

# ***Talking With Aging Parents About Death***

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<http://www.ec-online.net/Knowledge/Articles/deathedinberg.html>

How do we talk about death? Do we discuss it "matter of factly", without any emotion? Do we talk about it with great fear and trepidation dripping from each word we utter? Do we avoid talking (or even thinking) about it at all? Do we only use euphemisms such as "gone to a better place", "passing on", "asleep with the angels"? Do we avoid letting our innermost feelings, fears, and hopes about death be known to others?

If you answered any of the above questions with a "yes", you are likely to have some difficulty talking with your aging parents about death. You see, even though we think of ourselves (the younger generations) as the ones who have to listen or even put up with the older generations' hang-ups, our own reactions and ability to talk, listen, and understand our own emotional responses to this topic affects how our parents will talk with us.

I think (I have no research data on this) that most families do not talk about death directly. That is, it is not customary at the dinner table to say "Please pass the vegetables and, by the way, have you all thought about when you are going to die?" We all know at some level we will die, but somehow saying this to our parents (or our children) is not easily accomplished. Probably this is due to several factors, including feeling sad (grief) when having the discussion (which can be avoided by not having the discussion at all), being scared about what happens after death, being scared about what happens before you die, or other forms of uneasiness that have been lumped into a technical term, "death anxiety". Most research shows that older persons have no more death anxiety than young persons, by the way.

Many psychologists, psychiatrists, and other authors who write and research about death seem to feel that the more that is "worked out" between people, the better off they are. That may well be true, but there are many people who, in good conscience, do not want/need to talk much about death. My own father, when he was sick in a hospital bed before he died, one day said to me when I was visiting, "I know how this is going to turn out." I figured this was it, the beginning of an important conversation about his life and death. I was very ready to listen to whatever he had to

say. We were silent for a little bit, and then he talked about something unrelated. As best I can tell, that was all he had to say on the topic and seemed to feel he had said enough. My father happened to be a man who did not share a lot of his feelings, but was not conflicted about them. There are many ways to be comfortable and talk about what you have to talk about.

## **Family Dynamics Affect the Way We Approach Death**

In any family, talking about death is likely to be emotionally loaded. Simply raising the topic brings with it an acknowledgement that someone is not going to live forever, that someone will die before someone else, and that there will be grief and mourning by survivors, whatever form it may take.

In addition, there is always family history about what death is, what it represents, and what death has done to family members, including survivors. There can be histories of family members who died at a young age, who died in a war, who died from painful diseases, who were murdered, who never knew their mother or father, or whose lives were shattered by a death of a beloved family member.

Furthermore, there are family traditions that may stick in people's minds, such as having had to kiss a grandparent in the coffin, going to loud and raucous wakes, watching a parent cry or never cry, never being told that a parent has died, or being able to go to a family funeral because one was "too young".

If you are of the younger generation, it will serve you well to imagine what your parent's experiences with death have been **AT THE AGE(S) THEY EXPERIENCED THE DEATHS**. It is easy for us to forget that the parent we are concerned about was once a scared child of six attending a grandparent's funeral conducted in a language they did not understand.

Younger people sometimes forget that the older generations live with death on a daily basis. Approximately 6 percent of the elderly and 1/5 of the "old old", those over age 85, die each year. To be old is to have had parents, friends and spouses die. And yet older persons are, in general, no more afraid of death than younger persons.



So is it our parents' fears, our fears, our fears about our parent's fears or theirs about ours that make it difficult for us to talk about death? I also think it is more difficult to share "deep" feelings/anxieties/fears about one's own death than some of the aspects of death that are more instrumental, such as preparing a will, having a burial plot or place to house one's remains, naming an executor, doing estate planning, or even figuring out who should get which personal possessions after you die.

With these thoughts in mind, I'd like to pose and answer as best I can a few important questions about this topic.

## **Questions and Answers**

*Why should we talk with our aging parents about death?*

There are several important reasons to have discussions about death where you are the one taking the lead on this topic.

- There is an impending death of a parent or close family member and you can serve as a door opener to their sharing grief or fears.
- There is an "unresolved" issue about a death in the family's past (grandparent, parent, child, spouse) that gets in the way of family well being
- There are important "instrumental" issues that need to be taken care of, such as a will, living will, or medical power of attorney
- You want to know your parent's preferences and wishes regarding their own death, funeral arrangements and so forth
- You want to broaden the depth of relationships in your family

*Do we have to ask them about EVERYTHING?*

No, of course not. However, you may have to talk about issues about which you or your aging parents have discomfort. You can always ask questions such as "Are you willing to discuss this?" or "We need to talk this through even though it is difficult, how can we do this?" as ways to approach difficult aspects of the discussion.

*What if I don't want to talk with them about the topic, but I want them to talk to me?*



This question gets to a delicate issue, in talking about death you are perhaps asking your parents to open up but you do not want to. I find this approach out of balance, but in some cases where the discussion is about arrangements, wishes for the future etc. and the family is not accustomed to or is conflicted, perhaps just having them "tell you" what they wish is the best that can be achieved.

*What do we need to talk about?*

At the minimum, families are well served to talk about:

- wishes for burial, funeral arrangements, including paying for it
- having a will
- having a living will
- doing proper estate planning ahead of time

In addition, families can greatly enhance their relationships by talking about

- personal views of what is important in life
- personal views of the afterlife
- acknowledging that each person will die
- issues of legacy, that is, what lives on after an individual dies.

And, you never know how the topic will go. I remember in a men's group therapy session I was running in a nursing home, I asked the men what they wanted their legacy to be. One man asked me, "What's a legacy?". I answered, "You know, what lives on after you. Like if a group of people were sitting around 25 years from now talking about you, what would you want them to say about you?" He didn't hesitate a second, saying "That the b\_ \_ \_ \_ \_ should have died 25 years ago!" (He got the point, I think).

*How do I raise the topic?*

This is an interesting question, part depends on what you want to get accomplished, part also depends on the situation you are in. Raising the topic is very different in the Emergency Room at a Hospital than at the family dinner at Thanksgiving or another holiday, it is also very different in

front of others than when done privately. My guess is that people start with specifics they want to address and do so slightly generalized, such as "Dad, have you ever thought about what will happen to Mom if she outlives you?" or "Mom, I have a concern I read about on the Internet at ec-online.net. They said we should talk about where important documents are so if something happens, the family can take care of its business." (I know this is vague, but in some families vagueness is what members can tolerate.)

*How can I get to them when they are defensive or do not want to talk about it?*

My best answer is that you can't have it all if either side is defensive. There is, however, a question of building for the future, such as beginning the discussion and saying you will continue it at a future time "when they are ready". You can also figure out, depending on what you need, who else should be brought into the discussion to get a will drawn, to find out funeral wishes, etc.

*Disclaimer: This article is not intended to be considered as counseling, psychotherapy, or specific advice to be followed. It is not meant to take the place of consulting with appropriate professionals for medical, legal, or psychological information or strategies. Rather, readers should take the points of the article and make their own personal judgments as to how and when to apply them if at all.*

