

Understanding Your Choices

*A short guide to decisions families may
face after a death*



You DON'T have to DECIDE everything IMMEDIATELY

After a death, time can feel compressed. Decisions are often presented as urgent, even when they are not.

In most cases, nothing needs to be decided immediately. The body can be cared for or stored while you take time to breathe, gather people, and consider next steps.

This guide is here to help you orient yourself, understand your options, and decide what kind of support feels right - now, and later.

Note: Throughout this document, *family* refers to blood relatives or chosen family and/or community;

Legal requirements and the Human response

Legal Requirements

After a death, only a small number of things are legally required:

- The death is medically certified
- The death is registered
- The body is disposed of lawfully (burial, cremation, or another legally permitted method)

Note: The law does not dictate how the body must be handled before disposition. Families may choose how it is prepared, stored, or supported immediately after death.

Human Response

Most families choose to mark the death in some way.

This might include:

- gathering with others
- sitting with the body
- holding a ceremony
- creating a ritual, large or small

These acts are not legally required. They are human responses.

Understanding the difference can ease pressure and create space to think.

Most Common Pathways

There is no single "right" way forward. Families often choose one of these pathways, and some move between them.

Some families value the simplicity of having everything arranged through one provider; others prefer to be more hands-on, and/or greater choice and flexibility.

Pathway 1: Full funeral director support

This pathway includes a wide range of services, from no-service direct cremation through to fully arranged funerals. A funeral director coordinates care of the body, paperwork, transport, and usually supply items such as coffins, flowers, audio-visuals, printed materials, and venues through their preferred vendors.

Cost considerations

- Prices vary widely within this pathway
 - When multiple items are arranged through a single provider, choice is more limited
 - Limited choice can shape overall cost
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Pathway 2: Shared care

Families choose which elements to arrange themselves and which to have supported by a funeral director.

Families may organise items such as coffins or shrouds, flowers, music, audio-visuals, or printing, while a funeral director supports legal and logistical requirements.

Cost considerations

- Families can access a wider range of suppliers and price points
 - Items are paid for directly
 - Overall costs can be significantly lower than when all elements are arranged through a single provider
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Pathway 3: Family- or community-led care

Families take the lead in body care, ceremony, and arrangements, with guidance as needed.

Cost considerations

- Costs are limited to legal requirements and chosen items only
- Often the lowest-cost pathway

This pathway prioritises involvement, simplicity, and meaning.

Caring for the body

Caring for the body is something humans have done for generations. Many families already hold an instinctive understanding of how to sit, tend, and keep watch.

Care can be:

- Fully supported by a funeral director
- Shared between family and others
- Led by family, drawing on long-held human practices

This may include washing, dressing, shrouding, spending time with the body, or holding vigil. Some families choose these practices; others do not.

There is no requirement for embalming in most situations.

*If you would like practical, step-by-step information about family-led and shared care, the **Australian Home Funeral Alliance (AHFA)** offers clear, accessible resources grounded in lived experience.*

Ceremony: simple, elaborate, now nor later

A ceremony is not legally required, but for many people some form of ritual is an important human response to death.

Some families gather within days. Others wait weeks or months. Some choose very small or simple gatherings, a few people, a candle, shared words, or quiet presence.

Ceremony does not need to be elaborate to be meaningful.

Ceremony can:

- acknowledge the reality of death
- support grief
- bring people together
- mark a transition

If you would like to explore hands-on, participatory, or family-led ceremony approaches, see:

- *[A guide to getting hands-on: reclaiming your role in the funeral ceremony](#)*
- *[The quiet power of vigil and sitting with the body](#)*

Who can help

Different people offer different kinds of support.

Funeral directors

Coordinate legal and logistical requirements.

Celebrants

I work as a death care advocate, supporting families to understand their options and navigate conversations with funeral directors, as well as shape ceremonies that reflect their values. Other celebrants may work differently.

Australian Home Funeral Alliance (AHFA)

Provides guidance, education, and practical resources for family-led and shared care, grounded in the understanding that death care belongs to communities.

Natural Death Advocacy Network (NDAN)

Offers information about natural burial, shrouding, environmentally conscious options, and end-of-life planning.

Where to learn more

If and when you're ready:

[Australian Home Funeral Alliance \(AHFA\)](#)

[Natural Death Advocacy Network \(NDAN\)](#)

[Sincere Ceremonies Funeral blog](#) and

[Sincere Ceremonies Funeral resources](#)

A Pause

Before making any decisions, you might ask:

- What feels most important right now?
- What can wait?
- Who do we want around us?
- What kind of support would help?

There is no need to have all the answers at once.

