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# Putting the fun in funerals

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*There are many things we want to talk about with family and friends; mortality isn't one of them. But from death workshops to death cafes, there are plenty of signs that this is changing*

Lying in a mass burial pit, it's hard to not think to yourself: how in the world did I get here? For the 12 participants who undertook this mock exercise at a Delhi workshop recently, the answer was not really morbid. They were there because they wanted to experience the past, present and future of death.

It's that five-letter word we usually don't like to talk about, perhaps because we don't really believe in our mortality. But that might be changing, with the death-positive movement catching on with those who seek to confront and celebrate the inevitable rather than fear it.

## Burial practice

Art historian Shaleen Wadhwa, who conducted the unusual workshop, says the exercise was meant to establish death as a "truth across time" and to make people see the "process of death with its own history when religion and society, as they know it, didn't exist". Apart from lying for five minutes in a recreated mass burial pit, participants made prehistoric paintings that summed up their lives; learnt about various sustainable forms of burial in vogue currently, and discussed how our digital

footprint lives on after we die. The most powerful feedback Wadhwana got was from a little girl who had lost her mother. “She told me that the only thing weird about death is that we don’t talk about it,” says Wadhwana, who conducted the immersive workshop in collaboration with Bedlam, a creative community.

### Morbid main course

Morbid as it may sound, death has also become the subject of dinner table conversations across the world. Death over Dinner, a global initiative, was brought to India last January by RoundGlass, a health and wellness firm. Helmed by multidisciplinary innovation researcher Kritika Sharma, the dinners have taken place in homes, restaurants, and most recently, at an art gallery in Vadodara. The attendees include strangers of all ages and occupations, but also often friends and family members of the host. Sharma says, “The conversations cover all aspects of death—emotional, spiritual, practical, philosophical and medical. Each dinner is unique due to the background of the guests. There is also a lot of laughter.”

### Humour takes sting out

“Hello, I am a Sikh. So Sikh (sick) that I was admitted to Guru Nanak Hospital...” That joke came from a terminally ill patient who tackled the very serious subject of imminent death with a touch of comedy as part of a campaign called Last Laugh by the Indian Palliative Care Association (IAPC), aimed at creating awareness about end-of-life care. In another campaign by the IAPC, nurses and physicians discuss the various last words they have heard people utter. IAPC secretary Dr Abhijit Dam says, “The idea was to show that death isn’t taboo — it’s a matter of physiology, not pathology.” He argues that palliative care physicians need to know how to tackle the subject. “In our culture, talking about death is considered ‘ashudh’. That’s how we’ve been brought up, and you can’t change culture overnight. You need to understand this to help your patients.”

### Coffee connection

Palliative care physician Dr Sneha Rooh has her own way of dealing with questions of mortality. She hosts salon-style gatherings called 'Death Cafés'. Twenty-seven such events have been held in cafes across the country. Dr Rooh says people's reasons for coming differ — some are curious, others are grieving and some are simply looking for a place to crack a morbid joke. The Imphal-based doctor says hosting these events has made her think about her own mortality differently. "It puts things in perspective — I've learnt to have more fun and stopped striving to be the best professionally."

Tharun Bathini, 23, a graduate student who has attended some sessions is looking forward to the next one in Hyderabad because he recently worked with an NGO that works with HIV+ people. "I've been around a lot of death. I have so much to say," he says.

The end is a beginning

The conversations about death have also reached the screen. National award-winning filmmaker Aparna Sanyal recently made a documentary called *One Mustard Seed* which features intimate conversations with people who are terminally ill, or those who have experienced tremendous grief. At one point, the narrator of the documentary poignantly notes that clichéd phrases such as 'sorry for your loss' or 'he's in a better place', "feel false because if I'm honest I know the minute I hear of death or anyone dying, I have already put myself in a little cocoon as though death were a disease that could spread by touch".

The film emerged from a death in her family, and Sanyal feels it is vital that we develop the ability to openly talk about death because it could make life a lot less complicated. "We shun anything that is dark because we crave light so much. But the trouble with that is that the moment life throws any difficulty our way, it breaks us and leaves us incapable of coping."

And as Michael Hebb, the founder of the death dinners concept, puts it: "Thinking and talking about death can identify how you want to live."

