

## Death & Dying: How to begin the conversation.

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Whether or not we want to talk about it, the reality is that at some point, each of us is going to die. Like birth, death is another natural transition among the cycles of life. So why is it so hard to talk about it? We live in a culture in which we eschew the conversation. Perhaps it is because it causes us to face our own mortality. It can be frightening to think about our own death or the death of someone we love. We anticipate the feeling of loss and so it is easier to avoid it than address it. Maybe we feel unprepared, not having thought ahead to funerals or memorials, or understanding the final wishes of the dying, or question our financial stability after the loss. There could be unresolved issues in our life including relationships that need to be repaired or the anticipated grief that comes from acknowledging unfulfilled hopes and dreams. Perhaps the hardest thing is death itself and the fear of wondering what it will feel like, what happens after death, and all the things leading up to it.

But talking about death is an essential conversation that enriches living. As we reflect and talk, we start to look at all parts of our human experience differently. We may realize we are not alone in what we feel. Values and priorities may emerge with more clarity and this newfound awareness gives rise to intention and purpose. When we start the conversation, we give ourselves and others permission to feel deeply and the space to explore all of what is present. Ultimately, talking honestly opens us to the possibility that those things that might keep us from talking about death and dying might instead be embraced with ease and grace.

This is not small talk, and so starting the conversation may not be the easiest one you have ever initiated. Begin with yourself. What is important about your own mortality? What quality of life do you want at the end of life? Consider your relationships. Are there words that need to be said or actions completed before you die? Getting comfortable with the idea of your own death can be the first step in starting the conversation with others.

Consider exploring advanced directives with your loved ones. Advanced directives are documents that outline final wishes and often identify a representative to speak in proxy. This is an opportunity to plan care in advance of when it is needed. It is a perfect opportunity to explore the standard of care you want for yourself and to learn of the same requests your loved ones have for their own end of life. What are your own wishes when you are unable to speak for yourself? This is also a perfect opportunity to share how you want to be remembered. Discussing final wishes with loved ones relieves each person of the burden of making difficult choices and can open the door to fruitful and loving discussions.

If you find talking about all of this challenging at first, contemplate writing a letter to loved ones to be read after you have died. Perhaps there are stories in your life that remain untold or things held inside that need to be shared. Maybe the letter is a joyful celebration of the intersection of your life with theirs. Regardless of what flows from your pen, writing this message can be a wonderfully cathartic and inspiring way to share what you love about each person and what matters most to you.

Death is unavoidable, but talking about it is not. As we begin this new year, we also start a new cycle of life and death. With this comes the fresh opportunity to talk to those you love about what matters most. So while it can be hard, rest assured that the more we talk, the easier it gets.