

Talking about Death and Dying

By Jeanette Stehr-Green

A little over a year ago my father died. Although many miles separated us, we were close in heart. We exchanged newspaper clippings, funny cards, and links to online videos. I called him every Sunday morning and visited him two or three times a year. Shortly after his 92nd birthday my father died. So much was left unsaid. I felt utterly lost and alone.

Like most Western societies, Americans are a death-denying culture. In general, we do not like to think about dying, talk about death, or prepare for our own passing.

According to a 2022 survey undertaken by Ethos Life (a life insurance company), only a third of Americans report a willingness to talk about death, a proportion much lower than those willing to talk about other sensitive subjects such as money (81%), sex (46%), and religion (41%). Less than half of those surveyed had already discussed end-of-life preparations with loved ones and only a quarter had made a will.

Although the exact numbers vary, surveys undertaken by other sources suggest similar trends. Americans don't want to talk about death.

Why talk about death? Sharing thoughts and feelings about death can normalize a life event that happens to us all; talking about death can bring a level of acceptance, lower anxiety and fear, and even provide a sense of peace. Talking about death can reduce the burden on those who might be asked to make difficult decisions on your behalf. With an understanding of your wishes, family members can make sure you receive the care you want, minimize your suffering, and eliminate unnecessary expenditures. Finally, talking about death can bring us closer to those we love, fostering a deeper connection and understanding among family members and friends.

Granted, talking about death and dying is not easy for most. A non-threatening way to start might be a group discussion – not with family or friends and not particularly focused on your death – just death-related topics.

Volunteer Hospice of Clallam County (VHOCC) hosts a monthly community forum called "Tea To Die For." These discussions, patterned after "Death Cafes" that emerged in the UK in 2011, have no agenda, objectives, or themes. The group in attendance directs where the discussion goes. You can learn from others who have knowledge or experience in particular death-related topics. You can explore beliefs about death and the benefit of death rituals. You can sound out your own end-of-life plans and ask questions. The sky is the limit.

Another way to jumpstart conversations about death is in-person or online games that get you thinking (and talking) about end-of-life situations. One in-person game, "Go Wish," provides a deck of cards for players to rank their preferences about things that people often say are important when they are sick or dying like

- "Not being a burden to my family,"
- "To be free of pain," and
- "To have close friends near."

"Go Wish" preferences are then shared with other players and thoughtful discussions usually follow.

These games might seem light-hearted or even irreverent to some. But they can help you understand what you want and help you build the skills (and courage) you need to talk with friends, family, and even health care providers about death.

Guided workbooks are another way to start the process of talking about death and dying. One such tool, “Your Conversation Starter Guide” published by The Conversation Project, walks you step-by-step through preparing for and undertaking discussions about death. It includes thinking about your values, who to talk to, the best setting, and the conversation itself. It ends with tips to keep the conversation going and next steps. “Your Conversation Starter Guide” can be downloaded for free at <https://theconversationproject.org/get-started#Your-Conversation-Starter-Guide>

Regardless of how you go about it, you need to start talking about death and dying. In this monthly column, we will introduce death-related topics and hope to help you start and continue conversations about death and dying with your family, friends, and health care providers.

Jeanette Stehr-Green volunteers at VHOCC along with a host of other community members who provide respite care, grief and bereavement support, and access to free medical equipment.

Sidebar Quote:

“Death is not frightening. We just think it is because it has become so unfamiliar.”

From Atalanta Beaumont in *Psychology Today*

