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Death Over Dinner

By Jessica Zitter, MD

IN MY FAMILY, DEATH IS A COMMON TOPIC at the dinner table. So common, in fact, that it's sure to induce an eye roll from one of my children. "Pass the potatoes" might come right after "Sheila's dad just got put on a breathing machine, and he doesn't seem to have more than a few days." Of course, I'm a doctor who specializes in Critical and Palliative care medicine, which makes me more inclined to bring up this topic. I care for dying patients every day, and I am frequently sought out by friends and family when someone is dying. A few weeks ago my youngest, Sasha, looked at me and said, "Mom, can we please talk about something besides death tonight?"

Her question made me laugh. And reflect. In my own childhood, it was very different. My grandfather died when I was twelve. The lung cancer growing inside him had shrunk his once giant frame into a brittle skeleton. But no one talked about it. He died alone, in the hospital, with occasional visitors during allotted visiting hours. My parents thought the funeral would be too upsetting for me, but agreed to let me come if I stood outside the cemetery with my father. I remember watching from the fence as his casket was slipped into the earth.

When I asked my mother about this recently, she said, "When we learned he was dying, we never talked about it. Not to him, and not to each other." And this despite the fact that many of my family members are physicians. Death carried a hushed silence about it, the sense that discussing it would be too distressing for those involved.

And yet ample data show that the best deaths—those most closely aligned with the preferences of the dying patient—depend on extensive communication, both with the healthcare system and within the family system. Patients who are prepared for their deaths die significantly better than those who aren't. And that preparation usually entails having thought at length about the patient's priorities and values—about how she would want to live—all the way until the end. This likely includes preferences about location, about who should be around, whether the TV should be on or off, whether classical music should be wafting through the house.

I recognize that most families do not talk about death at dinner. And I understand why. Thinking about our own mortality, as well as that of those we love, can be terrifying. And talking about it might feel taboo. But it needs to happen somewhere, and the best way to normalize it might be right alongside the chicken soup or the spring salad. Food is a part of our lives, and so too is death. I'm not saying that it needs to happen at every meal, or even every month. But a healthy and ongoing dialogue about this topic that will eventually affect us all, that comes up in the news regularly, should be a part of all of our lives. And like household insurance, which we purchase for those times when life isn't going our way, conversations and preparation about death should also be considered preventive care.

But how should a family go about doing this? It may feel daunting. I will try to provide a few helpful steps and guiding principles below.

When should I start the conversation? I believe you should start now. Death often doesn't wait until old age. But even if it does, the dying have children and grandchildren who are a part of the experience. Death literacy can be helpful not only for them, but also for their loved one lying in the bed.

When are my children ready to talk about this? Although there is some variation here, I believe that most teenagers are ready for some form of this conversation. See "Death over Dinner" below for examples of how to engage in this conversation with younger people. In my experience, they can be more open than adults, curious and eager to learn.

How do I begin the conversation? We've never talked about this before. I suggest easing your way into it casually. Dinner is a great vehicle, as having food around can make it less intimidating. One way to start is by remembering a family member who died, and discussing his death. How was that process? What felt right about it? Was there anything about it that felt off? What would you have wanted to be different if it was you? And at your next dinner date with death, I would recommend bringing in one of the conversation guide resources I mention below.

My parents won't talk to me about death. What do I do? Mine didn't either, at first; even though they are both doctors. But with time and gentle persistence, they began to open up. Maybe it was the fact that I asked them questions about their individual preferences, which involved active choice. Death began to feel not like a trap, but a process with options and empowerment. My mother and I recently played "Go Wish," a card game that ranks a person's preferences for the dying process. Her ability to rank her choices, to tell me that she valued being kept clean and comfortable over many other factors, gave her a sense of peace.

Many of us keep quiet about death. We discuss it only out of necessity, usually too little and too late to avoid the suffering that comes of not being treated in accord with our values. A little conversation can go

a long way towards allowing each of us to live as we choose, as much as is possible, up until our last breaths. Death, like any other fear that we do not face, can be a lot less scary when seen in the light of day. Or dinner.

Resources that are Designed to "Get Everyone to the Table"

Here are three options for beginning your journey through open and honest communication about your wishes as regards the end-of-life. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but is a way to get yourself started.

Death over Dinner. This service provides an interactive, web-based platform to walk you through territory that we typically avoid. It will assist you in creating a dinner party, identifying the guests, your intentions for the evening as relates to conversations about death and dying, and prepares you to lead an effective and satisfying discussion with your friends and family. <http://deathoverdinner.org/>

The Conversation Project. This group's "conversation kit" helps you get your thoughts together so that you can begin to have these important conversations in a productive and effective way. <http://theconversationproject.org>

Go Wish. A card game that gives you a fun way to ease into discussing some of the most difficult topics. www.gowish.org Δ

JESSICA ZITTER practices ICU and Palliative Care medicine in Oakland. She has been published in the *New York Times*, *Huffington Post*, and more. Her first book, *Extreme Measures*, publishes in February, 2017, by Penguin. She is the subject of a documentary "Extremis," now streaming on Netflix.

"I recognize that most families do not talk about death at dinner. And I understand why. Thinking about our own mortality, as well as that of those we love, can be terrifying."

*Belief and learning led the way
but failed at Your door.*

*Only by yielding into Your mystery
was I invited in.*

—Sanai, in *Real Thirst: Poetry of the Spiritual Journey*,
edited by Ivan M. Granger

