



# safe on social

## Social Media Grief Etiquette and Death in the Digital Age



### Social Media Grief Etiquette and Death in the Digital Age

The age of social media has had a profound effect on the way a death was traditionally announced. Many people have floundered without specific guidelines, and it has become very easy to offend or simply not know how to express condolences in a way appropriate to the times.

What follows are some suggestions compiled from many individuals who have written on the topic – often as a response to circumstances where they have either found out about the death or a loved one from social media, or have had a well-meaning contact jump the gun and make a public announcement well prior to the family choosing to share the news.

Thanatechnology – is a term coined by Carla Sofka an American social worker to describe the phenomenon of death announcements on social media. She experienced the worst side of social media when news of her mother's death was posted on social media without her knowledge or consent by their chosen funeral home, when she had not had a chance to contact many close members of their family or friends.

The most important thing to remember is that there is a hierarchy of grief. This is not said to belittle the feelings of anyone close to an individual who has died, but as a reminder that there are individuals who take preference in such circumstances.

Hierarchy can be defined as:

- A system in which people or groups are ranked above on another according to status or authority.

And

- A classification of things according to relative importance or inclusiveness.

In practical terms, when someone passes away consider these as rules to abide by:

- If the person is married, in a defacto or longstanding relationship, let the partner post first.

- If the person is young and single, let their parents or siblings post first.
- If the person is older, and single let the children post first.
- If you don't know who the individuals closest to the deceased are, don't post at all.

This summation of the hierarchy of grief comes from Taya Dunn Johnson whose husband passed away and within an hour of his death a well-intentioned contact had posted of his death on Facebook, again when she had not spoken to many of his closest friends.

Please remember this is not about you.

Keeping that in mind, here are some additional pointers to keep in mind.

### **Is it your story to tell?**

NEVER post anything until the family does. Let the individuals closest to the person who has passed tell the story, or an individual they have nominated to do so. Replicate the information that has been shared and don't embellish or add details the family may not want shared.

This also applies to funeral announcements. Some families chose these arrangements to be private, and a mass announcement on Facebook may attract a potentially unwelcome crowd, or a feeling of resentment amongst individuals who may feel they should have been included.

### **Make sure you get your facts straight.**

If there is any doubt in your mind that information you have heard is lacking genuine confirmation do not post.

### **Think before you post.**

Keep in mind that children view social media, so if the manner of death may have been a suicide or an unfortunate accident, limit what you choose to share. Gruesome details are unnecessary and inappropriate.

### **Don't be mysterious or cryptic**

If the family has not released a statement, or it may not have reached the wider circle of friends, a post along the lines of "Thinking of the Smith family today" or "Sending my love to the Smith family on this difficult day" you are going to invite questions. And then you will end up announcing the death possibly to other that have not been informed. Be straightforward if the death has been announced or be silent.

### **Consider your relationship with the individual who has died.**

If you were not a close friend a response in the comments of an announcement is appropriate. Making an entire post about your loss when you were at best a peripheral member of the persons friends or family is more about you than the deceased. People can become very angry when a person social media postings imply a stronger relationship with the deceased that what it was in real life. This is not about you.

## **Be patient and have no expectations of a response from the family involved.**

If the family has not made an announcement, be considerate and think of the number of things they may need to organise and process. Take your cue from the family. WAIT – give the family a chance to recover. Posting about a death too fast runs the risk of distant loved ones not being reached first.

## **When making an announcement.**

Provide a warning in the initial sentences of the post that what people are about to read contains sad news. Notifications of a death can shock people and trigger anxiety. A gentle preface can help soften the news.

## **Replying.**

Respond in the medium in which you received the news.

Phone = phone, Facebook = Facebook, Text = Text.

If you receive a message rather than a call, don't jump to the phone, allow people the benefit of time and space send a message in return or an offer of tangible help and allow the family or core groups to respond when they are able.

## **At the funeral.**

Keep off social media during the funeral, don't post about it, don't check in at the cemetery or funeral home, don't location tag it. Families and friends may choose to limit numbers and you risk causing a potential scene later for the relatives of the deceased if certain individuals choose to feel left out. Turn off your phone, and don't take a selfie of any kind at the funeral, this is the most deplorable thing you could choose to do.

## **Consider traditions.**

Remember not everyone is technologically savvy and that an acknowledgement on social media may not register with all of a family. Cards and traditional messages of condolence should still be considered especially when it comes to older relatives and members of the family. While a hive of condolence maybe being shared across social media, a condolence card or flowers can be sorely missed as these act as tangible mementos for the remaining family.

## **For a family of the deceased.**

Consider the social media presences of the individual who died. If they were not active on social media ,then posting is a pointless way of announcing the death. Then again, if the deceased were prolific online maybe the only way to reach everyone involved.

Use their preferred form of social media, this maybe Twitter or Facebook. Consider a digital obituary, either as a post or through the funeral home.

## **News travels fast.**

This is unfair, and if you and your closest loved ones are unable to address the social media aspect , once you have contacted those closest to the deceased consider assigning this role to a close family friend and allowing them to field the online condolences and enquiries. Decide the information you wish to share and make this clear to the funeral home as well.

## **Decide whether to keep online profiles or memorialise them.**

Facebook offer the option to memorialise a profile in its settings. A digital executor can be established at any time prior to the individuals passing. This can clarify whether the deceased wishes their social media presence to be deleted or to continue as a memorial . A number of individuals have found these to be comforting, a space where friends can gather together to share images, memories or stories of the deceased.

Note: Twitter and Snapchat require a certified copy of a death certificate before a profile may be shut down.

It is important to make your own wishes known re announcements on social media and what you would like done with your profiles once you have passed.

## **Social media , teens and death.**

Social media as a forum can be positive for teens who have lost a friend.

Young people often struggle with expressing their feelings and social media offers a surprisingly positive space for them to express and process their emotions, both initially and as time passes. Communication of emotion can happen more freely online, and the sharing of emotions with their friends may help teens to fully identify their feelings.

It can also be helpful for parents, and others to identify those individuals who are struggling particularly or are very distressed, as the language used and the ideas, they are expressing may not come through in ordinary life yet be expressed on social media. This can offer a parent a chance to seek additional help for their child should this be necessary. This is particularly relevant if the death was a suicide of a friend.



w: [safeonsocial.com](https://safeonsocial.com)  
e: [wecanhelp@safeonsocial.com](mailto:wecanhelp@safeonsocial.com)

No part of this e-book or its associated modules may be reproduced or transmitted by any person or entity in any form by any means, electronic or otherwise including photocopying, recording or scanning or by any information storage without prior permission other than the licensor who is licensed to use this information on their website, in newsletters and in print and has been granted permission from the publisher under an annual license.

The publisher, authors, licensee, licensor and their respective employees or agents will not accept responsibility for injuries or damage, physical or emotional occasioned to any person as a result of a social media use or any other activities described in this e-book.

Whilst every attempt has been made to ensure that the information in this e-book is accurate, it is the nature of social media to be constantly changing. Therefore, Safe on Social Media Pty Ltd gives no guarantees to the completeness or accuracy of the contents of this guide.