

Discussing *Death*

HOW TO CHRONICLE AND CELEBRATE
THE LIVES OF YOUR LOVED ONES

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Discussing Death is Difficult, But Important

How do we talk about something as personal as death?

Whenever the subject comes up, it's usually from a distant point of view. Most of us find it easy to talk about death when it happens to *someone else*. Whether death occurs in the news, in the movies, or within our community of friends and acquaintances, the further removed we are, the more acceptable it is to bring up the topic.

Yet even though our own deaths are inevitable outcomes that we will all encounter one day, we generally avoid any discussion of funeral pre-planning.



Why is discussing death openly, and planning one's funeral, considered to be off-limits?

This guide explains the reasons why discussing death, and chronicling your loved ones' feelings and preferences about their remembrance, is so important. Its goal is to equip you to initiate the topic in almost any situation, before the time for having meaningful conversations has passed.



DID YOU KNOW

Fewer than **25%** of Americans do any kind of advance funeral planning.

Research shows that most families don't even spend five minutes discussing the subject.

In fact, many are left concluding that having a simple cremation, without a formal memorial ceremony, is the easiest and least burdensome way to go out.

This approach fails to acknowledge the role a traditional memorial ceremony plays in fostering healthy grieving, and healing, among family and friends.



Starting a Constructive Conversation

As you know by now, there's no easy way to bring up a conversation about death with a loved one, but there are many emotional and practical reasons for doing so.

IT MAY HELP TO THINK ABOUT THE EMOTIONAL ASPECTS OF WHAT THE CONVERSATION CAN ACCOMPLISH:

- » A mutual understanding of the things that matter most to both yourself and your loved one.
- » A clear picture of how you've each made a lasting impact on the other's life.
- » A portrait of the story, values, interests and experiences of the life to be honored.
- » A way to memorialize that life in a meaningful way.



NEXT, THINK ABOUT THE PRACTICAL OUTCOMES:

- » Mutual understanding of a loved one's final wishes.
- » A vision for how a loved one would like to be memorialized after they're gone.
- » Peace of mind that comes from knowing that those wishes will be carried out.
- » A plan for acting on those wishes, and for ensuring that surviving family members won't be burdened with both planning and paying for fulfilling them during their greatest time of need.

Having this kind of thoughtful conversation can be very rewarding; it can bring people closer together, and can reaffirm the importance of family, legacy, and personal choice.



IMPORTANT TIP

Before you start, remind yourself that the purpose beginning the conversation isn't necessarily to have all of your questions answered immediately. See it as a starting point for thoughtful, constructive, and long-lasting dialogue.

Discussing Death with Your Spouse

Of all the people you need to talk with about death, your spouse may be the easiest, and most difficult, at the same time.

Your partner is the one person who has, next to yourself, played the most important co-starring role in your life story; and they're someone with whom you share your most intimate thoughts, hopes, dreams, and fears.

Perhaps you've already spoken with your spouse about retirement, or openly considered moving to a senior living community or nursing home. If you've done that, then you've already started the conversation, and death is just another subject to be included.



IF YOU HAVEN'T YET VENTURED DOWN THIS PATH, HOWEVER, THERE ARE MANY EFFECTIVE WAYS TO EASE INTO THE CONVERSATION:

- » Consider starting by reflecting together on a memento, a cherished memory, a souvenir, an inspiring song, or anything else that's significant to your loved one.
- » Ask them to recall why that memory is so important to them, and to describe how it makes them feel now.
- » Remind them that they are also cherished by others, and ask them how they might like to be remembered by others one day.
- » Explain to them the importance for you of being able to fulfill their wishes, and how you also have wishes of your own that you'd like them to know about.
- » Let them know that you feel establishing a formal plan is the best way to ensure that each of your wishes will one day be honored.

IMPORTANT TIP

Start the conversation in a comfortable place, or during a comfortable activity — such as over a meal, during a walk, or even while playing a game.

Discussing Death When Someone Is Ill

Extended illness or disease are things that many of us will face during our lifetimes.

While the time when someone is experiencing a serious illness may seem to be the most obvious for discussing death, it's also the most delicate.

Acknowledging that one's illness may result in death could create the impression that you've given up on their life. While some ailing people want reassurance, many more become overwhelmed and afraid of what's to come. There is no better time to extend empathy and compassion, but you should broach the topic of death gently.



HERE ARE SOME USEFUL CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- » Ask them what they've been thinking about, and what things they worry about.
- » Talk with them about things or activities in their life that they miss doing since they became ill, and ask if there's anything you can do to help.
- » Ask whether they've considered what life might be like when they recover, and how it may be different than it was before their illness.

These are all effective questions for opening a discussion about what might happen if a recovery doesn't occur. They can lead to further discussions about how they would like to be remembered after they're gone, and how they'd like to be memorialized.

IMPORTANT TIP

Even if someone you love is terminally ill, they may not be ready to talk about death. It's useful to let them know that you're available to talk whenever, and for however long, they want. Be ready to talk about your own final wishes as a way to generate interest in discussing their preferences and needs.

Discussing Death With a Parent

Think about your parents. If you're like most people, no matter what turns your life has taken, they have always been there for you in some way.

But now it's getting closer to the time for saying goodbye to them, and chances are they are very sensitive about that fact.

That's why having a conversation about death with your parents is probably the most difficult and stressful discussion anyone can ever have. If they're aging, your parents are thinking about their mortality every day; any mention of it runs the risk of sorely offending them, and of exposing their deepest fears and worries.



A tremendous level of tact is needed for having this conversation.

HERE ARE SOME STRATEGIES FOR GETTING STARTED:

- » Consider asking your parents what great advice they have that they can pass along to others, particularly their children and grandchildren.
- » Ask them to describe the proudest moments of their lives, or their greatest accomplishments.
- » Ask them how they would like to be remembered after they're gone, and what steps they've taken to help ensure that those memories will endure; then use that as an opening to discuss funeral planning and their memorialization.

IMPORTANT TIP

When discussing this with your parents, emphasize the many ways in which pre-planning can help ensure that their final wishes will be fulfilled, and that they'll be remembered in the ways they want, rather than on how it will relieve burdens that would be placed on their survivors.

Even if your parents are relatively young, healthy and vital, discussing funeral arrangements well in advance of their time of need still has tremendous benefits. But you'll need to take a different approach:

- » Consider starting by talking about someone else — such as a relative or mutual acquaintance — who suddenly became ill, was rushed to a hospital, and died quickly.
- » Explain to your parents why that experience was difficult for you to see or hear about as it unfolded.
- » Tell them how it made you realize that having a plan in place, including documentation of your own final wishes for yourself, is so important.
- » Urge your parents to consider creating their own funeral plans for just such circumstances.



Discussing Death With Family and Friends

If you've already given some thought about your own death and final wishes, having a conversation with your family or close friends can be less stressful. But it's important to remember that talking openly about your future death may still be unsettling for them, so it still requires some tact.



HERE ARE SOME STRATEGIES FOR GETTING STARTED:

- » Consider taking cues from current events, such as a tragic accident or a celebrity death; or mention a book you've read or movie you've recently seen in which death played a major role.
- » Tell them about your concern that almost anyone could find themselves in the same situation.
- » Explain how important it is to talk about what you would want if something similar happened to you.
- » Let them know that your objective is to help ensure that they won't have to worry about managing or paying for your funeral; your concern lies in handling all of the funeral planning arrangements for them so that they can have a healthy, fulfilling grieving experience as they begin to cope with life after you're gone.



DID YOU KNOW

Research shows that regardless of whether cremation or a traditional burial are being considered, there are more than **100** decisions that usually need to be made when it comes to planning a memorial ceremony.

Acknowledge to your family and friends that after giving it much thought, you've decided it's best to make and document those decisions for yourself far in advance, so that they can focus on grieving, and ultimately celebrating your life.



How to Get Started

Having a discussion about death with a loved one is something that none of us wants to have to do. It can be a painful conversation that's loaded with numerous opportunities to create tension, and to potentially offend, someone you're trying to help.

By reading this guide you've already taken an important step: preparation. Before you start the conversation with anyone, read this guide again, and talk about what you've learned with someone else — perhaps a trusted friend — before approaching your loved ones.

As it is with starting almost anything difficult, one of the hardest parts is simply making the decision to get started. Congratulations — you've already gotten through that part.



Here are the Next Steps to Get Started

Your funeral home offers some highly effective tools to begin the planning process.

Meet with an Advance Funeral Planner

The first step is to meet with a professional **Advance Funeral Planner** who will review all of the many options that make up the time-honored tradition of funerals, to help you make decisions about the options that are best for yourself or your loved ones. Here you will be presented with a Final Wishes Organizer.

Create a Memorial Guide

The Final Wishes Organizer, or memorial guide, is a document that details all of the decisions you'll be making about your funeral and memorialization. This document answers the questions that must be asked and makes the decisions that must be made. The funeral home will keep a copy of this guide so that loved ones are relieved from the burden of creating plans.

Share Your Wishes with Family and Friends

The final step is to share the Final Wishes Organizer with your family and friends. This will allow you to assure them that the urgent tasks and decisions, which would otherwise burden them later, are handled now and detailed in the document. And that all funeral costs have been addressed—and many times, completely paid.

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