

# Don't shy away from talking about death

By Sarah Ascher

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Contemplating and talking about death can powerfully enrich the way we live our daily lives.

My mother, who died at the age of 51 during my teen years, wanted to die at home, where she could see our giant backyard oak tree and choose how to spend her remaining time. The year was 1977, and conversations about dying at home were often met with resistance by well meaning and beloved providers. My mom, an outspoken social worker, had prepared our family, meeting together regularly to discuss her wishes for care, something that continues to comfort me long after her death.

A few years later, my 18-year-old brother attempted to take his own life. As he lay in the hospital intensive care unit on life support for a week, my family said goodbye after making the decision to allow natural death and donate his healthy organs to people in need.



DEAN KNUTH / ARIZONA DAILY STAR FILE

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In 2007, my father, a retired physician suffering from dementia, died in a nursing home seven years after I moved him to Tucson and became his legal guardian. My dad began his time in Arizona living in a small, wonderful, assisted living home that he had been fortunate enough to afford through pension and social security. As his needs increased

in the last few months of his life, however, our options decreased, and although I had worked in hospitals and health care all my life, I felt lost in navigating it all from the other side.

As I write this, I'm flooded with group texts of compassion for a friend whose husband is on life support in a hospital ICU, one week after planned and seemingly

routine surgery; a harsh reminder that while the timing and circumstances of each of our deaths remains a mystery, we can only control the way we communicate about our final experiences, making our wishes and priorities known to those caring for us at the end before it all takes us by surprise.

Death is the one thing we all experience, but it is never easy to let go, whether it is the person dying; family and friends still living; or those involved in caring for us saying goodbye. Sudden or gradual, at a young or old age, it is always hard.

As the backbone organization of a new End of Life Care Partnership, United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona is working to convene organizations and individuals to fundamentally change the way we talk about death. Our partnership strives to create a hub of community specific resources that make Tucson a wonderful place to live throughout our journeys, prioritizing values of person centered care, compassionate

communication, and collaboration.

Funding for the groundwork of this innovative new partnership was generously provided by the David and Lura Lovell Foundation and the Community Foundation for Southern Arizona in their combined grants of almost \$3 million. United Way, in its mission to build a thriving community by uniting people, ideas and resources, is dedicated to expanding this partnership and creating a global community model of care.

Experiencing and talking about the death of loved ones has transformed my life and instilled an immense sense of gratitude for living each day. On April 16, National Health Care Decisions Day, let us lead by example to start the conversation with loved ones about individual priorities for living and ending well, honoring each life by hearing and following through with each person's preferences for care.

Sarah Ascher is the senior director for the end-of-life care partnership of United Way.