

Blog 2: 5 Reasons we don't want to talk about dying and death

Source: Banksy Girl with Heart Balloon

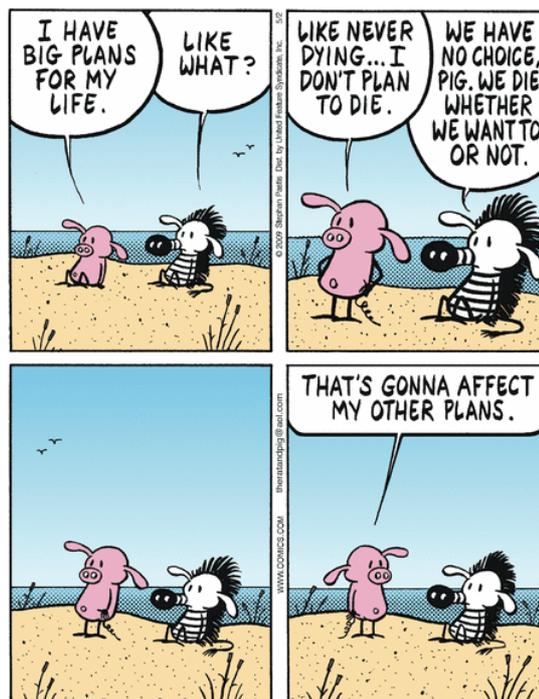


Today's blog will reflect on why we might be afraid to talk about death and dying.

1. Fear of the unknown:

As Bertrand Russel said, fear is the main source of superstition and one of the main sources of cruelty. To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom.

It's natural and normal that we fear what we don't know or understand. It's part of the human condition. This is seen in all parts of our society.



Ultimately, we like what we know and who we know. We don't like to take ourselves out of our comfort zone. Popular culture has taught us that dying and death are to be hidden, avoided. Those who are sick must be isolated and insulated. Death is hidden away. The stark reality is that death is a natural part of the cycle of life.

2. We don't want to think of ourselves dying.

As Woody Allen famously quipped 'I'm not afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens.' When I read this I smile, because I think Woody knocked the nail on the head. Perhaps we can talk about death in some profound way, or superficial and objective way. But when it comes to ourselves we find it difficult. We generally like living, being around our family and friends. It is incredibly difficult to imagine ourselves not being in the world any more. When we run Café Conversations centred on discussing dying and death, getting people to focus on their own death is the hardest part. What we discovered (are what you probably already know) is that we are GREAT at informing others about what they should do and how they should feel, but not so good at doing it for ourselves.

3. Best not to tempt fate.

If we talk about dying and death it will bring us bad luck, jinx us. Our fear is that if we start talking about death is that a terrible fate may befall us.

If we talk about death when we are newly diagnosed with a life threatening illness, does it mean that there is no hope of recovery, or are we tempting fate to intervene?

Ironically death is thrust upon us every single day. We talk in hushed tones when we hear of someone we know dying, or sigh as we turn on the television and look at the atrocities around the world that cause death and devastation. But when it comes to us, perhaps we're just not ready ...

4. We are too busy

This is a really real reason. We might be in debt, have a very demanding job, have children or ageing parents to look after. We are tired from work and simply have neither the time nor the inclination to open that 'can of worms'. It's just another thing we have to worry about. When I talk about my work with dying, death and bereavement, friends of mine frequently smile at me and say "I just can't go there today. It's too much. Let's talk about it another time when I'm not so frazzled."

5. We've been conditioned to live not die

At the beginning of each year we may assess where we are in relation to our diet and exercise regime. Do we get enough sleep? Eat enough vegetables and fruit? Can we stay healthy enough keep on living? We are programmed to live and encouraged to be vigilant about staying healthy. That is a good and positive thing for each of us and for society. But we have not yet discovered immortality. When people die, it can be viewed as failure - they "lost their battle" - or punitive and judgemental - they "didn't exercise" or "they smoked". We cannot stop being mortal. But we can take our mortality into account and prepare for the inevitable, as we think about, talk about and prepare for all other life stages.

Let's not leave it too late to think about. Let's not wait until we receive the telephone call, or meet with the doctor, or hear the phrase "Please sit down, I've got some bad news"...

Have a look at the results of the Have Your Say survey and the People's Charter on Dying, Death and Bereavement in Ireland on www.hospicefoundation.ie/haveyoursay/