

SILENCE IS DEADLY

BIGGEST EVER SURVEY SEES 30,000 BRITS TACKLE DEATH TABOO

Over 30,000 people have come a step closer to tackling the taboo of death, as Co-op reveals the findings of the UK's biggest ever survey into death, dying and bereavement¹.

“For the NAFD, there’s a bigger issue behind this story, an issue we’re endeavouring to do something about. The issue is how we prepare for, and support, children after a loss; how we help them make sense of the ending of a life.”

The survey commissioned by Co-op, conducted by YouGov and supported by a coalition of national charities, was opened to the nation in May 2018.

The findings, released in a report entitled *Making Peace With Death*, highlight that further action is needed to tackle the nation’s last taboo. The research uncovered attitudes towards mortality, bereavement and the way in which the nation plans ahead for death.

Highlighting the extent of the last taboo, the report reveals that almost 18 million people are uncomfortable talking about death. Almost 5 million people say they are too uncomfortable to talk about their own death at all, with almost 13 million UK adults saying they are uncomfortable, but would be willing to talk.

Whilst we aren’t at ease talking or opening up to others about death, according to the findings, as a nation, people do think about their own mortality:-

- 91% of Brits have thought about their own mortality, with women (93%) more likely to consider their own death than men (90%);
- 26 is the average age people first think about their own mortality;
- a third (35%) think about their own mortality once a week or more.

Findings highlight that life events and external news reports are amongst the top 10 reasons people consider their mortality:

Top 10 reasons people consider their mortality

- 1 The death of a family member (28%)
- 2 Reaching a milestone age (22%)
- 3 A medical diagnosis – someone I know (17%)
- 4 News reports of death (16%)
- 5 A medical diagnosis – myself (15%)
- 6 The loss of a friend (15%)
- 7 Making my own will (14%)
- 8 Terrorism (13%)
- 9 Hearing about a celebrity dying (12%)
- 10 The death of an acquaintance (10%)

Perhaps as a result of this, when it comes to experiencing bereavement



the national taboo is having a detrimental impact. Findings reveal that:-

- the average Brit first suffers a bereavement of someone close to them aged 20;
- for half (47%), the death of a close relative or friend is their first recollection of death;
- a seventh (14%) of those who have been recently bereaved (ie in the last 5 years) said that, after the death, nobody knew what to say or do;
- a sixth (16%) of those recently bereaved kept it to themselves, possibly to avoid having that “chat”;
- a quarter (24%) kept as busy as possible, whilst 12% got back to work as soon as they could;
- whether the death³ was expected (50%) or sudden (39%) altered the way in which the bereaved were able to cope.

Further findings highlight that grief remains hard to deal with long after a death. For many of those who were recently bereaved, the period immediately after finding out about the death (52%) or during the funeral (46%) were amongst the most difficult. However, birthdays (26%), the anniversary of their death (25%), Christmas or religious festivals (21%) and the return to work (12%) were also referenced as times when it was hard to deal with grief.

In response to this, to help increase awareness about how to better support the bereaved, using the findings the Co-op has produced the below guide, highlighting the most and least helpful things people have done for the bereaved following a loss.

Most helpful during a bereavement

- 1 Asking if they were ok (41%)
- 2 Asking if they could do anything (32%)

- 3 Having friends and family sit with them (19%)
- 4 Asked if they wanted to talk about their loved one (18%)
- 5 Giving them time off work (16%)

Least helpful during a bereavement

- 1 People avoiding the subject (17%)
- 2 People equating their grief with their own (17%)
- 3 People avoiding them (15%)
- 4 Being told to cheer up (15%)
- 5 Being treated differently (11%)

A further area uncovered through the research, is how the taboo is leading to a failure to plan ahead:-

- across the UK, 81% of people have not yet saved anything towards a funeral;
- nationally, people have a good awareness of what a funeral costs,

with people thinking it is £3750 on average⁴;

- over a quarter (27%) have written a will, just one in 20 (6%) have nominated a lasting power of attorney and only 5% have put a funeral plan in place.

Highlighting the impact of this, over 4 million UK adults may have experienced financial hardship as a result of someone's death⁵.

Co-op is working with key national UK charities, including British Red Cross, Child Bereavement UK, Cruse Bereavement Care, Dying Matters, Remember a Charity and Sue Ryder to drive social change. This work will look at the following gaps identified by the research:-

- a greater support network and guidance for employers to assist managers with supporting colleagues following a bereavement;
- a shift in the national language used to talk about death, moving to more direct conversations and a national campaign for a more open culture that breaks the taboo;
- opening up new networks for bereaved families and individuals, ensuring there are more natural

opportunities for them to seek support and contact with others following a death;

- greater focus on the interactions with death and mortality in the early stages of life to understand better the role of education in preparing us for one of life's hardest events.

Robert MacLachlan, Managing Director of Co-op Funeralcare and Life Planning, said: "We see increasingly that a failure to properly deal with death has a knock-on impact for the bereaved, affecting mental health and also triggering financial hardship. We're committed to doing right by our clients and more needs to be done nationally to tackle this.

"It's overwhelming that the survey led to 30,000 people sharing their views. Now that we have such a wealth of insight on what stops the nation engaging with death and bereavement, we can start to address these areas and work with others to drive genuine social change."

Julia Samuel, author of the bestselling book *Grief Works*, comments: "This Co-op survey being on such a large scale is both convincing and fascinating. It gives us concrete evidence of the extent that death is unvoiced in our society and shows that

we need to find a way to bring those thoughts and fears out into the open.

"The fear of talking about death, both their own and of those they love, means that people are not receiving the support they most need at the time, and following their bereavement. This support is the predictor of their outcome, for good or ill. When someone dies it is the love and support of others that enables us to heal and find a way of living again. I welcome this survey as part of the wider Co-op campaign to improve the support and care of bereaved families."

Carol McGiffin, television broadcaster, commented: "Death, dying and bereavement are unavoidable experiences that impact all of us, so it's incredibly eye-opening to see how many of us are still uncomfortable talking about it. Having experienced a life-threatening illness myself, I now have a completely different perspective on mortality and have realised how important it is to come to terms with it.

"It's so important that these conversations become more of a norm and that it doesn't take something drastic to trigger them. I'm sure that the work the Co-op is doing and the findings of its survey will help to drive positive change."

¹ Co-op's biggest ever survey into death dying and bereavement was conducted by YouGov from 7th May to 25th June 2018 among over 30,000 UK adults. Further detail on the study can be found in Co-op's media report

² Population figures calculated by the Co-op, based on YouGov figures. **For those uncomfortable about death:** When asked what statement best described how they felt talking to their loved ones about their own death = 33.25% chose "Not at all comfortable – I won't discuss it" or "Not very comfortable – but I am willing to talk about it". *Mid-2017 UK 16+ ONS population estimate = 53,534,872, 33.25% of 53,534,872 = 17,800,344.94.* **For those who won't talk about death:** When asked what statement best described how they felt talking to their loved ones about their own death = 9.00% said they were "Not at all comfortable – I won't discuss it". *9.00% of 53,534,872 = 4,818,138.48.* **For those who are reluctant to talk about death:** When asked what statement best described how they felt talking to their loved ones about their own death = 9.00% said they were "Not very comfortable – but I am willing to talk about it". *24.25% of 53,534,872 = 12,982,206.46*

³ Based on bereavements experienced in the last 5 years

⁴ According to Co-op data, the average UK funeral cost in 2017 was £3,944 including our costs and third party fees

⁵ Population figures calculated by the Co-op, based on YouGov figures. For those who have experienced financial hardship as a result of someone's death: When asked if they experienced financial hardship as a result of someone close to them passing away, including having to meet your partner's share of the mortgage, to pay more bills, taking time off work = 7.58% said they had. *7.58% of 53,534,872 = 4,057,943.30*