

EASY-READ EDITION

One Life, Well Lived

Living well, knowing that
one day we will die



STUART CORLETT

WITH GROUP DISCUSSION WORKBOOK

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Book 2 of a three-book easy-read series. An easy-read version of Living with Mortality: How do I live with myself knowing I will end?

This book is not a substitute for medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about yourself or someone else, please talk to a doctor or another qualified professional.

Unless otherwise stated, the people described in this book are imagined, and are introduced as such.

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A Note from Stuart

Chances are, if you've picked up this book, you're hoping for some answers. These books grew out of a search for understanding. I've always found that understanding something helps me work out what to do. I hope they give you something to think through, both on your own and with friends. Researching and writing them helped me. If that's all they ever do, I'm happy.

I'm getting older, and so are my friends. So are you. Gone are the days when I could ride my motorcycle at high speed and feel invincible. I also feel more at risk in the war zones where I work. Looking back, some of the things I did when I was younger were downright dangerous. There might be a book in that.

My mother died by suicide when I was in my thirties. The experience changed me in many ways, some of which I still struggle to explain. My marriage collapsed in my fifties, something I had hoped would never happen

to me. I've walked alongside friends through great difficulties. I've also spoken with hundreds of people from Myanmar who have experienced atrocities, most of which I won't describe here.

Yet, through what I've lived and witnessed, I've seen people find ways to go on, often with great happiness. I've found ways, too.

There have been times when I've felt like giving up on trying to be a decent person or a positive influence in the world. I've wondered whether it would be easier to harden my heart and stop feeling so much.

But I've come to think that, within a generation of my death, most people will have forgotten who I was. Perhaps what remains will be the influence I had: something I did or said that made a difference to someone, who then made a difference to someone else.

So, my friend, these books won't give you all the answers. But perhaps, if you take time to reflect, there's something in them for you.

I've practiced as a pharmacist on and off since 1989. A pharmacy is one of the places where people quietly face

the fact that life does not last forever. A prescription changes. A new medicine arrives. People rarely say, “I’m frightened of dying.” But often the question is there, tucked inside another one. Will this help? How long will I need it? What happens if it stops working?

For about twenty years I also did health work in Thailand, much of it among Shan communities on the border with Myanmar. I lived among people with very different beliefs about death. Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and people who believed in spirits and ancestors. Many others were simply unsure.

Yet whatever we believe, most of us want some of the same simple things. To be free of pain. Not to be a burden. To know the people they loved would be all right. And to have enjoyed their days while they had them.

This short book asks a big question in plain words: how do we live well, knowing that one day we will die?

It is an easy-read version of a longer book of mine called *Living with Mortality*.

You will meet some people in this book. Most are made up to help explain an idea. When a person is made up, I will say “imagine” or “suppose”, so you will always know.

At the back there is a workbook. You can use it with a group, or on your own.

I do not promise that this book will take away all fear. What I hope is that it helps you see that something does not have to last forever to matter. An afternoon, a conversation, a joke, or a kind act can be worth a great deal, even though it ends. Perhaps a life can be like that too.

Stuart Corlett
Carterton, New Zealand

Knowing We Will Die

A question most of us carry

Most of us know, somewhere deep down, that we will die one day. We do not think about it all the time. But now and then the thought comes back. Perhaps after a funeral. Perhaps after a health scare. Perhaps late at night.

When it does, a question can come with it: *how do I live with this?*

It is not just about keeping busy

People often answer that question with advice. “Make the most of every day.” “Live with no regrets.” “Do what matters.”

That advice is not wrong. But it is not the whole answer. A very busy, successful person can still be frightened of dying. And someone whose days look quite ordinary might find them full of meaning.

The question is not really about how much we get done. It is about how a person with a limited life can live that life well.

Many questions in one

When we think about death, we may be wondering about many things at once.

Will it hurt? Is there anything afterwards? Has my life mattered? What about the things I have left undone?

Will the people I love be all right? How can I be less afraid? Am I allowed to enjoy today, knowing my days will run out?

These questions are linked, but they are not the same. Answering one does not answer the others. This book takes them one at a time.

The main idea of this book

Here is the main idea, in one sentence.

Something does not have to last forever to be worth having.

A good meal ends. A conversation ends. A walk on the beach ends. They were still good. A life ends too. That does not make it worthless.

This idea does not make death welcome. It does not stop us being sad about what we will miss. But it can take away one heavy weight: the belief that only things that last forever really count.

What Are We Really Afraid Of?

Dying, and being dead

When we say we are afraid of death, we can mean very different things.

We might be afraid of *dying*: pain, losing control, being dependent, being a burden, or being alone at the end.

We might be afraid of *being dead*: not existing, missing out on the future, or what might come after.

Or we might be afraid *for others*: who will look after my children? Will my partner cope? What have I left unfinished?

These are different fears. Each needs a different kind of help.

Matching the help to the fear

Imagine a man who is frightened of dying. His friend says, “Don’t worry, you won’t feel anything when you’re dead.”

That might help with one fear. But suppose the man's real worry is about his wife being left alone with no money. The friend's words have not touched that at all. What might help is a talk about money, a will, or who could support his wife.

So before trying to comfort someone, it helps to ask:
what exactly are you afraid of?

“I'll be in the dark forever”

Some people picture death as being trapped in a dark, empty room forever, aware of nothing but darkness.

But think about it carefully. If death is the end of awareness, then there is no one in the room. There is no one to feel the darkness. The picture imagines us being there to experience our own absence, which, if death is the end, cannot happen.

For some people this thought brings real relief. For others it does not, because their fear is about something else. They are not afraid of being in the dark. They are sad to lose all their tomorrows. That is a different fear, and a very understandable one.

The fear that keeps coming back

Imagine a woman who is very relieved when a test shows she does not have cancer. A few weeks later, she begins to worry about her heart.

Reassurance can answer one question. But no test can promise that we will never die. If our fear is really about death itself, getting the all-clear from one danger may not settle it for long.

This is not her fault. Telling her to “be sensible” will not help. It may help more to gently notice what the reassurance is being asked to do, and to keep her company with a question that cannot be fully answered.

Fear is not the same as unhappiness

A person can love their life and still be afraid of death. Another person can find life hard and still not want it to end. Being afraid of death does not mean you think every part of your life is wonderful. Being unhappy does not mean you want to die.

Most of us are a mixture. We can be grateful and fearful in the same week. We can enjoy today and still wish we had more time.

Not Being Here

An old idea

Over two thousand years ago, a Greek thinker named Epicurus offered a famous idea about death. He said: *where death is, I am not. Where I am, death is not.*

In other words, while you are alive, you are not dead. When you are dead, you are not there to suffer. So, he said, why be afraid?

This idea helps some people a lot. It especially helps with the “dark room” picture from the last chapter.

Why it does not help everyone

But many people understand this idea perfectly well and still feel uneasy. Why?

Because their real worry is not about suffering after death. It is about *missing out*. Death takes away the future. All the mornings, conversations, birthdays and springs we would otherwise have had.

A later thinker put it this way. Death can be bad for us, not because we suffer it, but because of the good things it takes away.

So if Epicurus' idea does not comfort you, you have not misunderstood it. You may simply have a different worry.

Wanting more time

Imagine an old man who has had a long, full life. He is grateful for it. But he still wants to see his granddaughter grow up.

Someone says to him kindly, "Well, you've had a good innings."

That is meant to comfort. But it changes the subject. He did not say his life was bad. He said he wants more of it.

Being grateful for the past and wanting more in the future are not in conflict. Enjoying a conversation is a good reason to want it to go on.

Two people, one more year

Imagine two people who each hope for one more year. One wants to finish a book she has been writing for ten

years. The other just wants more ordinary mornings with his wife.

The first hope is not more important just because it would produce something you can see. Each matters because of the life it belongs to.

Does it have to last to count?

Imagine a lovely afternoon with a friend. Years later, neither of you can remember it. Does that mean it never mattered?

Most of us would say no. It mattered then. Being forgotten later does not undo it.

Think of being given a cup of water when you are very thirsty. You benefit right then. That does not stop being true if you later forget it.

This is the heart of this book. Good things that end were still good. A life that ends was still worth living.

Beliefs About What Comes After

So many different beliefs

People have many different beliefs about what happens after death. Some believe in heaven or paradise. Some believe in rebirth. Some believe the dead become ancestors who stay close. Some believe we live on in our children or in people's memories. Some believe death is simply the end. Many are not sure.

These are not all the same belief. Hoping to meet a loved one again is different from hoping for rebirth, which is different from fearing judgment.

Do people make up beliefs to feel better?

Some people say that beliefs about an afterlife were invented to comfort us about death. It is a common idea. But it is more complicated than it sounds.

Researchers have looked at whether religious people are less afraid of death. On average, there is a small link. But it is not true for everyone, and it varies a lot.

A belief can comfort some people and frighten others. Someone who believes in judgment may be more afraid, not less.

And most of us learn our beliefs from family and community, often long before we think much about death. How we came to a belief is a different question from why it matters to us now.

Comfort does not prove anything

Here is something important. A belief that comforts us is not proven true by that comfort. And a belief is not proven false just because people find it comforting either.

Whether there is anything after death is a real question. It cannot be settled by how a belief makes us feel.

You can hold more than one view

Some people think about death in different ways in different places. At the hospital they may think in medical terms. At a funeral or a temple they may think in spiritual terms. That is not necessarily a contradiction. They may simply be answering different questions.

Living together with different beliefs

A person who believes in heaven and a person who believes death is the end can still agree on many things. Both can agree that a dying person deserves honesty, kindness and good care. Both can sit at the same bedside.

We do not have to agree about the ultimate future in order to care for each other now.

The Unfinished Life

No one finishes everything

Many people worry about dying with things left undone. A project not completed. A trip not taken. A relationship not mended.

But think about it. What would a “finished” person look like? Someone who has done everything, learned everything, mended every relationship? No one has ever lived that life. And as we grow, we keep discovering new things we want to do.

There is a difference between finishing a *task* and finishing *yourself*. You can finish a book, a garden, or a promise. You cannot finish being a person.

Regret

Some regrets point to real mistakes. We hurt someone. We let someone down. We put off something important for too long. These are worth facing honestly.

Other regrets are about paths we did not take. If you chose one job, one town or one partner, you could not

also have had the others. That does not mean you chose wrongly. No single life can hold every good thing.

“Live with no regrets” sounds nice. But a good life can still include some sadness about what was left behind.

“I have so much left to do”

Imagine a man who wants to finish writing his family history before he dies.

There are practical questions. How much is left? How much time does he have? Could he write a shorter version? Could someone help, or carry it on after him?

There is also a deeper worry: that if the book is unfinished, his whole life will have been wasted. But a book cannot carry that much weight. His life mattered long before the book, and will have mattered whether or not it is finished.

Saying sorry

Knowing that life is short can make us want to say sorry for things we have done. That can be a good thing.

But an apology does not give us the right to be forgiven. The other person may need time. They may say no. They may accept the apology but not want to be close again.

Imagine a father who, near the end of his life, asks his son to forgive him for years of hurt. The father may be completely sincere. But the son may not be ready. A true apology does not turn the son's "not yet" into a new wrong.

Sometimes making amends can be practical: paying back something owed, telling the truth about what happened, or treating people differently.

Being kind to yourself

Being kind to yourself does not mean pretending you did nothing wrong. It means you can admit a mistake, learn from it, and keep going, without punishing yourself forever.

Beating yourself up is not the same as taking responsibility. Often, the more useful question is: *what can I still do now?*

Time and What Matters

When time feels shorter

Researchers have noticed that when people feel their time is limited, their priorities often change. They tend to spend more time with people they are close to, and less time on things that only matter for the future.

This happens to many older people. But it can happen to younger people too, for example if they are about to move far away from friends.

This is not a rule. An older woman learning a new language she may never master can be doing something wonderful. A young man putting time into an old friendship is not wasting his life.

“Make the most of your time”

This advice can mean many different things. Doing exciting things. Spending time with family. Keeping promises. Creating something that lasts. Resting.

You cannot do the most of all of these at once. A full diary is not proof of a good life. Rest can be valuable too,

not just because it helps you work harder later, but because it is good in itself.

Urgent is not always important

Some things feel urgent because someone else set a deadline. Some precious things, like a friendship, have no deadline at all, so they keep getting put off.

Imagine a woman deciding between an afternoon with a friend and finishing work her colleagues are relying on. There is no simple rule. What has she promised? Has she been putting off the friend for months? Could the work wait without making trouble for others?

Putting something off once can be sensible. Putting it off forever can mean it never happens.

Other people need our time too

Our time is not only ours. We have promises, families, jobs and friends.

Imagine a man who cares for his elderly mother. He longs to go to choir one evening a week. Her needs are real. So is his wish to sing. Perhaps someone else could sit with her for that one evening. The answer may depend on what help is available, not just on his choices.

Starting something you may not finish

Knowing life is limited does not make long projects pointless. You can plant a tree you will not see grow tall. You can start learning to play the piano at seventy. The good is in the doing, not only in the finishing. And someone else may carry on what you began.

The Worth of an Ordinary Day

Small things count

Not everything good in life is big or lasting. A cup of tea with a friend. A funny story. A walk. A game of cards. A song on the radio.

If we only count things that last forever, all of these disappear. But each one can be truly good while it happens.

Enjoyment cannot be ordered

Saying that small pleasures matter is not the same as saying you *must* enjoy them. Someone in pain may not enjoy music. A beautiful view may not cheer someone who is grieving. That is okay.

Imagine a woman who spends an hour listening to a friend talk about her hobby, which is not very important to anyone else. Nothing is achieved. Nothing is written down. But the hour was good company. It was not wasted.

Laughter

Laughter does not solve the fear of death. But it can sit alongside it. A person can laugh at something silly and still be worried about dying. Neither cancels the other.

Not every joke needs to teach a lesson. Sometimes we laugh just because something is funny.

Play

Games end. That is part of what makes them games. Winning matters inside the game, even though no one will remember who won next year.

Play is a good reminder that not everything has to produce something lasting to be worthwhile.

Beauty

In one study, older people took weekly “awe walks”, paying special attention to the wonders around them. Afterwards they reported more good feelings in their everyday lives. But their worries and anxiety did not clearly go away.

That is fine. A walk does not have to cure anything to be worth taking. You can come home still worried and still want to go again tomorrow.

You do not have to be good at it

You do not need to be an excellent singer to enjoy singing. You do not need to win at bowls to enjoy playing. Doing something just for the love of it, without being the best, is part of an ordinary good life.

You do not have to appreciate every moment

Some people feel they must appreciate every moment, because life is short. That can actually spoil things. If you keep asking yourself, “Am I enjoying this enough?”, you stop enjoying it.

It is okay to be distracted sometimes. It is okay to forget details. A good day does not need to be perfect, or remembered forever.

Enough for today

A good meal may not be enough to make anyone feel at peace about death. But it can be enough to make the meal worth sharing.

Small goods do not have to answer the biggest questions. They only have to be good in their own way.

Growing Older

A reminder we cannot ignore

For many people, getting older is when thoughts of death become more real. Friends start to die. Bodies slow down. Retirement changes the shape of the week. The birthday cards start to joke about age.

Growing older is not the same as dying. Many people live for decades after retirement. But ageing can make us more aware that life is limited.

Losing friends and peers

One of the hardest parts of growing older is losing the people of our own generation. Friends from school. Workmates. Brothers and sisters. People who shared our memories.

Each loss can bring grief, and also a quiet thought: *my turn will come too.*

It can help to keep making new friends, even later in life. A new friend cannot replace an old one. But they can bring something new and good into the years ahead.

Changes in the body

Our bodies change as we age. We may not hear as well, see as well, or move as easily. We may need more medicines and more appointments.

These changes can be frustrating. They can also make us feel that we are losing ourselves. But we are still the same person inside. Needing glasses, a hearing aid, a walking stick or help with some tasks does not make someone less of a person.

It is worth talking to your doctor or pharmacist if a change is worrying you. Some changes are a normal part of ageing. Others may have a cause that can be treated.

Worrying about memory

Many older people worry about losing their memory. Forgetting names or where you put your glasses is very common and is not usually a sign of anything serious.

If you or someone close to you is worried about memory, it is worth talking to a doctor. Finding out early can help, whatever the cause.

Retirement and purpose

Retirement can be a welcome rest. It can also leave a gap. For years, work may have given us a routine, a role, company, and a sense of being useful.

Imagine a man who worked as a builder for forty years. After he retires, he feels lost. Then a neighbour asks him to help fix a fence. Soon he is helping at the community garden twice a week. He has found a new way to be useful.

Not everyone needs to stay busy. Some people are glad to slow down. But if retirement feels empty, it may help to look for small ways to stay connected with people and doing things you care about.

Staying in charge of your own life

As we age, other people may start making decisions for us, sometimes without asking. Adult children may worry about our driving, our home, or our money. They usually mean well.

But older people have the right to make their own choices, including choices that others think are risky. A

good conversation listens to both sides: the worries of the family, and the wishes of the older person.

Never too old to begin

Growing older does not mean we must stop starting new things. People learn languages in their eighties, take up painting at seventy, and make new friends at ninety.

You may not finish or master it. That is fine. As this book has said, something does not have to be finished to be worth doing.

When the Fear Won't Go Away

Understanding is not the same as feeling better

You might understand every idea in this book and still feel afraid. That does not mean you have done something wrong. Feelings do not always follow ideas.

Fear of death can come and go. It may be quiet while you are busy and come back at night. It may disappear for months and return after a funeral or a health scare.

Help is available

Some people find that fear of death becomes very heavy. It may keep them awake, stop them enjoying things, or fill every conversation.

There are talking therapies that can help. Some have been tested with people living with serious illness, and many people find them valuable. They do not always make fear disappear completely. But they can make it easier to carry and easier to talk about.

If fear of death is troubling you a lot, it is worth talking to your doctor. In New Zealand, you can also call or text 1737 any time to talk to a trained counsellor.

“Acceptance” can mean many things

People often talk about “accepting” death. But that word can mean different things.

It might mean knowing that death will happen. It might mean letting yourself feel afraid without fighting the feeling. It might mean feeling at peace. It does not have to mean being happy about it.

You can know that you will die without welcoming death. You can feel afraid without letting fear make every decision for you.

Do not wait for the fear to go

Imagine a young woman who decides she cannot start anything new until she has worked out whether life has any real meaning. She reads one book, then another. Each time, she finds another question. Months go by.

Thinking about big questions is good. But she does not need a complete answer before she can go to choir practice, start a drawing, or meet a friend for lunch.

Those small things are worth doing for their own sake.
She can keep thinking while she lives.

When fear fills every conversation

Imagine a couple where every evening has become a talk about death. One partner needs to talk, or they feel alone with the fear. The other has started to dread the evenings.

Neither is wrong. They might agree on a time to talk about the hard things, and also agree that other evenings can be about other things. That way both people's needs are respected.

When life itself feels hard

Sometimes the problem is not fear of death. Sometimes a person cannot feel that their life is worth anything at all.

If that is you, please know this. You do not have to find meaning before you deserve help and care. You matter even when you cannot feel it.

Please talk to someone: a friend, your doctor, or a helpline. In New Zealand, call or text 1737. In an emergency, call 111.

Would Living Forever Help?

More time is not the same as forever

Wanting more life is very natural. Wanting another year with someone you love. Wanting time to finish something. Wanting to get well.

That is different from wanting to live *forever*. Asking whether living forever would be good does not mean anyone's wish for more time is silly.

A thought experiment

Imagine you could live forever. But over the centuries, your memories, interests and relationships slowly change until there is nothing left of the person you are now. Would that be you living forever? Something would go on. But would it be *you*?

Now imagine the opposite. You live forever, but nothing about you ever changes. You never learn anything new or meet anyone new. Would that be a good life?

These puzzles do not prove that living forever would be bad. They just show that *how long* we live is only part of

the question. What matters is also *what kind* of life it would be.

Would we get bored?

Some thinkers have argued that if we lived forever, we would eventually get bored of everything. Others disagree. They point out that some things do not wear out.

Think of the difference between a jigsaw puzzle and a friendship. Once you finish a puzzle, it is done. But an evening with a good friend does not “use up” the friendship. Next week’s evening can be just as good.

A favourite song can be worth hearing again. A good meal does not have to be the best ever to be welcome.

More time for me, but what about you?

Living forever alone would not take away the fear of losing the people we love. Much of what we want is not just more time. It is more time *with particular people*.

What the wish tells us

When we imagine living forever, we may notice what we really want. Perhaps it is more time with family. Perhaps

it is a chance to put something right. Perhaps it is to keep enjoying the world.

These are all things we can pay attention to *now*, in the life we have.

Finding Meaning That Is Yours

What is “meaning”?

People talk about having “meaning in life”. It can mean having a purpose, feeling that your life makes sense, or feeling that you matter.

These can feel very different on different days. A person can have a deeply worthwhile life and still not feel it during a hard week.

Whose purpose is it?

Sometimes people live a life that looks impressive from outside but does not feel like their own. They may have taken on a job or a role because others expected it.

Researchers have found that feeling your life has meaning is linked with less fear of death, especially when people feel their life is truly their own. That does not prove anything for certain, but it raises a good question: *is the purpose I am living for really mine?*

That does not mean you must invent everything for yourself. Many of the best things in life are handed down

to us: a language, a craft, a family recipe, a faith tradition, a way of caring for others. They can still be truly yours if you choose to carry them on.

When two good things pull against each other

Imagine a musician who stops touring to care for her ageing father. That may be the right choice. But she has still given up something she loved.

It would not be honest to say that caring for her father was her “true purpose” and the music never mattered. Both mattered. Sometimes a good life includes choices that cost us something real.

You do not need one big purpose

Some people feel they must find one great mission for their life. But many good lives are made of several things: caring for family, working, helping neighbours, gardening, learning, laughing with friends.

They do not all have to fit together into one grand story.

Small pleasures do not need a reason

Imagine a retired man who spends his evenings building a model boat. He will not sell it, show it or teach anyone with it. He just enjoys it.

That is enough. Not every hour has to prove something or improve something. Some hours can simply be lived and enjoyed.

Talking About Death

Why talk about it?

People talk about death for many reasons. To share a fear. To let others know their wishes. To sort out practical things. To say something important while there is time.

It helps to know which kind of conversation it is. Someone who wants to be listened to may not want advice. Someone who wants to sort out their will may not want a deep talk about heaven.

Letting people lead

It is often best to let the person who is thinking about death lead the way. Ask, “Would you like to talk about what’s worrying you?” rather than “We need to have this talk.”

They may want to talk about practical things, but not feelings. They may want a short talk, then a cup of tea and a chat about the weather. They may want privacy. All of these are okay.

Honest comfort

Imagine a father who asks his adult daughter, “Will the family be all right after I’m gone?”

She says, “Everyone will be fine, Dad.” She says it out of love. But she cannot really know that.

She might instead say: “We’ll look after each other. I’ll keep in touch with the boys. And yes, we’ll miss you terribly.”

This is true. It is something she can really promise. And it is still kind.

Talking about ordinary things is fine too

A conversation about dying does not have to push out every ordinary topic. Imagine two old friends. They talk for a few minutes about the fact that one of them is very ill. Then they argue happily about a film they both disliked.

The second conversation does not cancel the first. It shows the friendship has room for more than the ending.

Writing down your wishes

Writing down your wishes can help the people you leave behind. It can be about your care at the end of life, your funeral, or what you would like done with special belongings.

It helps to explain *why* something matters to you, not just *what* you want.

Imagine a woman who writes, “Keep my books together.” Years later, her nephew has no room for them. If she had written *why*, for example, “I’d love them to be read”, he could find a way to honour her wish that works for his life.

For legal and medical documents, such as a will or an advance care plan, it is best to get proper advice from a lawyer or your doctor.

You can also change your mind. What you wrote years ago does not have to be your final word.

There is no perfect goodbye

People sometimes hope for a perfect last conversation where everything is said and everything is mended. That is a lot to ask of one conversation.

A relationship is made of many years of meals, visits, arguments, jokes and kindness. It cannot be judged by its last words. A rushed goodbye does not mean there was no love.

Facing a Serious Illness

When death feels closer

For many people, death stops being a distant idea when they or someone they love is given a serious diagnosis. Suddenly there are appointments, tests, new words and new medicines. Life can feel like it has been turned upside down overnight.

It is normal to feel shocked, angry, numb, frightened, or all of these in one day.

Hope can change shape

People sometimes think that hope means hoping for a cure. But hope can be about many things.

A person may hope for more time. They may hope to be comfortable. They may hope to see a grandchild born, to make peace with a brother, or to spend the summer at the beach. They may hope their family will be all right.

When one hope becomes less likely, other hopes can still be real. No one should be pushed to give up a hope

before they are ready. But no one should be told they have “given up” because their hopes have changed.

Asking questions

Doctors and nurses are busy, and it can be hard to ask questions. But it is your body and your life. You have a right to understand what is happening.

It can help to write your questions down before an appointment. You might ask:

- What is happening in my body?
- What are my choices?
- What might each choice mean for my daily life?
- What happens if I choose not to have a treatment?
- Who can I call if I am worried between appointments?

Taking a friend or family member with you can help. They can listen, take notes and remember things you might miss.

Questions about medicines

People with a serious illness often end up taking many medicines. It can be confusing.

Your pharmacist is there to help. You can ask what each medicine is for, how and when to take it, what side effects to watch for, and whether it is safe with your other medicines, vitamins or herbal remedies.

If a medicine is causing problems, do not just stop it without talking to someone. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist first. Often there is something that can be changed.

Comfort care is not giving up

Palliative care, sometimes called comfort care, is care that focuses on easing pain and other symptoms and supporting the whole person and their family. Hospice teams often provide this.

Some people worry that asking for this kind of care means giving up. It does not. Many people receive comfort care alongside other treatment. Its aim is to help you live as well as possible, for as long as possible.

If you would like to know more, ask your doctor or nurse.

Your life is more than your illness

Illness can take over everything: conversations, plans, even how others see you. But you are still you. You still have opinions, a sense of humour, things you love, and things that annoy you.

It is okay to have days where you do not want to talk about being sick at all.

Needing Care

The fear of being a burden

Many people say, “I don’t want to be a burden.” This can mean different things.

It might mean: I don’t want my daughter to lose her job to care for me. Or: I hate the thought of someone helping me in the shower. Or: I feel I’m worth less if I need help.

Each worry needs a different answer. The first is about getting more help. The second is about privacy and dignity. The third is about how we judge our own worth.

Needing help does not make you worth less

Some people imagine that life with a serious illness or disability would not be worth living. But many people living with these conditions say their lives are still worthwhile. They value their relationships, their interests, and their days, even if they need a lot of help.

That does not mean their lives are easy. They may still want better care, less pain, or fairer support. But we

should be careful about judging other people's lives by how we *imagine* we would feel.

Everyone depends on others

None of us is truly independent. We all rely on others for food, transport, buildings, roads and much more.

Needing help with personal things simply makes our dependence more visible.

A person who needs care can still make choices. A woman who cannot cook can still choose what is for dinner. A man who cannot write can still choose every word of a letter. Good care helps people stay in charge of their own lives.

Carers matter too

Carers are real people with real limits. They may be tired, worried, or short of money.

Imagine a family where one daughter does almost all of her father's care, because no other help can be found. Her exhaustion is not her father's fault. It is a sign that the care needs to be shared out better.

Respecting the person who needs care and the person giving it means finding ways to share the load fairly.

Your story, your way

Imagine a woman in a rest home who loves talking about her childhood, but does not want it recorded. Her son would love a recording to keep. But she would rather just have the afternoon.

That is her choice. A life does not have to become a story for others to keep.

Being With Someone Who Is Dying

Not knowing what to do

When someone we love is dying, many of us feel helpless. We do not know what to say. We are afraid of saying the wrong thing. Some people stay away for this reason, and later wish they had not.

You do not need perfect words. Being there matters more.

Follow their lead

The person who is dying may want to talk about death. They may want to talk about anything but death. They may want to laugh, complain, remember, or sit quietly. Their wishes may change from day to day, or hour to hour.

It helps to follow their lead. You could ask, “What would you like to talk about today?” or “Would you like me to just sit with you?”

Being there without talking

Sometimes the best thing is to simply be there. Holding a hand. Reading aloud. Playing their favourite music. Sitting quietly while they sleep.

Being present is a gift, even when nothing is said.

Things that can help

Small, practical things can make a big difference. Bringing a meal for the family. Taking the dog for a walk. Doing the shopping. Sitting with the person so the main carer can have a rest or a sleep.

As always, it is better to offer something specific than to say, “Let me know if you need anything.”

Saying what matters

Some people find it helpful to say important things while there is time. “Thank you.” “I love you.” “I’m sorry.” “I forgive you.” “We’ll be okay.”

But these words should never be forced. Some families do not talk like this, and their love is no less. And if the moment passes, it does not mean the love was not there. A whole relationship says far more than any last words.

When different beliefs meet at the bedside

The person who is dying, and the people around them, may have different beliefs. One may want prayers.

Another may not believe in anything after death.

It helps to keep the dying person's wishes at the centre. Visitors can share their own beliefs gently, as their own, without pushing them. "I'll be praying for you" is different from "You must pray."

Look after yourself too

Being with someone who is dying can be exhausting. It is okay to take breaks, to ask for help, and to cry. Carers need care too.

If you are caring for someone at home, ask the doctor or hospice team what support is available. You do not have to do it all alone.

Leaving Something Behind

Caring about a future we will not see

We will not see the world after we die. But many of us still care about it. We care about our children and grandchildren, our community, and people we will never meet.

Imagine a woman who fixes a broken garden bench just before she moves away. She will never know who sits on it. But someone will. Her kindness still works, even though she is not there to see it.

Wanting to be remembered

Many people want to be remembered. That is natural. But being remembered is not the only way a life can count.

Many good things leave no name behind. An evening of caring for someone. A kind word to a stranger. A cup of tea for a tired friend. These things still mattered, even if no one remembers who did them.

Letting others carry it on

When we hand on something we care about, such as a family tradition, a club, or a garden, the next person may do things differently.

Imagine a man who started an evening reading group, because the local workers could only come after their shifts. Years later, work hours change, and an afternoon group would suit people better. If he insists on evenings, he keeps the habit but loses the purpose. If he explains *why* he chose evenings, the next leader can keep the purpose alive.

Caring about the future means letting others make their own choices.

You do not need children or fame

Some people feel they have left nothing behind because they have no children, or because they have not done anything famous.

But teaching, friendship, work, kindness and care all reach into the future. Many of these connections are invisible. A life does not need a monument to have mattered.

Unfinished business is not a debt

When someone dies, the people left behind may inherit unfinished work. A half-written book. A garden. A family business.

They do not always have to finish it. The wishes of the person who died deserve respect. But they do not take away the living person's right to live their own life.

Living Well Today

How do we live well, knowing that one day we will die?

Here is what this book has tried to say.

Something does not have to last forever to be worth having. A conversation, a meal, a walk, a kind act, and a whole life can all be good even though they end.

It is natural to want more time. Wanting more is not ungrateful. And being grateful does not mean you have to stop wanting more.

You do not have to finish everything. No one does. You can still say sorry, still make things right where you can, and still begin new things you may not finish.

You can enjoy small, ordinary pleasures without having to prove they matter.

You can be unsure about what comes after death, and still live well now.

You can need help without being worth less.

You can care about a future you will not see, and let others carry it on in their own way.

And if fear stays, that is okay too. You can live alongside it. You do not have to wait until the fear is gone before you start living.

Your life matters. Not because it will last forever, but because it is yours, and because of the people, moments and kindnesses it holds.

About the Author

Stuart Corlett has been a registered pharmacist since 1989 and practises at Carterton Pharmacy in the Wairarapa, New Zealand. From 2002 to 2023 he did humanitarian health work in Thailand and among Shan communities on the Thai–Myanmar border. He founded Circuit International, a New Zealand charity, in 2015.

This book is an easy-read version of his book *Living with Mortality: How do I live with myself knowing I will end?*

Group Discussion Workbook

One Life, Well Lived

How to Use This Workbook

This workbook goes with each chapter of the book. You can use it in a group, or on your own.

For each chapter there are two parts.

Talking together has questions for a group. You do not have to answer all of them. Pick the ones that feel useful.

Just for you has questions to think about privately. There is space to write your own notes. No one else needs to see what you write.

Some ground rules for groups

- No one has to share anything they do not want to.
- What is said in the group stays in the group.
- Respect different beliefs. No one needs to agree.
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- It is okay to feel uncomfortable, and okay to laugh.

Looking after yourself

Talking about death can bring up strong feelings. Take breaks when you need them.

If you feel overwhelmed, or very low, please talk to your doctor. In New Zealand, you can call or text 1737 any time to talk to a trained counsellor.

Chapter 1: Knowing We Will Die

Talking together

1. When do thoughts about death usually come to you?
2. Was death talked about in your family when you were growing up?
3. “Something does not have to last forever to be worth having.” Do you agree?
4. Which of the questions in this chapter feels most important to you?

Just for you

1. Think of a good moment that is now over. Was it still worth having? Why?
2. What is one thing you would like this book to help you with?

My notes

Chapter 2: What Are We Really Afraid Of?

Talking together

1. Are you more worried about dying, being dead, or leaving others behind?
2. Has anyone tried to comfort you about death in a way that missed the point?
3. What is the difference between being afraid of death and being unhappy with life?
4. How could we ask someone what exactly they are afraid of?

Just for you

1. Finish this sentence: “When I think about my own death, what worries me most is...”
2. What kind of help might make that worry a little lighter?

My notes

Chapter 3: Not Being Here

Talking together

1. What do you think of Epicurus' idea? Does it help you?
2. Is it wrong to want more time after a long, good life?
3. Can something matter even if no one remembers it later? Share an example.
4. What would you most hate to miss out on?

Just for you

1. Write about an ordinary good moment from your life that might be forgotten. Why did it matter?
2. What do you most want more time for?

My notes

Chapter 4: Beliefs About What Comes After

Talking together

1. What beliefs about death did you grow up with? Have they changed?
2. Can a belief comfort some people and frighten others? Why?
3. Does finding a belief comforting make it more likely to be true? Why or why not?
4. How can people with very different beliefs care for each other well?

Just for you

1. What do you believe, hope or wonder about what comes after death?
2. Is there a belief you were taught that you now see differently?

My notes

Chapter 5: The Unfinished Life

Talking together

1. What is the difference between finishing a task and finishing yourself?
2. Is “live with no regrets” good advice? Why or why not?
3. What makes a good apology?
4. What does it mean to be kind to yourself without pretending you did nothing wrong?

Just for you

1. Is there something you would like to finish? What would a smaller version look like?
2. Is there an apology you would like to make? What could you say?

My notes

Chapter 6: Time and What Matters

Talking together

1. Have your priorities changed as you have got older?
2. What does “make the most of your time” mean to you?
3. What is something precious that you keep putting off?
4. Is there something you would like to start, even if you never finish it?

Just for you

1. Draw two columns: “Urgent” and “Important”. What goes in each for you right now?
2. What is one important thing you could make time for this month?

My notes

Chapter 7: The Worth of an Ordinary Day

Talking together

1. What small, ordinary things do you most enjoy?
2. Is there something you love doing even though you are not very good at it?
3. Have you ever spoiled a moment by trying too hard to enjoy it?
4. What makes an ordinary day a good day?

Just for you

1. List five small things that made a recent day good.
2. What is one ordinary pleasure you could make room for this week?

My notes

Chapter 8: Growing Older

Talking together

1. How has getting older changed the way you think about death?
2. What has it been like to lose friends and people of your generation?
3. What gives you a sense of purpose now?
4. How can families talk about risks and choices with older relatives respectfully?

Just for you

1. What is something new you would like to try?
2. What do you want to stay in charge of as you get older?

My notes

Chapter 9: When the Fear Won't Go Away

Talking together

1. Does fear of death come and go for you? What brings it back?
2. What does “acceptance” mean to you?
3. Can you live well while still feeling some fear?
4. Where could someone go for help if fear became too much?

Just for you

1. What helps you when fear comes at night or on a bad day?
2. Who could you talk to if you needed support?

My notes

Chapter 10: Would Living Forever Help?

Talking together

1. Would you want to live forever? Why or why not?
2. What things in life do not “wear out” for you?
3. When you imagine more time, who do you imagine spending it with?
4. What does the wish for more time tell you about what matters to you?

Just for you

1. If you had ten more healthy years guaranteed, what would you do with them?
2. Which of those things could you start now?

My notes

Chapter 11: Finding Meaning That Is Yours

Talking together

1. What gives your life meaning?
2. Have you ever lived for a purpose that did not feel like your own?
3. What have you been handed down that you have chosen to carry on?
4. Do you think a good life needs one big purpose? Why or why not?

Just for you

1. List the things that make your life worthwhile. They can be big or small.
2. Is there anything you are doing only because others expect it?

My notes

Chapter 12: Talking About Death

Talking together

1. Have you ever talked with family about death or your wishes? How did it go?
2. What makes these conversations hard?
3. How can we comfort someone honestly, without promising things we cannot know?
4. Have you written down any wishes for the end of your life?

Just for you

1. Is there someone you would like to talk with about death or your wishes?
2. What would you want them to know?

My notes

Chapter 13: Facing a Serious Illness

Talking together

1. Have you or someone close to you faced a serious illness? What changed?
2. How can hope change shape during an illness?
3. What makes it hard to ask doctors and nurses questions?
4. What do you understand by comfort care or palliative care?

Just for you

1. Write down three questions you would like to ask at your next health appointment.
2. What do you hope for right now?

My notes

Chapter 14: Needing Care

Talking together

1. What does “being a burden” mean to you?
2. Have you cared for someone, or been cared for? What made the care good or hard?
3. How can someone who needs care stay in charge of their own life?
4. How could care be shared more fairly in families and communities?

Just for you

1. If you needed care one day, what would matter most to you?
2. Who could you tell about that?

My notes

Chapter 15: Being With Someone Who Is Dying

Talking together

1. Have you been with someone who was dying? What helped, and what was hard?
2. Why do some people stay away? What might help them come?
3. What practical help could you offer a family caring for someone at home?
4. How can people with different beliefs share a bedside respectfully?

Just for you

1. Is there something you would like to say to someone while there is time?
2. If you were dying, who would you want with you, and what would you want them to do?

My notes

Chapter 16: Leaving Something Behind

Talking together

1. What do you hope to leave behind?
2. Can a kind act matter even if no one remembers who did it?
3. How do you feel about others changing things you started?
4. Does a life need children or fame to matter?

Just for you

1. Write down three small ways you have made life better for someone else.
2. Is there something you would like to hand on? What would you want the next person to know about why it matters?

My notes

Living Well Today

Talking together

1. Which idea from this book was most helpful to you?
2. Is there anything in the book you disagreed with?
3. What has it been like to talk about these things in a group?
4. What does “living well today” mean to you?

Just for you

1. Finish this sentence: “My life matters because...”
2. Finish this sentence: “One thing I want to do while I can is...”

My notes
