTING STALLED IN THEIR GRIEF.

COMPLICATED LOSS AND PSYCHIC NUMBING

As you know, the death of a loved one is always hard, but when the death is sudden and unexpected, it’s often that much harder. Violent or self-inflicted death, whether accidental or intentional, can leave mourners in shock for weeks, months and sometimes years. The death of a young person is also naturally challenging. And when the death circumstances prevent the body from being recovered, doing the necessary work of acknowledging the loss with not only the head but the heart can go on indefinitely.

Immediately after the death, people affected by these kinds of traumatic loss typically exhibit psychic numbing. They’re in shock. They’re there, but they’re not there. I’m sure you’ve seen it many times. This protective mechanism is nature’s way of shielding them from experiencing the full force of the loss all at once. The reality of their loss is so overwhelming and sometimes brutal that they simply cannot (and should not be made to try to) fully absorb what is happening.

This means, of course, that they also cannot fully absorb the funeral. Their normal and necessary shock buffers them not only from the horrible reality of the death but also from the healing functions of the funeral, as depicted in my Hierarchy of the Purposes of the Funeral pyramid illustration.

THE MAGIC OF THREE CEREMONIES

So what’s to be done in such circumstances? I trained for 13 years as a talk therapist, and over the decades, I’ve counseled many mourners who’ve been waylaid by traumatic loss. But I’ve come to understand that it’s not talk therapy they need most. Instead, it’s more ceremony.

First, a personalized, elements-rich funeral (consistent
with the family’s unique rites and rituals) shortly after the death is always essential. It marks the beginning of saying hello to the reality of a death; without this hello, there’s no embarking on the journey through grief. I hope you are consistently educating families about the necessity of a full, timely funeral, especially when the death circumstances are complicated. The family’s natural psychic numbing does not mean that the funeral isn’t crucial; it simply means that additional ceremonies will also be needed later.

Second, as part of your funeral home’s aftercare services, I encourage you to educate families about the helpfulness of holding additional ceremonies after the funeral. Think of these ceremonies as providing mourners with additional doses of the healing properties of the funeral.

I usually recommend that families affected by traumatic death hold three ceremonies spaced out over a period of about two years. Time alone does not heal grief; active mourning does. But psychic numbing does dissipate over time, allowing the family to engage more and more deeply with their grief as time elapses.

The first ceremony is the funeral. The second ceremony is optimally held about six to eight months after the death. Sometimes a significant date makes sense, such as the birthday of the person who died. For the second ceremony, I often recommend a simple candle-lighting ceremony in the family’s home. The family invites close friends and family to gather around a table on which photos and memorabilia have been placed. The ceremony might begin with a piece of music and contain a short reading or two. Each guest can hold a small votive candle and light their candle as, one by one, they share a memory or thought about the person who died. A prayer, song or piece of music makes a good close. There are no set rules. As long as the ceremony helps mourners touch on all of the layers of the pyramid, it will foster continued movement toward reconciliation.

The third ceremony is often best held between 18 and 24 months after the death. I often recommend a gathering at the gravesite or place of permanent memorialization. Again, readings, music and memory sharing turn a gathering into a meaningful ritual. Redosing mourners with the purposes of the funeral – reality, recall, support, expression, meaning and transcendence – is a powerful, healing elixir.

YOUR FUNERAL HOME’S ROLE

You not only are the gatekeepers of the funeral ritual but the gatekeepers of death rituals in general. Stepping into your rightful and necessary role as your community’s death ceremony specialist means educating families not only about the purposes and elements of the funeral but also about the need for rituals in general.

Because you formed a relationship with them shortly after the death, you are uniquely positioned to help families in their ongoing struggles with traumatic loss. Keep in mind that what they need is more ritual. In fact, I’ve found that simply holding these three ceremonies over time is often more helpful to mourners than months and months of weekly talk therapy appointments. How’s that for the power of ceremony?

I encourage you to hold a staff meeting to discuss how your funeral home can educate families about and perhaps facilitate additional death rituals as part of your aftercare services. Holiday ceremonies are one good vehicle, but adding in other opportunities and educational materials will help more people and build your reputation as your community’s premier death resource.

Please understand that my intent here is not to make you into therapists but rather to remind you that “when words are inadequate, we need ceremony.” I thank you for what you do each and every day to help the families you are honored to serve.

Alan D. Wolfelt is a respected author, educator and consultant to funeral service. Among his many books are Funeral Home Customer Service A to Z, A Tale of Two Funerals and Creating Meaningful Funeral Experiences: A Guide for Caregivers. He also advocates for the value of meaningful funeral experiences in his death education workshops across North America each year. He conducts an annual training program on the “WHY” of the funeral for funeral directors in Fort Collins, Colorado. For more information, call the Center for Loss at 970-226-6050, visit www.centerforloss.com or email drwolfelt@centerforloss.com.