



16 Things to do

WHEN A PERSON IS DYING

SHAYKH WALEED ABDUL HAKEEM

AlMaghrib
Institute

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Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala says about death

“He who created death and life in order to test you which of you is best in doing deeds.”

(AlMulk 67:2)

Knowing that this life is a test from Allah, we must acknowledge that the final test of this life is death itself. Since the angel of death takes the souls of over 6,000 people every hour, the turn of someone we know is bound to come; are we prepared to handle such moments? Are we able to assist the dying person as his soul leaves the body? Can we tell the difference between what culture is and what religion is when dealing with a sensitive topic such as death? What steps should we take if a person of knowledge is not within reach? This guide will, insha'Allah, explain, everything we need to do in a simple 16 step-by-step process so we are ready whenever the time comes.

Step 1

To invite righteous people to be around the dying person

The advantages of having a righteous person around the dying person are to:

1. Remind him of Allah, for those who are righteous are above average in knowledge and are closer to Allah.
2. Pray for him and those who are around him and remind them of them of supplications (du'aa) from the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet peace be upon him, and the angels would say Amen to their supplications insha'Allah.
3. Give patience to the dying persons family. Some family members get emotional and need to be reminded about the virtues attained through patience.
4. Serve as a reminder to astray family members who may be present at this time.
5. Teach them about the Sunnah and warn them from common innovations that people practice at the time of a person's death.

Step 2

To remind him that he should have more hope than fear

Often when a person is close to death, they begin to fear all of the sins they have committed during their life. It is possible that person had lived a lifestyle where they've procrastinate repentance and they were struck with the reality of the hereafter before they had a chance to turn back to Allah. It is normal for a person in these last moments to have all kinds of fear. Anas ibn Malik may Allah be pleased with him narrates:

“The Prophet (peace be upon him) entered on a young person dying, and said “how do you find yourself?” he said “I seek hope from Allah, and I fear my sins O Messenger of Allah,” so the Prophet peace be upon him said “They are not combined in the heart of a believing slave at this time except that Allah gives him what he wants and protects him from what he fears”

(Ibn Majah, 4231)

While it is natural for the person to have some fear, this fear should not overcome the hope a person has in Allah. At these moments, it is our duty to remind the person of the mercy of Allah, and that they should have more hope in the kindness of Allah than fearing His wrath. Nothing comforts the soul more than reminding them of the saying of the Prophet peace be upon him:

“None of you should die except having good thoughts about Allah.”
(Muslim, 7412)

We must remind the person that he should be happy to have the chance to meet Allah-who is more merciful to him than his own mother. A scholar by the name of Mak'hool Ash-Shami was seen sad most of the time. When his friends were visiting him in his final sickness, they found him laughing and they asked him “Why are you laughing?” He said:

“How can I not laugh when the thing that I have been avoiding (death) is near, and what I was hoping for is very close (referring to his meeting with Allah)?” (The Final Wishes of Scholars, Ar-Rab'ii)

Step 3

To moisten his face and lips

It is from the Sunnah of the Prophet peace be upon him to moisten the lips and throat of a dying person so that he can pronounce the Shahada. The mouth becomes more dry during the last moments of death. Ayesha may Allah be pleased with her used to say:

“The Prophet peace be upon him had a can of water with him. So he would enter his hand in the water and then he would wipe his face and say “There is no God but Allah. Death has its intoxications”
(Bukhari, 6145)

Step 4

To dictate the Shahada to him without asking him to repeat it

This should be done as gently as possible, as not to anger the person and cause him to curse. The Prophet peace be upon him said:

“Dictate to your dying people La ilaha illa Allah”
(Aljami, 8550)

Once the person pronounces the Shahada you should not ask him to repeat it unless he says something different, the Prophet peace be upon him said:

“Whoever’s last words are La ilaha illa Allah, he will enter paradise.”
(Abu Dawoud, 3116)

Step 5

Pray (make Du'aa) for him, and do not say anything except good

There is no specific du'aa to say at the time of death. The people around the person can pray with whatever comes from their hearts in the language they speak. An example of this would be to pray that Allah gives him patience, makes his death easy, protect him from the test of the grave, grant him paradise, protect him from hellfire, give his family patience, and any such good things. The Prophet peace be upon him said:

“If you approach the sick or dead person, then only say good, as the angels are saying Ameen to whatever you say”

(Muslim, 2079)

Contrary to popular belief, there is no proof that Surat Yaseen must be recited at the time of death as the narration: “Recite Yaseen on your dying person” is classified extremely weak by the scholars of Hadeeth.

Step 6

To place the dying person in the most comfortable position

A common mistake that people often make is to position the dead person facing Makkah when he is dying. This action is based on a very weak narration that was mentioned in the book of Al-Bayhaqi (6396) in which Abu Qatada narrated that Al-bara' ibn Ma'roor had willed at his death that they would make him face Makkah. This reached the Prophet peace be upon him, so (it was narrated) he said: “he has hit the Fitra.”

In addition to not being part of the Sunnah, this adds an extreme hardship on the dying person and should be avoided at all since there is no sound proof for this action.

Step 7

Testing to see if the person has indeed died

It is important to emphasize this particular point, hundreds of people are misclassified as dead around the world on a daily basis (stories of people waking up to find themselves inside a closed grave are not uncommon). In the United States alone, more than 400 people are misclassified as dead yearly, and more than 2000 in the past 20 years in the city of London alone (Source: Death and its Causes, by Carrington and Mider). The following are some ways to test if a person has died until a doctor arrives:

1. Testing for a pulse: This is probably what most people think of when testing for death, but it may not be the most effective since some patients may have a very faint pulse that eventually (appears) to come back to life. This method must be supplemented with other methods as listed below.
2. The pupil test: Umm Salamah narrated that the Prophet peace be upon him said:

“When the soul leaves the body, the (faculty of) vision follows it”
(Aljam, 8554)

One of the first signs of death is to observe a wide pupil. The easiest way to test this is to gently open the eyelids of the person and aim a flashlight at his eye. If the size of his pupil changes according to the level of light, then the person is still alive.

3. The breathing test: It may be difficult to test for breathing by using your hand or ears, or by watching the chest, as the person may be breathing faintly. The easiest way to check breathing is to use a mirror test. Simply place a mirror near the nose of the person. If you see that a fog is building up, chances are this person is still breathing faintly.
4. The body becomes colder: Immediately after death, the body loses about 1 degree centigrade per hour.

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5. The skin test: Following the death of a person, the skin loses its elasticity. If you (gently) pinch the person in an area full of skin, and the shape doesn't go back to its original shape, this is a sign that the person has already died.
6. The joints test: Once a person dies, their blood circulation stops and therefore their joints become stiff. If you find it hard to bend the person's arm, this is a sign that they have died.

Step 8

Closing his eyes

It is the Sunnah of the Prophet peace be upon him to gently close the eyes of the person after they die. A person's pupil becomes very wide and is unpleasant to people who are around. Umm Salamah narrated:

“The Prophet entered on Abu Salamah when his eyes have opened. He then closed it and said ‘When the soul leaves the body, the (faculty of) vision follows it’”

(Aljami, 8554)

Step 9

Saying the prophetic du'aa

When Abu Salamah died, the Prophet peace be upon him said the following words:

“O Allah forgive Abu Salamah (substitute the name of the person) and raise his degrees with those who are guided, and replace those whom he has left behind (with benefits), and forgive us and him O Lord of worlds. Make his grave wide for him, and light it for him.”

(Muslim, 2080)

Step 10

To wrap his jaws

When a person dies, their mouth stays open either widely or slightly, and odors will come out. Therefore, one should gently wrap the jaw of the person using a soft string or a piece of cloth. Do not put too much pressure when tying as this may leave a mark on the face of the person.

Step 11

To loosen his joints

As mentioned earlier, when blood circulation stops in the body, the joints become stiff within a few minutes due to the trapped blood. This will make it very hard to wash or shroud the person and perform other burial rites. By loosening the joints of the person shortly after they die, this makes it easier to perform funeral rites. This is done by gently bending the joints of the person shortly after their death (the arms, legs, fingers, shoulders, etc.)

Step 12

To take his outer garments off

The companions peace be upon them asked:

“Should we uncover the Prophet -peace be upon him- just like we uncover our dead people?”

(Ibn Hibban, 2156)

This indicates that this was the practice with other dead Muslims. This also makes it easier for the person performing the washing and shrouding, as it becomes harder to take off the clothes when the joints become stiff. This is done for both males and females by their respected gender or their spouse (according to the opinion of the majority of scholars).

Step 13

To cover him completely

Once his outer garments are removed, it is only natural to cover the person. This is also the practice of Islam as narrated by Ayesha may Allah be pleased with her:

“The Prophet -peace be upon him- was covered with a thin cloth when he died.”

(Nasa’i, 7117)

The covering must be done using one cloth that covers the entire body, including the face. Also, if a family member arrives late and wants to see the face of the dead person, they are permitted to do so. Jabir may Allah be pleased with him narrated:

“When my father was killed, I used to uncover the cloth off his face and cry, and the Prophet peace be upon him was not telling me to stop.”

(Bukhari, 1187)

Step 14

The permissibility of kissing the deceased

It is human nature that a person may want to kiss his dead family member one last time before he is buried. It is from the abundant mercy of Allah that this practice is not only permissible in Islam but from the Sunnah. Ayesha may Allah be pleased with her narrates:

“The Prophet -peace be upon him- used to kiss Uthman ibn Math’oon when he died, until I saw the tears fall on his eyes.”

(Tirmidhi, 1000)

Also, Ibn Abbas may Allah be pleased with him narrates:

“Abu Bakr- may Allah be pleased with him- used to kiss the Prophet peace be upon him after his death.”

(Bukhari, 1241)

Step 15

To hasten the act of paying his debts

It is enough to mention that the Prophet peace be upon him did not pray on a person until his debts were paid as narrated by Abu Qatada may Allah be pleased with him:

“They brought a (dead) man to the Prophet peace be upon him, so he asked “Is there a debt on him?” They said “Yes, two gold coins.” So he was slowed down and did not pray on him. So Abu Qatada said “I will take care of the two gold coins O Prophet of Allah,” so the Prophet - peace be upon him- replied “It is the right of the lender.”

(AlHakim, 2/58)

Debts could be either due to Allah (Zakah, Kaffara, or Oath) or due to people.

Paying the debt of the person must be done before the distribution of any inheritance, even if it exhausts the entire amount. This is also one of the best ways the family of the dead person can help him, the Prophet peace be upon him said:

“Whoever has an act of oppression towards his brother from his honour or his money, then let him repay it to him before the Day of Rising comes when there is no gold or silver. If he had any good deeds, it would be taken from him and given to his friend. And if he did not have any, then it would be taken from the sins of his friend and he would carry it.”

(Bukhari, 6169)

Step 16

It is an obligation to speed up his burial

Finally, we must end this list by mentioning that it is not permissible to delay the burial of a person except for a necessity, or if some family members are arriving within a few hours. This is clear from the words of the Prophet peace be upon him:

“Hasten the funeral, as if it was a good soul, then it is a favour you are doing him, and if it was other than that, so it is an evil that you are lifting from around your necks.”

(Bukhari, 1252)

We pray to Allah that this reminder has cleared up any misconceptions regarding the preparation of the deceased, and that it serves great benefit to our Muslim community.