END OF LIFE SURVEY: THOUGHTS AND ATTITUDES ON DEATH AND DYING

April 2019
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Executive Summary

A majority of adults have positive attitudes related to aging and end of life issues.

• Notably, nearly nine in ten believe dying is an important part of life and eight in ten say there is a special value in getting old.

• This positive attitude is also seen when it comes to caring for people who are dying with a large majority saying caring for those nearing the end of life is a rewarding experience.

Moreover, this positive attitude translates to a majority of adults saying they are comfortable with discussing death and dying.

• Although few talked about death and dying during their childhood, most say they are either very or somewhat comfortable talking about these issues. Men and the oldest age group (65+) are significantly more likely to say they are comfortable discussing death and dying.

• Additionally, four in ten say the topic of death and dying is not discussed enough in our communities.

Most adults exhibit an openness to being informed about their serious health issues, perhaps to be prepared to discuss end of life matters, and to be able to plan so they are not a burden to family when the time comes.

• More than eight in ten say they would want to know if they had a serious illness or if they only had a few months to live and three in four say it is unlikely they would avoid getting a medical exam in fear of bad news.

• Correspondingly, the majority of adults say they are likely to prepare legal written instructions related to healthcare like a living will and appointing a healthcare proxy. Additionally, eight in ten say they are likely to prepare a last will and testament.
Executive Summary

Still, some are concerned about being a burden on family.

- Although most say they will prepare for end of life by completing related legal documents, over four in ten say they are concerned about being a physical or financial burden as well as not being able to leave an inheritance.

Our results suggest while adults are concerned about being a burden as they age, they are willing to discuss and prepare for end of life.

- Eight in ten or more say they are comfortable talking about death and dying, want to be aware of serious health issues and are likely to prepare related legal documents.

- However, there is a difference between saying you will prepare and being prepared. For example, studies show that fewer than half of adults (18+) have wills.¹ This suggests while there is a willingness to prepare for end of life, there needs to be more programs and services geared towards ensuring adults actually take the necessary steps.

¹See for example: https://news.gallup.com/poll/191651/majority-not.aspx
EXPERIENCE AND COMFORT WITH DEATH AND DYING
Majority Have Positive Attitudes Related to Aging and End of Life

Although death and dying wasn’t discussed during childhood for most, the majority of adults agree that there is a special value in getting older and that dying is an important part of life. Most adults also say it is rewarding to care for someone who is reaching the end of life.

Q4. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Base: Total Respondents  [n=1,003]

- There is a special value in getting old
  - Strongly agree: 45%
  - Somewhat agree: 36%
  - Disagree (somewhat or strongly): 17%

- Dying is an important part of life
  - Strongly agree: 61%
  - Somewhat agree: 25%
  - Disagree (somewhat or strongly): 12%
Men and Older Adults More Comfortable Discussing Death/Dying

Positive attitudes regarding aging and end of life may explain why a large majority of adults say they are comfortable with talking about death and dying. Significantly higher percentages of men and those age 65 and older say they are comfortable with discussing end of life issues.

% Very Comfortable or Somewhat Comfortable Discussing Death

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Comfortable or Somewhat Comfortable Discussing Death</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-34</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>78%</td>
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<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>73%</td>
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<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>81%</td>
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<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>89%</td>
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Q3. How comfortable are you with talking about death and dying? Base: Total Respondents [n=1,003]
May Need More Discussion on Death/Dying in General

While a large majority of adults say they are comfortable talking about death/dying there is an indication that there needs to be greater opportunity to discuss the topic in our communities. Less than half say there is the right amount of discussion on the topic in the U.S.

Q7. For the U.S. in general, do you think there is too much discussion about death and dying, too little discussion, or about the right amount of discussion?
Base: Total Respondents [n=1,003]
END OF LIFE CONCERNS AND PREPARATION
Most Would Like to Be Able to Prepare for End of Life if Possible

Related to the topic of preparing for end of life, most adults indicate they would want to know if they are gravely ill or only had a few months to live. Additionally, three-quarters say it is unlikely they would avoid medical check-ups because they are afraid the doctor will find something serious.

Q4. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

• I would want to know if I had a serious illness

- Agree: 87%
- Disagree: 12%

• I would want to know if I had only a few months to live

- Agree: 81%
- Disagree: 17%

Q6. How likely are you to…? [Avoid medical check-ups because you are afraid that the doctor will find “something serious”]

Base: Total Respondents [n=1,003]
Majority Likely to Make Legal Preparations for End of Life

Supporting the theory that most adults would like to be able to prepare for end of life (especially in the case of advance notice of impending poor health), eight in ten say they are likely to speak to loved ones about death/dying and prepare legal documents related to healthcare and final wishes. Of note however, respondents were asked about their “likelihood” to engage in these preparations which does not indicate actual follow-through.

% Very Likely or Somewhat Likely

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Likelihood</th>
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<td>Prepare a last will and testament that controls how your money and other property are to be distributed</td>
<td>83%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prepare a living will or other written instructions in which you state the kind of healthcare you want or don’t want under certain conditions</td>
<td>79%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appoint a healthcare proxy to act if you were unable to communicate</td>
<td>78%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-plan your own funeral</td>
<td>62%</td>
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Q6. How likely are you to…?
Base: Total Respondents  [n=1,003]
Being a Physical Burden to Family Tops List of Concerns Related to End of Life

It is likely many adults will try to prepare for end of life because there is concern related to possible undue burden to their family. When thinking about death and dying, more than half of the respondents say they are concerned they will be a physical burden to their family. The 18 to 35 age group is significantly more likely than any other age group to say they are concerned about being a physical or financial burden as well as not being able to leave an inheritance.

% Very Concerned or Somewhat Concerned

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concern</th>
<th>% Concerned</th>
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<tr>
<td>You will be a physical burden to your family or friends*</td>
<td>56%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Your (or your spouse or partner’s) money won’t last</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You will be a financial burden to your family or friends*</td>
<td>46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>You won’t be able to leave an inheritance for your children or grandchildren*</td>
<td>42%</td>
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* The 18 to 35 age group is significantly more likely than any other age group to say very concerned or somewhat concerned.

Q5. When you think about death and dying, how concerned are you about the following?
Base: Total Respondents [n=1,003]
Background

In November–December 2018, AARP Research contracted with SSRS to field a survey among adults ages 18 and older to better understand U.S. adults’ experiences, thoughts, and opinions on end of life issues. In the survey, respondents were asked about their experiences with death and dying during their childhood as well as thoughts and opinions on their own mortality and end of life preparations.

The major impetus for this project was the recognition that, though it is a part of the life-cycle, opinions regarding the subject of death and dying are rarely discussed or studied. To this end, we were interested in exploring whether or not adults were comfortable discussing end of life issues and whether they expect to take steps to ensure proper preparation.
Objectives and Methodology

Objective: To gather information about U.S. adults’ experience, opinions, and attitudes related to end of life issues.

Methodology: Phone, nationally representative survey via SSRS with sample targeting adults age 18 and older.

Sample: n=1,003

Fielding Dates: November 27 – December 2, 2018

Weighting: Data are weighted according to the March 2018 Current Population Survey (CPS) by weight by age, race, sex, region, education, and phone usage.

Questionnaire Length: Interviews averaged 6 minutes in length. The full questionnaire is available upon request.

Confidence Interval: Total sample: ± 3.1 percentage points. The margin of error among subgroups (e.g., age cohorts) is higher.

Note: Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.
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About AARP

AARP is the nation’s largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering Americans 50 and older to choose how they live as they age. With nearly 38 million members and offices in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, AARP works to strengthen communities and advocate for what matters most to families with a focus on health security, financial stability and personal fulfillment. AARP also works for individuals in the marketplace by sparking new solutions and allowing carefully chosen, high-quality products and services to carry the AARP name. As a trusted source for news and information, AARP produces the nation’s largest circulation publications, AARP The Magazine and AARP Bulletin. To learn more, visit www.aarp.org or follow @AARP and @AARPadvocates on social media.

Acknowledgements

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Older Generations More Likely to Say They Were Exposed to Death/Dying Discussions During Childhood

While the majority of the adult population say they attended at least one funeral as a child, those age 18-34 were significantly less likely than any other age group to say they talked about death and dying or attended a funeral during their childhood.

**Frequency Discussed Death/Dying During Childhood**

- **Often**: 12%
- **Occasionally**: 29%
- **Rarely**: 31%
- **Never**: 10%

78% attended a funeral during childhood.

Q1. Thinking back to your childhood, how often were death and dying talked about in your family?
Q2. When you were a child, did you ever attend a funeral or memorial service for someone who had died.

Base: Total Respondents [n=1,003]
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This research was designed and executed by AARP Research