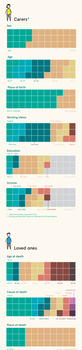
Death of a loved one

This research shines a light on the experiences of those who have had a loved one die. It describes the journey of death from the perspective of those left behind.

Over eight weeks we conducted 33 interviews with 39 people who had lost a loved one between 6 and 18 months ago. We also interviewed 9 service providers—from lawyers and financial planners, through to funeral directors and mental health professionals—who have extensive experience in helping others through their experience of death.

This journey is a representation of some of these diverse and touching stories, and depicts the experiences, feelings, challenges and opportunities that factor into the experience of a death.



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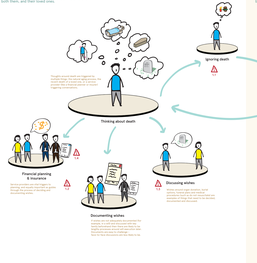
Severe life disruption

"The six month struggle"

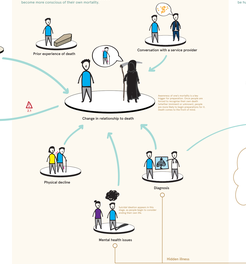
Preparation
Years

People are very good at avoiding thinking about death, and even better at avoiding preparations for it. However, preparation is critical to the experience of death for those left behind. It can significantly ease the pain, the easier it is emotionally and financially later on, for both them, and their loved ones.



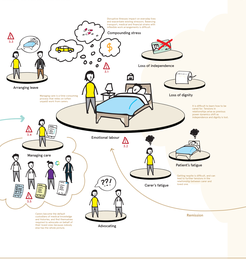
Awareness
Years — Months

There are moments in life where people's relationship to death changes. This is often triggered by the death of a loved one, as a natural part of the aging process, or a diagnosis of terminal illness. These events can bring up thoughts of death. This stage is where people become more conscious of their own mortality.



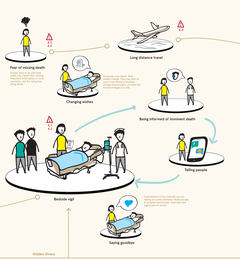
Care
Years — Months

Certain types of illnesses can lead to a period of planned care. This often relies on a close family member or friend ("carers") to support. Illness is placed on family relationships and responsibilities, and the care of illnesses require large amounts of other unpaid labour. It can also be humbling and frustrating to be cared for.



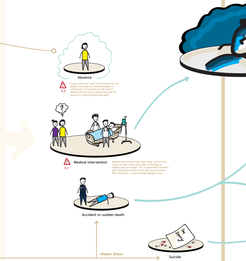
Decline
Months — Weeks — Days

As people move closer to death, care regimes change, and regular life is disrupted for family and friends. People who are overseas will travel back to see their loved ones, and last days are filled with intensive care and emotional support. In this stage, hope of a recovery is lost, and people begin to say goodbye.



Death
Hours — Minutes

The hours and minutes leading up to the medical death of an relative are critical. It describes the process of certifying a death, and the formalities of enlisting service providers to care for the body. Being present and causing government benefits the loved one may have been receiving.

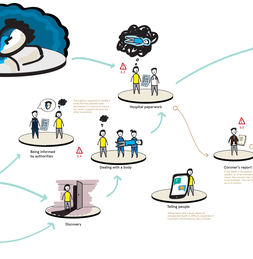


Alive

Dead

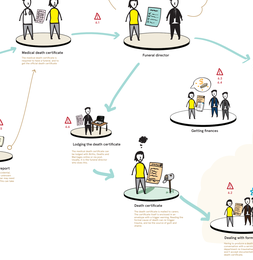
Death Administration
Days — Weeks — Months

This is the period of time immediately following the death of a loved one. It describes the process of certifying a death, and the formalities of enlisting service providers to care for the body. Being present and causing government benefits the loved one may have been receiving.



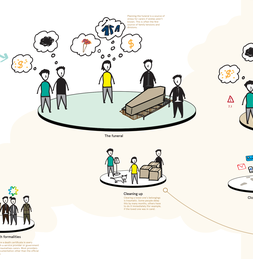
Estate Management
Months — Years

From executing the will to finalising the closure of bank accounts, this can be a long period of tying up loose ends and making decisions around a loved one's estate. If the loved one has left behind a will, it can be a very emotional process if they didn't. There is a heavy burden on carers to make decisions and smooth family disputes.



Coming to Terms
Years

Once administration is complete, or nearing it's end, carers are able to properly grieve for their loved one and contemplate the loss. People will seek help for themselves and for others, and will begin to make sense of their new life as a result. They memorialise their loved one, and are more capable and confident preparing for their own death.



Actors

Carers*

Loved ones

Interactions

Touch points

Opportunities

Service risks

How might we... / Great ideas

How might we... Help people better plan for death?
- Help people know where to start?
- Help people have better discussions around death?
- Help people understand the choices and decisions they'll need to make?
- Help people document their wishes in robust ways?

How might we... Introduce the need to plan at the right moment?
- Avoid triggering avoidance behaviours?
- Help support services have better conversations about planning well preparation?

Prevent suicide!

How might we... Help people better navigate benefits?
- Find benefits they are eligible for?
- Apply for those benefits?
- Keep on top of reporting obligations so that payments are not interrupted?

Provide better respite and carer's supports?
- Prevent carer's fatigue?
- Help keep lines of medical communication?
- Help other friends and family know how to help?
- Help employees support carers?

Help carers find, trial and maintain support services that are appropriate for them?
- Help support services be more responsive to critical events?

How might we... Help carers understand what they need to finalise?

How might we... Help medical staff articulate their needs and expectations together?
- Help carers understand the ethos of medical staff?
- Help medical staff share tools within each other, across shifts and locations?

How might we... Help emergency services perform their duties with greater sensitivity to carers?
- Help medical staff understand the ethos of emergency services?
- Help service providers know what might trigger trauma?

How might we... Help people document what they need to tell?
- Help people share the circumstances of death/ lesser illness, to avoid distress?

Help people get faster financial supports?

Help formal and informal supports know how to help?
- Help people understand the difference between different powers of attorney?

Help medical staff, the coroner, and Births, Deaths and Marriages communicate more effectively?
- Improve the process from medical death certificate to formal death certificate?

How might we... Help carers understand and move through the processes around account and service closures?

Help families work through conflict without traumatising legal intervention?

Help carers know that their work is finished?

How might we... Break taboos around dealing with mental health after a death?

Help people find and access informal, community based supports?

Improve geographical and financial access to formal supports, such as mental health services?