

YOU WANT TO BE A MORTICIAN?

Here are Ten Pieces of Advice for New Funeral Directors

By: Caleb Wilde, sixth-generation funeral director, speaker and author

ONE. Nobody who “wants” to be a funeral director will make it.

It isn't something you want in the way that you want a boy/girlfriend or a new car. No. It's more like marriage. It's a commitment that's intended to last. It's not a job ... nor is it just a profession ... this business is a lifestyle. And if you're not ready to marry it, then move to another job that demands a less committed relationship.

TWO. Dress Above Your Station

I'm always impressed by a funeral director who dresses well. Find a good tailor, buy good shoes, spend extra on that suit that fits you really well, keep your hair in shape and smell good. It might cost you money that you don't have, but it will pay you back in confidence and numerous good-humored flirtatious advances from people three times your age.

THREE. Don't try to be a perfect professional

One of the common pitfalls I see in young funeral professionals is that they're entirely too stressed out in their pursuit to be the perfect funeral professional. Families don't want you to be stressed out. They don't need a perfect funeral director. They need you to be calm, in control of your stress and ready to be present. It's hard, I know because I was once that stressed out “professional”, but somewhere along the way I stopped trying to be a consummate “professional” and it was then, and only then, that I really started being present and helping families.

This also means that you know your knowledge boundaries. Direct those questions outside our professional knowledge to the people who are qualified to answer. We aren't lawyers, doctors, grief counselors or theologians. And when we don't know an answer to a funeral question, ask a mentor. It's okay if you don't know an answer; what's wrong is when we let our pride get the better of us and we act like we do.

FOUR. You will get used to the schedule

When you first start in this business, ITS SOOOOO DAMNNNN TOUGHHHHHHHHH!!!! The holidays. The weekends. It even takes our nights! And after it takes our weekends, and our sleep, it tells us to get back up at 7 AM because there are two funerals we have to work the very next day. It really does take awhile for our bodies and minds to get used to the schedule. Sometimes our bodies and minds need help getting used to the schedule. Sometimes we might need a psychologist. Sometimes we might need a fitness instructor. But most times we just need a good nap. If you stick to it, you'll eventually be able to keep up.

FIVE. Allow yourself to learn patience

Have you ever been around grieving people? At times grieving people act like they're out of their minds. And, there's times when grieving people can act ... well ... they act kinda crazy. And it's their

right. In fact, it's the reason WE exist. Their world has been pulled out from under them, they haven't a foot to stand on and everything that they used to know is suddenly ... gone. And you're here to help create semblance in the crazy.

It can be tough to learn patience, especially when we're working on small amounts of sleep and are arranging multiple funerals at once. But it's something we have to do.

SIX. Continually remind yourself why you're here

The secret to learning patience, to getting used to the schedule, to finding resilience during the tough schedule is this: Learn to love serving others. Probably the best means to cope with the funeral business is found in the people we serve. Love them intentionally and don't be afraid to find joy in meeting their needs. Don't be afraid to hear their stories and become part of their family.

SEVEN. It takes a while to grow into this business (in other words, have patience with yourself)

Generally, you work with older people and older people prefer to work with people within their generation. It can be hard for a younger person to establish themselves in this business, but it's very possible. There are no Mark Zuckerberg 18-year-old prodigies in funeral service because being a funeral director is about life experience, not business acumen.

EIGHT. Find a Mentor

This doesn't have to be anything official. You don't have to update your Facebook status to "in a mentor relationship with" Find someone you respect in this profession, someone who has more experience than you do, someone who is willing to answer your numerous questions and stick close to that person (it's best if you work with that person). At one time, this industry was a trade; in other words, it wasn't taught in schools and regulated by state boards. It was a trade that was taught by a mentor to an apprentice and the skills and business acumen were passed down through word, practice and in house training. I do believe that the best funeral directors are still being produced when they treat this work like a trade. They find a mentor, and they learn by the guidance of someone older and wiser.

NINE. Learn to practice self-care

I've been burnt out a number of times in this work. Landed in the hospital. Reevaluated life. I started to see a psychologist. I started anti-depressants. I started writing more. I started going to the gym more. Saying "no" more often. I started to realize that if I wanted to take care of others, I had to take care of myself. Self-care is the unselfish act of selfishness and it's a key part of being able to increase your resilience.

TEN. This job will affect your family, significant other, and/or friends

The stressors of this job not only affect you, it will affect your circle of love too. Let them know this job isn't always a 9 to 5. Let them know that there will be times you'll miss parties, events, and hangouts. Let them know that you will need them in new ways. Cause doing this job with support is difficult, doing it without support can feel impossible. You may lose some friends, but you'll find some too. Don't be afraid to ask them for love.

For those who have been in this industry, what are some other "pieces of advice" you'd like to add?