



Final Details: A Checklist

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You have just suffered an emotionally devastating event and the last thing you want to deal with is money and legal matters. But they do matter, now and for your future, so try to do the best you can. Many of these tasks can also be handled by family members and trusted friends, so allow them to assist you.

Within the First Month

- Ask your bank to release joint bank account funds to you.** In some states, joint bank accounts are automatically frozen upon the death of one spouse.
- Set up a new bank account.**
- Secure an ample number of certified copies of the death certificate.**
- Find important papers:** deeds, bankbooks or account statements, stock certificates or investment account statements, and insurance policies. View checklist of papers you may need.
- Locate important certificates:** your marriage certificate, your spouse's birth certificate, military discharge papers, Social Security card, tax forms, and birth certificates of any minor children. These records are needed to establish claims for Social Security, life insurance, or veteran's benefits. View checklist of papers you may need.
- Notify the insurance companies (in writing) that insured your spouse of his or her death.** Each company will need a statement of claim and a death certificate before the surviving spouse can receive benefits. Keep copies of all correspondence.
- Contact your Social Security office to find out if you are eligible for new benefits.** Social Security benefits are not automatically paid out after a death; you must apply for them. Learn more about benefits.
- Write a formal letter to your spouse's employer, union, or any other group or professional organization with which he or she may have had an association.** Many of these organizations have insurance policies of which you may be the beneficiary. Also inquire about

any 401(k), pension, or company stock benefits. If your spouse was a veteran, apply for veterans' benefits at the nearest Veterans Administration office. Keep copies of all correspondence. Learn more about benefits.

Advise all creditors in writing, including issuers of credit cards, that your spouse has died. If you have any loans, find out if they are insured.

Consult a lawyer. Your family may be very well meaning, but they are not necessarily legal experts. Discuss fees before you engage any legal help.

Within the First Six Months

See a tax accountant or tax lawyer. Federal law requires that an estate tax return be filed within nine months of the death in many cases. Since tax laws are constantly being revised, it is important to seek out expert advice to determine your full tax liability.

Probate. These procedures can be a complex matter, depending upon the size of the estate and the claims against it. In some states probate can take a year to complete, so again, an attorney can be helpful.

Within the First Year

Determine your annual income, which consists of your salary (if you work), benefits, and income-producing assets. This will include investments and savings.

Create a yearly budget.