

## ©Death Unfiltered: The Podcast

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### Why People Don't Talk About Death

Hello. Welcome to Death, Unfiltered where we talk about all things death and dying. I am Staci Sokol, a dementia educator, end-of-life navigator as well as a southern sassy sister .

I am Jeanne Bain, an end of life navigator, dementia consultant, and improviser who loves the ocean but currently lives in the land of 10,000 lakes. Staci let's jump into this episode called why people don't talk about death. Why do you think people don't talk about that ?

Staci: Well I live in the southern part of the United States and here is not talked about or celebrated until the person has passed on. It's kind of like being kept in the closet, under the door, nobody wants to talk about that even though it's the circle of life. It's just not something that is spoken down here.

Jeanne: I'm really interested in how different communities talk about death and I would love to at some point have guests from different communities talking about why we don't talk about death. I don't even know why it's so puzzling to me.

Staci: In Minnesota is death culturally acceptable?

Jeanne: The people I know for the most part want to talk about death. So when you and I have classes people want to come and they want to talk about death. I'm not really reaching the people who don't want to talk about death so it's a really interesting conversation and a really interesting question.

Staci: Well I can tell you in my small little circle on Facebook, when I posted on my Facebook page that we are looking for individuals to tell their end of life story, I had only two people reach out and say they were willing to tell their story and I over 400 friends and only two people showed up. I think people are scared.... it's almost like sex. People don't want to talk about it. They know it happens but don't want to talk about it. Let's not talk about sex or death that makes sense, I get it.

Jeanne: I don't get it, so I don't understand because I've always talked about it. When I was presenting at a workshop my 23-year-old son said to me you know Mom, I brought up death the other night with a bunch of people and everyone got really quiet. Nobody wanted to talk about death. The fear around it was so great for these 20 to 30-somethings and he said to me Mom I'm so grateful that I was raised in a death positive family. I personally wasn't raised in a death positive family, but I have raised my children in a death positive family. If you were not raised in a death positive family, then why did you want to do it differently?

Staci: To live life to the fullest until there's no more life to be lived. I think of end of life as part of life and that's what I focus on. I feel that you are still living and life is meant to be lived, even in that last transition there are things to take away from that and that's a gift my children. They know exactly what I want, what I don't want. It took me 3 years to work on my mom for her to say what she would like at her funeral. She's still not comfortable with the subject but she's better with it. You know she went ahead and she already bought her plot and I told her that was a gift that she gave us. It's all about gift-giving and being present to me.

Jeanne: That's what I think of the end of life is it sounds like one of the reasons that people are afraid of it is because they don't have experience, they didn't grow up in a death positive culture. So let's put that up off to the side, That's one reason and what would be another reason?

Staci: I mean I think about fear, right talking about death won't kill you but maybe people are afraid that it will be an issue with themselves and grounded enough to know this is going to happen to everybody, right. No one gets off this earth without it and how you embrace that or were taught to embrace that goes back to you were raised.

Jeanne: I also believe it's a religious component to it and a cultural component of where you live in the United States. I was presenting or offering to present in a community in a church, and I had a woman come up to me and say it's not important to me that I give my final wishes to my children, it's more important that they just do whatever it is that they want. What I heard was a little apathy, maybe she didn't want to acknowledge her own end of life,

Staci: It's scary to her.

Jeanne: In this situation, I don't think so, I think it was more apathy or lackadaisical and you and I have talked about this before. I feel like some people don't want to talk about death because they feel like it's not their job or their position. In families where it's left, who needs to clean up the mess? Because I cleaned up my mother's mess. My mother didn't leave a mess but I'm saying just as kind of a global family issue.

Staci: Yes, in general because they don't know any better, most parents want to give their children the best they can, whatever that is. Taking care of yourself and letting your wishes be known at the end of life is the best present that you can give your children, I believe. Because I can't imagine that any of us like to walk into chaos, sure we may thrive in chaos but isn't it nice if you're not having to second guess what somebody wants. We're not mind readers. Jeanne, were you raised in a death positive environment?

Jeanne: I was raised in a death environment. I was raised in a family where there was always death. I actually remember when my uncle Ken died no one told me that Uncle Ken died and I was kind of a literal gal and I wasn't sure but my dad dropped the phone and cried. I needed some grounding. I needed some concreteness. I was in sixth grade at the time, and I remember there being this huge sadness in the family but when Uncle Ken died I remember thinking why aren't they telling me. It's as if that crying was supposed to be enough and for a 12-year-old

child it wasn't enough. Obviously I figured out that Uncle Ken died because there were arrangements to be made and there was a funeral date and then I knew. But I wouldn't call my family death positive. I would call them death frequent.

Staci: I feel tremendous gratitude because I feel like if I grew up in a family where I still had living grandparents.

Jeanne: My parents were still alive. You know my grandparents would be really ,really old and my last grandparent died in 1985. I was a senior in college, all my grandparents were gone. My aunt died, my very last relative died, maybe five or six years ago, In terms of my dad's generation. I'm only 56 so they're all gone. I feel like it gave me the foundation to be able to talk about it and to realize it as the cycle of life and nothing to be feared. I haven't just had beautiful old age deaths in my family. So let's just be clear, about that right now. There have been two murders, several baby deaths you know those to me aren't the the end of life that we want. To know you have drama around your end of life stories and that gives a whole different perspective. It does. It does. I remember 9/11, when the world trade center was coming down and I saw people jumping out of the windows, I remember thinking how much I wish I could just be with them to just hold space for them as they died. I think that was probably the first pull that I had towards wanting to be with people, at the end-of-life.

Staci: You said it out loud, that you are willing to share that and be vulnerable with people. Because I am flashing back to that time as well. As you're talking about it, I am thinking about where I was, and what I was doing. I can just imagine the space that you would have been able to hold and the comfort that you would have been able to bring. In our profession of end of life work, you and I both are huge advocates of what the individual who is transitioning wants. To make them comfortable, to make sure their wishes are heard, at the same time recognizing what the family needs. So if you had been able to be present on 9/11. even if you were present for one person, what a difference that would have made! I think about the people who chose to jump, instead of stay. I think about how they must have had some kind of drive about how they wanted to be found. How they wanted to be remembered and how they wanted to be in control of their choices. I was so moved by that and what's interesting is, I don't think that I've ever talked with anyone other than my husband about the strength and courage that those individuals had to jump.

Staci: Right, you had to be so strong and secure in who you are.

Jeanne: Oh, absolutely!absolutely! and so strong and knowing that this is the way you wanted to have your body found. You wanted your body found. I mean that's the story that I came away from. I wanted my body to be found.

Staci: Interesting.

Jeanne: Yeah, when I'm looking at the reasons we have for why people don't talk about death, for some people there's a religious element, for some people there's a cultural element, for

some people it's about fear, for some people they just don't have experience about it and it's just a startling stark reality that they haven't practiced. So you and I practice, practice, practice. We talk about it all the time. and then sometimes out of the fear . I see this in lots of tragedies, I don't want to talk about a murder because maybe I'll know someone who got murdered, I don't want to talk to somebody about COVID because I'm afraid I'm going to get it, I don't want to. It's like holding fingers in the ears, when children put their hands over their ears, because they don't want to hear it whatever it is. I think as adults we do that because if we don't hear it, then we can't experience it and it must be okay. So what other reasons do you have? Just in our last few minutes here, why else do you think people don't talk about death?

Staci: I'm going back to a point you made, I think it's a generational thing. Somewhere along the line, in society, it didn't become okay to talk about it, anymore. I think there was a time, where people celebrated end-of- life and they celebrated the life that people lived. Even in different religions in this country, some people call it celebrations of life, some people call it homecomings, some people have a bit of time where set aside, where they grieve but as a nation we don't embrace it. It's a bad thing, and sure it is a bad thing when someone dies of a terminal illness or too young or too sudden or whatever the case may be.

Jeanne: I might challenge you on that Staci, okay who determines what's good or bad.

Staci: Well that's what I was just about to say.

Jeanne: Yeah. Yeah. That's very Buddhist thinking. We don't talk about it but in that family where they don't talk about end-of- life, they also don't talk about other things in the closet, either. So this is just one of the coats in the closet that people don't talk about that we're hoping to bring out of the closet and make part of daily conversation.

Staci: What would you like for someone to be able to walk away with after listening to this episode?

Jeanne: I feel like I would really like people to take inventory and really look at what it is that's keeping them from talking about death. We're all busy. Everybody's got full lives, some people have over full lives. At the same time, talking about death doesn't take very long, just starting to bring it into the world a little bit. To me, the way that you reference sex seems really important because we started talking about sex with our kids with Roby Harris's book. It's so amazing! When they were not even 3 years old, so they're talking about babies and how babies are made and that might be controversial for some people but my kids have a really good understanding and it was never taboo to talk about sex and sexuality growing up. In some families, it's totally taboo, no! no! no! no! you do not talk about it! You don't talk about anything referencing sex.

Staci: My kids were just raised in that open environment, so what I want people to walk away with is how does your conversation about death, mirror what your childhood was like around death or not? How does it mirror how your family talked about sex? Ask yourself, is there a way that I can take the shame out of this because everybody dies and it looks different to everybody

regardless of what it is. I'll tell you in the house where my children grew up, we constantly talked about sex. It was a dinner table conversation either seriously or jokingly and my daughter's friends knew that this is the house they could talk about it. Because that's reality, it's part of life.

Jeanne: Oh my gosh, Staci how did we find each other ? It's so amazing, because my house was always the house. In an improv class several years ago, we had to stand up on stage and talk about what we were good at. So each person stood up on stage, and had their topic. It was you know, some people had fly fishing and what are you an expert at and mine was how to get teenagers to talk about sex and everybody had their jaw down on the floor , they couldn't believe that here was this 50 plus year old woman talking about how she gets teenagers to talk about sex, but it's just the way. Why not talk about the topics that are uncomfortable because that way they get less uncomfortable. And two, why it is hard to talk about the end of life?I think it was great to have this conversation with you Staci because each time that we have a conversation like this we can remind ourselves that it's really our job right now to continue to have conversations and invite more and more people into those conversations.

Staci: Thanks for joining us on another episode of Death Unfiltered if you liked what you heard and want to hear more subscribe to us on iTunes, Spotify or wherever you get your podcast. If you'd like to know more, about what Staci and Jeanne are up too, sign up for our tiny letter at [tinyletter.com/deathunfiltered](http://tinyletter.com/deathunfiltered).

Jeanne: Can't wait to connect with you again, about all things death and dying.