



Germany's grieving culture

Just like anywhere else in the world, Germany has various traditions of expressing grief when a person close to you has died. This is also true of how you respond to grieving people and express your condolences. Sadness about the loss of a dear one is expressed, for example, in crying, wearing black clothes and symbols like a photo of the deceased person with a black sash. Personal grief is generally expressed inwardly and quietly rather than outwardly and loudly.



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On the death of individuals of public importance or after bad catastrophes official flags flown at half-mast on public buildings are an expression of public grief.

Honouring the deceased

To express your sympathy with the loved ones of the deceased you can use expressions such as *Mein herzliches Beileid* ("My heartfelt condolences"). Germans will often send a card with a black perimeter to express their condolences or even money to help pay for the funeral, which is usually very expensive in Germany.

At the funeral itself wreaths of flowers are placed on the grave as a symbol of the eternal sphere where the deceased has passed on to. More and more people in Germany are now cremated and buried in an urn because the small grave in a cemetery is not so expensive and needs less looking after.



At the funeral the deceased is honoured by a speaker. Here, the custom is that nobody says anything negative about the deceased. During and after the funeral the life of the deceased will often be described in brief terms or what they meant to family and friends. In most cases, the family and friends will sit together over a simple meal and spend some time recalling the deceased. In German this wake is sometimes referred to as a funeral feast (*Leichenschmaus*).

Besides traditional Christian funerals with a pastor in a church, there are increasing numbers of purely secular funerals with a speaker and no reference to the Christian faith. This is when the deceased and their family did not belong to any church.



The Christian perspective

Christians with a personal relationship to Jesus know that after they have died, they will spend eternity with God. Through resurrection to eternal life death does not have the final say. That is why funerals for people who have lived with Jesus are often full of the assurance that the deceased is in the best possible place for eternity and one will see them again when one's life is also with Jesus. This assurance comes from a believing Christian's trust in Jesus' words: "Whoever believes in me will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life." (John 5:24) Through his death and resurrection Jesus took the blame for the separation from God, which we human beings are responsible for, and thus opened up the path to God. (For a more detailed explanation see Easter—a major festival in Germany). For this reason, the songs sung at the funerals of believing Christians are often full of hope, and sometimes the people attending do not wear black clothes so as not to give grief too much symbolic significance.



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Without this living Christian hope funerals in Germany can often convey very little consolation to those attending – irrespective of whether they take place in a church or with a secular speaker. It is of existential importance during your life that you deal with the question of where you will spend eternity.