

# DAY OF THE DEAD



**Should we talk more  
openly about death  
and dying?**



A group of people, primarily young adults, are dressed as sugar skulls (calaveras) for the Día de los Muertos celebration. They have white face paint with black accents around the eyes, nose, and mouth, which is painted to resemble a skull. The individuals are holding lit candles and large bouquets of orange marigolds. They are wearing traditional Mexican clothing, including white blouses with colorful floral embroidery and straw hats. The scene is set at night, with the background being dark and illuminated by the warm light of the candles and some ambient street lighting. The image is framed by a decorative border of orange marigolds and green leaves.

# DAY OF THE DEAD TRADITIONS

## **The offrenda**

The offrenda is an altar where people leave offerings of food, sugar skulls and other comforts such as blankets and pillows for the souls of those who have died. Relatives come here to pray and share joyful stories of their loved ones.

## **Marigold flowers**

Marigolds are a key symbol, thought to guide the souls of loved ones from the Land of the Dead towards the offerings left on the offrenda.

## **Sugar skulls**

Decorated skulls made of sugar are left on offrenda or given as gifts.

## **La Catrina**

Jose Guadalupe Posada's etching of a female skeleton wearing a flowery hat inspires much of the festival's makeup and stories. La Catrina is a reminder to remember the dead with good humour and warmth.





# What can the Day of the Dead teach us about talking about death and dying?



The Day of the Dead festival can teach us a lot about talking about death and dying. The festival reminds us that death is a natural part of life. Families often celebrate the Day of the Dead in a cemetery. They decorate graves of their loved ones with marigolds and candles and then share a holiday meal by the side of the graves. They bring offerings of food for those who have died, so that they can be included in the celebrations.

In the Day of the Dead festival, death is seen as a natural part of the cycle of life. The dead are honoured as part of the family, whilst the living have a chance to remember them with joy and celebration and to maintain links with them. Death here is not something to be hidden away and not spoken of, but is an accepted fact which helps people live more fully in the present.

A 2024 UK survey for Marie Curie found that 59% of people thought we should talk more about death and dying. However, only 14% had talked about their wishes at the end of life. This means that they may not have their wishes taken into account. Similarly, family members may be left to make difficult decisions without knowing what their loved one wants or would have wanted.

On the other hand, if we have honest, informed conversations we can plan for death, as we do for birth. Developing more open approaches to talking about death and dying reduces fear, supports wellbeing and gives us agency over our own story. The following pages give some practical hints on how natural conversations about death and dying can be achieved.







## WHY TALK ABOUT DYING AND DEATH?

Having a conversation about death 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 be able to be me until the end.**

**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.**



## WHAT STOPS US TALKING ABOUT DEATH AND DYING?

Two in three people think we do not talk enough about death in England (MacMillan, 2017).

**So what stops us talking?**

Death seems  
far off and  
irrelevant.

People seem upset  
if I talk about my  
upcoming death.

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

I don't want to  
burden friends and  
family.

I feel like I should  
leave it to the  
doctors to bring  
the subject up.

**Talking about death can make it more likely  
that we will live life to the full and die well.**



If you want to have a conversation with someone about **your own** death, 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.





People have very different feelings about death and dying. You may want to talk to someone who is dying 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 ill or dying 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.
- “You shouldn’t talk like that” – It is for the person to decide how they feel, not you.

## HOW CAN I START THE 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 ...

I know talking about  
this is not easy.

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





## SOURCES OF INFORMATION

This booklet draws 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>

Goss, S., Sivell, S., Harrop, E. and Noble, S. (2024) Public attitudes to death, dying and bereavement in the UK revisited: 2023 survey. Available at: [https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/globalassets/media/documents/policy/policy-publications/2024/n401\\_padd\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/globalassets/media/documents/policy/policy-publications/2024/n401_padd_report_final.pdf)

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](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>

Photographs accessed from PIXABAY:  
<https://pixabay.com/photos/la-catrina-girl-costume-portrait-5824505/> -  
Image by Jose Sanchez Hernandez (background removed).

<https://pixabay.com/photos/people-religion-calls-3339434/>  
Image by Ernesto Rodríguez

Photograph accessed from Wikipedia:  
La Calvera Catrina - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La\\_Calavera\\_Catrina](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Calavera_Catrina)





## 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=ayMhA1pRLeY>

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 HEAR/JOIN MORE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT DEATH AND DYING?

Dead Good. podcast. Available at: <https://www.stchristophers.org.uk/deadgood/>

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

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

### SOME BOOKS EXPLORING DEATH AND DYING

**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.

**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.

**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.**



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[patchattcommunitygroup@gmail.com](mailto:patchattcommunitygroup@gmail.com)

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