

Leaflet # 1 O: Mythbusting

Getting the facts right about death and dying

Don't talk to me about dying...

"I know that it's painful. I know that hospices are places you go to die. And I know that talking about it won't do anyone any good. That's all I need to know."

Ever considered that you might be wrong?

From our childhood, we absorb images and ideas about dying. Some of them are wrong but, because we don't talk about dying much, our misconceptions grow. The trouble is that these myths can get in the way of us planning properly for how we would like to live at the end of our lives. This, in turn, can cause distress for us and our loved ones. So here are five myths about dying that can be knocked on the head straight away.

Myth 1

There's no point in thinking about dying

It's easy to be superstitious: to believe that the more we think about death, the closer it gets. It doesn't, of course. And if we do think about the end of life a little bit and plan – by making a will, by deciding what kind of care we'd like, or by making clear our wishes and doing practical things to help loved ones left behind – it can make the last days easier and help to reduce feelings of regret. People who have talked about, and planned for, the end of their life generally find they can get on with life more happily, and so can those who care for them.

Myth 2

It's inevitable that most of us will die in hospital

It's certainly true that currently most people in the UK die in hospital – but it isn't inevitable. Increasing numbers of people are getting the support they need to be able to die at home. There are other possibilities like hospices and care homes. Planning ahead, talking to your health care team and writing down your wishes make it more likely that you will die where you want to.

And don't think that hospices are just places where people go to die either – they provide care and support to people who cannot be cured of all types of illness, sometimes over long periods.

“I don't put the end of life stuff to the back of my mind – in fact it's at the front of my mind. It makes me make the most of life”

Myth 3

It's better to keep loved ones in the dark to protect their feelings

Being honest about illness or death with those you love can be hard. You don't want to upset them, or create such emotional upheaval that everything seems to be falling apart. You might fear you won't be able to put things together again. That is a possibility, but it's unlikely if you talk honestly and openly, and listen to each other. Facing illness together can bring people closer, take away unanswered questions, and make the situation easier to cope with. There is advice on how to have these conversations in other Dying Matters leaflets.

Myth 4

Death is generally very quick or very painful

Death on television or in films is often quick, violent or romantic – sometimes all three. People who have witnessed someone dying know that the media images are almost invariably wrong. Everyone's death is different, but often the dying process is gradual, indefinite, and is linked to life in unexpected – and occasionally uplifting – ways. If people receive good care, there is no need for them to be in pain – doctors and nurses now have many different types of medications to control pain. Sometimes, they use morphine and related drugs. Although these drugs are often used to control severe pain towards end of life, being prescribed them doesn't mean you are dying.

"I'd like a bit more time but I know there are no guarantees for anyone. I'm not frightened."

Myth 5

I'll be vulnerable and powerless towards the end of my life

It's true that as people become increasingly ill they are unable to control what happens to them on a minute-by-minute basis. But many people effectively remain in control because they have prepared for a time when decision-making won't be easy – leaving instructions on how and where they would like to be cared for, when they would like treatment to stop, who they would like to make decisions for them. There is information on this in other Dying Matters leaflets.

For more information...

...on what you can do to prepare

<http://www.dyingmatters.org/site/why-talkabout-it/planning-dying-well>

...on planning your care towards end of life

www.dyingmatters.org/site/need-support/legaland-ethical

...on having conversations about dying

www.dyingmatters.org/site/why-talk-about-it/talking-about-dying

...about hospices

www.helpthehospices.org.uk/about-hospicecare/

“Everyone has thoughts about dying. Although I'm not ready to pop my clogs yet, I'm aware that it will happen at some point.”

To find out how to get more help visit www.dyingmatters.org

or call freephone 08000 21 44 66

THE
NATIONAL
COUNCIL FOR
PALLIATIVE
CARE



This is number ten in a series of leaflets focusing on dying, death and bereavement produced by Dying Matters.

The National Council for Palliative Care (NCPC) is the umbrella charity for all those who are involved in providing, commissioning and using palliative care and hospice services in England, Wales & Northern Ireland.

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