

Coronavirus pandemic: All stories Lifestyle / Family & Relationships

# 10 years of talking about death, and life, at Death Cafés, and why the taboo-busting movement is having a moment

Jon Underwood launched the Death Café movement – open forums to discuss life and death – in 2010 to break some of the taboos about dying and grief

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced many to consider their own mortality, and virtual Death Cafés are springing up around the world

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Most people are terrified of death, so they tend to avoid talking about it or bringing up anything that might tacitly remind them of dying. But never has it been more appropriate to broach the topic as the coronavirus pandemic forces people to face their own mortality.

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As the Covid-19 death tolls continue to rise around the world, people who have lost their loved ones to the virus are feeling increasingly terrified and confused, and gripped by the fear of losing their own lives.

Talking about death, although still taboo in many cultures, has become inevitable as we hear of people dying alone with no family or friends by their side, no wake, no funeral, and no final farewell. More and more, people are looking for ways to talk about their fears of death, and learning how to grieve and how to support the dying and bereaved.

A global movement, Death Café is growing in popularity, as it helps make people feel comfortable about death; the movement seeks to increase people's awareness of

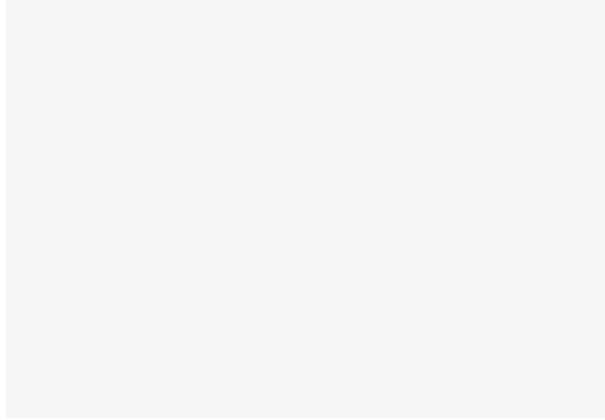
death while helping them make the most of their lives.

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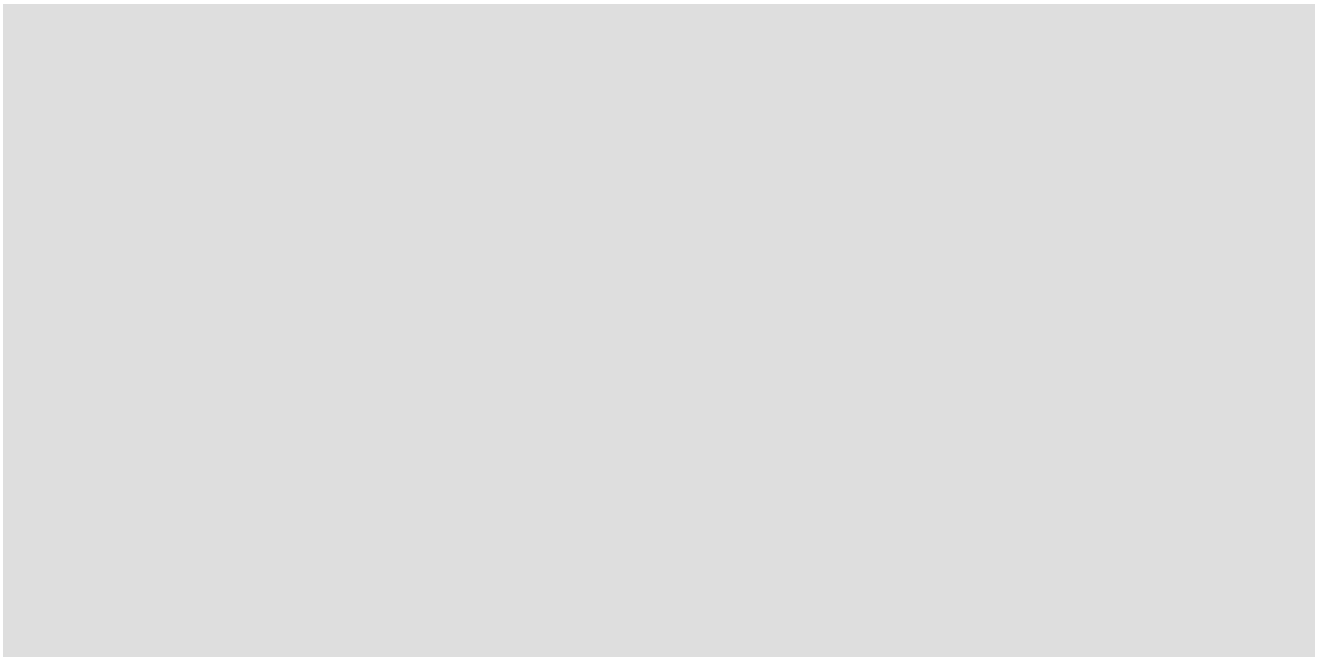


The Death Café concept came about in 2010 when its founder Jon Underwood, inspired by a similar movement, created a community project that “encouraged people around the world to discuss – over tea and cake – life, the finality of life, and why we fear it”.

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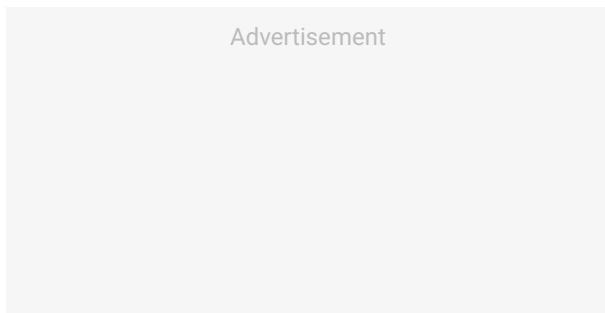


“He believed that death anxiety and denial was creating consumer capitalism and many other negative things in society,” says Megan Mooney, Death Café’s US-based social media manager.

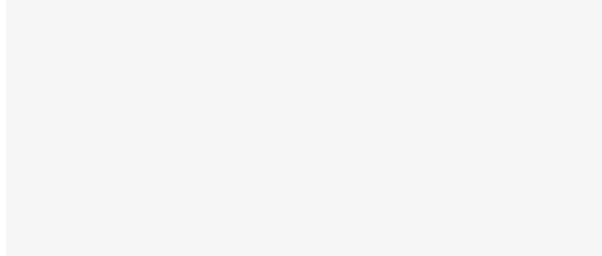


Megan Mooney, Death Café’s US-based social media manager. Photo: Megan Mooney

The first Death Café was hosted at Underwood’s home in Hackney, East London in September 2011. He ran it on a voluntary basis until June 2017, when he died suddenly of a brain haemorrhage. His mother, Susan Barsky Reid, a psychotherapist, and sister Jools Barsky, are now tasked to continue his legacy.



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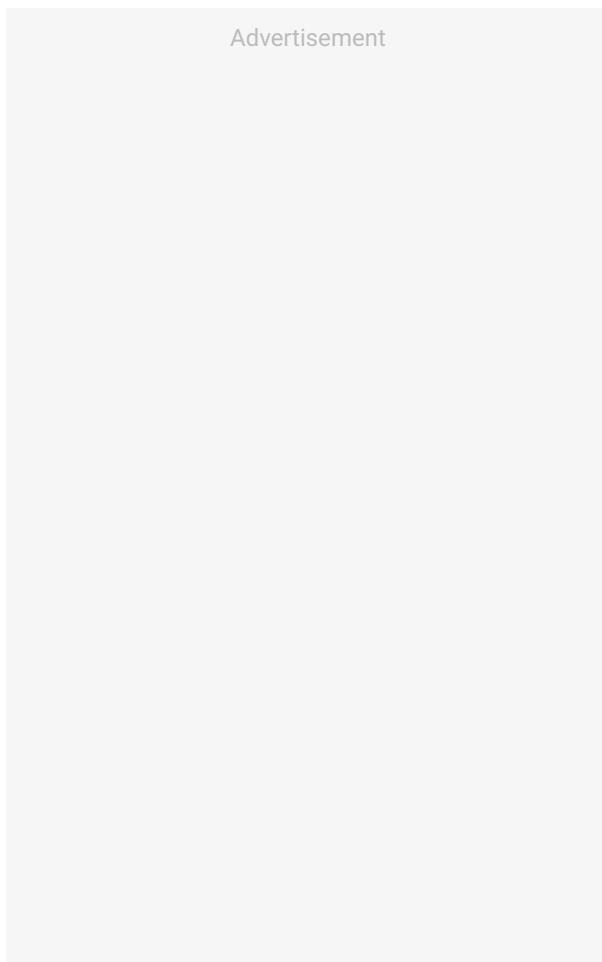


As a result of the pandemic, more people are hosting Death Cafés around the world and attending these events, says Mooney. She has been hosting gatherings on Facebook and in virtual rooms, while many others are [hosting similar events via Zoom and Skype](#).

“There’s a huge demand right now and I’m getting lots of requests on our Facebook page. I’ve been training others how to host virtual Death Cafés and make sure tea, coffee, and cake is always available to its patrons,” she says.

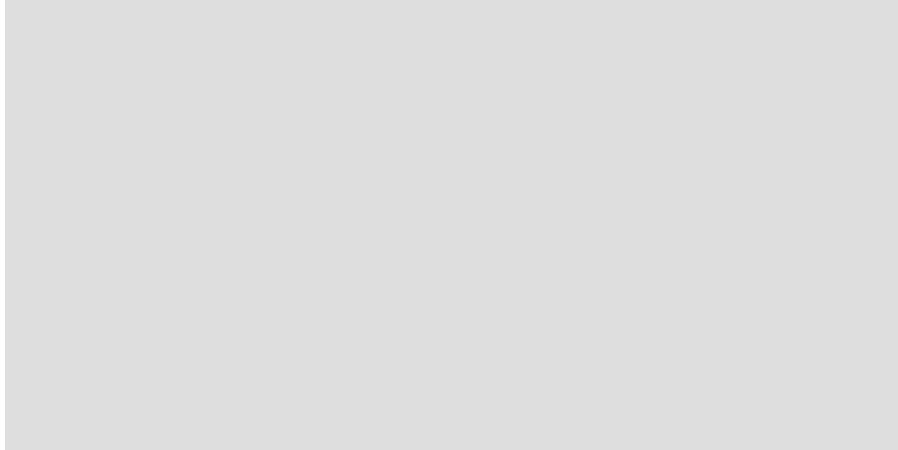
Death Café meetings are discussion-based rather than counselling sessions or a chance to facilitate grief. They are always offered on a not-for-profit basis, with no intention of leading members to any beliefs or actions, says Mooney.

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It is a “social franchise” and anyone who agrees and signs up to its guidelines and principles can use the brand to host gatherings.

The network has spread quickly across Europe, North America and Australasia, and 11,162 Death Cafés have been held in 73 cities and countries since September 2011. Hong Kong has been hosting Death Café meetings since 2014.



Jon Underwood founded Death Cafés in 2010.

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“People, mostly strangers, gather together and talk about what is on their mind as it relates to death, dying, and all that entails,” Mooney says. “We have found that you can’t talk about death without talking about life. Discussing life is definitely a subconscious part of any Death Café set-up, and it is certainly vital.”

“When sitting with a stranger and talking about death, it seems more natural to open up and let your pretences fade. This is because it is such an intimate topic and it causes you to let go of trivialities and focus on what is really important,” Mooney adds.

Hong Kong-based clinical psychologist Dr Quratulain Zaidi believes talking openly about death has overall benefits.

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“To open up a dialogue about death helps create a space for loved ones to connect and talk about a difficult and scary subject for most of us.

“Research shows that opening up this dialogue helps people who are grieving cope with bereavement better because they can seek and find the right support and they don’t have to do it alone,” Zaidi explains.

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She adds: “Embracing mortality can have the surprising effect of helping people live in the moment and make the most of the time that they have left. Appreciating that your time is finite – even if there’s still a lot left – definitely helps you realise what really matters in life.”



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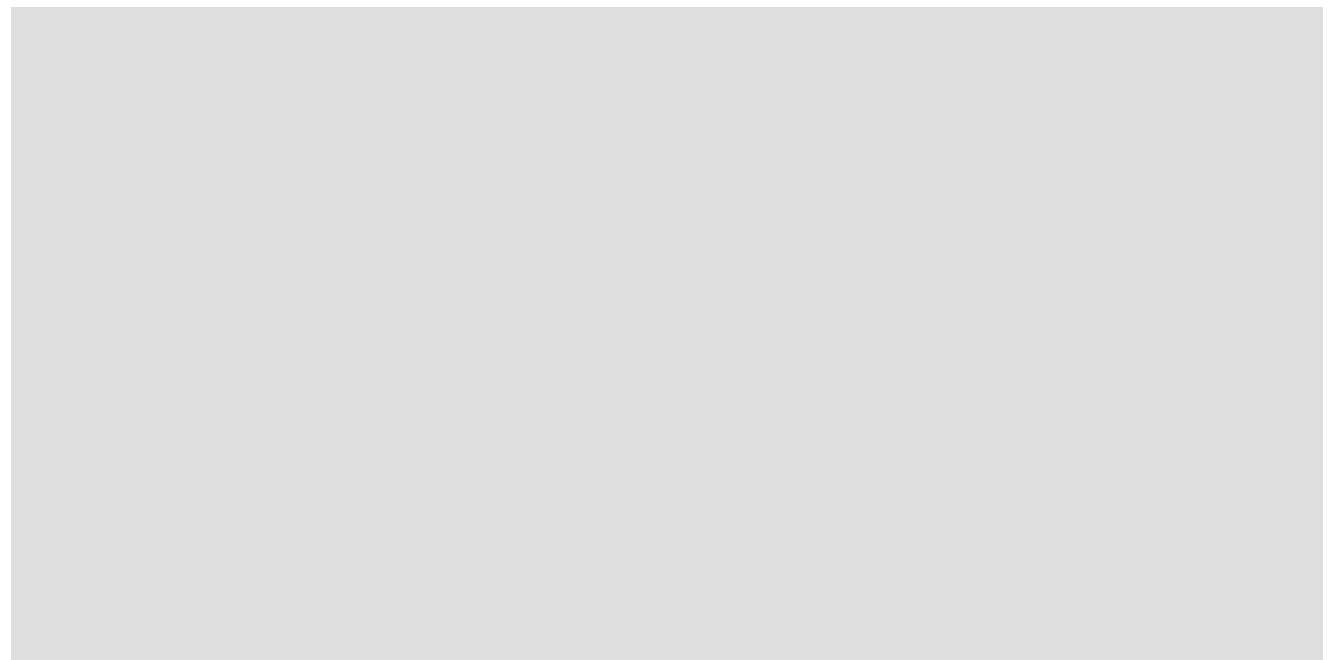
— Megan Mooney, Death Cafe’s US-based social media manager

Zaidi warns that thinking about death constantly is unhealthy and should be avoided.



In regards to how to open up someone to talk about death, Zaidi suggests the following.

“There are different stages of grief and they can come in any order; it’s different for different people and it’s best to ask if someone wants to talk and let them know you are available for them.



The coronavirus pandemic is making more people think about life and death. Photo: Reuters/Siphiwe Sibeko