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Facebook still needs to work on what to do when users die

We highly recommend you appoint a Facebook legacy contact, if you haven't already.

By [Amanda Luz Henning Santiago](#) on August 29, 2018



Credit: VICKY LETA/Mashable

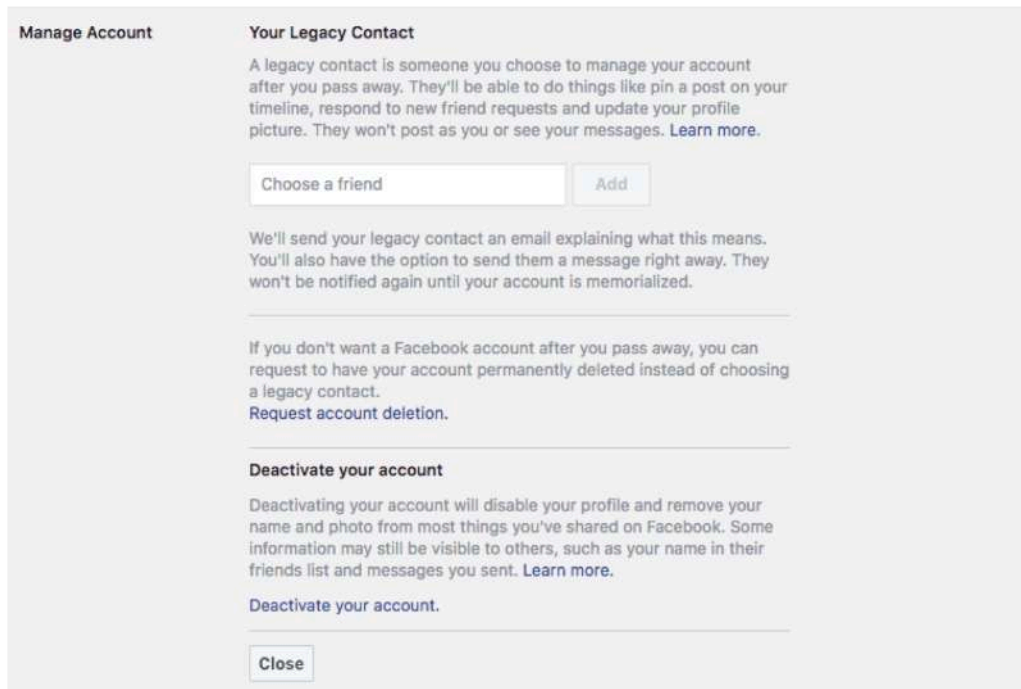
What happens to your Facebook account after you die? Well, that largely depends on who reports your death to Facebook first.

In 2015, Facebook announced in a [press release](#) that users would be able to name a "legacy contact," or a person responsible for managing your account after you die.

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Legacy contacts can memorialize accounts and download all of an account's data. They can even delete accounts completely. However, users can set preferences to have accounts memorialized or deleted after they pass away, and a legacy contact must abide by those specifications.



The screenshot shows the 'Manage Account' settings page on Facebook. The 'Your Legacy Contact' section is highlighted. It explains that a legacy contact can manage the account after death, including pinning posts and responding to friend requests. Below this is a text input field labeled 'Choose a friend' and an 'Add' button. Further down, it states that an email will be sent to the legacy contact and that they won't be notified again until the account is memorialized. There is a horizontal separator line. Below the line, it offers the option to request account deletion instead of choosing a legacy contact, with a link 'Request account deletion.' Another horizontal separator line follows. Below this line, the 'Deactivate your account' section is shown, explaining that deactivation disables the profile and removes it from most shared content. It includes a 'Deactivate your account.' link and a 'Close' button at the bottom.

In your general account settings, right below the setting for your preferred temperature scale, you can add a legacy contact.
Credit: screenshot/facebook

A lot of social media platforms don't seem to take into account users' deaths, artist and researcher Caroline Sinderson argued in a 2016 [essay for Splinter](#), in which she wrote about the process of planning for her own online death.

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Sinderson cites the language social networking websites use for the accounts of the deceased as an example to back up her argument. They're typically referred to as "inactive" or a "legacy account" after a user has passed away, and sometimes they are simply "shut down."

"For Google, you're not deceased, you're just away from your computer for a very long, long time," Sinderson writes.

There's also practically no mention of the word "death" anywhere on social media sites, Sinderson explains. It's difficult to gauge whether or not a person on social media is dead or alive, except on Facebook, where the word "Remembering" denotes who is deceased — something that occurs automatically once the account has been memorialized — on the platform.

Death on social media is still in many ways a mystery.

Nearly all [social media](#) platforms offer some way users can report that an account belongs to a deceased person, but these options are not widely known. Often, reporting a deceased person's account merely results in its removal, which is not ideal for those who'd like access to the user's content.

Instagram has quietly begun allowing users to [memorialize accounts](#), preserving the deceased's account as they left it at the time of their passing. Like memorialized Facebook profiles, once these Instagram accounts are memorialized, no one can log into the account, and it is impossible for them to be altered. But unlike Facebook accounts that signify deceased members with the word "Remembering," it's impossible to tell which accounts on Instagram have been memorialized.

Facebook is one of the few social media platforms to outwardly acknowledge death. However, the memorialization process still leaves much room for improvement.

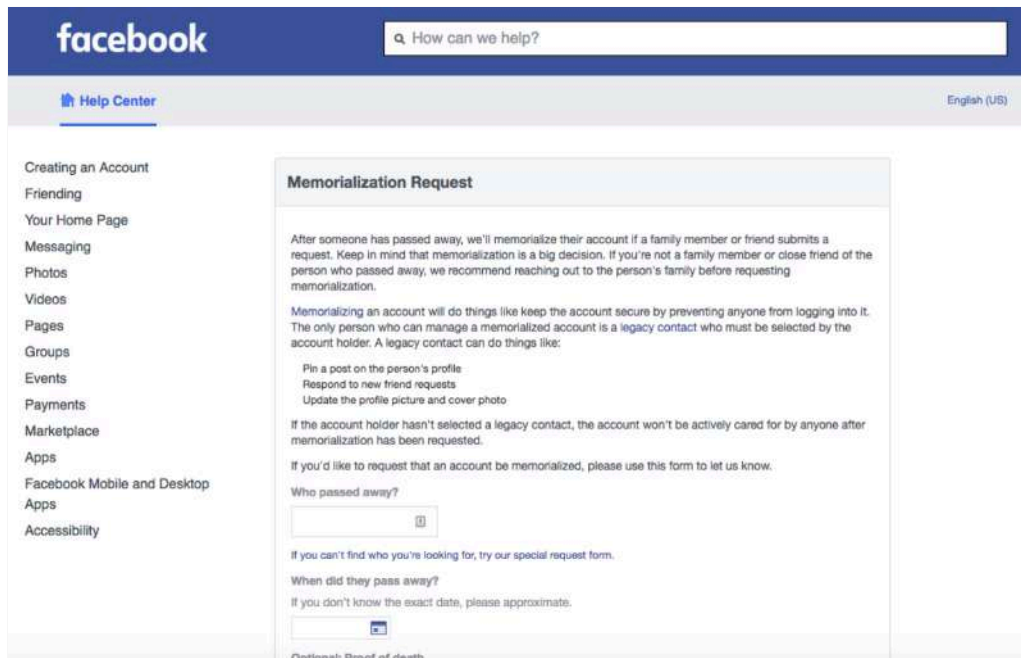
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How to memorialize a loved one's account

Locating information on memorialization proved difficult for me. After a couple of searches on Facebook itself, I decided to Google the process.

My first search result brought me to Facebook's Help Center page about [memorialization](#), which provides answers to questions about the memorialization process, deleting accounts, and appointing [legacy contacts](#).

To memorialize an account on Facebook, [a request](#) needs to be sent naming the deceased and providing their date of passing and proof of their death, such as an obituary or death certificate. Eventually, if it all checks out, Facebook will memorialize the account.

The image is a screenshot of the Facebook Help Center page, specifically the 'Memorialization Request' form. The page has a blue header with the Facebook logo and a search bar. Below the header is a navigation menu with links to various help topics. The main content area is titled 'Memorialization Request' and contains text explaining the process of memorializing an account. It includes instructions on how to request memorialization, what a legacy contact can do, and how to fill out the form. The form has fields for 'Who passed away?' and 'When did they pass away?'. The text is in a clean, sans-serif font, and the layout is organized with clear headings and bullet points.

Facebook's memorialization request form Credit: Screenshot/facebook

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Facebook user Kari Driskell — who wrote a [blog post](#) about the process — also found it difficult to locate information on Facebook memorialization back when her husband Eric died in 2017.

Driskell told Mashable it wasn't until she changed her marital status on Facebook to "widowed" that she even knew you could memorialize someone's Facebook account. After a series of Google searches, and seeking out advice in a Facebook group for widows, Kari figured it out.

Kari made herself Eric's legacy contact by accessing his account on his phone (where he was still logged into Facebook); then she made the request to memorialize the account.

Once her husband's account had been converted, she became extremely active on it. "I would share quotes, share other posts, phrases, share our story," Driskell said. "I would change cover pages, add photos, and things like that."

Now she checks in on it every two weeks or so.

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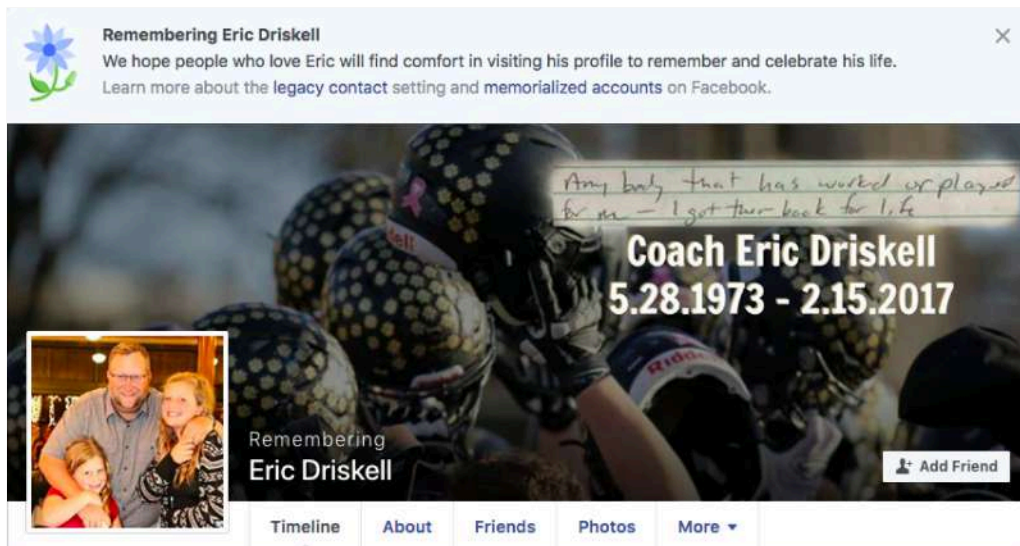
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Driskell feels strongly that Facebook should make more people aware of its legacy contact feature: "Someone should ask, 'What do you want to happen to your Facebook account when you die?' Like, when they ask, 'How do you want to be buried?' It should also be, 'What do you want to do with your social media contents?'"

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Eric Driskell's memorialized Facebook profile Credit: Eric driskell/facebook

For Karen Marcus, who lost her husband Steve in 2011, the process was a little different.

Prior to 2015 and the invention of the legacy contact, if anyone saw the Facebook profile of someone they knew had passed away, all they needed to do was report it to Facebook and request that the account either be memorialized or deleted. The only other way people could manage someone's account after they passed away was if they had their password.

Luckily, Marcus had her husband's Facebook password. The first thing she did, she told Mashable, was download all of Steve's data, afraid she might get locked out of his account if someone else reported him deceased before she had a chance to access it.

"For me that was the biggest thing I did, I just didn't want to lose the electronic part of Steve," Marcus said.

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Marcus shared information on Steve's account (such as his funeral arrangements), accepted friend requests, and posted pictures for about a year after his passing. Then she memorialized the account.

For Marcus, keeping the memorial account alive ended up becoming too difficult for her. No one was posting on it, and she felt she was the only one left remembering Steve. She deleted it after a year.

Facebook needs to address this glaring issue

Both Driskell and Marcus felt that the most frustrating part of Facebook's memorialization process is that anyone can memorialize an account. A friend, a stranger, an ex-girlfriend, a camp buddy, an acquaintance — anyone.

Only legacy contacts that have been predetermined can access the accounts after they've been memorialized, according to Facebook, but that doesn't mean they're the only ones who can memorialize the account.

Marcus said she heard horror stories of people locked out of their loved one's accounts despite having their passwords because someone else had memorialized it first.

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"A total stranger can do it. All they have to do is send something to Facebook saying, 'This person is dead, here's the obituary.'"

"Even now anyone can memorialize an account," Marcus said. "A total stranger can do it. All they have to do is send something to Facebook saying, 'This person is dead, here's the obituary,' and Facebook will automatically memorialize it."

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"I think that in the memorializing application, you should have to provide proof, and write how you are connected," Driskell suggested. "[Driskell's late-husband Eric] was a high school teacher. One of his students could have easily memorialized the account before me."

This issue is unfortunately nothing new.

Facebook has been receiving complaints about the lack of verification required for memorialization for years. Yet little headway has been made in remedying this massive flaw.

In 2013, it became popular for Facebook users to prank their living friends by memorializing their accounts and locking them out of their accounts permanently, according to a [HuffPost report](#).

In 2012, a German 15-year-old was hit by a train in an apparent suicide. When her mother tried to access her Facebook account, she was unable to, because it had already been memorialized, [Reuters reported in 2017](#).

Locked out of the account, she was forced to go to court to try to gain access to her daughter's profile. The court in Germany initially sided with her, but a ruling in an appeals court dictated that the right to private data outweighed any parental inheritance of information.

In 2017, Lisa Menzo Santoro was murdered by her live-in boyfriend. After Facebook was made aware of her death, her account became a perfectly preserved memorial — which became problematic for her family, [SJTV News reported](#) in April.

Pictures of Santoro and the boyfriend who murdered her were still uploaded onto her account. Her family tried reporting the photos as offensive and reached out to Facebook directly to have the photos removed, but the pictures have remained on Santoro's page despite all efforts.

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The list of complaints goes on.

What can social media sites do to improve the grieving process?

In a [story for Quartz](#) earlier this month, Jo Bell wrote that "social networking sites are replacing traditional mourning objects — such as items of jewelry, clothing, or gravestones — that are imbued with particular emotional resonance and which subsequently take on additional significance after death."

This rings true, as online memorialization becomes more prevalent, and other methods of [grieving online](#) grow in popularity.

David Kessler, the founder of [Grief.com](#), told Mashable that he finds social media to be incredibly helpful when it comes to coping with grief.

"I often think of social media as the new town square," Kessler said. "It's where we meet now, and the wonderful thing about social media and grief is that you really get to connect with people who really feel like you do."

If we are to embrace this notion, shouldn't efforts be made to provide social media users the same kind of support online that we have in the waking world?

Facebook will never be able to hold your hand at a funeral service or bring a casserole to your house, but it can support its users by addressing these long overlooked memorialization issues. Then hopefully other social networking sites will follow suit.

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