

## Blog 3: Confessions of a Café Conversation



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I've been holding Café Conversations throughout Ireland for almost five years now. A Café Conversation is a bit like a Death Café but with some differences. A Café Conversation does promote talking about death, but it also has a focus on the challenges of long-term illness, life-limiting illness, grief and loss. We show films and encourage focussed debate, as well as introducing people to the excellent Think Ahead form produced by the Irish Hospice Foundation. There is always tea and coffee and cake too.

I'm often asked, "How do you do that? It's so depressing! Don't you get upset?" To be honest attending and hosting a Café Conversation is mostly uplifting, always illuminating, and often bring surprises.

The truth is that while death, grief and loss are universal, they are also personal and unique. Every one of us has an experience that is different from another's. But there is an underlying commonality. And when we are gathered together and share our wisdom with others it is truly transformative.

What has stood out over for me over the past five years? Let me share some stories.

One of the first Café Conversations we held was in the countryside, arranged by a colleague in his community. It was well attended, with a mixture of men and women. As a warm up exercise, we often ask people why they have come along. One very senior elder of the community came because he (in his own words) "Wondered who in the hell would come to something like this," and he was simply "being nosy".

Another man, another day, claimed his wife had dragged him along tempting him with the prospect of chocolate cake and tea. "I'm a sucker for a nice piece of chocolate cake," he said, "but if you told me I would be spending two hours talking about death, I would never have come ... but I'm glad I did. I found out so much today."

We held a Café Conversation with a Man's Shed group, filled with huge men, with huge hearts and huge losses. They listened attentively and spoke little... until one stood up and spoke of one of their members who had fallen from a ladder that weekend and was in the hospital and very sick. A widower with no children, his Men's Shed family were very concerned for his welfare. They took a Think Ahead booklet and spent the next few weeks filling it in with him. "You don't expect it to happen to you," they said, "but now we know it does".

A homeless man came to a Café Conversation with all his belongings in a wheelie shopping bag. He sat at the back of the room. All that he asked was "What will happen to me? Who will look after me? What choices do I have?"

Although you may think that these conversations are sad, which they are, they are so much more than that. Café Conversations provide opportunities and space to talk and ask questions. They give us permission. Permission to give voice to things we may never have said, or thought, or shared before, such as fear and loss and grief and love. They are a permissive and safe space. They can't provide all the answers, but shared experience and information can be helpful and healing.

One example is the woman who worried about her dependent child. Her child had multiple problems that required full time care from her mother. "Who will look after her?" she asked. "It keeps me awake at night". What happened that day was a process of natural brainstorming. People offered advice on who to contact, put her in touch with others in similar situations, offered practical help, listened to and supported her.

What is also interesting is how we work through the fear of dying, death, loss and grief. As part of an icebreaker exercise, we ask people to say their name and one word to describe how they are feeling at that time. People generally say neutral words like nervous, curious, or interested. At one Café Conversation a woman said her name and then said "I feel hopeless." It was as shocking a word to hear as I am sure it was for her to speak. With great care, as we went through the Café Conversation we checked in with her from time to time. As the meeting progressed she began to talk more and more about her situation and as is often seen, the group sympathised, empathised, advised, supported and rallied her along. What she realised was that she was not alone and her community was there to offer support. At the end of the session we again went around the room to ask for 'one word.' "Better," she said, "I feel a little bit better." What more could you ask for?

Finally, a few years ago, a woman asked if she could speak to me privately. She explained she had stage four cancer and a poor prognosis. "I haven't told anyone" she said. I asked her why, and she broke down into tears. "My husband doesn't want people to know," she said. "He doesn't want people to treat me differently. I feel so alone; I have no one to speak to." This was a tricky situation for me. I am not a social worker or a medical professional. So I spoke to her as a woman, a wife and a mother. "I can't tell you what to do," I said, "but you have to be true to yourself. George Bernard Shaw said 'Life isn't about finding yourself; Life is about creating yourself.' Create the life you want to have, and if that is different from the life you are living at the moment – perhaps there are changes you need to make."

I often wonder what happened to her. In fact, I wonder what happens to most of the people I meet. Sometimes I do get to find out.

A few weeks ago I got a call from a man from the Men's Sheds Association. "Can I get some of those Think Ahead booklets?" he said. "Of course you can," I said. "How many do you need?" "Fifty," he said. "I'm holding one of those talks in the local library. You see some time ago I fell off a ladder ..."

So it's not all sad ...

After talking with each other about death and care and loss and grief for almost two hours people generally leave having a slightly greater acceptance of the inevitable, and even a cheery and more positive outlook. What is so interesting is that most are grateful for having had permission to speak about their pain and loss, their hopes and fears. Not avoiding the subject does seem to improve people's quality of life. Not to mention the comfort of sharing while drinking tea and eating cake – chocolate or otherwise.

Café Conversations show me every time that people value the opportunity to talk about what can be seen as taboo subjects. People are kind, they are compassionate and they care. That's death awareness.

Download a [Think Ahead](#) form

Are you interested in a Café Conversation for you, your friends, work colleagues, community or organisation? Email us [info@hospicefoundation.ie](mailto:info@hospicefoundation.ie)

More information on the work of the Irish Hospice Foundation [www.hospicefoundation.ie](http://www.hospicefoundation.ie)