

#tacklethe taboo

# The 'F' Word – Taking the taboo out of funerals

New research shows what we  
really feel about death in 2016



**C.P.J. Field.**

More than a funeral director since 1690.

# 1. Talking about funerals won't kill you

Few of us want to admit it but death is one of life's certainties. As a nation, we find death and end of life wishes one of the most difficult topics to discuss, especially with loved ones. Death is a sobering subject and people can find funeral planning a sensitive or awkward matter, as if talking about dying will somehow make it happen.

However, in recent years, our 'stiff upper lip' attitude has softened and Brits are beginning to get better at speaking about what is often perceived as a taboo subject. The rise of the [Death Café](#) movement is testament to this, with over 3,000 informal forums springing up worldwide since its inception in East Hackney in 2011. People are seeking out spaces to congregate and chat in a relaxed environment about death and dying, often with complete strangers.

## A spotlight on end of life wishes

End of life care has been at the centre of a high-profile public debate, bringing it to the forefront of the nation's consciousness. In December 2015, [NICE](#) launched the first guidelines for the NHS on improving care for people who are in their last days of life, putting the dying person at the heart of decision making, with a focus on meeting individual wishes.

[The National Council for Palliative Care](#) has also set up the [Dying Matters Coalition](#) to promote public awareness of dying, death and bereavement. With over 32,000 members, Dying Matters provides a wealth of resources to help people talk more openly about death. It also runs [Dying Matters Week](#), a national awareness week that is growing rapidly in popularity.

Additionally, the internet and digital communications has opened up the discussion about death and dying, providing new opportunities to share experiences, as explored in the report, ***Making the most of life: Modern attitudes to death, bereavement and funeral planning***, published earlier this year.

## An open dialogue is still needed

New research commissioned by leading family funeral directors, CPJ Field, shows that a more open dialogue around death is starting to take place in the UK. However, as this report will demonstrate, many people still remain wary of discussing the subject.

According to [The Office of National Statistics](#), of the 500,000 deaths in the UK each year, 75 per cent are not sudden but expected. Despite this, the new report findings show that people are still failing to plan ahead or share end of life wishes with loved ones readily enough.

The report explores the UK's attitudes to and experiences of talking about death and funeral planning. It looks at three distinct stages of funeral planning and bereavement; from planning ahead; to the organisation of a funeral for another person; to looking at what support and assistance is available to the bereaved, after the funeral.

The aim of this report is to get people talking more about these important issues and all the different stages of dying, death and bereavement. It also aims to encourage an open and honest online dialogue at [#tacklethe taboo](#), with experiences and support being freely shared.



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## 2. Look who's talking

Everyone's experiences of and reactions to death can be incredibly different but this report's findings show many commonalities in how people feel when talking about the subject, as well as highlighting some generational differences in attitudes.

### First-hand experience

Whilst the UK is not always forthcoming about discussing death, the findings reveal that the **majority of people (91%) have attended a funeral.**

Unsurprisingly, this figure drops dramatically in younger age brackets, with 39% of people aged 16-19 years old, and 22% of those aged between 20-29 years never having attended one.

### Different comfort zones

Generally, **people feel uncomfortable talking about death with 42% not wanting to do so.** This is equally the case for men and women. The younger generation is much more reluctant to discuss death with **well over half (63%) of 16-19 year olds loathe to talk about it,** suggesting that experience breaks down fear.

Although people are adverse to discussing death itself, the findings highlight that they are **more willing to talk about funerals, with 61% happy to do so, rising to 66% amongst those aged 60 or above.**

CPJ Field Funeral Director, Jack Stanisstreet from Deric Scott in Bournemouth, spends time with people of all ages helping them talk about death and discuss funerals. He is seeing a much greater willingness to discuss funeral plans, particularly amongst those in their 40s and 50s.

He explains: "The real difference generationally is in how open and comfortable people are in discussing their wishes. Younger generations are much more willing to talk about the personal touches they'd like included in a service. They are also braver about asking questions and are keen to understand the processes, as well as discuss what a service will feel and look like.

"This is also the case with choices of remembrance. Older generations tend to have more traditional preferences focused around intimate ceremonies, whilst those in younger age groups may request for ashes to be made into a piece of jewellery or incorporated into a firework display.

"Older generations also tend to worry more about what friends and family will think of a service, discussing features they think will be expected by their peers rather than necessarily creating a service that will truly reflect their own personality and life."

### Personally speaking

In fact, **41% of people regularly spend time thinking about the type of funeral they would like and 42% would like to plan their own funeral.**



## 3. Personal reflections

This new research shows that whilst we don't always want to talk about death, we do spend time reflecting on our own funeral and how we will be remembered when we die.

Well over half of the population **(57%) often wonder what people will say about them when they die.** This is most important for people aged between **16-19, with 78% of people in this age group thinking about this regularly, despite many never having been to a funeral.**

Stanisstreet continues: "Partly, this may be down to older generations seemingly being more at ease with themselves. However, social media has had an impact too, particularly amongst younger generations. There is an ethos of instant recognition and gratification that those in their late teens and early 20s have come to expect through the use of social media channels, making the need for a positive public perception of great importance. The recent deaths of a number of high profile celebrities over the past year, and the public's reaction to these on social media, have also made the younger generation think more about remembrance and alternative funerals.

"Certainly, there is a clear difference in the way younger generations communicate their wishes and condolences. Formal notices of death in papers are becoming much less common with announcements increasingly being made via Facebook."

Respondents cite a wide variety of ways in which they want to be remembered, from professional recognition for **'being a good police officer'** to close personal relationships such as being **'a best friend and mother'**.

Some people want to be remembered for standout attributes such as being **'sexy'**, **'beautiful'**, **'athletic'** or **'cheerful'** whilst others are keen that they leave their mark in the world by being remembered as **'weird'**, **'interstellar'** or **'shrouded in mystery'**.

Being remembered in the right way is clearly very important for people, **with 36% of people even considering writing their own eulogy.**



## 4. Taking action

So who is actually planning ahead? Whilst many people are investing time thinking about what type of funeral they would like and how they would most like to be remembered, they do not appear to be acting upon their wishes.

### How to write a eulogy

It is essential to plan the eulogy you are going to write otherwise your speech may well become a drifting, rambling affair. That is not to say the eulogy must be perfect! Your audience will not be expecting perfection and they will be the most sympathetic and forgiving audience you will ever have.

As the eulogy writer, you are looking for common themes in people's recollections of the deceased person, combined with your own memories to try to capture the essence of the person.

Some possible ideas for themes could include:

- Their prized possessions,
- Their sayings,
- Their work in the community,
- Their proudest moments,
- Their outstanding qualities,
- Their love of a challenge,
- Their laughter and mannerisms,
- Their passions.

Warning... While planning is important, excessive time spent planning can be an excuse not to start on the actual writing!

**Hannah Sherriffs, writer in residence at CPJ Field.**

**Only 29% of people have started saving for funeral arrangements**, leaving the vast majority of family and friends faced with the task of arranging a funeral service for them once they die.

### Share clear ideas

The report shows that those with clear ideas about the type of funeral they would like have shared their ideas with friends and family, such as **'play I'm forever blowing bubbles and bury me with my dogs' ashes**'.

Some respondents have written a funeral plan or included details in their will but some feel **'it's too early to think about death'** or that they are too young, **'I'm 18 and don't need to think about that yet'**, or they are putting the decision off – **'I will get round to that eventually'**.

When asking people about the different features of the funeral service they would like, many were unsure that those closest to them would get the right flowers, with **40% of people who want to have flowers at their funeral uncertain that loved ones would select the same flowers as they would.**



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## 5. Don't get left in the dark

Despite **21% of people having shared with at least one loved one the way in which they wish to be remembered after death**, the majority of us risk being left in the dark when arranging a funeral service for them.

If wishes haven't been talked about or shared, arranging a funeral can be a daunting task at an impossibly difficult time but there are some key things to think about which will help get the arrangements started, including thinking about what made a person unique.

### Choosing a funeral

**Humanist funerals** – a Humanist service does not recognise an 'after life'. It focuses instead upon the life and experiences of the person who has died. For this reason, Humanist funerals are often considered appropriate for those who have led secular lives.

**Civil funerals** – these too may be appropriate for those for whom religion has not played a central role. They offer the opportunity to create a personal service that reflects the life and wishes of a loved one, but it is also possible to incorporate some aspects of religious origin, such as readings or a particular hymn. If the religious content of the funeral extends beyond one hymn and prayer, a religious minister should be considered.

**Family funerals** – a family funeral allows those closest to the person who has died to create their own service, with members of the family having more involvement and the inclusion of elements from across the spectrum.

**Locations** – there is no rule that says that the funeral service must take place in a church, other place of worship or crematorium. The choice of location is yours and may include hotels, sports halls, village halls or other venues.

**Vehicles** – another element of the service that can help reflect the personality or lifestyle of your loved one is transportation.

To read a complete guide on how to make a funeral more personalised, please visit [www.cpjfield.co.uk/arranging-a-funeral/special-consideration/making-a-funeral-personal](http://www.cpjfield.co.uk/arranging-a-funeral/special-consideration/making-a-funeral-personal)

Simply talking to an expert can help. A core part of a funeral director's role is to listen and to help the bereaved decide on the best way to remember their loved ones, making a funeral experience as personal and individual as possible in every detail.

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## 6. Keep talking

The key is to keep talking. Talk about what made a person's life special, how a life has been well lived and how best to remember a loved one and use this to help personalise a funeral.

Crucially, the talking should not stop once a funeral has taken place.

Bereavement can last a whole lifetime and sharing experiences is a key part of coming to terms with loss. Just as every life is unique so is loss and talking about the person who has gone will help to break down the final taboo of death – grief.

As expressed by Julian Barnes in his renowned novel, *Levels of Life*, about the death of his wife, Pat: "This is what those who haven't crossed the tropic of grief often fail to understand: the fact that someone is dead may mean that they are not alive, but doesn't mean that they do not exist."

### A Widow's Tale: One Year On

The rooms are bright, comfortable and bursting with memorabilia; all of it obviously belonging to the man of the house. Three walls of the dining room are taken up by display cases full of model Ferrari racing cars; the office is crammed with model aeroplanes, a huge music collection and other display cases, one filled with a large number of Hard Rock Café tie pins. A framed print of Selhurst Park hangs in prime position in the sitting room and a fireman's helmet and two medals sit on the sideboard. It feels as though the house owner has popped out to buy some milk for our tea and will be back shortly.

If this was an episode of *Through The Keyhole*, the panel would never guess the owner's identity, but, from the clues which scatter the house, they would deduce that the owner was: a retired Chief Fire Officer of Bedfordshire, with 32 years' service in the Fire Brigade; a Freeman of the City of London (awarded for his charity fundraising); a huge Crystal Palace fan; a Formula One enthusiast; a husband; a father of four and grandfather to six.

"Everything in this house is Ian's," says Lynn, as I get my bearings. "I haven't changed anything." Lynn Edwards is Ian's wife... or rather his widow. Ian died nearly a year ago, aged 65, and Lynn is finding life without her husband difficult. "Ian was larger than life and full of fun; he believed life was for living. I actually still can't believe he's not here. Every day I get up and think how did that happen? One day he was here, and then he wasn't."

**To read more of Lynn's story by Hannah Sherriffs, writer in residence at funeral directors, CPJ Field, please visit [www.cpjfield.co.uk](http://www.cpjfield.co.uk)**



A wide range of bereavement services exist in the UK, including those from Cruse Bereavement Care, the leading national charity for bereaved people which offers face-to-face, telephone, email and website support to help people deal with grief.

Accessing services like these, sharing experiences and getting conversations going around topics that many people often feel uncomfortable discussing, can break down the taboos around death, funerals and bereavement.

This report and the new research has shed light on many areas of progress, in terms of people beginning to talk more about the one certainty that faces us all. However, despite the many areas of increased awareness and more open dialogue, there is also still an overwhelming reluctance from people to engage fully with this final chapter in life.

Join in the conversation online, using **#tacklethetaboo** or visit **www.cpjfield.co.uk** for more information about the subjects and issues raised here.

## Notes

The CPJ Field research 'The F Word – taking the taboo out of funerals' was conducted by Opinion Matters and undertaken between 3 November 2015 and 6 November 2015. Sample: 2,361 UK adults.

Further information relating to the Julian Barnes novel, *Levels of Life*, can be found here: <http://www.julianbarnes.com/books/levels.html>.

