



# DYING

Straight Talk about  
Death and Dying





## **DYING**

### **STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT DEATH**

Ben Franklin said there is nothing certain in life except death and taxes. Ironically we try to avoid both. Despite constant exposure to images in movies, video games and the news, we avoid any frank conversation about the reality of death.

It is uncomfortable to talk about. We use other words to describe it, such as resting in peace, passing on, deceasing, and graduating or even in light hearted terms such as kicking the bucket. What-

ever we call it, it is difficult because we don't want it to happen. Woody Allen said, "I am not afraid of dying, I just don't want to be there when it happens."

We try to avoid death and prolong life through anti-aging lotions, diets, vitamins, and reading magazine articles telling us how to have longer lives. Despite all our efforts, every human, animal and living thing dies. We are not immortal, our days are numbered and our bodies have an expiration date. Science and the Bible tells us that even the earth will pass.

**"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."**  
Matthew 24:35

**“Death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart.”**

Ecclesiastes 7:4

**“As no one has power over the wind to contain it, so no one has power over the time of their death.”** Ecclesiastes 8:8

We have no power over the time of our birth nor death. Death represents the great unknown and its uncertainty causes us anxiety and fear. It is impossible for us to even imagine what it is like. Someone once said, “Thousands of people are dying today who have never died before.” Although humorous, it is a true statement because it is an experience that none of us have gone through before, even though we may have been with loved ones who have died. We can only imagine the loss we are about to experience.

**“Have the gates of death been shown to you? Have you seen the gates of the shadow of death?”** Job 38:17

Rush Limbaugh said, “We all know that we’re going to die at some point, but when you have a terminal disease diagnosis that has a time frame to it, then that puts a different psychological and even physical awareness to it.” The prognosis of death extends beyond the physical to the mental, emotional, and spiritual areas of life. The best way to deal with it is through talking.



## WHY PEOPLE WHO ARE DYING WON'T TALK ABOUT IT

Dr Ira Byock writes, in *Dying Well*, “When death approaches, we are stunned and feel unprepared to deal with the situation we face. We don’t know the right thing to do or say, and so we may retreat, turning over to professionals. In reflexively turning away from reminders of death, we have at times inadvertently isolated loved ones who needed our presence, and we have

robbed ourselves of precious opportunities. Socially we have paid dearly, and culturally we are poorer for failing to explore the inherently human experience of dying.”<sup>1</sup>

Unless we talk about it, death and terminal illness can be a lonely and stressful experience, not only for the dying but for the ones that remain. Fred Rogers said, “Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable.” Talking about death doesn’t bring death any closer, it is about planning for life.

The ability or willingness of someone who is dying to talk openly about what they’re going through may be affected by many factors.

### Reasons may include:

- Fear of being a burden to family, friends or society or upsetting relatives
- Lack of trust or privacy, particularly in hospital wards
- Inner conflict and unfinished business. We may feel like we wasted our life and are grieving missed opportunities.
- Fractured, strife-ridden families, including estranged family members
- Secrets that have never been shared or the need to confess to things that happened in the past, or to ask for forgiveness
- Denial – avoiding the truth or clinging onto hope for a miracle cure
- Never been a talker, and don’t want to start now
- Superstitions or afraid to die
- Anger and feel cheated by their God, family or the medical team.

<https://www.dyingmatters.org/page/TalkingAboutDeathDying>

# WHY RELATIVES AND FRIENDS WON'T TALK ABOUT IT

Friends and relatives also find it difficult to talk openly with a dying person, and the dying must under-

stand this and extend grace and patience.

Awkwardness, embarrassment and fear means we tend to shy away from connecting with those who are dying or those who are grieving rather than an opportunity to minister to and learn from them.

## Reasons may include:

- Fear of saying the wrong thing and making matters worse
- Fear of loss
- Refusing to face the reality, or pretending everything's alright
- Fear of what other family members might say
- The notion that professionals know best, so nothing is addressed
- Fear of their own mortality
- Guilt or shame about what has happened in the past

The most important thing is not to push anyone into talking if they don't want to, but to make sure they know you are willing to listen if and when the time is right.

<https://www.dyingmatters.org/page/TalkingAboutDeathDying>

## *Famous Last Words*

**"I am about to - or I am going to - die: either expression is correct."**

Dominique Bouhours,  
French grammarian

**"I'm so bored with it all."**  
Winston Churchill

**"I have tried so hard to do right."** Grover Cleveland

**"Don't you dare ask God to help me."** Joan Crawford to her housekeeper.

**"All my possessions for a moment of time."** Queen Elizabeth I of England

**"Oh, do not cry- be good children, and we shall all meet in heaven."** Andrew Jackson

**"I die hard, but I am not afraid to go."** George Washington

**"Go away. I'm alright."**  
H.G. Wells

**"I am ready."** Woodrow Wilson

**"Am I dying, or is this my birthday?"**  
Lady Nancy Astor, after waking briefly

# FINAL PREPARATIONS

Dr Byock reached two important conclusions. First he said that although the experience of dying is highly individualized, “patients who died most peacefully and families who felt enriched by the passing of a loved one tended to be particularly active in terms of their relationships and discussions of personal and spiritual matters.”<sup>2</sup>

Not discussing death doesn't serve us well. Not communicating causes our wishes to go ignored or unfulfilled. Hasty decisions may be made at the last minute that may cause more physical and emotional suffering as well as financial costs. It is important to empower the dying in order to express their wishes to how they would like their dying take place.

Families commonly report that it comes as a relief once the subject is brought out into the open. They are able to express their wishes about how the person would like to die, or what you'd like to happen after you die. This helps you and your loved ones to cope better both emotionally and practically with what your death could mean.

In the Bible, God tells King Hezekiah, “**Put your house in order,**

**because you are going to die; you will not recover.**” (2 Kings 2:1) The question we can ask ourselves is how can I prepare myself and my family for this?

## Subjects you might need to talk about

- ✓ The type of care you'd like towards the end of your life.
- ✓ Where you'd like to die.
- ✓ How long you want doctors to be treating you.
- ✓ Funeral arrangements.
- ✓ Your will.
- ✓ Care of dependents / children or parents
- ✓ Organ donation.
- ✓ How you'd like to be remembered.
- ✓ Worries you'd like to discuss about being ill and dying.
- ✓ What you'd like people to know before you die.
- ✓ How you feel about people.
- ✓ Your anxieties about the afterlife.

Helpful ways to enter dialogue about death are through questions such as:

“Have you ever wondered what would happen...?”

“Do you think we should talk about...?”

“I know that talking about these things is never easy...”

“What does it mean to die well?”

“What would your ideal death look like?”

“What do you think happens to you after you die?”

“Do you think God really exists?”

“What do you think dying is like?”

“To what extent are you prepared to die?”

Be totally honest about how you feel from the start. If you’re open, there may be either laughter or tears – don’t be afraid of either.



## FINDING GOOD IN DEATH

God created life with the capacity to die. Mark Berkson, author of *Death, Dying, and the Afterlife* says, “that we would not have this precious life were it not for death. Death is necessary for new life to be possible.”<sup>3</sup> Death releases chemicals that are necessary for life.

Without death we wouldn’t be able to enjoy all of earth’s resources such as coal, petroleum, and limestone. Our bodies have iron, calcium and oxygen because of the death of stars that lived and died eons ago. We owe a lot to death.

If we didn't die the earth would not be able to sustain so many people. Death keeps things in checks and balances and puts an end to evil. It also puts an end to suffering and pain.

Death can also give us an ap-

preciation for life and dependence upon God. All the great works of art, music and literature not to mention religious philosophy, have been inspired by human suffering and death.

**"Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." John 12:24**

## THE FACTS

Each year around 2,839,200 Americans die. We will always be in good company. The average lifespan in the U.S. is 78.7 years. Longevity is usually due to good genes and

healthy living. In reality, fewer than .02% of people live to reach 100 yrs old. 80% of the deaths in the U.S. are to adults sixty-five and older.

**"For they are mortal; their days will be a hundred and twenty years."**  
Genesis 6:3

**"Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures."**  
Psalm 90:10

### The five leading causes of death for men:

- Heart diseases 14.3 %
- Dementia and Alzheimer disease 7.9%
- Malignant neoplasm of trachea, bronchus and lung 6.4%
- Chronic lower respiratory diseases 6.2%
- Cerebrovascular diseases 5.6%

### The five leading causes of death for women:

- Dementia and Alzheimer disease 15.2%
- Heart diseases 8.8%
- Cerebrovascular diseases 7.5%
- Influenza and Pneumonia 6.1%
- Chronic lower respiratory diseases 6.0%

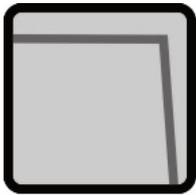
<https://www.cdc.gov/healthequity/lcod/index.htm>

# THE PROCESS OF DYING

Because we are all unique, we will all have a different experience in dying. Most deaths are caused by long-term chronic illnesses such as: heart disease, cancer, respiratory disease, strokes, Alzheimer's and dementia diseases. These illnesses have become more prominent because people are living longer lives due to the advancement in disease

control of illnesses that ended lives quicker and earlier such as cholera and diphtheria.

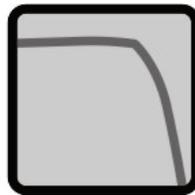
The environment and circumstances in which we die often depend upon the severity of our health condition and trajectory. Generally there are four common dying trajectories.



1. A sudden death, such as from a heart attack or brain trauma.



2. Death from **organ failure** is marked by a gradual decline, with roller coaster-like up-and-downs with increased need for care.



3. Cancer or a **terminal illness** may have a steady progression with some fair activity marked by a rapid final phase.



4. **Frailty** refers to deaths from dementia or extreme old age where the patient may have a prolonged and gradual decline.

Most people agree that they would like these four end-of-life goals met in order to have a good death:

- 1 Being comfortable and free of pain
- 2 Maintaining their dignity
- 3 Being knowledgeable about and prepared financially and emotionally for death
- 4 Having positive relationships with care providers.

75-80% say they would like to die at home. Dying at home may require home health aids or other helpers to assist in the tasks of caring.

# SIGNS THAT DEATH IS NEAR

There are certain signs in the last few months, weeks, and days that

indicate when we are nearing death. Recognizing what these are will help us to say those important goodbyes, and prepare yourself for what is to come.

## Signs that indicate death is nearing include:

- **Weight loss:** Along with unintentional weight loss, our skin can become very thin and pale, with dark liver spots appearing on hands, feet and face.
- **Appetite reduces:** Our body knows it no longer needs fuel to keep it going so we often lose our desire to eat or drink. Tani Bahti, founder of Passages says, “People do not die because they are not eating: they do not eat because they are dying.”<sup>4</sup>
- **Our external world begins to diminish:** We may no longer want to leave the house or our bed and we may not want to talk very much. Our mood, character and behavior may change. We may become anxious or want to explore religious or spiritual teachings.
- **Increased sleep:** We desire to sleep for longer periods. This can be distressing for relatives, but it’s important to understand that even the mildest physical exertion for someone approaching death can be exhausting, and for the moment all effort is being put into staying alive. Nearer the end, the dying person may increasingly drift in and out of consciousness.
- **Changes of expression:** We may begin talking about “going home” or making some kind of journey. We may express that we don’t know how to leave or arrive there. We may even have visions of family members who have died or do life review.
- **Special requests:** A dying person may also want to visit a particular place or hear certain music, or have family photographs nearby.

# WHAT IS DEATH LIKE?

Dr Sam Parnia, director of critical care and resuscitation research at NYU Langone School of Medicine in New York City, said dying is “very comfortable.” Regarding the physical process, Dr Parnia says, “Death is a process, it is not a black and white moment.

The final result is we have a deduction of oxygen that gets inside the brain when we are about to die and that causes our brain circuits to shut down and we become unconscious to the outside world. When the heart stops, all life processes go out because there is no blood getting to the brain, to the kidneys, and liver and we become lifeless

and motionless and that is the time that doctors use to give us a time of death.”<sup>5</sup>

Tani Bahti continues to say, “the body has a natural wisdom built into it, to protect itself and promote comfort. Just like a body must go through certain stages to prepare to be born, it must also go through certain stages to shut down and die.”<sup>6</sup>

Parnia says, “When we die, that experience is not unpleasant for the vast majority of people. For those of us who die naturally, even if we were in pain before we die, the process of death becomes very comfortable, it is very blissful, peaceful.” Unlike scenes from Hollywood, most people die as they are asleep or unconscious.

## *Biblical Scriptures on Death*

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” *Psalms 23:4*

“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” *John 14:3*

“Because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with

Jesus and present us with you in His presence.” *2 Corinthians 4:14*

“We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God.” *2 Corinthians 5:1,7*

“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” *Romans 8:18*

“Death has been swal-

lowed up in victory.

‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting.’” *1 Corinthians 15:54,55*

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” *John 3:16*

“Because I live, you also will live.” *John 14:19*

## Certain physical signs which indicate the person is close to death.

- **No longer responding:** We may no longer speak even when awake.
- **Congestion in the lungs:** Our breath may become labored and have 'gurgling' sounds. This can sound like loud snoring and can be disconcerting to listen to. (It is often referred to as the death rattle) but is quite normal and caused by secretions pooling in the back of the throat because the brain makes no more effort to clear the throat.
- **Coldness in the limbs:** Sometimes our hands, arms, feet and legs become cold, with the skin tone changing as blood circulation slows down.
- **Tea-colored urine:** With no fluid intake coupled with the kidneys beginning to shut down our urine will become concentrated.
- **Incontinence:** As our muscles cease to function, we may lose bladder and bowel control. This can be very upsetting and embarrassing for the person.
- **Agitation and restlessness:** Often we can be confused or become distressed. Medical staff can give medications such as morphine to help us calm down.
- **Breathing pattern change:** Sometimes we will only breathe periodically, with an intake of breath followed by no breath for several seconds, and then a further intake.

## BEING THERE AT THE END

As caregivers, family and friends, we need to be aware of what a person needs the most during these moments.

- Remember: hearing is thought to be the last sense to go in the dying process, so never assume the person is unable to hear you. Talk as if they can hear you, even if they appear to be unconscious or restless.
- If possible, lower lighting until it is soft, or light candles, making sure they burn in a safe place. Try to keep bright sunlight away from the dying person's face and eyes.
- You can create a peaceful, soothing atmosphere by playing a favorite piece of music or songs softly in the background.
- You might wish to quietly read a favorite poem, a spiritual passage or a religious text that means something special to the person.
- Strong physical contact can be painful or invasive. It is often best just to sit beside the bed and gently hold their hand. If appropriate, a gentle massage to the feet or hands can provide comfort and help communication on a deeper level. Even when a person is unconscious or semi-conscious, they might be able to respond with faint pressure from their thumb, or twitch a toe.
- According to their faith, say prayers or hymns to bring comfort.
- Remember: it is impossible to predict when death will actually happen. People can hover between life and death for hours and often days, and it is easy to miss the final moment.



<https://www.dyingmatters.org/page/being-someone-when-they-die>

# THE MOMENT OF DEATH

The moment of death can happen in many ways. It can be an intensely spiritual experience. The essence of the person has gone, leaving behind a body that can seem like an empty shell. The dead will usually look very peaceful.

For our loved ones, they will feel grief and numb. They may feel relief that there is no more suffering. It's not unusual after someone has died, especially when you were present at the time, to feel disconnected from people, places or things. It can feel as if you are in a dream, or looking at life through frosted glass. This can be especially

difficult when you are thrown into the intensity of making funeral arrangements.

If it's what you want, staff may also leave you alone for a while with the body. This can be both reassuring and sometimes unexpectedly peaceful.

It can be hard to explain how you are feeling, especially to those who have never witnessed a death. But feeling strange or disconnected from reality for a period of time is understandable when we have watched someone die. Remember, there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to feel. However you experience what happens, life will never be the same again. It can't be after something so profound.

## *Famous Quotes about Death*

"To the well organized mind, death is but the next great adventure." *J.K. Rowling*

"If death meant just leaving the stage long enough to change costume and come back as a new character... Would you slow down? Or speed up?" *Chuck Palahniuk*

"Nothing can happen more beautiful than death." *Walt Whitman*

"Death is not the opposite of life, but a part of it." *Haruki Murakami*

"No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet, death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it, and that is how it should be, because death is very likely the single best invention of life. It's life's change agent. It clears

out the old to make way for the new." *Steve Jobs*

"Death ends a life, not a relationship." *Mitch Albom*

"If you don't know how to die, don't worry; Nature will tell you what to do on the spot, fully and adequately. She will do this job perfectly for you; don't bother your head about it." *Montaigne*

# LIFE AFTER DEATH

So what happens to us after we die? Do we cease to exist as humanist would say? Or do we pass on to another dimension referred to as the afterlife? There is plenty of evidence that says we do. For those who have had the experience of dying, being pronounced dead, and then returning, they no longer have a fear of death for they have experienced what is on the other side.

People who have had this experience describe a sensation of a bright, warm, welcoming light that draws them towards it. They de-

scribe a sensation of experiencing their deceased relatives, almost as if they have come to welcome them. They often say that they didn't want to come back (to life) in many cases, it is so comfortable and it is like a magnet that draws them that they don't want to come back.

A lot of people describe a sensation of separating from themselves and watching doctors and nurses working on them. They can hear things and remember conversations that are going on around them. Some of them describe a sensation where they review everything that they have done.

## *Religious Views Regarding the Afterlife*

### **Judaism:**

Jews have different ideas regarding the afterlife depending upon their sects.

Orthodox accept an afterlife and resurrection. Entrance is based on completion of the law. Reformed Jews would say they don't know.

### **Christianity/Protestant:**

Christians believe in a heaven and hell, with heaven being in the presence of God, or paradise. Entrance to heaven is interpreted as immediately after death as well as after a time of being asleep in Christ. Entrance is based purely on faith in God and

his son, Jesus Christ, as no amount of good works can earn entrance.

### **Christianity/Catholic:**

Catholics include an intermitten time called Purgatory to cleanse themselves of sin in order to enter heaven. Entrance is based on completion of church sacraments.

### **Islam:**

Muslims believe in a Paradise called Janna and a Hell, Jahannam. Entrance is based on answering correctly the questions, "Whom have you worshipped and who was your prophet?"

### **Hinduism:**

Hindus aspire to be liberated from the cycle of reincarnation through good behavior.

### **Buddhism:**

Buddhists also believe in the cycle of death and rebirth. Life is driven by Karma. The lowest level is hell and the highest level are the devas or demigods who live in bliss or Nirvana.

### **Humanism:**

Humanist reject the idea of an afterlife and interpret death as the end of an individual's consciousness.

“I know the same man (whether in the body or out of the body I cannot tell, God knows), how he was taken up into Paradise and heard words not to be spoken, which no man can utter.” 2 Corinthians 12:3

## **Twelve Common Elements of Near Death Experiences (NDEs)<sup>7</sup>**

- 1. An out-of-body experience**  
(A separation of consciousness from the physical body.)
- 2. Heightened senses**  
(More alertness and higher level of conscious)
- 3. Intense and generally positive emotions or feelings**  
(Incredible feelings of love and peace)
- 4. Passing into or through a tunnel**  
(Moving with great speed with possible beautiful colors or with others present.)
- 5. Encountering a mystical or brilliant light**  
(A great light with no discomfort to look at)
- 6. Encountering deceased relatives/friends or mystical beings**  
(The deceased appear in perfect health)
- 7. A sense of alteration in time or space**  
(A sense of infinite timelessness)
- 8. A life review**  
(A complete knowledge of all life’s experiences)
- 9. Encountering otherworldly (heavenly) realms**  
(Beauty beyond anything on earth)
- 10. Encountering or learning special knowledge**  
(Acquisition of special knowledge of the universe)
- 11. Encountering a boundary or barrier**  
(A barrier such as a river, bridge or canyon)
- 12. A voluntary or involuntary return to the body**  
(A heavenly being saying it is not the time)

# CONCLUSION

Berkson finishes his book with these thoughts. “From the outset of our journey together, we have repeatedly encountered one question, directly and indirectly: “If we’re just here for a short time and then die, what does it all mean?”

“Despite all of the psychological, existential, and philosophical challenges, death confronts us with, it might be the case that death is what makes a meaningful life possible. Knowing what little time we have makes every day precious, and each moment sacred.”<sup>8</sup>

One thing life teaches us is not to hold onto things too tightly for God is the owner of all. We are called to enjoy them for the moments. Ecclesiastes 11:8 says, “However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all.”

In this journey we need to appreciate and look for the little things we often overlook, such as the smell of coconut sunblock or a good cup of coffee, a mother’s handwriting, holiday dessert tables, a job well done, a three year old’s inquisitive questions and a baby’s coo, a Hershey kiss or a lover’s kiss, the smell of a Fall bonfire and a summer rain. These are what truly make life worth living.

## Notes

1. Ira Byock, *Dying Well*, (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1997).
2. Byock, Ira
3. Mark Berkson, *Death, Dying and the Afterlife*. (New York: The Teaching Company, 2016)
4. Tani Bahti, *Dying to Know: Straight Talk About Death and Dying*, (Tuscon, Pathways Education Publishing, 2006).
5. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/science/880461/Life-after-death-what-happens-when-you-die-sam-parnia-afterlife>
6. Bahti, Tani
7. Jeffrey Long, *God and the Afterlife*, (New York, Harper Collins, 2016)
8. Berkson, Mark

## *Ecclesiastes Twelve*

1 Remember your Creator in the days of your youth,  
before the days of trouble come  
and the years approach when you will say,  
“I find no pleasure in them” —

2 before the sun and the light  
and the moon and the stars grow dark,  
and the clouds return after the rain;

3 when the keepers of the house tremble,  
and the strong men stoop,  
when the grinders cease because they are few,  
and those looking through the windows grow dim;

4 when the doors to the street are closed  
and the sound of grinding fades;  
when people rise up at the sound of birds,  
but all their songs grow faint;

5 when people are afraid of heights  
and of dangers in the streets;  
when the almond tree blossoms  
and the grasshopper drags itself along  
and desire no longer is stirred.

Then people go to their eternal home  
and mourners go about the streets.

6 Remember Him—before the silver cord is severed,  
and the golden bowl is broken;  
before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,  
and the wheel broken at the well,

7 and the dust returns to the ground it came from,  
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

