

WHAT TO DO AFTER THE DEATH OF A SPOUSE

Immediate Issues

1. If you are alone, telephone a friend who can spend the next few hours with you. (Shock and trauma can take unexpected forms.)
2. Ask a close member of your family or a good friend to notify the rest of the family.
3. If your spouse has indicated an interest in donating organs or other body parts, act on those wishes in his/her behalf. (It's incredible how much benefit can be had from these donations. Even the skin has a use in treating burn patients.)
4. Notify a funeral director and make an appointment to discuss funeral arrangements. Get written estimates of what a funeral service will cost. Ask the funeral home director to itemize the estimate for you. Take some time in considering your options for a service. Hopefully, you had a preneed plan in place to help you during this difficult time when you may be susceptible to decisions you may later regret.
5. Request 15 copies of your spouse's death certificate. You may need more if there are numerous accounts.
6. Contact the newspaper in which you wish the obituary to appear to find out how to place it. Since often a funeral service happens within a few days of a death, getting an obituary in the paper so that friends can know is important.
7. Decide what you want people to do to honor the deceased, such as flowers for the service, or donations to a favorite charity.
8. Call five friends and give them each a list of your address book divided into five parts. Ask them to call or e-mail the list and notify of your spouse's death and subsequent service.

9. Ask a friend to be your “right hand person” before, during and after the service. You will need someone who will write down the name of every person who brings you food, visits the funeral home or assists in any way.
10. Law enforcement officials recommend that you ask or hire someone to housesit for you while you and your family attend funeral service. (Thieves have been known to browse obituaries to see when people will most certainly not be home.)

Financial Issues

1. Beware of anyone who approaches you to “complete a purchase” your spouse may have started. This is a common abuse of women at their most vulnerable time.
2. Call your attorney, accountant and advisor as soon as you can. If your attorney is no longer around, ask your financial advisor and/or friends for recommendations.
3. Locate the family’s important papers. Gather as many as possible and continue to do so for the next few weeks.
4. Record in a small ledger all money you spend. These figures will be needed later for tax returns.
5. Call your spouse’s employee benefits office with the following information: Your spouse’s name, social security number, date of death; whether death was due to accident or illness, and your name and address. Ask for required forms to claim any benefits. Request a list of all benefits that are due and payable to him. This may include unused sick time, a 401 K, a pension benefit, life insurance etc.
6. If your spouse was eligible for Medicare, notify your program office and provide the same information as in #5.

7. Notify life or accident insurers of your spouse's death. Give them the same information as in #5 and ask what further information is needed to begin processing your claim. Ask which payment option your spouse had elected and select another option if you would so prefer. If there is no payment option, you will be paid in a lump sum.
8. If you need emergency cash before claims are paid, a cash advance may be made from any life insurance benefits to which you are entitled.
9. Notify banks and brokerage offices where your spouse had accounts, after consulting with your financial advisor. Please be aware that in many instances if an account is titled solely in the name of your deceased spouse or relative, the bank/brokerage firm will freeze the account until a court order has been obtained. Make sure that all transactions or checks solely in their name be completed before the bank/brokerage is notified.
10. Social Security
 - a. Apply to the nearest office in person and bring: Social Security number of your spouse, Certified copy of the death certificate
 - b. Proof of your relationship (marriage, license, spouse's birth certificate)
 - c. Ask about the small death benefit may Social Security provides
 - d. Ask them what you need to do to start receiving your spouse's benefit (if you are 60 plus or have children under the age of 16), Social Security will tell you whether you will benefit from drawing against your spouse's benefit or whether you want to continue with your own if it is bigger. If you are 60, you can draw 71.5% of your spouse's age 65 death benefit. When you are 62, you can switch to yours if it would be higher than your spouse's. However, we recommend working with an advisor who is familiar with Social Security to determine your optimum claiming strategies.
11. If your spouse was ever in the military, check with the Veterans Administration. You may be eligible for a small benefit.

12. Avoid contracting for anything and avoid spending or lending large sums of money.
13. Make an appointment with your financial planner to discuss tax planning and to help you through the decisions you'll be making over the next few months.
14. Find out if your spouse's estate settlement will require the services of an attorney. If so, be very specific in finding out how they will bill you. (Will they bill you for telephone calls?) What is the billing rate? If you wish to minimize costs, ask for a list of things that you can accomplish yourself or you Advisor would normally be doing at no additional cost to you.
15. Be prepared for appointments with your advisors. Have records such as investment account statements, pension check stubs, social security information, ownership information on personal assets and real estate. Copies of annuity or life insurance contracts.
16. Don't change title to any assets until your advisor or attorney tells you to (e.g. don't roll your spouse's IRA into your own name until you are instructed to do so).
17. Let your attorney and financial planner be the guide in deciding when to pay off debts.
18. Touch base with your tax accountant as to how to file tax return in the year of your spouse's death.
19. If you were covered for health insurance through your spouse's company, inquire about continuing it under COBRA.
20. Check beneficiary designations on all life insurance policies to make sure you have applied for benefits due you. Ask your attorney if you should accept the benefits or disclaim in accordance with your spouse's estate plan.

21. Don't accept insurance payments from life or annuity proceeds in lifetime annuity payments. You can leave cash with the insurance company until you decide what to do with it. Don't make any investment decisions at this time.
22. Open a checking and savings account in your own name if you do not already have one.
23. Change title on your automobiles, trailer, motor home or boat. Contact department of Motor Vehicles to get this done.
24. Check on contents in safety deposit box(es) and make an inventory of contents.
25. Notify all your insurance carriers on your home and personal property (autos, etc.) and change the name of the insured on the policies.
26. In a few weeks much of this paperwork will begin to diminish. After that you can begin to change the registrations on jointly owned assets such as:
 - Auto
 - Bank/Brokerage accounts
 - Residence(s)
 - Recreational vehicles
 - Charge accounts
27. Update your own Will and beneficiary designations on all of your accounts.

If you are reading this because you have recently lost a loved one, please accept our condolences from the team at Meira.