

## **Netiquette Regarding Digital Legacies and Dealing with Death, Tragedy, and Grief**

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(See source list on pages 4 and 5)**

### **Digital Legacies: Planning ahead and at time of death**

1. Don't assume that you know what someone would want to happen to their digital assets and social media. Be proactive and learn about deceased user policies on social media (e.g., memorializing a FB page/Tribute section vs. creating a private FB group in memory of the deceased). Discuss someone's wishes regarding their digital legacy ([www.digitallegacyassociation.com](http://www.digitallegacyassociation.com)) and how they prefer to receive "bad news" before a crisis or loss occurs.
2. NEVER request changes to the deceased's social media platforms or online services UNLESS you received permission from the deceased to act on their behalf (e.g., you are the assigned Legacy Contact or Inactive Account Manager).

### **Sharing "Bad News" / Death Notification / Informing about Events:**

3. "Soften the blow" (Ganger, 2019): Regardless of how you are using technology to announce a death, provide a warning that the message/posting contains sad news so that someone can choose to postpone reading it if the timing/circumstances warrant a delay.
4. Digital obituaries may be provided through the services of a funeral home. Coordinate the timing of its' posting online with the funeral director to allow time for more personalized notifications. Once an obituary is online, control over the sharing of the news is lost.
5. Think before you text, post, or Tweet. Families need time to notify everyone who deserves to learn of an illness, death or tragedy in a personal manner. Ask yourself the question: Is it your story to tell? Where do I fall in the "mourning hierarchy" (Walter, 2015)? If you are not a primary mourner (immediate family member or close significant other) or have not received permission from someone in the deceased's inner circle to share news of a death, it's not your right or responsibility to make the news public. If you have not seen postings about the death or an online obituary that has been shared on the social media of the primary mourners, this most likely reflects a conscious choice not to do so or a decision to wait.
6. DON'T ask questions about the tragedy/death on social media or expect details about the death to be posted publicly. Privacy is more important than curiosity; information may be excluded for a very good reason.
7. Once personal notifications of the death have taken place, many people choose to post details about a wake/visitation, funeral, or celebration of life IF they are public events. Using social media to share practical information can save time and energy. (Avoid sending Evites since they can go to spam and these events are time sensitive.) Do NOT share information about services or memorial events on social media WITHOUT PERMISSION from the family or other primary mourners.

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### **Grieving Online:**

8. Avoid posting vague comments that might cause someone to be worried about your well-being or safety.
9. Avoid “comparing” your grief to others. There’s no need to “one up” or disenfranchise/ invalidate another person’s reaction to a loss. DON’T turn the loss into a competition (As Woods notes, it’s not the “Grief Olympics” – see Hiss, n.d.)
10. Carefully consider where you choose to post information about your grief and the impact that your posts will have on others. If you post about your grief on your personal social media, it will be on display for everyone who has access to that page.
  - a. Consider the benefits of creating a page with restricted access for those who knew the deceased. This provides people with more control over when they choose to expose themselves to information that may be emotionally intense. It also creates a layer of protection against memorial trolls/RIP-trolling.
  - b. Is it more appropriate to share messages privately (via Messenger or another non-public aspect of social media).
  - c. Remember that if you tag the deceased in photos that they might show up in other family members’ and friends’ news feeds, which can be potentially unwelcomed and overwhelming.
11. DON’T feel guilty for unfriending someone who has died. If it’s too painful to keep seeing them tagged in posts, do what is right for you.
12. DON’T impose your religious/spiritual beliefs and/or coping strategies on anyone else.
13. Be mindful of how your social media settings influence how easily others can share the information that you post. Regardless of whether or not your postings can be shared with one click, you cannot control what others do with the information that you post online.

### **Providing Support to the Bereaved:**

14. Confirm that death notifications have taken place (see #3) before using social media to post messages of condolence and support.
15. Be respectful of differences in how people deal with illness, death, tragedy, and grief. Some people are very private and believe that the use of social media and social networking sites (SNS) is inappropriate, while some are comfortable talking about their experiences and sharing emotions publicly. If someone is NOT using social media/SNS to grieve, support them in “traditional” ways (send a card; talk with them in person or call on the phone (texting may be preferred by those who have grown up communicating this way; hugs if appropriate. For guidance about supporting the bereaved offline (“in real life – IRL), see the resource list below<sup>1</sup>.) Even if someone uses social media during times of grief, providing support in real life is always a good idea, especially if YOU are not comfortable providing support online.
16. If someone is posting about their grief, acknowledge that you’ve seen it by using an appropriate reaction button/emoji and match the “tone” of their post if you include a comment.

### **Providing Support to the Bereaved (continued):**

17. If you perceive a discrepancy between how you think someone “should be reacting or feeling” and what you observe, avoid criticizing or judging these behaviors/responses. Reactions to grief vary across people and change with time. For example, it is normal and healthy to experience moments of lightheartedness and joy (and perhaps to post about this), even during times of intense grief.
18. Avoid posting “clichés” or “platitudes” (see the resource list below<sup>2</sup>).
19. Sharing memories or stories is appropriate and is often appreciated. Use good judgement about what is socially appropriate to post publicly on social media vs. what should be shared privately.
20. Acknowledging a loss on significant dates in the future can provide comfort to the bereaved. If someone has NOT posted about their grief on social media, do this PRIVATELY. Consider making a phone call, sending a “thinking of you as you remember him/her” message (a card in the mail or a private message) on the deceased’s birthday or other dates of remembrance such as the anniversary of the death or a significant event at which the deceased’s presence will be missed (a graduation, wedding, Father’s/Mother’s Day, holidays).
21. DON’T speak ill of the dead or criticize the bereaved. If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything.
22. DON’T expect a response. Grief is exhausting, and someone may not have the time, energy, or desire to read and respond to posts on social media. Remember – it’s not about you!
23. Accept strangers who post respectfully – they are part of the grieving community.
  - a. Some people who do not personally know the deceased or their family may want to reach out due to “experiential empathy” – the ability to relate to one’s grief due to having experienced a similar loss. Grieving the death of a stranger may provide them with a socially acceptable outlet for their grief as well as the benefit of helping another griever feel less alone.
  - b. People who have never met IRL can form significant relationships online (e.g., virtual gaming communities, FB interest pages). Cyberloss isn’t any less genuine simply because the interactions took place in cyberspace.

### **Taking and Sharing Images / Photos:**

24. It is generally not a good idea to photoshop an image of the deceased or turn their image into a meme.
25. Funeral selfies are controversial. It is generally considered inappropriate to post a selfie that includes the deceased in the photo. For younger generations, selfies are not considered to be irreverent; they may simply be a way to acknowledge a loss or inform others about one’s grief. Talk with young adults about the etiquette of taking photographs at a visitation/wake, funeral, or gravesite before arriving. It may be considered offensive to post a “check-in” at a funeral home or cemetery.

### **Taking and Sharing Images / Photos (continued):**

26. DON'T sensationalize another person's tragedy. Sharing grim details, posting gruesome images or recordings (e.g., the scene of the death or accident, fire, or shooting), or even posting the photo of someone's gravesite can be disturbing and painful, particularly if they appear in a social media feed when someone is not expecting it.

### **Livestreaming / Webcasting a Funeral or Memorial Service:**

27. NEVER livestream or webcast a funeral or memorial service without explicit permission from the primary mourners as well as anyone who has a primary role in the service. Carefully consider how access to the livestream is gained (privacy settings on social media or if viewing is by invitation).
28. If there is an open casket (as noted in #25), including an image of the deceased is most likely not appropriate. To include an image of the deceased, consider using a favorite photograph of the person taken during life.
29. Guests should be made aware that the service will be livestreamed. The camera should not be focused on the people in attendance. Respect the privacy of the mourners who may not want their reactions during a potentially emotional time to be observed by others or captured on a recording. Check with the primary mourners and ask if they want footage included from any processional or recession that would include them entering or leaving the service and respect their wishes.
30. Be mindful that there may be copyright issues if recorded music is being used in the service; check with the funeral director about whether or not it should be included.
31. If a recording of the funeral or memorial service is made, do not share it through any mechanism (public or private) without explicit permission from the primary mourners. They have the right to control how and with whom it is shared.

### **Digital Survivor Advocacy: Using digital and social media following a death or tragedy to advocate for a cause or a change in awareness, behavior, or policy (also known as hashtag activism):**

#32. If a primary mourner has already publicly commented on an aspect of the individual's life and/or death regarding a particular cause (a specific illness, suicide, overdose, etc.), it may be appropriate to honor that person's memory by doing the same in relation to an advocacy effort IF the primary mourner provides permission. (See #5. If you are not a primary mourner, it is not appropriate for you to disclose potentially private information about someone's cause of death or personal details about their life using a hashtag.)

#33. Be aware that the media may reach out to primary mourners or others who are participating in advocacy campaigns. Not everyone is comfortable becoming "newsworthy", so respect a primary mourner's decision if they do not wish to "go public". Not everyone is comfortable participating in advocacy efforts; for those who make the decision to do so, the time following a death that it takes to be "ready" varies widely.

#34. Respect the way that people have chosen to frame the cause or issue that is the focus of their advocacy efforts. DON'T substitute or propose a different word or phrase in a hashtag

since doing so discounts the importance and relevance of the cause or issue that they have chosen to address.

#35. DON'T argue with or criticize someone if you do not agree with their beliefs and/or their point of view about a controversial issue. It is disrespectful and inappropriate to incite controversy on a social media posting or memorial site that was created to honor someone's memory. Post your personal beliefs or opinions on your own social media or in a separate digital space rather than imposing your beliefs in their space. For example, a friend posts on Facebook that they just found out that their cousin who is a police officer died in the line of duty and uses the hashtag #BlueLivesMatter. This post about their loss is not the place to publicly comment on your opinion about the hashtag.

Netiquette compiled by Carla Sofka using information from personal experience, her own research on social media and research, and the following sources:

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## **<sup>1</sup>Resource list: Supporting the Bereaved Offline**

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<sup>2</sup>Resource list: Clichés / What NOT to say:

Athen, L. (n.d.). What not to say to a griever. Retrieved from <http://www.griefspeaks.com/id9.html>.

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