

# 10 facts about death that everyone should know

[Kerrie Noonan](#) Saturday 20 July 2013



Kerrie Noonan

Death might be considered taboo but it comes to all of us. And in my experience most of us want to talk about it. You may wish to avoid the topic all together, that's fair enough, though chances are there is at least one person in your life right now living with a life threatening illness or grieving the loss of a loved one.

Death is there, like it or not, and a little bit of knowledge can go a long way at times when we are feeling vulnerable or out of our depth. So get informed and help break down the taboo of talking about death. What are you Dying to Know?

1. You can die at home
2. You can care for your loved one at home after death
3. Clothes for the Grave
4. Did you know you can be buried at [sea](#), in your [backyard](#) (if you get council permission), in a natural burial ground without a coffin, or via aquamation (aqua-what!)?
5. You don't have to hire a funeral director to organise a funeral
6. You can have a funeral anywhere
7. Want to shine when you are dead? Have your ashes turned into a [gemstone](#). Yep.
8. You don't have to see a counsellor to grieve
9. Your lack-of-will can hurt your family
10. At least 60 percent of us want to talk about death [more](#).

## 1. You can die at home

Not so long ago most of us were cared for and died in our own homes. Nowadays only about 15% of us die at home. So while it's not an option everyone might want, dying at home is both possible and legal.

In most situations you'll need to plan well for a home death, and it's likely you'll need lots of help and support including from your GP, your family, friends and community and a local palliative care team, but there is a growing number of organisations who can help with information and support.

## 2. You can care for your loved one at home after death

These days we are largely unaccustomed to dead bodies in our living rooms and bedrooms, though just across the ditch in NZ (and for many NZ-born Aussies) the Maori mourning rituals known as [Tangihanga](#) are still practised, where the family and friends stay with the body for days.

Again it might not be for everyone, but for many people caring directly for and being responsible for the dead body of their family member or friend – [especially in the case of a child or a baby](#) – is their final gesture of love.

In most states of Australia, if the death took place at home, you can care for your dead at home for up to five days. There are now trained community-support workers and access to [cooling beds](#) in Australia to enable care to continue at home.

There are many myths and fears about dead bodies. [Here](#) is a great little video from the 'Ask a Mortician' series – with Caitlin Doughty - that debunks some of the common ones.

## 3. Clothes for the Grave

Want to wear something befitting your love of life in the grave? You don't have to wear your favourite nightie or your best suit – biodegradable garments from fashion designer [Pia Interlandi](#) and personalised shrouds by Helen Dunne via [Shroud Memento](#) are examples of clothes you can take with you! These garments also enable caring rituals that support mourning and grief in the most loving way. The art of washing and dressing our dead is being reclaimed and in some communities it quite simply was never lost.

## 4. Did you know you can be buried at [sea](#), in your [backyard](#) (if you get council permission), in a natural burial ground without a coffin, or via aquamation (aqua-what!)?

In Australia, natural burial grounds are pretty [rare](#). This is surprising considering how much bushland we are surrounded by, and also given that our major cemeteries are running out of space. Perhaps it's time for us to think outside the box (pun intended) and look to the Natural Death Centre in the [UK](#) and [Australia](#)? There are loads of examples in the [UK](#) of natural burial and there is mounting interest [here](#) in Oz too. [Lismore](#) has a natural burial ground where you can be buried without a coffin enabling quick decomposition – if you are into that.

If you love the water, but burial at sea is not your thing, then [aquamation](#) might be for you? It's a [process](#) whereby your body is returned to water and it's environmentally friendly too.

Also see [woolen coffins](#), [biodegradable urns](#).



*Well if Ryan Gosling is doing it, maybe we should too...*

D-I-Y funerals are becoming more popular. It's good to know that, if so inclined, you can plan and hold a funeral yourself. It may require a bit of assertiveness on your part as the would-be funeral organiser. Cemeteries and crematoria are not used to dealing directly with grieving relatives and the funeral industry is accustomed to doing everything for you so may try its darnedest to persuade you to default to this norm.

However, some enterprises are more open to the alternatives than others, so if you are thinking about D-Y-I-ing (!), shop around for a service that can cater to your requests. These requests need to be within the Department of Health guidelines (for your state) of course.

If you are interested in knowing more about the options check out Robert Larkins' book [Funeral Rites](#), which debunks myths, provides insight to the deathcare industry and gives you a stack of knowledge about the process.

Haven't got time to read a book and need advice now? Employ an advocate – someone like [Victoria Spence](#) in Sydney or Zenith Virago from the Natural Death [Centre](#) in Byron Bay and [Community Undertakings](#) in Port Kembla who can talk (and walk with) you through the process.

There are people in just about every town who know stuff about death and dying who are willing to share it, you just have to find them.

## 5. You don't have to hire a funeral director to organise a funeral

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## 6. You can have a funeral anywhere

Well just about. Parks, surf clubs, RSLs, backyards, beaches, living rooms, national parks – you name the place and you'll find Aussies are remembering their dead there. Next time you see a group of people gathered in the public place, remind yourself that they may well be having a memorial service.

The only legal requirement in a public space is that you have a closed coffin. This is a public health regulation. But be sure to check in with your local council because some are a bit nervous about the dead being out in public spaces – even those tucked neatly into a coffin.

## 7. Want to shine when you are dead? Have your ashes turned into a [gemstone](#). Yep.

This is just a modern day version of the *memento mori* jewellery or [mourning jewellery](#) that was popular in the 1700 and 1800's. Hair, bone, teeth and [photos](#) of the deceased were lovingly crafted into worn pieces that help reminded us and connected people to their dead.

## 8. You don't have to see a counsellor to grieve

We don't grieve in stages and about 90 percent of us don't need professional support after a death. Grief is a human experience and all the talk about stages, phases, [complicated and uncomplicated grieving](#) doesn't really do it justice.

We all need support in our most vulnerable times but there is a growing body of research based on experiences from the 9/11 terrorist attacks and other natural disasters that show we are indeed pretty [robust](#) and [resilient](#) in the face of grief especially when we have support from our friends and family. The idea that we all need medical or clinical support is a fallacy. It's about time we all developed the skills to be more accepting and supportive and accommodating of the crazy, wild and often *loooong* ride that is grief. Proper bereavement support in our workplaces and end-of-life caring leave, are two things that would support people enormously.

## 9. Your lack-of-will can hurt your family

45 percent of Australians die without a [Will](#)! And [51%](#) of us die without discussing their wishes for end-of-life care. There is a lot of non-talking and avoidance going on! Considering most of us actually die (yes, I know, sorry to break it to you) from an expected illness such as cancer or heart disease, this is pretty shocking. Dying without a Will can mean months and sometimes years of heartache for your family and next-of-kin as your assets are distributed according to a set formula. If you have no legal beneficiaries the state claims your assets for itself. So if you don't want your long-lost third cousin or the government inheriting your assets speak to a lawyer who can turn your wishes into legalese. There are also D-I-Y kits if you are confident you know what you are doing.

An [Advance Care Directive](#) helps your family to make decisions on your behalf about treatments you would like to have if you have a life-threatening illness. If you don't have a life threatening illness but would still like to ensure that someone knows what kind of healthcare you'd like to receive if EVER you can't speak for yourself then look into an Enduring healthcare [Guardian](#). Whatever your wishes are, they need to be communicated to your family and friends because these are the people medical staff consult if you can't speak for yourself. Again, it might be hard to imagine but chances are you will die in hospital (about 60% of us do), and if your time is up, and you know you don't want medical intervention or the Intensive Care Unit, tell your family.

Just in case you think that doctors want your hospital bed for themselves, it's interesting to consider that [medicos die differently](#) – at home, with less intervention and with a focus on quality of life. In the face of a life-limiting prognosis, try asking your oncologist or surgeon what they would do with their time left if they were in the same situation – you might get different treatment advice.

## 10. At least 60% us want to talk about death [more](#)

Weird right? Not really. If you made it to the end of this list you are probably keen to see a change in our current culture around death and dying. You probably also know that amongst all the avoiding, Botox adverts and fear we actually are pretty keen to see as much death as possible on our TV screens via CSI, Zombie flicks, Six Feet Under, True Blood and all the other memes about death and living with our mortality.

So, next time a family member or friend comes to you wanting to talk about their death or their funeral or how awful their life is since their hubby died, don't tell them they are "being morbid" or that they have "plenty of years left in them" – instead, put on the kettle, take a moment and listen up!

*Kerrie Noonan cofounded [The GroundSwell Project](#) in 2010. Now 41, Kerrie was age appropriately death-curious as a teenager following the sudden death of her much loved Nan. Unlike most young people who grow out of their death-curious stage Kerrie grew up and made a career out of having conversations about death by becoming a psychologist, grief counsellor, social researcher and then founding The GroundSwell Project. Though she does love wearing black, you may be surprised she was never a Goth. Kerrie lives in the Blue Mountains with her partner and 2 daughters.*

Read more at, [Ten Facts about Death Everyone Should Know](#)