

NOT SO MORBID: Why are we still avoiding talking about death?

In a time where nothing seems taboo to the younger generations - why are they still avoiding talking about death?

If nothing is certain in life except death and taxes, why is it that death remains such a taboo topic to discuss, particularly with younger Australians? As a society we have grown to embrace the uncomfortable and not shy away from addressing the hard issues we find ourselves faced with, so why is it that we continue to avoid the subject of death like the black plague? Is it our lack of knowledge on the subject? The fear of the unknown so to speak; or is it quite the opposite - that with death being an undeniable fact of life, many of us simply believe "what will be, will be?"

A recent survey commissioned by Southern Cross Funeral Directors questioned Australians about death, dying and the funeral industry in order to establish our views. The results highlighted some interesting notions that we hold when it comes to our perspective on death and the emotions that we attach to the concept. It found quite understandably, that our age plays a large role in our responses, however it was the views that were captured in each age group which were notable when we dissect how we engage with the ideology of death and what it entails.

The survey captured the opinions of 1006 participants from a very diverse and equally spread demographic of women (51%) and men (49%). Likewise, there were comparable participant numbers across age groups ranging from those under 45 (47%) to those over 45 (52.5%).

Our 478 younger generations (those under 45), displayed the most hesitancy and perhaps naivety on the subject of death when the responses were analysed as an age group. whilst generally seen as an age group which is open minded, confident and, for the younger end of this spectrum, liberal in character, this subjective undertone appeared across the majority of their answers but most notably stood out when they were asked to consider their own mortality. 36.5% of the younger participants indicated that they actively avoid thinking about it or had a preference not to discuss it. The general consensus for this question had these answers weighted as 29.9% of the group, indicating that the jump to 36.5% significantly pinned this as a "younger notion."

Why though are young Australians so hesitant to discuss the subject of death? 17% of them were quick to point out that they felt their families were not willing to discuss the wishes or specific plans they had, shifting a proportionate blame as to the reasons they may be avoiding discussions on the topic. Once again, this was in reference to their own mortality, not that of others. This was compared to 8% of older Australians who felt their families found it acceptable to discuss end of life plans later in life.

So often seen as fearless and driven, it is hard to fathom that as a group (of course, generally speaking) that over 1 in 3 of them could feel so strongly averse to the topic. Could it be that for them, aside from trying not to upset their families with "talks of death", the end of life is seen as something so far off that they feel no need to, thus they almost feel ambivalent about it? 20% of participants were apathetic when it came to the emotions, they link to death versus 44% of those experiencing sadness and a further 25% said to feel anxious or awkward. This would tend to indicate that their avoidance on the topic is driven by fear rather than simply considering it as a topic too far off to worry about.

76% of the younger generation had had some form of serious discussion on death before entering adulthood, whether it be with family, friends or others. This is in direct comparison to 66% of the older Australians – generationally, we don't shy away from these deep conversations as we once did. As a society, we are generally quite particular with whom we will discuss death (54% of us) with 57% of younger Australians supporting this mindset. Discussions of death are more transparent than in earlier times and yet remains something of angst. Just under 1 in 3 of this age group have had to organise a funeral in the past. This would indicate that there is an intimacy with death that perhaps may have been assumed this group would not have experienced to this capacity yet.

It would appear that the younger generation have had a chance to talk about it, many of them have experienced death through the loss of someone close to them yet they remain tight lipped and apprehensive. More of them had been privy to some form of conflict over estates, finances or final wishes than their older counterparts had so perhaps this, along with the fact their families are reluctant to discuss the finer details of their eventual passing has left them dejected and emotionally unable or unwilling to engage in these conversations.

Over 1 in 3 of them don't know that you can organise a pre-paid funeral and about the same again have made sure they have their "obligatory" wills sorted, but would have no idea where they would start to make any further arrangements for themselves. Death is not just a topic for our older generation. This survey has shown that whilst we have conversations with our children about death in general and our own passing, we need to allow them the space to confidently discuss their own plans which are just as important and significant. Death does not need to be taboo and is something our younger generation should feel confident in their understanding of in relation to the death industry and in their emotional capacity to discuss.

Southern Cross Funeral Directors website - <https://southerncrossfunerals.com/>

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