

Heart & Soul Funerals



Heart & Soul Funeral Directors

In many cases families and friends would like to be involved in carrying the coffin of the person who has died to their last resting place – it can be a lovely thing to do. Before you choose to do this, consider whether you have any back, neck, shoulder or knee injuries that might be aggravated by this and read these guidelines carefully.

Safety guidelines for bearing
and lowering a coffin.

Please read these carefully.

Guidelines for lifting, carrying and lowering a coffin

A coffin may be carried low, by the handles (check they are weight-bearing first), or on the shoulders of the bearers. The former is more advisable over uneven or slippery ground.

- **Think before lifting/handling.** Plan the lift. Remove obstructions around the coffin, and ensure you have a clear path to where you are going both underfoot and above. Make sure the person on the other side of the coffin is about the same height as you. Put shorter bearers at the front. When bringing the coffin onto the shoulder, have someone at each end to assist with the lift.
- **Feet first.** It is traditional to carry a coffin so that the body travels feet first. If carrying into a crematorium the coffin must be placed feet first onto the catafalque (the platform on which it must be placed by the end of the ceremony). Many coffins are shaped, so the feet end is the more tapered end. For straight sided coffins, make sure you use something to mark which end is which (this could be by reference to a name plaque).
- **Survey the journey.** If possible, take a look at the whole journey before you begin, noting uneven ground, steps and low doorways.
- **Think about the weight.** Know the weight of the person in the coffin and bear in mind that wooden coffins are also quite heavy, adding up to 20kg. If the load is more than 90kgs (14 stones) you will need six bearers. If the load is more than 125 kilos (20 stones), you should think very carefully about carrying the coffin.
- **Keep the load close to your body.** The coffin should be kept close to the body when handling it. If a close approach is not possible, try to slide it towards you before attempting to lift it.
- **Adopt a stable position.** Keep feet apart with one leg slightly forward to maintain balance. Feet should be moved to maintain balance during the lift. Avoid tight clothing and unsuitable footwear which might impair movement.
- **Get a good hold.** Where possible, keep the coffin as close as possible to the body. If it has weight bearing handles, use these. Otherwise ensure you have a firm grip of the underside and side of the coffin and, if you are raising the coffin to shoulder height, get a hand underneath it as you bring it onto your shoulder.
- **Work as a team.** Have someone who leads the lift, saying ready, steady, lift, and the same for putting the coffin down. Work together.

- **Employ good posture.** At the start of the lift, slight bending of the back, hips and knees is preferable to fully flexing the back (stooping) or fully flexing the hips or knees (squatting).
- **Don't flex the back any further while lifting.** This can happen if the legs begin to straighten before starting to lift the coffin.
- **Avoid twisting the back or leaning sideways,** especially while your back is bent. Shoulders should be level and facing the same direction as the hips. Turning by moving the feet is better than twisting and lifting at the same time. As you carry the coffin, keep your shoulders as even as possible, avoiding twisting your back.
- **Keep the head up when carrying.** Look ahead for obstacles, keeping your head up as far as possible, once the coffin is held securely and you are in motion.
- **Designate one person at the front to give warnings.** One of the front bearers can announce steps, uneven ground and obstacles. Or better, have someone walking with you to do this.
- **Move smoothly.** The coffin should not be jerked or snatched as this can make it harder to keep control and can increase the risk of injury. Walk slowly, coordinating your left and right steps with the person in front of you.
- **Don't lift or handle more than can be easily managed.** There is a difference between what people can lift and what they can safely lift. One guideline is about 25 kilos (4 stones) for each person. Don't forget that the coffin itself may weigh as much as 25kg (sometimes more). If in doubt, seek advice or get help. If you are finding it too heavy, say so, even though this may be difficult. Another means can always be found.
- **Put down, then adjust.** If precise positioning of the coffin is necessary, put it down as close to the right place as you can first, then slide it into the desired position.
- **Trestles.** If you are to place the coffin on trestles, put one trestle in place so you can approach it without getting tangled up with another trestle, and have someone ready to slide the second trestle under as you put the front of the coffin on the first trestle. Have one trestle under the shoulders (broadest part of the coffin) and one eighteen inches in from the feet end.
- **Aisle width.** Make sure the entrance and aisle is at least 4 feet wide if carrying on shoulders, and 6ft if carrying low.

Lowering the coffin into the grave

If you are carrying a coffin to a grave, it will need to be placed on two slats across the grave. The left hand and right hand bearers must walk on each side of the grave in order to position it. This means the bearers on one side will have to walk on a narrow ledge between the open grave and the soil which has been taken out of the grave, possibly in wet and slippery conditions. This is the most dangerous part of the process.

We recommend that the coffin is lowered and held by the (weight-bearing) handles just before reaching the grave, or it could be held on webbing passed through the handles if the handles are not weight-bearing. Make sure there is someone standing firmly on the ledge who can assist the front bearer by taking their free arm if necessary to steady them. The bearers on the opposite side should ensure they stay close to the grave edge so as not to drag the bearers on the ledge across.

If you do keep the coffin on shoulders whilst you position yourselves at the grave, it can be lowered from the shoulder, the bearers turning sideways towards the coffin and placing their hands under the coffin and gently lowering it onto the slats.

Otherwise the same principles apply as outlined above.

When it is time to lower the coffin, the bearers take the ends of the webbing, which is passed under the coffin, at least 18 inches from each end (and preferably passed through the handles). Taking a firm grip on the webbing, then lift the coffin slightly so that the two slats over the grave can be removed (by someone else). The bearers then slowly lower the coffin by letting the webbing through their hands hand over hand (this has better control than letting the webbing slip through the hands). Keep an eye on the other bearers and keep the coffin as level as possible. It is also a good idea to have someone at each end to make sure the coffin goes in straight. As you lower the coffin, keep your back relaxed and straight, and your knee slightly bent.

If you read this carefully, put it into practice and proceed with caution, you should be fine, so don't let this put you off. If you want to talk about it please call us on 01803 840779.