

'Death cafes' normalize a difficult, not morbid, topic

by [Janice Lloyd](#)

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(RNS) No one wants to talk about death at the dinner table, at a soccer game or at a party, says Lizzy Miles, a social worker in Columbus, Ohio.

But sometimes people need to talk about the "taboo" topic and when that happens, they might not be able to find someone who will listen, she says.

"Whenever people hear I'm a hospice worker, they talk to me about death. It doesn't matter if I'm on an airplane, gambling in Las Vegas, or in a grocery store line," she said. "I really see firsthand the need to let people talk. It's my gift to others."

Her gift sparked the birth of "death cafes" in the U.S., a trend that started in England and is about to take off across America, she said.

The casual get-togethers are held at coffee shops, restaurants and, recently in Atlanta, at the historic Oakland Cemetery. Hosts are social workers and chaplains -- no professional association, philosophy or religion sponsors them, and no one tries to sell anything like coffins or funeral plots.

The concept is really very simple and civilized. "They're a place to talk about the issues surrounding death while drinking tea and eating delicious cake," said Miles, 42.

The Internet is spreading the word. The website Deathcafe.com was created by Jon Underwood, who held the first cafe in September 2011, in England. He developed the idea from the writings of Bernard Crettaz, a Swiss sociologist who says talking about death leads to authenticity.

Since 2011, Underwood said, he's had hundreds of inquiries from the U.S., Australia and Canada.

"Death Cafe exists because of a belief that more authenticity is needed in the world," Underwood said. "Death denial is an omnipresent feature of Western consumer capitalism."

About 40 people met at the conference room at Oakland Cemetery on March 30, broke up into clusters of five to eight people, and talked for several hours. At a typical death cafe, facilitators move about the room and monitor conversations, to identify anyone who might need counseling, pull them aside and tell them where to find help. The cafes are not support groups, said chaplain Mark LaRocca-Pitts, a host of the Oakland Cemetery cafe.

Meetings often start with the question "What brought you here?" he said.

The conversation helped Julie Arms. "My partner doesn't want to talk about dying, especially about my dying, so it gave me a chance to explore ideas with other people," she said. "I found comfort in that."

Arms, a breast cancer survivor, says other participants understood her when she said, "I don't think death is nearly as scary after going through cancer."

"Two other people said the very same thing," she said. "We have come close to death."

Putting the cafe in a cemetery setting seemed natural, said LaRocca-Pitts; one of the participants is a volunteer there and was able to book the room. "We knew we'd have a large turnout and a coffee shop wouldn't have held us."

Each cafe is different, he said, but talk can center on advance directive planning, physician-assisted dying, funeral arrangements and what happens after death.

A hospital intensive care unit is the most difficult place to have those conversations, he said. "As a hospice chaplain, I know people often don't talk about these things until it's a crisis, and there's little comfort in that."

But the gatherings don't draw only people who are worried about dying or those who are grieving. As Underwood noted, they attract people seeking authenticity.

"They're not being morbid," he said. "These are people who want to live more fully. They think that by fearing cessation they can't be spiritually alive. The more we talk about dying and what it means about ego and self, the more we add to life."

Underwood credits Miles with starting the cafe movement in the U.S. She says very soon death cafes will take on a life of their own.

"At the end of April, I'm presenting the cafe concept at the annual conference of the Association for Death Education and Counseling," she said. "Several other death cafe hosts from the USA will also be there."

"I know many of the people attending will find out about it, hear us talking about it and want to start one."

(Janice Lloyd writes for USA Today.)