



How to think about death (and life)



This booklet is one of a series by Life Squared. Our booklets explore important topics and ideas, and provide practical suggestions on ways you can improve your life.

Life Squared is a not-for profit organisation that helps people to live well – to live happy, wise and meaningful lives within the pressures and complexity of the modern world. We aim to provide you with ideas, information and tools to help you get more out of life, see things more clearly and live with greater wisdom.

We offer guides, courses, ideas and advice on a wide range of topics, from ‘How to get involved in your community’ through to ‘How to choose your own pace of life’, and from ‘The problem with consumerism’ through to ‘How to be happy’.

For more information visit www.lifesquared.org.uk.

We’d like to thank Dying Matters for collaborating with us on this project. Find out more and explore their resources at www.dyingmatters.org.

Find them on Facebook – DyingMatters, and on Twitter – @DyingMatters.

The logo for Dying Matters, featuring the words "Dying Matters" in a blue, sans-serif font. The text is contained within a light blue speech bubble shape that has a tail pointing towards the bottom right.

*Let's talk
about it*

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How to think about death (and life)

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Introduction

“In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.”

Benjamin Franklin, 1817

Given that death is about the only certain thing about our lives, it is surprising how little we talk or even think about it. Although death is everywhere in modern life in the news, television programmes, films and computer games, we are largely shielded from the reality of death, until it affects us and people we know directly.

This can be a problem, as we can be ill-prepared to deal with the reality of our own death, how to come to terms with it or even how to plan our preferences for arrangements around it. It can also prevent us from facing the reality of the death of friends and loved ones and thus make it harder for us to come to terms with it in a constructive way, or being able to help and support other people who need us at these times. Often, when we do get round to thinking about death, it is with a sense of fear, panic or denial.

At Life Squared, we believe that being able to think about death in a wise way is a critical life skill, as

it could enable us to live fuller, better lives while we have the chance and, possibly, die better deaths. So, this booklet explores some ways we could begin to contemplate the subject of death.

It focuses more on the idea of death than the practical side of how to deal with it - but we have teamed up with Dying Matters for support on practical steps you can take and their website contains some comprehensive, accessible guidance on these more detailed, practical aspects of death – from how to support someone who is dying through to what to do when someone dies. We highly recommend you visit their website (www.dyingmatters.org) once you've read this booklet.



Part 1

How to think about
death (and life)

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People have had many ways of thinking about death over the ages. Some entire religions could be seen as attempts to help people navigate the reality of death. It is time to adopt a more modern and enlightened view of death – without suspicion or fear, but understanding the reality of it and giving some thought to it throughout life, so that death is one of many areas of perspective that inform the way we live.

In this section we will examine a number of ways you can think about death – and life – that could improve your experience of both. And rather than starting by thinking about death, let's think about life.

1. Appreciate the fact that you are alive

You are alive. Isn't that amazing?

Many of us tend to be so busy and absorbed in the pressure and rush of everyday living that we rarely (if ever) take time to step back from our lives and appreciate the remarkable fact that we are alive and

what this really means. In fact, one of the most mind-blowing aspects of being alive is realising what it means to be alive!

Learning to appreciate life like this, and reminding yourself about it regularly, can be one of the great pleasures of life, and can add a real sense of meaning to your life. No matter how difficult everyday living may be sometimes, seeing our lives in this wider context can help us to put everyday worries into perspective and give us a great sense of calm.

It can also help us think about death in a more realistic and helpful way, so let's first look at what it means to be alive.

We live on a planet that is a tiny speck in the universe, and that has the highly fortunate placement in its solar system to be able to accommodate life. Through a lucky draw in the evolutionary lottery, you were born and have survived up to this point where you are now reading this booklet. What's more, you have been born into a species with the capacity to reflect on your own existence – a quality that, as far as we know, most other species do not possess.

Somehow, you have emerged temporarily out of the non-experience of not-living, for a brief period of 80 years or so, to be living.

It can be very good for us to reflect on this fact regularly – indeed, some people do it every day and simply register their gratitude and appreciation of

the fact they exist. This doesn't have to be thanking anyone (like a god) in particular – it is just the process of acknowledging your luck in existing.

This acknowledgement and gratitude can help us to see our lives in a positive way and give us some perspective, no matter what daily life might throw at us. It can also help us to ease up on the pressure we put on ourselves to succeed or achieve particular goals in life. Many of us strive for particular goals in our lives – from material success to the desire to be loved – but perhaps we don't need to achieve any goals in life in order to appreciate our lives, as the very experience of existing itself is amazing enough.

2. See life as the exception, not the norm

So, each of us is an animal that lives for a period of 80 or so years, after which our bodies stop working. Some people's bodies may stop working before this point, but most (around two thirds) of the 500,000 or so people who die each year in the UK are aged 75 and over.^[1]

At this point when our bodies stop working, our brains also stop working, and our consciousness and any memories or subjective sense of who we are disappears. Once your brain dies, any sense you ever had of being 'you' also disappears. Once we are dead, we don't feel a thing.

And it is perhaps our consciousness – our feeling of

existing – that makes it so hard for us to comprehend death. When you exist as a self-conscious creature like a human being, it is difficult to come to terms with the idea that we only actually live in this state for a very limited amount of time.

As individuals, it is easy for us to have a negative and doom-laden attitude to the idea of our own life and death. We often see our life as the focus point, and death as the end of it, where there begins an infinite period of nothing. Why can't we see it the other way? Rather than see death as the exception and life as the rule (i.e. death as the end of a life, and something to be dreaded), perhaps we should see life as the exception – a brief, but amazing flash of light – a window within the darkness of non-existence that we should make every moment of whilst we have the profound luck to appreciate the experience of existing.

So, an appreciation of the fact that we're alive can change the way we see death.

This in no way diminishes the sadness of death – whether it's that of other people or our own. But it means that the sadness is limited to leaving behind all the wonderful things that came with being an experiencing creature (such as families, friends and loved ones, experiences and memories and being able to participate in life). This is indeed a lot to lose, but we can take solace from the fact that once we have died this will not matter to us and this regret will cease.

3. Accept you're ultimately not in control

The other comforting thing about our own death is that there is nothing we can do about it when it happens.

So, although it may be intensely sad to leave behind all the things that come with being an experiencing creature, if we can come to terms with the fact that we have no choice but to leave them behind, we can allow ourselves a more peaceful, fulfilling death. For some people this acceptance doesn't happen until near the very end of life, but it is part of letting go.

This is of course simply a general comment about the moment of death. And it doesn't mean that we don't have choice and control in our end of life care depending on how our life is ending – indeed, this sense of empowerment can be vital to our ability to have a 'good death'.

4. Let your life flash before your eyes whilst you're living

A classic story from people who have come close to death is that they have seen 'their life flash before their eyes' in the moments before they were likely to die. This may give us the sense that each of us will have the chance for a final 'review' of our lives before we die – a chance to reflect upon the journey we've been on.



But not only does research suggest this is this largely apocryphal but the reality is that you may die suddenly and never get the chance to review the life you've led and cherish the memories you've accumulated. Life could end in an instant and we may never get the opportunity for a neat 'tying up' of our own narrative – which, for many of us, would seem deeply regrettable.

So, why not spend some regular time reviewing the journey of your life and being thankful while you are living? In other words live “with the constant awareness that one's existence is not only finite but always in danger of ending unexpectedly.” [2] It could make your life feel more enjoyable and fulfilled.

5. Understand what death is like – to help you deal with it

Very few of us really understand what actually happens to people's bodies and minds when they die of some of the most common causes (including cancer and heart disease), or what people (both the dying person and those around them) are likely to go through during that process.

But this could be an important piece of perspective and wisdom to develop and carry with us through our lives – not because of a morbid fascination about it but simply to help us understand the reality of the process so that our expectations are realistic (or at least more

realistic than they were).

An excellent book to help you understand this aspect of life is “How we die: reflections on life’s final chapter” by Sherwin B Nuland. As the author says:

“ Too often, patients and their families cherish expectations that cannot be met, with the result that death is made all the more difficult. ” [3]

This understanding can also equip us to make better choices for ourselves, and others, when we or they reach the end of life.

“Treatment decisions are sometimes made near the end of life that propel a dying person willy-nilly into a series of worsening miseries from which there is no extrication – surgery of questionable benefit and high complication rate, chemotherapy with severe side effects and uncertain response and prolonged periods of intensive care beyond the point of futility. Better to know what dying is like, and better to make choices that are most likely to avert the worst of it. What cannot be averted can at least be mitigated.” [4]

6. Understand what death is like – to help you truly live

By understanding the reality of the processes we and our bodies may well go through when we die, we may



well gain the final inspiration we need to convince us of the ideas discussed earlier – that life is a window of light in a sea of nothing, and that we should really resolve to live the lives we want, without letting it pass us by or burdening ourselves with unnecessary stresses and imaginings.

Death, when it comes, doesn't often take place in a way that we would see as dignified while we are healthy, and also often takes place in mundane, familiar places such as hospital wards, nursing homes and your own bedroom. What we're simply saying here is that death is the ultimate leveller – so make sure your life that precedes it is better than mundane.

Just to press this point home one final time, consider the age you are now. Then, consider the fact that you're likely to live to a maximum of 80 years old (give or take a few years) – and possibly way fewer than this – before you go through one of these processes of death yourself. Do the calculations of what this means for you at this point in your life.

It's a sobering thought and is perhaps the starkest reality of life. But, for most people, it is obscured by our absorption in everyday life and the fact that death is a topic largely hidden from us in modern society.

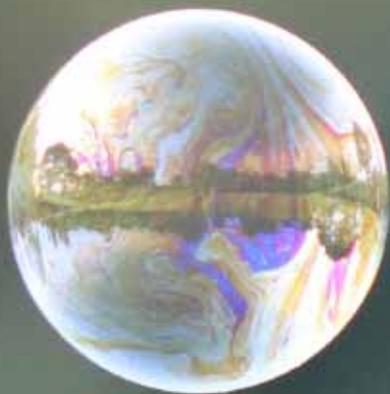
So, when you find yourself sucked back into the so-called 'reality' of normal social life, and starting to feel that this insight and the philosophy on life that it leads to is a bit extreme, just remember you're only

feeling this because a) it is indeed a huge, possibly life-changing, thing to realise, and is the actual, ultimate reality and context each of us lives our life in and b) very few people around you will have yet understood or realised this – and if they have, some may not have accepted or faced up to it in the way they live their lives. So, be one of the select few who apply this perspective to their lives and see your life move on as a result!

Conclusion – how should we live with death?

We don't need to dwell on death as we go through life, but we should live with a clear sense of perspective at the back of our minds about how brief our lives are and that death is a certainty – however much it may be hidden away from us in modern society and however far away we may feel from it when we are in the process of living.

Having this perspective on death is just one of the many useful pieces of perspective we should be carrying with us in the back of our minds throughout life – others include our position in the universe, our situation and lives in relation to other people around the world. See Life Squared's resources on 'Perspective' for more details and ideas.





Part 2

How to think about
other people's deaths

How to think about other people's deaths

In part one we explored clearer ways we can think about our own lives and deaths. At some point in our lives though, we are likely to have to deal with the death of other people who are close to us.

This may require some further thinking, but the perspective we have gained in relation to our own lives (and deaths) will help us here too.

1. Accept the possibility of it

It is of course a major shock when anyone close to you dies, but at least don't let the possibility that they could die in the first place be a shock to you. What we mean by this is that, by having an acceptance of the possibility of the death of those we love at the back of our minds at all times, we can not only remind ourselves to make the best of these relationships while they're there, but also make it slightly easier to come to terms with these events if they happen.

Even considering this possibility can be a difficult thing to do, especially with our children or partners. This doesn't however have to take the form of a



morbid obsession with the impending doom of our loved ones, but rather an acceptance of it as a reality of being alive, of the fragility of life and of having emotional connections to other people.

2. Appreciate the relationships you have

A parallel point to some of those made in part one of this booklet – we can use our acceptance of the reality of death, and the brevity of life (including of those we love) to remind us to make the most of our relationships and the time spent with people we love.

In short we should use our perspective on death to enhance our appreciation of life.

3. Don't feel bad about how you react

We all react differently to major life events, so the last thing you need to do during the testing time of dealing with the death of someone close to you is to judge yourself on how you're reacting compared to others and worry about whether it's the 'right' reaction.

4. Let them go

If you are close to someone who is dying or whose life is threatened, challenge yourself to check that you are making decisions and giving advice that is based on what is best for the person and what they want – rather than what you want. That's why it is

so beneficial when people make their wishes known before they are dying.

When we face the threat of losing someone we love, it can be extremely difficult to step back from our overwhelming desire to preserve their life and keep them around us, but try to make sure that you are thinking about it from their perspective.

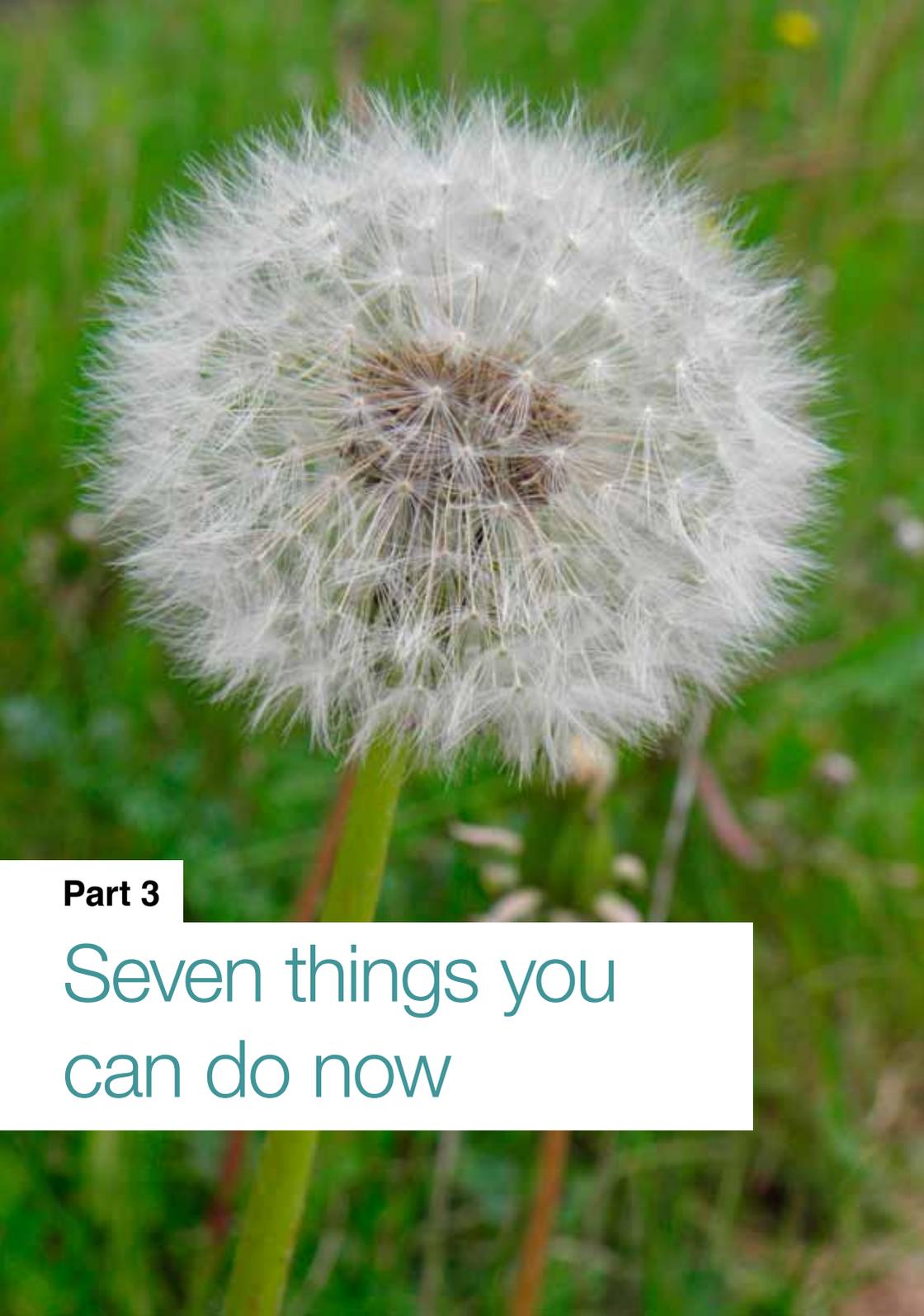
5. Try to look to the future

Being told of the need to ‘move on’ after a bereavement might seem to be a very cold and unrealistic idea, which completely fails to understand how the bereaved person may be feeling.

Despite this though, there seems to be some value in trying to accept the transience of things – even ourselves and the people we love the most – and using this to stop us holding on to anything too much – both people and anything else in life. This idea, used by Buddhism and several other schools of thought, can be very hard to follow as most of us cling to things in life – often quite naturally, as these things can give our lives meaning. Perhaps though, it could help us to see other people as gifts that come into our lives that we don’t own and can’t hold on to forever. This in turn might make it a little easier to try to continue our lives making new attachments rather than letting the loss of past ones make our lives unbearable.

6. Understand their preferences

If someone is close to you and you may need to be involved in planning arrangements for them after their death (such as their funeral), try to make time to discuss their preferences for this with them in a calm and open way while they are alive. This not only gives them a chance to properly reflect on what they really want to happen but also gives you a good chance of meeting their wishes as closely as possible and with minimal pain.



Part 3

Seven things you
can do now

Seven things you can do now

The aim of this booklet is to help you think about death, rather than provide you with lots of practical advice on how to prepare for and deal with it. So, please visit the Dying Matters website – www.dyingmatters.org – to find lots of useful resources on the practical side of this topic.

Getting your house in order as early as possible in life can however give you peace of mind and really help the people you leave behind when you die. So, below are seven things to think about or do to plan for the future - some won't take long. Others may require some thought and important conversations. Try to do them soon when you have a spare moment.

1. Make a will

Writing a will allows you to plan what happens to your money and possessions after you die. It's also a good way of letting people know any wishes you have about a funeral, or how you'd like to be remembered. If you die without a will, your possessions will be allocated according to set rules, rather than according to your wishes.

You can write a will yourself – there are booklets and will-writing packs available from banks and some shops and supermarkets. Banks also offer will-writing services. But it's usually best to use a solicitor – at least to check what you have written.

You can find a solicitor by contacting:

- Your local Citizens Advice Bureau
www.citizensadvice.org.uk
- Your local Law Centre
www.lawcentres.org.uk
- The Law Society's Client Section
www.lawsociety.org.uk/clientsection or
020 7242 1222
- Society of Trust and Estate Practitioners
www.step.org or 020 7340 0500
- Direct Gov
www.direct.gov.uk (search for 'making a will')

2. Make a funeral plan

It may feel a little morbid to think in advance about what type of funeral you'd like, but it may be something that you find you have strong views on and it could certainly ease the pressure on your loved ones after your death and help them feel that they have given you the funeral that you wanted.



peace

Did you know that there is no legal requirement to have a member of the clergy at a funeral? Or that you can be buried in your garden if you like? There's plenty of scope to make a final statement – if you plan your funeral ahead.

You can leave written wishes about your funeral and what should happen to your body with those you care about, or in a will. Or you can make arrangements well in advance with the help of a funeral director.

If you don't know a local funeral director, contact the National Association of Funeral Directors – www.nafd.org.uk or 0845 230 1343 or the National Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors – www.saif.org.uk or 0845 230 6777

Funerals aren't cheap, but you can pay in advance, spreading the cost over many months or years so that your family's not burdened with expense and stress. Various charities, finance organisations and funeral directors run funeral plans. You can also get advice from Age UK – www.ageuk.org.uk or 0800 169 6565.

3. Consider your digital legacy

Our use of digital and online media has grown massively in the last decade or so. This raises an interesting and important question we all need to answer before we die – what do we want to happen with our digital legacy?

In other words, what should happen to all the digital content we own or have produced (such as online photos and music) and the social media and online accounts we have operated?

Research suggests that the majority of people (71%) have never considered this question, yet it is an important one, and more than one in ten of people (11%) said they would want a friend or family member to keep updating their social media accounts on their behalf after they die. So, telling people of how we would like them to deal with our digital legacy is another thing we need to consider.

4. Start planning for your future care and support

None of us know how things will turn out as we get older. It's quite possible that many of us will need caring for. Some of us might also lose the capacity to make decisions for ourselves.

You can talk to your family and health care professionals (for example, your GP) about the sort of care you'd like if you become dependent or seriously ill:

- Where would you like to be cared for – home, hospice, hospital, nursing home?
- Are there any treatments that you would refuse?

- Do you want to appoint someone to make decisions for you, if you are unable to do so?
- Is there a particular place you would like to spend your final days?

It's best to write down your plans so that those who care for you have a record. You can find out more information from the NCPC and NHS Improving Quality leaflet *Planning for Your Future Care* at www.ncpc.org.uk/publications or 020 7697 1520.

There are many ways to help you and your family finance the cost of any future care (for example in a nursing home). Charities like Age UK can provide advice, or you can talk to a financial advisor. Ideally find one by personal recommendation, and check they are authorised to give advice by using the Financial Services Authority's online register – www.fsa.gov.uk.

5. Sign up as an organ donor

Other people can benefit from your organs after your death. If you want to find out more about organ donation contact NHS Blood and Transplant - www.organdonation.nhs.uk or 0300 123 2323.

6. Make sure your loved ones know your plans

Before you finalise any of these things, consider talking them through with those close to you.

This gives them the opportunity for input, and means you can begin sharing your thoughts and feelings about the future. If you have important documents or notes about your care, inheritance or funeral, keep them in a safe place and let loved ones know where they are. If the documents are hard to find your wishes may not be carried out.

7. Make sure you know your loved ones' plans

As noted earlier in this booklet, try to find the opportunity to open a conversation with your loved ones about end of life arrangements, including their preferences for end of life care and arrangements for after their death.

This may feel like a difficult thing to do and the time may never seem right to introduce this topic, but even an everyday conversation about the future or health of other people you know could provide an opportunity to open up this discussion – ‘So, what would you want?’.

So, even opening up the topic of death in a very general way can help you to start thinking and talking about it in a more open way together - and could give you a better chance of meeting the wishes of your loved ones if the need arises.



Final thoughts

By giving adequate, mature thought to death as we go throughout our lives, we can enable ourselves to live richer and more meaningful lives.

“The greatest dignity to be found in death is the dignity of the life that preceded it” [5]

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Further reading

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How to think about death

Death is one of the only certain things in our lives, but we rarely talk or even think about it.

Yet being able to think about death in a wise way is a critical life skill, as it could enable us to live fuller, better lives while we have the chance and, possibly, die better deaths. So, this booklet explores some ways we could begin to contemplate the subject of death.

It had been produced in collaboration with Dying Matters – an initiative led by the National Council for Palliative Care charity that aims to help people talk more openly about dying, death and bereavement, and to make plans for the end of life.



*Let's talk
about it*