

Etiquette and Advice from the Emily Post Institute
Sympathy Etiquette
Flowers and Funerals and Conveying Sympathy Q&A

Q. 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?

A. Flowers are a beautiful symbol of sympathy. If you do choose to send flowers, and the family has indicated that they would like gifts to go to a charity, it's best to send flowers as an additional gift. 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.

Q. My college roommate's wife just died. I want to send flowers to the funeral home. What type of flower is appropriate?

A. With their beauty, color and scent, flowers serve as graceful tribute to the deceased. While roses, lilies, carnations and other traditional choices have never gone out of style, arrangements that are more personalized and dramatic are increasingly common. Here are some examples of what you could send:

* Floral baskets and living plants: Virtually any type of plant is suitable and can be chosen to reflect the personality of the deceased. Flowers can be sent to the bereaved individual's home or to the funeral home.

* Floral wreaths, crosses and sprays: These more elaborate displays are often sent by a group. They are also a good choice for companies or associations that want to honor the deceased.

* Casket arrangements: These are traditionally supplied by family members. Lid sprays, often of roses or calla lilies, cover the unopened section of the casket at an open-coffin funeral and the entire casket once it is closed.

Q. My co-worker's partner died one year ago. Is it appropriate for me to send him flowers on the anniversary of her death?

A. It's never wrong to show that you care about someone who has suffered a loss, but each person grieves differently. Let the person's state of mind and personality be your guide, judging whether a condolence would be a comfort or only serve as a sad reminder. In most cases, a card or handwritten note along with an arrangement of flowers is a very welcome gesture. You can also consider making a home-cooked meal and offering to spend time together.

Conveying Sympathy Q&A

Q. I just learned that a friend's husband passed away. Is it OK to send her an email expressing sympathy?

A. If this is a way you often communicate with your friend, and you're certain that she frequently uses e-mail, you can precede a phone call or written condolence with an e-mail. This is an immediate and non-intrusive way to show that you are thinking of her in the initial days following her loved one's death. But an e-mailed message should be followed by a handwritten note and, whenever possible, attendance at the funeral or visitation.

Q. My co-worker's mother just died and I want to write her a sympathy note. I just don't know how to get started. What should I say?

A. When writing a sympathy note, say what you truly feel. A single sincere line expressing the genuine feeling you had for the deceased is worth more than an eloquently written treatise. As you write, don't dwell on the details of an illness or the manner of death. Nor should you suggest that the loss is a "blessing in disguise." Do, however, ask if there is something you can do to help.

Following are two examples of short but appropriate sympathy notes:

Dear MaryAnn,

We were so very sad to hear of Jack's death. If Keith or I can help by shopping, running errands, or doing anything else for you, I honestly hope that you'll call on us. In the meantime, you are in our thoughts and prayers.

With deepest sympathy,

Margo

Dear Mrs. Phillips,

I know how little words written on a page can mean to you at such a time, but I still want to let you know that you are in my thoughts. I would also like to help you in any way I can, so please don't hesitate to call on me.

Your mother held a special place in our hearts for as long as we knew her. The countless hours she spent with our son Jordan will always be remembered, and we will miss her nurturing presence very much.

With deepest sympathy,

Enos Walker

Q. My husband and I were attending a relative's visiting hours, and my husband said something to the spouse like "It's a mercy he's out of his pain." I told him he shouldn't have said that and he disagrees.

A. Offering words of sympathy to a grieving individual is never easy. Tension often accompanies a conversation because you're just not sure what to say. Here are some tips:

Don't say:

"He's in a better place."

"Call me if there is anything I can do."

"It's God's will."

"I know how you feel"

Do say:

"I'm so sorry about your loss."

"I'd like to bring you dinner tomorrow night. May I?"

"She was an extraordinary person."

"Please know that I am thinking of you."

Q. My best friend's mother just died. Do I send the sympathy note to my friend or her father?

A. When sending a condolence note to a friend whose parent has died, the note is usually addressed to the friend, not the surviving parent.

Q. 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?

A. 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 and even offer to help. In many locales, those who don't know each other well rally to assist bereaved neighbors in some way. Perhaps it's with a gift of food - a casserole, a fruit basket, or some brownies for the family and their visitors. Sometimes a neighbor offers to house out-of-town relatives or friends. The circumstances vary greatly, and you'll need to go with your intuition as to whether to do something and what it is you feel comfortable with.

With regards to the memorial service, check with another neighbor or look in your local newspaper for a 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 "Funeral Private."



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The Emily Post Institute, created by Emily in 1946 and run today by third generation family members, serves as a "civility barometer" for American society and continues Emily's work. That work has grown to address the societal concerns of the 21st century including business etiquette, raising polite children and civility in America. Read to find out more about [Emily Post Institute](#) and the [Etiquette Experts](#)