

LET'S TALK
ABOUT ...

Death, dying and loss



Death, dying and loss

WHY TALK ABOUT THEM?

Having a conversation about death, dying and loss can be very difficult. So why do it? Why not just ignore these things until they happen? Some possible answers are shown below.

I've got worries
about dying I want
to share with my
family.

I want to know what
to expect in my
husband's last days
to support him well.

I want to talk about
how I feel to help me
cope with my grief.

I want to get things
like wills and money
sorted.

I want to be open with
everyone so there are no
family rows
after I'm gone.

**Talking about death, dying and loss
helps us to live better together.**



Death, dying and loss

WHAT **STOPS** US TALKING ABOUT THEM?

Two in three people think we do not talk enough about death in England (MacMillan, 2017). Grief specialist Julia Samuel explains the huge importance of talking about grief in order to gain support.

So what stops us talking?

Death seems
far off and
irrelevant.

I don't know what
to say to a grieving
person.

Talking about my
death feels like
I'm giving up.

I don't want to
burden friends and
family.

I'm worried I will
get it wrong and
offend people so I
stay quiet.

Talking about death makes it more likely that we will die well. Talking about grief means we can feel less alone.

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HOW CAN WE GET READY TO TALK?

If you want to have a conversation with someone about **your own** death or loss, planning helps you to get started. You can always change what you have planned when the time comes. You might want to share some of the following things:

- Where you want to spend the final days of your life
- What kind of medical care you want in the final days
- What kind of funeral you would like
- How you want people to remember you
- Your worries about death or dying
- Anything you want to say to someone before you die
- Anything you want people to know before you die

If you want to have a conversation with someone else about **their** death or loss, you can turn these points into questions.

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HOW CAN WE ENCOURAGE OTHERS TO TALK?

People have very different feelings about death and dying. You may want to talk to someone who is dying or grieving about their feelings. However, it may not be right for them at that point in time. It is important not to push someone into talking if they do not want to.

Instead you might want to say something like:

"If there comes a time when you do want to talk about something, please do tell me."

If the person **does** want to talk:

- Listen more than you talk. This is their space and time. Sometimes just sitting with someone can be very comforting to them.
- Be natural in your own emotions. If you cry, you give others permission to cry too.
- Be calm in the conversation. You do not have to solve this problem – you can't. You just need to be present and offer your time and attention.



Listening is much more important than talking. We need to listen without thinking about what we are going to say next. The person who is dying or grieving should be in control of the conversation. We should take our cues from them. The very act of listening offers people the space to be heard and understood, rather than faced with imagined 'solutions'.

Techniques to support listening and understanding

- Adopt body language which shows you are interested and are giving your full attention – sit next to the person, lean towards them and nod, maintain eye-contact
- Give verbal affirmations (yes, aha etc.)
- Suspend judgement – set aside your own assumptions
- Ask open questions such as “Can you tell me more about that?”
- Be patient – avoid fidgeting and interrupting

Things **NOT TO say**

- “I know how you feel” – You don’t, you can’t and this is about the other person, not you.
- “Time is a great healer” – It might be for some, it might not be for others and the pain is being experienced now.

**How can
I start a
conversation?**

What would you
like to talk about?

I wonder if we should begin to
plan for the worst even
though we hope for the best.

I'm so sorry to hear
that (name) has died.

I know talking about
this is not easy.

I've been thinking about
what happens next and
want to share my thoughts
with you.



Julia Samuel (2018) contrasts the small, tidy word 'grief' with the messy, unpredictable experience of grief and loss. The process of grieving – finding a way to live with what we have lost – can be incredibly painful. The actions below may be of some help to you.

- Tell your story – talk about the person who has died, write about how you feel in a journal etc.
- Listen to/read/watch other people's stories
- Make something to keep meaningful things in – a box, a picture frame, a set of drawers
- Get out of the house
- Get some exercise
- Fundraise in memory
- Work with Julia Samuel's Eight Pillars of Strength – <https://www.juliasamuel.co.uk/8-pillars-of-strength>
- Get support from others



Information sources for this booklet

The information in this booklet has drawn on multiple sources, detailed below.

Carter, L. and Froden, G. (2017) *Let's talk about death and dying. How to have difficult conversations.* Age UK Ltd. Available at: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/health-wellbeing/relationships-family/end-of-life-issues/talking-death-dying/>

Dying Matters (2025) *Talking about death and dying.* Available at: <https://www.hospiceuk.org/information-and-support/death-and-dying-what-expect/about-death-and-dying>

Dying Matters (2025). *Talking to someone who is grieving.* Available at: <https://www.hospiceuk.org/our-campaigns/dying-matters/dying-matters-resources>

MacMillan Cancer Support (2017) *No regrets. How talking more openly about death could help people die well.* Available at: https://www.macmillan.org.uk/_images/no-regrets-talking-about-death-report_tcm9-311059.pdf

St. Clare Hospice (2020) *How to talk about death and dying.* Available at: <https://stclarehospice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/How-to-talk-about-death-and-dying-Guide-Ver-2.pdf>



Further support

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW TO PLAN FOR DEATH AND DYING?

Age UK. *End of life planning*. Available at:
<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/money-legal/end-of-life-planning/>

Dying Matters resources. Available at:
<https://www.hospiceuk.org/our-campaigns/dying-matters/dying-matters-resources>

Hospice UK. *Planning ahead*. Available at:
<https://www.hospiceuk.org/information-and-support/your-guide-hospice-and-end-life-care/planning-ahead>

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PEOPLE DIE?

Dying for beginners - Dr. Kathryn Mannix

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayMhAlpRLeY>

This 4 minute video de-mystifies the sequence of events which happen to a person when they are dying.

What happens as we die? - Dr Kathryn Mannix

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9f6twy70iM>

This 14 minute TEDTALK suggests we all need to know and share information about what happens when people die, not leave it up to health professionals.



Further support

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT GRIEF?

What is grief? Julia Samuel (2018)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1AYTSIHWIY>

This 6 minute video explores the personal nature of grief and how to be self-compassionate and seek support where needed.

CRUSE bereavement support - <https://www.cruse.org.uk/>

Good Grief - <https://goodgrief1.wpengine.com/resources/>

Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief -
<https://www.goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk/>

MIND - <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

The Compassionate Friends - <https://www.tcf.org.uk/>

Sue Ryder's Grief Guide - <https://griefguide.sueryder.org/>

Widowed and Young - <https://www.widowedandyoung.org.uk/>

WHERE CAN I HEAR/JOIN MORE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT DEATH, DYING AND LOSS?

Dying for a cuppa - The podcast. Katie Costello. Available at: <https://katiesoulmidwife.com/dyingforacuppamasterclass>

Griefcast with Cariad Lloyd. Available at:
<https://cariadlloyd.com/griefcast>

The Dying Matters podcast. Available at:
<https://audioboom.com/channels/4941503-the-dying-matters-podcast>



Further support

SOME BOOKS EXPLORING DEATH, DYING AND GRIEF

Becker, E. (1973) *The denial of death*. USA: The Free Press.

This book argues that humans deny their mortality, which leads them to live their lives creating 'immortality' projects to give their life meaning.

Broyard, A. (1992). *Intoxicated by my illness*. New York: Fawcett Columbine.

This is a collection of six personal essays, some written post-diagnosis in the last 14 months of the author's life.

Clarke, R. *Dear Life*. (2020) A doctor's story of love and loss. GB: Little, Brown.

This book illustrates the vital importance of human connection and how the author became the doctor she is today.

Gawande, A. (2014). *Being Mortal. Illness, medicine and what matters in the end*. London: Profile Books.

This book explores the modern experience of mortality and the shift of ideas about death and dying across time.

Mannix, K. (2017) *With the end in mind*. London: William Collins.

This book tells end of life stories with the goal of opening up honest conversations about living and planning for death.

Tolstoy, L. (2016 edition). *The death of Ivan Illyich*. Translated by Briggs, A. Penguin Classics. London: Penguin Publishing House.

This is a fictional account of the dying and death of Ivan Illyich, who has never really thought of death before he is faced with his own.

Yalom, I. (2011) *Staring at the sun*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

This book recounts a doctor's experiences of the problems his patients face linked to their own mortality.



**"I cannot escape death,
but at least I can escape
the fear of it".**

Epictetus, Greek philosopher, c. 55-135 C.E.



www.patchatt.co.uk/beingmortal
patchattcommunitygroup@gmail.com

