**Headline:** As a Growing Social Movement and Self-Care Practice, Death Literacy Is Fostering Positive Conversations About the End

**Teaser:** The new self-care movement teaches death literacy as a life-enhancing practice.

By Caren Martineau

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**[Article Body:]**

As global populations transition into what has been called the “[longevity society](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanhl/article/PIIS2666-7568%2821%2900247-6/fulltext),” caring for the aging and dying has prompted the emergence of an unusual self-care movement promising improved quality of life as it anticipates death.

Since its [development and introduction](https://researchers.westernsydney.edu.au/en/publications/developing-death-literacy), death literacy awareness has seen a steady organic rise, ­primarily due to the efforts of early adopters advocating for a “[new public health perspective](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-024-82421-8#ref-CR5)” that enhances end-of-life awareness and care.

“[D]eath literacy is defined as the knowledge and skills that make it possible to understand and act upon the end-of-life and death care options,” according to a 2024 [article](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11418362/#bibr1-26323524241274806) in the journal Palliative Care and Social Practice, and its four foundational pillars: knowledge, skills, experiential learning, and social action.

Although experts and people attest to the benefits of early introductory conversations about end-of-life, industrialized societies like the United States lost touch with [end-of-life rituals and home funerals](https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2022/09/evolution-of-american-funerary-customs-and-laws/) in the early 1900s. As a result, what was once a natural relationship with the ending of life evolved. The dying were consigned to hospitals and then transferred to funeral homes. Such distancing from dying led to denial, avoidance, and fear of the process.

**Origins: Defining Death Literacy**

A chance meeting in 2010 between clinical psychologist [Kerrie Noonan](https://www.deathliteracy.institute/kerrie-noonan) and playwright [Peta Murray](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peta_Murray) led to the formation of [The GroundSwell Project](https://www.eqt.com.au/philanthropy/jo-and-jr-wicking-trust/the-groundswell-project) (TGP), an end-of-life educational initiative. Employing community-driven strategies to build awareness and momentum, TGP went on to launch *Dying To Know Day* (2013), an annual grassroots event encouraging open conversations about death and dying across Australia. By 2021, [Proveda](https://proveda.com.au/our-services/end-of-life/) merged with TGP, integrating [D2KDay](https://proveda.com.au/community-programs/dying-to-know-day/#:~:text=Dying%20to%20Know%20Day%20was,place%20annually%20on%20August%208th.) into its portfolio of community resources.

While casually researching nonmedical end-of-life educational resources late one night in 2015, I discovered this Australian grassroots organization using the term “death literacy” to describe their mission. As a branding professional, I immediately recognized the power of this term as a positive change agent. Upon receiving permission from TGP’s co-founders to introduce and represent the death literacy movement in North America, Bevival organized its first national grassroots [D2KDusa](https://www.facebook.com/D2KDusa/?checkpoint_src=any) campaign in August 2016. By then, Noonan had become a founding member of the [Caring at End of Life](https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/966301/EndofLife_Report_Final_14Sept.pdf) research team at Western Sydney University and part of the pioneering research team that coined the term “death literacy” and developed the [Death Literacy Index](https://www.deathliteracy.institute/death-literacy-index-questions) in 2019.

**A Culture Change Moment**

The lure of transformation typically attracts early adopters who, in turn, inspire change through collaboration. To evangelize death literacy’s mission, the movement attracted support from a wide range of [critical stakeholders and change agents](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/22/nyregion/the-positive-death-movement-comes-to-life.html)—creators, educators, [entrepreneurs](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/end-of-life-startup-roundup-daniel-shaw/), academics, social scientists, and health care practitioners. Mindful of creativity’s role in laying a foundation for culture change, these advocates took it upon themselves to foster public awareness with a cautious message about the economic and emotional consequences of living longer and dying slower.

In the ensuing years, the death literacy awareness movement spawned many mission-driven organizations that endeavor to [normalize dying, death, and grief](https://www.bevival.com/podcast) as inevitable human experiences. Examples include [Reimagine](http://letsreimagine.org/), [End Well](http://endwellproject.org/), my organization, [Bevival](http://bevival.com/), and influential individuals such as [Dr. Ira Byock](https://irabyock.org/), [Katy Butler](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katy_Butler), [Frank Ostaseski](https://frankostaseski.com/ostaseski-teachings/), and many others. Collectively, we are helping to dimensionalize the term “death literacy.”

**Setting the Stage: America’s Aging Demographics**

The [2014 U.S. Census report](https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2014/demo/p25-1140.html) pointed to an unprecedented population shift in America—an inflection point that announced the future of America’s obsession with youth and consumerism belonged to three consecutive aging populations: primarily boomers, closely followed by Gen X and millennials.

“Between 2012 and 2050, the United States will experience considerable growth in its older population. … In 2050, the population aged 65 and over is projected to be 83.7 million, almost double its estimated population of 43.1 million in 2012,” [stated](https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2014/demo/p25-1140.html) the report.

This unprecedented “[silver tsunami,](https://www.combo.co/whitepapers/the-silver-tsunami-is-here)” with its unique [macroeconomy,](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK148831/) has led marketers to influence a wide range of consumer goods and services tailored to America’s aging population.

Popular magazines such as [Time](https://time.com/tag/death/), [AARP](https://www.aarp.org/money/retirement/celebrity-estate-planning-mistakes/), and the [New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/25/world/canada/euthanasia-bill-john-shields-death.html) began addressing our nation’s emerging death consciousness. While some offered practical advice, such as the demise of social security and the rising cost of health care, others inspired readers with bucket lists and lifestyle stories highlighting the West Coast’s youthful “[Death Positive Movement](https://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/death-positive-movement/).”

**Death With Dignity**

Congruent with the movement promoting death literacy education, an important parallel initiative supporting the legalization of [Medical Aid In Dying](https://compassionandchoices.org/states-where-medical-aid-in-dying-is-authorized/) (MAID) has become legal in 11 states and Washington, D.C. The *right to die* conversation has been slowly making its way through individual state legislations spearheaded by [Compassion & Choices](http://compassionandchoices.org/), [Death with Dignity](http://deathwithdignity.org/), [NHPCO](http://nhpco.org/), and [End of Life Choices](http://endoflifechoicesny.org/). As of 2025, [states where legislation is under consideration](https://compassionandchoices.org/states-where-medical-aid-in-dying-is-authorized/) include Delaware, Massachusetts, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.

**Peak 65**

The U.S. Census named 2024 as the start of “[Peak 65](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/retirement-medicare-401k-what-to-know-peak-65/),” a period that will last through 2027. Around 4.1 million Americans are expected to turn 65 each year from 2024 to 2027 (approximately 11,000 a day). By 2030, all baby boomers will be 65 or older. Implications of “Peak 65” include:

* Long-term care: According to a [2002 Health Services Research study](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC1464018/#:~:text), the trickle-down economics of aging will impact younger generations, who may need to become caretakers for their aging loved ones. “The real challenges of caring for the elderly in 2030 will involve: 1) making sure society develops payment and insurance systems for long-term care that work better than existing ones, 2) taking advantage of advances in medicine and behavioral health to keep the elderly as healthy and active as possible, 3) changing the way society organizes community services so that care is more accessible, and 4) altering the cultural view of aging to make sure all ages are integrated into the fabric of community life.”
* Labor gap: Retirement will cause a [massive reduction in talent](https://401kspecialistmag.com/employers-worried-about-recruitment-as-peak-65-boomers-retire/), leaving employers to lose expertise, and they may struggle to replace retiring workers.
* Retirement: It’s a well-known fact that many boomers are entering an underfunded retirement and will face challenges with [dwindling finances](https://www.aarp.org/money/retirement/peak-boomer-readiness/).

It is impossible to overstate how critical widespread death literacy adoption is for our society. As the demand for public-facing initiatives supporting end-of-life preparedness accelerates, ratification within professional environments validates the evolutionary arc of social transformation.

By building proficient narrative *long before the end*, entire populations will be better served before, during, and after the passing of loved ones.