

LET'S TALK
ABOUT ...

Death,
dying
and loss



INTRODUCTION

This booklet has been produced as part of the BEING MORTAL campaign which encourages us all to celebrate life and acknowledge, talk about and plan for death, dying and grieving.

Talking about and planning for these natural life processes helps to reduce fear, promotes wellbeing and gives us agency over our own story. It empowers us to engage, over time, in end-of-life decision-making which fully reflects what matters to us as individuals.

We hope you find this booklet useful as you walk your own path through life.

DEATH, DYING AND LOSS:

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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.**



A 2024 UK Marie Curie survey found that 59% of people thought we should talk more about death and dying. However, only 14% of people have discussed their end of life. Grief specialist Julia Samuel explains the huge importance of talking about grief in order to gain support.

So what stops us talking?



72% of people are comfortable talking about death and dying (Wilson et al., 2024). They avoid the subject of death because they believe others are uncomfortable talking about it (Islam et al., 2021).

Death, dying and loss

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.

Death, dying and loss

HOW CAN WE ENCOURAGE OTHERS TO TALK?

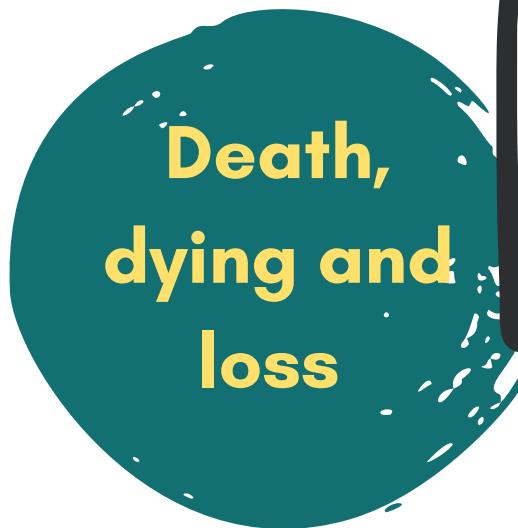
People have very different feelings about death and dying. **You** may want to talk to someone who is dying or grieving about their feelings. However, it may not be right for **them** at that point in time. It is important not to push someone into talking if they do not want to.

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.
- 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.
- "You'll meet someone else" - They might not, and it is no comfort now anyway.
- "He's in a better place now" - The bereaved person may not believe this.

How can I start a conversation about death and dying?

Would any of these be useful starters?

Is there anything about the future you would like to talk about?

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

Have you thought about what you want your legacy to be?

When I'm gone, can you make sure

I'd been thinking about what matters to me at the end of life and wondered what matters to you

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

I'd like to talk to you about something difficult

What can I say to someone who is grieving?

Would any of these
be useful starters?

I heard about (your
dad/sister etc.). I am
so sorry

How are you doing?

Would you like
to talk about it?

I remember ... (your mum's
fantastic cakes, the day we
spent in London etc.)

I'm sorry it's so hard
for you

I'm sorry I can't make
things better

I'm thinking of you

Is there anything I can
do for you?

This [Sue Ryder video](#) has further suggestions.



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

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>

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

Islam, I., Nelson, A, Longo, M. and Byrne, A. (2021) *Before the 2020 pandemic: an observational study exploring public knowledge, attitudes, plans and preferences towards death and end of life care in Wales.* BMC Palliative Care, 20: 116.

Marie-Curie (2024) *Better end of life 2024.* Available at: from <https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/research-and-policy/policy/better-end-life-report>

Sue Ryder (2023) *Grief Guide Class 2 - What can you say to be grief kind?* Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q29jNHR Sq6M&t=5s>

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>

Wilson, E., Caswell, G., Turner, N. and Pollock, K. (2024) *Talking about death and dying: Findings from deliberative discussion groups with members of the public.* Mortality, 29(1), 176-192.

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 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://katiessoulmidwife.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*. London: 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.

Mannix, K. (2022) *Listen: how to find the words for tender conversations*. London: William Collins.

This book explores how to communicate well in difficult conversations.

Further support

Samuel, J. (2017) *Grief works: Stories of life, death and surviving*. London: Penguin.

This book provides explores grief and provides clear advice for those seeking to comfort the bereaved.

Scott, R. (2020) *Between life and death*. London: Little, Brown.

In this book Rev. Rachel Scott, diagnosed with lymphoma, reflects on life and the difficulties we all face.

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.

White, E.B. (1952) *Charlotte's Web*. London: Penguin.

This children's book explores issues of friendship, life and death through the story of a pig whose life is saved by a spider.

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

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



 www.patchatt.co.uk/beingmortal

 facebook.com/beingmortal2025/

 beingmortalcic@gmail.com



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