

Talk About DEATH

WE IN THE CHRISTIAN WORLD imagine the agonizing death of Jesus on the cross. Crucifixion was death by asphyxiation, as the torn and beaten arms worked to lift the weight of the body to enable each excruciating breath. As I write, many people are fighting their own battle to breathe, as coronavirus ravages their lungs. I don't know what the world will look like when this is over, but nearly everyone will know someone who has died during this global pandemic.

This is a tough reality for us, our children, and the elderly and vulnerable. It's even tougher when we're not prepared for it. It's healthy for families to talk about death together, both before and after it happens, in order to process their thoughts and feelings. Here are some ways to do that.

TALKING WITH CHILDREN

Use a natural springboard to talk about death, such as when a pet dies, when you find a dead creature on a walk, or when someone you know dies. You can ask your child what death means to them, because they will often have some ideas of their own. This helps you to check any misconceptions. Share what death means to you and what you believe about death. Many Bible stories include death and grief, but we often glide over them rather than explore the important issues with our children. This can inhibit us from being honest about the pain of loss and the natural sadness and grief we feel when someone dies. Ask your children what they think their family members thought and felt when they died. Ask how they might like to be comforted.

Some children's books can help you to explore the experience of what happens when someone dies. *Miss Grandpa* is a book I wrote for Adventist children to help them understand death and resurrection. It also includes some practical ideas for helping children with their grief.

Use straightforward language when talking about death. When we say we've "lost" someone, children think they'll be found again.

The term "passed away" makes no sense to children, and even saying that someone has "fallen asleep" can make children feel frightened to sleep in case they die too.



WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW

- When someone dies, they are no longer breathing and living, and we won't be able to talk to them and see them again.
- When someone dies, it makes us feel very sad because we loved them so much.
- We will miss them for a very long time, and it is normal to feel sad about that and to cry.
- In between crying for the person we can't see and talk to anymore, we can still laugh together and enjoy the good things of life.
- There will be a funeral, which is a service in which family and friends come and say goodbye and honor the person.
- Their body will be put safely in a wooden box, like a treasure.
- The box is buried in the ground, or sometimes it is burned. Either way, the body becomes like dust. But that doesn't matter because God can bring anyone back to life again.
- Jesus was brought back to life after He died, and He was taken up to heaven to live with His Father.
- One day Jesus will come again. He will bring those who loved Him and who loved other people back to life. He will take them to heaven to live with Him forever.

If your children ask questions about death, answer them as honestly and simply as you can. It's OK not to have all the answers, and it's OK not to tell them everything. But don't lie to them.

TALKING WITH A SPOUSE

Yesterday (as I write this) nearly 1,000 people in the United Kingdom died from the coronavirus. Many of them died in intensive care units without any relatives and friends to hold their hand. So my husband and I talked about dying alone in the hospital. Although we would want to be together if one of us was dying, we both understood that this would not be possible during the pandemic. I told Bernie that no one must ever feel guilty for not being there if I had to die alone. As long as I was able to, I would think about those I love, and that would comfort me.

Even before the pandemic, we had told each other about our wishes for organ donation, resuscitation options, and where we would prefer to die (at home, in the hospital, or in a hospice). We have also given each other permission to remarry if one of us dies so that neither of us needs to feel guilty if that's the choice we make.


TALKING ABOUT FUNERALS

This year we had a family funeral for an elderly relative. As we planned the service, we realized none of us knew his favorite hymns or which passage of Scripture he would have chosen. We weren't clear about all of his life story or what his wishes would be about the service.

My adult daughter was listening to the discussions. Later she asked me what I'd like to happen at my funeral. It wasn't a sad conversation at all. I told her the songs I would like and my favorite chapters in the Bible. I followed up by sending her an email with all the information in one place, and I attached the story of my life that I had written for a project. If it's too difficult to talk about funeral plans many years in advance, write your wishes in a letter that your family members can open at the appropriate time.

Wherever possible, let children come to the funerals and burials of those they love. Ask for a service outline in advance and explain everything that will happen so there are no surprises. Some children might like to read a Bible verse or share music, but give them the option to let someone else do it if they decide they don't want to at the last minute. Some children might like to gather flowers for the coffin or write a letter or poem for the person who has died.

GOD CARES

If it feels too scary to talk about death, pray about your concerns and ask yourself why you find it so hard. Because of sin, death is a natural part of life and being human. God cares about every aspect of our lives. He remembers that He made us out of dust and that we are fragile (Psalm 103:13-18). His love for us is everlasting, in death as much as in life. And best of all, one day He will personally wipe away every tear of grief from our eyes (Revelation 21:4). 

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