

Dealing with the Emotions of Taking Care of a Loved One's Belongings

by the Schoedinger Griefcare Program



When you are faced with the responsibility of sorting through or packing up the belongings of a loved one, it can seem like an overwhelming task. Sometimes going through their possessions can feel like experiencing the loss all over again. However, it can be something of a healing process to take care of and share the belongings they have left behind.

When should this task take place?

There are no firm rules on how long you should wait to sort through a loved one's possessions. Some families don't have the luxury of waiting to begin this task. But if you can choose, don't do it immediately. Most experts recommend you address this task when YOU are ready. They also caution families to not to wait too long because belongings can become a shrine to the deceased and keep you too firmly settled in the past. Recognize that it is normal to want to put the sorting aside as you cope with grief, but realize that it is an inevitable task.

Be respectful of the Next of Kin.

If you are not the closest family member to the person who has died then it is a good idea to take your cue from the close relative(s) about how and when they want to address dealing with the possessions. He or she may need days, weeks or even months to accept the reality of the situation and feel emotionally ready to perform this task. If the subject does not present itself after several months, an element of denial may be present. Gently ask how and when the close relative(s) would like the process to get underway and then provide gentle support.

Packing up after a death in the family causes a pain all its own, one that should be dealt with thoughtfully and honestly to aid the grieving process. It is never easy, so be sure to enlist the resources you need to evaluate your loved one's possessions, save the family mementos you cherish and unburden yourself of the things that will make you feel encumbered and sad.

When you feel the time has come to handle the deceased loved one's belongings then here are eight tips to help you proceed.

Follow any instructions the will has offered.

If your loved one wished, for example, that her book collection be donated to the local library, then part of clearing process would involve taking books to the library. Knowing that you helped carry out your loved one's wishes can be comforting and encouraging during this emotional time.

Ask for help.

Often, it's just too painful to face the sorting process alone. Don't be afraid to ask a family member, a professional organizer or a grief counselor to help you. It can be a great comfort to have a good friend there with whom to share the history of certain items and to take a break with when you need to process what you're doing. Take your time, but work steadily, with your helper by your side.

Be organized.

Using a method can be helpful when approaching what might seem an impossible task. In the Grief Recovery Handbook, authors *John James* and *Frank Cherry* lay out the ABC approach to taking stock of deceased loved one's belongings. ABC stands for the three types of piles you will sort these items into.

Group A will contain all of the belongings that you definitely want to keep, either for yourself or for others in the family.

Group B will contain those things you know you want to get rid of, usually items that have no sentimental value.

Group C will be those things you're just not sure of yet.

Do not save everything.

eHow contributor, *Erick Kristian*, cautions "It may be tempting to hold on to and save as many belongings as possible but it is not healthy to do so and may create unnecessary clutter. Be pragmatic and save only those things most valuable or with particular sentimental value. Photo albums, a favorite book or jewelry are small things that can have a strong association with a loved one. However, some items like clothing or furniture (unless they are an antique or heirloom) likely do not and would best be donated to charity or sold. Holding on to those items that have the strongest association makes disposing of other items easier."

Once you've created the three different groups of things, it's time to deal with them.

Group A items can go back where they were stored, if that makes sense, or can be moved out of the home to the family members or friends who will receive them.

Group B can be taken or picked up by a charitable organization, sold on eBay or Craigslist, or in an estate sale.

Group C is the problematic one, the one you may just not be ready to deal with yet. If possible, these items can be moved out of the way into a storage area until you're ready to make a decision. If time is short, as in the case of having to empty a person's apartment or home, see if you can buy yourself a day or two, until you're ready to try again.

Author Rachel Kodanza, Living with Loss magazine, comments that "a frequent question asked by surviving family members is: 'What happens if I find an item that upsets me such as an unexpected financial document, a picture, a journal or letter?' There is no doubt that occurrence would be a disappointment and disturb the process of organizing the belongings but how you react to the situation will determine how you will recover. Since you cannot confront the deceased and you are already in an emotional state, consider consulting with a professional or someone you can trust who will be more logical and help you work through the situation."

Share Sentimental Items with Family Members and Friends.

Other family members or friends might appreciate the opportunity to select something that reminds them of the relationship that they had with the person who died. Sharing personal items that will bring comfort and keep memories alive in the years to come will benefit all family members.

"In some families, tensions can rise if more than one person wants the same item. If no provisions in the will were provided to handle such a situation, families may vote on who gets what. A family may want to discuss what happens if such a situation arises before they begin the cleaning out the departed's home. Kristian suggests, If all else fails, the family may want to consider using the estate lawyer as an arbitrator to settle the dispute. Some people have an auction and donate the money raised to either settle the estate or to the loved one's favorite charity."

Donate Items that can Bring Comfort or Relief to Those Who Need It.

It is often quite comforting to donate gently used clothing, housewares, blankets, toys, books or other useful items to Goodwill, Salvation Army, or other organizations that provide useful items to families and people in need. Consider the act of donating an extension of the generosity your loved one had shown during their life. Knowing that your loved one's personal items will provide comfort to those in need makes the task much easier.

Give yourself permission to let go of "stuff".

If you are living among or holding on to things that a loved one had because you think they would want you to, or because you think keeping things will help make the one you miss seem present, reconsider your thinking. As *Reuben M. Chow* says on his site *Living-With-Grief.com*, "Bear in mind that 'stuff' [is] not the same as love. Just because you let go of someone's belongings, does not mean you are letting go of his or her memory. And throwing away his or her things certainly does not mean you love him or her any less."

Do Not Make The Process Any Longer Than It Needs To Be.

Set aside a few afternoons or a couple weekends to perform the majority of the physical work or make the necessary arrangements. Set your mind to the task at hand and take care of all necessary steps to complete the task as efficiently as possible. You can revisit small assortments of sentimental items at your leisure.

While it is never easy dealing with the possessions of a deceased loved one, it is possible to address the task in an efficient way to make the process as painless as is possible – leaving you free to remember them and the times you shared together.