

#tacklethetaboo

# Making the most of life:

Modern attitudes to death,  
bereavement and funeral planning

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

More than a funeral director since 1690.

# 1. A New Outlook

Attitudes to death are intrinsically linked to society and culture. How we remember a life and how we mourn for people is ever changing, never more so than in the Digital Age of communication and personalisation.

In the Middle Ages, death was such a part of everyday life, it was frequently personified and seen as 'the familiar collective destiny of the human race.'<sup>1</sup> The Victorians had a preoccupation with death and dying, turning it almost into an art with a 'cult of death' involving many rituals and ceremonies to honour the dead.

The World Wars brought a more 'secular culture of suppressed private mourning and public commemoration after 1914'<sup>2</sup>, and in recent decades death has become further and further removed from daily life to the extent that it has been viewed as almost a taboo subject in Western Society.

## Transforming traditions

Today, we have arrived at a new tipping point with the advent of the Internet and Digital, enabling more communication and discussion around death than ever previously possible. The Internet is also a gateway for access to more customised funeral and bereavement services with the collective sharing of grief and online memorials.

Against this backdrop, new research has been undertaken by leading family funeral directors, CPJ Field, exploring modern attitudes to death, examining what society deems a 'good' life to be and looking at how people would like to be remembered after life, on and offline.

Funerals that were once considered to be 'traditional' are no longer the norm. The *'Making the Most of Life'* research finds big differences between generations and highlights how attitudes to death, bereavement and funeral planning are rapidly transforming, with people increasingly celebrating and remembering the uniqueness of a life, in an increasingly personal and meaningful way.

<sup>1</sup> Philippe Ariès, "Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present", JHU Press, December 2010

<sup>2</sup> International Encyclopedia of The First World War (Bereavement and Mourning in Great Britain). Retrieved 07 April 2016 from: [http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/pdf/1914-1918-Online-bereavement\\_and\\_mourning\\_great\\_britain-2014-10-08.pdf](http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/pdf/1914-1918-Online-bereavement_and_mourning_great_britain-2014-10-08.pdf)



## 2. A Life Well Lived

'Health', 'wealth' and 'happiness' are often considered to be the secret to a 'good' life, but what do people really see as the most important elements in life, to be celebrated and to be remembered for?

### The most important elements in life

The research asked, **'what do you consider to be the most important elements in your life?'**

The top answer was **'family' (77%)**, followed by **'good health' (52%)** and **'happiness' (51%)**.

In comparison, wealth was only seen by 7% of respondents as one of the most important elements in life, despite living in a consumer society.

As well as **'happiness', 'mental wellbeing'** was also of importance, and both of these came out **highest in the 16–19 year old age group** (59% said 'happiness and 22% said 'mental wellbeing'), at a time when there is increasing interest in mental health and wellbeing.

In terms of what makes people happy, when asked **'what have been the happiest moments of your life so far?'** the top answer was **'the birth of children'** selected by 45% of respondents, followed by **'the meeting of a partner' (31%)** and then **'marriage' (29%)**, putting family centre stage in what makes life meaningful.

**'Coming into money', 'paying off a mortgage' or 'getting a promotion at work'** did not even come close in comparison, selected by only 4%, 8% and 7% respectively; ultimately demonstrating that perhaps the old adage 'money can't buy happiness' is true. The low percentage however could also be due to these options not being applicable for some of the respondents.

### Wrangling with wealth

Despite money not topping the list of what makes a good life, people do regret not having more of it.

When asked, **'what would you do differently, if you had the option to live your life again?'** 35% of people said **'save more money.'** Not saving more was also the **top regret** in life across all age groups.

**Women are concerned** about not having saved enough money, with 40% insisting that they would save more if they had a second chance at life, even though wealth was only considered by 6% of women as an 'important element' in their lives.

From a generational perspective, **16 to 19 year olds rate 'wealth' more highly than other age groups**, with 17% seeing this as important compared to just 3% of those aged 60 and over. 16-19 year olds also consider not saving more money as **one of their biggest regrets**, with this coming in at 30% for those under the age of twenty.



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## Life regrets

Regret is a subject that often comes to the fore at the end of life, with many people asking *'have I lived a good life?'* and *'what would I have changed for the better?'*

The research shows that after **'saving more money'**, the next biggest regrets in life are not **'changing career path'** and not **'spending more time travelling the world'** selected by 26% and 24% of respondents respectively. Other notable regrets included not **'having children'** (11%) or not **'having more children'** (10%).

The least contented age group was those aged between 20 and 29 years. The option **'I wouldn't change anything about my life so far'** was selected by only 11% in this age group, compared to 26% of those aged 60 and over. This is supported by recent ONS data<sup>3</sup>, which has found that adults, aged between 65-79, are the UK's happiest age group.

**Overall, men were found to be more contented compared to women**, with 6% more men feeling contented about their lives.

<sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics. Retrieved February 2016 from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/measuringnationalwellbeinghappiness>



## 3. How we want to be remembered

Whilst money is important, particularly 'financial security', which is listed by 21% of people as a key element to life, when asked how they would like to be remembered after death only **2% of respondents said they wished to be known as 'wealthy'**.

Rather than being remembered by success and riches, **people want to be remembered for who they are** and for their personal traits and characteristics, such as being **caring (49%), honest (42%) and reliable (38%)**.

Some respondents were very specific about how they want to be remembered, with individuals stating qualities such as being a 'vegan', as 'athletic' or as 'a mum'.

The research clearly shows that traditional ways of remembering people are rapidly changing, not just in relation to what people want to be remembered for but how they want to be remembered and also how they want to remember the lives of others.

### Digital condolences

A notable change is in how people pay condolences. While 50% of respondents remain attached to the traditional condolence card, **22% of people are now inclined to post their condolences on social media**.

Unsurprisingly, **the 20-39 age group** is most comfortable posting condolence messages on social media, with **nearly a third (31%) opting to do so**, whilst older generations, such as those aged 60 or over, are still more likely to put a sympathy card in the post (69%).

### Lasting memorials

The traditional headstone/gravestone is also losing popularity, with only 32% of people who wish to be remembered selecting this option as a memorial. Growing in popularity are **memorial trees, with 41% of people preferring one as a lasting reminder of who they are**.

Digital is also gaining ground here, with 6% of people who wish to be remembered saying they would like a **virtual space** on the Internet for the purpose of remembrance, with this rising to **9% amongst 16-19 year-olds**, arguably an indication of things to come.

### Bespoke funeral services

When asked **'how would you want your funeral to be?'** a large proportion of respondents opted for less than traditional funeral service themes, revealing that the style and format of service preference varied greatly amongst participants.

The most popular option was a **'celebratory affair' (42%)**, yet some respondents hoped for a day of **'singing and dancing' (12%)**, whilst a handful of others hoped for a 'simple' or 'fuss free' event. One respondent even had a 'fancy dress party' in mind and 8% wanted an all night rave.

These responses highlight a growing demand for bespoke funeral services.

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## 4. Planning and preparation

Whilst respondents have some quite specific ideas about the type of funerals they would like, the research reveals that a huge number of people are still not planning for their funeral.

### Wishes not being shared

The research shows that just **21% of people have shared the way in which they wish to be remembered after death** with loved ones, leaving the majority of family and friends in the dark about how loved ones would like their lives celebrated. **32% have never even considered their own funeral arrangements.**

### The digital afterlife

Another key area of planning that is being overlooked is **'digital inheritance'** and a person's **'digital legacy'** after life.

A digital legacy is the online presence a person leaves behind when they pass away. Still a relatively new concept, it is one that is not widely understood, with the research finding that many people are unaware of who owns digital assets after someone has died or how to manage them.

The research found that **74% of people had never heard of a 'digital heir'** – the person (or people) to whom a digital estate has been bequeathed or to whom rights have been assigned – and that **90% of people don't know what a 'legacy contact'** is – someone appointed to look after a Facebook account, if it is memorialised.

This is underpinned by the findings that **only 14% of people have shared social media passwords** with family or loved ones in the event of an emergency and only 6% have shared passwords to storage clouds, potentially leaving those closest to them unable to access online assets.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the more digitally-savvy generations – those aged between 20 and 29 – have the best knowledge of what a legacy contact is, with 18% having an understanding.

Most surprisingly, in the youngest generation (16-19 year olds) and the group likely to be most active sharing the most content online, **only 12% knew what a legacy contact is.**

It is clear there is a need for a greater awareness across all age groups in this area.



## How you can plan for dying in a digital age

This report has underlined a serious lack of knowledge about the subject of digital and dying. With this in mind, here's our helpful guide of things to consider:

- Make a list of all online accounts and social networking sites to make it easier for family members to piece together your online footprint
- Speak to loved ones about your organ donation preferences and contact the relevant organisations to confirm these wishes
- Leave clear instructions about all of your digital assets, who they should be passed on to and whether profiles should be deactivated etc.
- Elect a digital legacy contact for each of your social media profiles
- Pre-plan your funeral, or speak to someone close to you about your funeral wishes
- Tell loved ones about where you keep details of your life insurance and pension.

**Links to the terms & conditions of some of the most popular online platforms can be found below for reference:**

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/help/103897939701143>

Twitter: <https://support.twitter.com/forms/privacy>

Pinterest: <https://help.pinterest.com/en/articles/reactivate-or-deactivate-account#Web>

Instagram: <https://help.instagram.com/264154560391256/>



## 5. What's to come?

The role of social media is changing every aspect of life, including announcing when people have passed away. Recently, we have seen how more than four million tweets dedicated to David Bowie flooded the Internet following the online announcement of his death.<sup>4</sup>

### A digital renaissance

The Internet is also opening up the debate about death and helping dying to become less of a taboo. Take the moving example of Rosie Sara Choueka<sup>5</sup>, a mum of two who penned a blog about her battle with terminal cancer or Stephen Robert Sutton MBE<sup>6</sup>, a teenage English blogger and terminally ill charity activist, who became famous for his 'bucket list' blog and fundraising efforts for the Teenage Cancer Trust.

Digital is also enabling more discussion around funeral planning. Typing 'funeral ideas' into Google, or even Pinterest, brings up a whole host of ideas for planning a truly personal funeral, many of which are more akin to wedding planning.

### Planning your funeral, just for you

Understandably, some people think the idea of planning their funeral is rather morbid and maudlin but many take great peace of mind in preparations and use it as a time for reflection on what they have achieved and what they would still like to do before time runs out.

The challenge now is the choice. In an age where anything is possible, where do you start when planning a funeral? The multitude of options is just one of the reasons why simply putting ideas on paper is sensible.

The guiding principle is to plan the funeral that reflects an individual's character and the impact they have had on those around them throughout life. No two lives are the same. Which is why every funeral can be completely individual too.

**Modern day attitudes and new technology now mean that this is attainable and accessible, enabling people to remember loved ones in the most fitting and meaningful way.**

**For more information about the subjects and issues raised here, please visit: [www.cpjfield.co.uk](http://www.cpjfield.co.uk) or join in the conversation online, using the [#tacklethe taboo](https://twitter.com/tacklethe taboo) hashtag.**

#### Notes

*The CPJ Field research 'Making the Most of Life' was conducted by Opinion Matters and undertaken between 3 November 2015 and 6 November 2015. Sample: 2,361 UK adults.*

<sup>4</sup> Daily Mail. Retrieved January 2016 from: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-3393666/Madonna-Kayne-West-David-Beckham-lead-Twitter-tributes-David-Bowie.html>

<sup>5</sup> Mirror.co.uk. Retrieved June 2015 from: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/brave-mum-terminal-breast-cancer-5895532>

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia. Retrieved March 2016 from: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen\\_Sutton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Sutton)

