

# Death.

*A user-friendly guide.*

Why are we afraid of the dark? Why do snakes and spiders frighten us? If we were to trace all our fears down to their very root, we would inevitably come face to face with the Spectre of Death. To be no longer numbered amongst the living haunts us like no other demon. The knowledge that one day we will all cease to *be* has turned some of us into philosophers and others into priests. Mostly, though, death has made cowards of us all. We pop vitamins, eat fibre, run three times a week: all the while looking warily over our shoulder to be sure that death's long shadow isn't gaining on us.

Our vigilance & all the advances in medical science make no difference. The statistics on death are still a hundred per cent, just as they used to be ten thousand years ago. Whoever is born, dies. A birth and a death, in fact, are the two only requirements for a life. Once we accept our demise as a certainty and a part of the cosmic deal; death becomes a friend who sits on our shoulder to remind us that, as we are only here for a short visit, shouldn't we be smelling the flowers along the way?

At the Singapore Hospice Council, we believe it is neither morbid nor fatalistic to contemplate our own death. As Morrie so wisely puts it in *Tuesdays with Morrie*, 'Once we learn how to die, we'll learn how to live.' So to help us mull over our mortality, we have assembled some useful information and friendly advice on the subject.

**The best place to die.** Given a choice, most of us would rather spend our final moments in the comfort of our own home, and certainly not in our least favourite place: the hospital. While we want to die at home, the fact is only one-quarter of us will end up doing so. With the assistance of a hospice, however, our wish of dying at home becomes a distinct possibility. Under our home care programme, more than half our patients get to 'go home' from home.

**Quick exits.** When asked how we'd like to go, most of us would hide behind dark humour. 'I want to live to be a hundred and ten, and be shot in the back by a jealous husband.' Or, 'I want my last words to be: 'A truck!' While sudden deaths might seem appealing, in reality they leave a great many things undone, and they are very often the

hardest deaths for families to accept. In contrast to an abrupt, easy death, dying of a progressive illness offers time and opportunities to put 'our house in order', which includes the healing of strained or severed relationships, perhaps between previous spouses, or a parent and an estranged adult child. When two people end well, the story of their lives will be fondly remembered.

**So long.** 'I forgive you.' 'Forgive me.' 'Thank you.' 'I love you.' 'Goodbye.' Those are the five steps of relationship closure. Under hospice care, we are encouraged to mend our relationships with the most important people in our life. After we've resolved feelings of hatred or love with others, there is nothing left but peace. We may never be happy to move on, but at least we'll be prepared.

**Never walk alone.** We all pass away alone. Unless we die in a car accident with others, we are the only one dying at that moment in time. Death is, by its very nature, the loneliest experience man was ordained to endure. It is a loneliness that's compounded by the fact that we isolate the dying at this crucial time. We isolate the dying by no longer talking to them. We isolate them by no longer listening to them. Sometimes we're not with them physically; but more often, we're no longer with them emotionally. The widely held notion that the dying do not want to talk about death is a myth. Of course, they want to talk about it; they are about to enter the great unknown and talking can be therapeutic.

**Caring for the dying.** Death need not be painful nor a lonely experience. There are eight hospice organisations providing medical, nursing and psychosocial care to the terminally ill and their families. Their chief priority is the relief of pain and suffering at the end of life. As hospice is a philosophy of care more than a specific place of care, palliative care can be given in a day care centre, a hospital ward, an in-patient hospice or even at home. Most patients are, by the way, looked after at home. And you will be pleased to know that our hospice home-care service is generously subsidised. Log on to [www.lifebeforedeath.org.sg](http://www.lifebeforedeath.org.sg) or call us directly on 1800 333 6666, if you need some more friendly advice.