

What do I write in a [sympathy note](#) to my coworker who lost her brother? I talk to her mother on the phone sometimes. Would it be okay to send a note to her as well?



Only one rule should guide you in writing [sympathy messages](#) : say what you truly feel. Your clear expression of sympathy and caring for your coworker is what matters the most. Sit down at your desk as soon as you hear of the death and let your thoughts be with your coworker as you write to her. If you knew him, some kind words about him—perhaps an anecdote—would mean a lot. If you didn't know him, you could mention something special you've heard about him. You could offer to be helpful to her, perhaps by helping her with her workload the day of the funeral or memorial service. Close with warm words, such as "With deepest sympathy." Surely, a card or note to the mother would be welcomed as well.

Don't forget that you can also e-mail your coworker to express your thoughts before you write your condolence note. E-mail is an immediate way to reach out and say, "I'm sorry. I'm here for you." And unlike a phone call or a personal visit, e-mail doesn't require an immediate response from the recipient. E-mail shouldn't replace a handwritten condolence note, but it's a nice way to let your coworker that you're there for her.

My neighbor down the street lost her husband. I just moved here and I don't know this family well, but want to attend the memorial service. Would it be inappropriate to attend?

Check with another neighbor or look in your local newspaper for an obituary or death notice. A notice would either state the hour and location of the service, which would mean that it would be appropriate for you to attend if you wished, or it would indicate if the service is private.

Even though you're new to the neighborhood, your neighbor would likely appreciate your expression of sympathy. You could certainly send her a personal note expressing your condolences. In many locales, even those who don't know each other well rally to assist bereaved neighbors in some way. It could be anything from a gift of food—a casserole, a fruit

basket, or some brownies for the family and their visitors—to an offer to house out-of-town relatives or friends.

My best friend lost her adult son. She's asked me to help plan the memorial service. What do I do?

Consider it an honor to help your friend during this painful time. Be sensitive to the feel of help your friend is asking for. She may depend on you entirely or she may wish to participate in the planning and have you take care of the details. In either case, develop a list of questions that your friend will need to answer. Where would she like the service to take place? Is there a member of the clergy or other person she has in mind for performing the service? Will it be a private or open service? Who else would she like to have involved as eulogists, readers or ushers? Would she like to have a reception for some or all of the attendees of the memorial service? Where would it be held? Decide upon the best way to get the word out to friends and relatives about the service. Then, organize help with phone calls and the preparation of a newspaper announcement.

Once the major decisions have been made, visit, or at least speak with, the person performing the service. Ask for his/her input and a checklist of what needs to be decided and completed. Keep your friend informed and get her feedback. By merely being there, listening and taking care of the details, you'll undoubtedly be a great help to her during this sad time.

I've lost a very close friend. Her family has asked me to give the eulogy. I'm not sure whether or not to accept. What if I break down in the middle of it? How can I honor my friend in a dignified way?

Some people are able to manage the delivery of a eulogy with aplomb; others can't even bear to think about doing so. Before making your decision, take time to consider the family's request. Think through how you truly feel about it. Talk to your friend's family. Are others going to be speaking about her? Then go with your intuition. If you decide you want to do it, then write your talk from your heart. Think of some light, special stories about your friend. It's fine to ask others to share their memories and weave them into your eulogy. Relate stories that show your friend in a positive light, and handle any humor with care. Remember, the subject of your eulogy is the person's best qualities, not your feelings. You can also include a poem, passage or anything else you feel reflects your friend's life. The more eulogies that are to be delivered, the shorter yours should be—no less than two minutes, but no longer than eight to ten. Ask the person who will be officiating at the service for any tips on preparing and delivering a eulogy. It's a good idea to have a friend read over your eulogy. Then, practice it out loud, preferably in front of another person or a mirror. The more you practise, the more comfortable you will be delivering it at the service. Have a shortened version ready in case you find yourself breaking down.

If you're completely overwhelmed by the prospect, and feel that you must decline, it's okay to do so. Thank the family for offering the honor to you. Explain that you don't feel you can do it, and be honest as to why. They'll surely understand. Offer your help in other ways, such as ushering, delivering a reading, preparing the program for the service, or assisting the family with plans for the service or for any reception afterwards (if there is one).

How do I select honorary pallbearers and what do they have to do?

Honorary pallbearers are chosen from among the deceased's closest friends and/or business associates. Since this is such a personal request it should be made, if at all possible, either in person or with a phone call. Usually, 6-8 people are asked. Members of the immediate family aren't chosen, as their place is with the family.

Honorary pallbearers do not actually carry the casket at a funeral, and they do not serve at a memorial service because there is no casket present. At a funeral, either the casket is carried by professionals provided by the funeral home, in which case the honorary pallbearers follow, two by two, or they flank the casket, as it is wheeled down the aisle. They sit in the first two rows on the left, and after the service they leave, two by two, preceding the casket.

There are almost never any honorary pallbearers at the funeral of a Christian woman, but at a Jewish funeral both men and women may have honorary pallbearers.

Since it is such a singular honor, one shouldn't refuse an invitation to be a pallbearer except for illness or absence from the location in which the funeral is being held.

My co-worker's obituary states that the family has requested donations in lieu of flowers. I know his mother is particularly fond of lilies. Would it be wrong for me to send her a bouquet of lilies with a condolence note?

It's best to stick with their request at such a sensitive time. If you want to do something now, send a donation as suggested by the family. Your personal condolence note would be especially kind, too. Since you know that his mother likes lilies, you might want to wait a bit—until the activity immediately following your co-worker's death settles down—and then send her the lilies. It would surely be a meaningful and caring gesture. **I've received almost 300 notes of condolence. Do I need to write a thank you note to each person who sent me a note?**

Notes of condolence should be acknowledged with a handwritten note. The only exceptions to this obligation are when the expression of condolence is simply a printed form with no personal message, or when the writer asks that his or her note not be acknowledged (a thoughtful thing to do when writing a close friend, or when someone you know well will receive a great number of condolences).

There is no official time frame for writing notes of appreciation to those who have extended their condolences and kindness to you. The important thing is that you have received comfort from the many who have helped you. For some, writing notes is helpful as they work through their grief; for others it is too difficult to get much done for some time. The best thing is to work things through at your own pace. Another option is to ask a close relative or friend to write some notes on your behalf. It's up to you.

It's been a few weeks since my neighbor whom I am friendly with lost her husband. She's been fairly reclusive. What can I do to help her without being too intrusive?

Just letting her know that you are thinking about her can be helpful. Offer specific assistance: "I'm going to the grocery. Can I get anything for you?" "Would you like to have lunch with me next Tuesday?" She'll let you know, when you ask, whether or not she wants to see you and or needs anything. Drop her a note periodically, or even an e-mail, to let her know you're thinking of her. In her own time and way, she will start to venture forth more.

My daughter is 10. Should she attend her uncle's memorial service?

Most 10-year-olds are ready for this type of experience, as long as they are accompanied by a parent or someone else close to them. If you decide to let her attend, prepare your daughter by letting her know what the service involves and address any questions she may have. It's worth noting that some communities and faiths have an open casket at the visitation and at the funeral service. If you don't feel comfortable having your daughter view an open casket, skip the visiting hours and simply attend the service.

I will be attending the funeral of a Hindu colleague. What customs and traditions should I be aware of so that I can be respectful?

Hindu funerals usually take place within 24 hours of death. Friends may call or visit family members of the deceased to offer their condolences upon hearing of the death and may bring flowers to them at that time. The flowers are placed at the feet of the deceased. The body usually remains at home until it is taken to the place where it will be cremated. The funeral ceremony is conducted at the place of the cremation. The coffin is generally open, and guests are expected to look upon the body and be seated in the room for the service, which is conducted by a priest or a senior member of the family. Guests may attend the cremation, but if they do not want to, they may depart after the service. After the funeral, friends may visit the bereaved, usually bringing gifts of fruit.