

Advance Care Planning Book Suggestions



A public health crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic, causes many of us to think about our life, our goals, and the type of care we would want to receive if confronted with a serious medical illness. Although end-of-life conversations can be difficult to bring up with loved ones, it's important to think about and let others know your wishes. Often times, we aren't sure where to start or we don't know what to say. To help you get started, we have compiled a list of books that provide different ways that you can approach end-of-life care conversations with your loved ones. Read these books alongside your family and friends, and as you talk about the books, you can also discuss your own end-of-life wishes.

Advanced Care Planning Book List

Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End, Atul Gawande (2015)

“A non-fiction book by American surgeon Atul Gawande. The book addresses end-of-life care, hospice care, and also contains Gawande's reflections and personal stories.” -[McMillan Memorial Library](#)

Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant? Roz Chast (2014)

“A graphic memoir of American cartoonist and author Roz Chast. The book is about Chast's parents in their final years. Her father, George, died at the age of 95 and her mother, Elizabeth, who worked as an assistant elementary school principal, died at the age of 97.” -[Wikipedia](#)

Dead People Suck: A Guide for Survivors of the Newly Departed, Laurie Kilmartin

“An honest, irreverent, laugh-out-loud guide to coping with death and dying from Emmy-nominated writer and New York Times bestselling co-author of *Sh*tty Mom*. Death is not for the faint of heart, and sometimes the best way to cope is through humor.” -[Google Books](#)

Die Laughing, William Novak (2016)

“From the cocreator of the celebrated *Big Book of Jewish Humor* comes a ‘funny...geezerlicious’ (Jack Handey, author of *Deep Thoughts*) collection of jokes about growing older that makes fun of memory loss, marriages, medicine, sex, the afterlife, and much more—a perfect gift for almost anyone who was born before you were.” -[Google Books](#)



Dying Well: Peace and Possibilities at the End of Life, Ira Byock (1998)

“Dying Well brings us to the homes and bedsides of families with whom Dr. Byock has worked, telling stories of love and reconciliation in the face of tragedy, pain, medical drama, and conflict. Through the true stories of patients, he shows us that a lot of important emotional work can be accomplished in the final months, weeks, and even days of life. It is a companion for families, showing them how to deal with doctors, how to talk to loved ones—and how to make the end of life as meaningful and enriching as the beginning.” -[Google Books](#)

Extreme Measures: Finding a Better Path to the End of Life, Jessica Zitter (2017)

“In medical school, no one teaches you how to let a patient die. Jessica Zitter became a doctor because she wanted to be a hero. She elected to specialize in critical care--to become an ICU physician--and imagined herself swooping in to rescue patients from the brink of death. But then during her first code she found herself cracking the ribs of a patient so old and frail it was unimaginable he would ever come back to life. She began to question her choice.” -[Google Books](#)

Fifteen Dogs, André Alexis (2015)

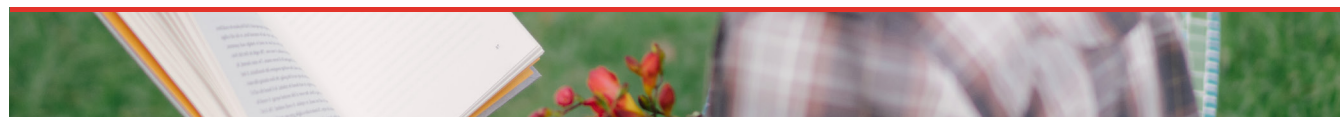
“André Alexis’s contemporary take on the apologue offers an utterly compelling and affecting look at the beauty and perils of human consciousness. By turns meditative and devastating, charming and strange, *Fifteen Dogs* shows you can teach an old genre new tricks.” -[Good Reads](#)

Final Exam, Pauline Chen (2007)

“A brilliant transplant surgeon brings compassion and narrative drama to the fearful reality that every doctor must face: the inevitability of mortality. When Pauline Chen began medical school, she dreamed of saving lives. What she could not predict was how much death would be a part of her work. Almost immediately, she found herself wrestling with medicine’s most profound paradox—that a profession premised on caring for the ill also systematically depersonalizes dying. *Final Exam* follows Chen over the course of her education and practice as she struggles to reconcile the lessons of her training with her innate sense of empathy and humanity.” -[Good Reads](#)

From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death, Caitlin Doughty (2018)

“Fascinated by our pervasive fear of dead bodies, mortician Caitlin Doughty embarks on a global expedition to discover how other cultures care for the dead. From Zoroastrian sky burials to wish-granting Bolivian skulls, she investigates the world’s funerary customs and expands our sense of what it means to treat the dead with dignity. Her account questions the rituals of the American funeral industry, especially chemical embalming, and suggests that the most effective traditions are those that allow mourners to personally attend to the body of the deceased.” -[Good Reads](#)





Life After Life, Kate Atkinson (2013)

“What if you could live again and again, until you got it right? On a cold and snowy night in 1910, Ursula Todd is born, the third child of a wealthy English banker and his wife. She dies before she can draw her first breath. On that same cold and snowy night, Ursula Todd is born, lets out a lusty wail, and embarks upon a life that will be, to say the least, unusual. For as she grows, she also dies, repeatedly, in any number of ways. Ursula’s world is in turmoil, facing the unspeakable evil of the two greatest wars in history. What power and force can one woman exert over the fate of civilization -- if only she has the chance?” -[Good Reads](#)



Old Man Country: My Search for Meaning Among the Elders, Thomas R. Cole (2019)

“We aspire to live in a country where old men are celebrated as vital elders but not demeaned if they become ill and dependent. We aspire to maintain health as well as maintain dignity and fulfillment in frailty. Old Man Country helps readers see and imagine these possibilities for themselves. The book follows the journey of a writer in search of wisdom, as he encounters twelve distinguished American men over 80, including Paul Volcker, the former head of the Federal Reserve, and Denton Cooley, the world’s most famous heart surgeon. In these and other intimate conversations, the book explores and honors the particular way that each man faces four challenges of living a good old age: Am I still a man? Do I still matter? What is the meaning of my life? Am I loved? Readers will come to see how each man - even the most famous - faces universal challenges. Personal stories about work, love, sexuality, and hope mingle with stories about illness, loss and death. This book will strengthen each of us as we and our loved ones anticipate and navigate our way through the passages of old age.” -[Good Reads](#)



Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: And Other Lessons from the Crematory, Caitlin Doughty (2014)

“This book tells an unusual coming-of-age story full of bizarre encounters and unforgettable scenes. Caring for dead bodies of every color, shape, and affliction, Caitlin soon becomes an intrepid explorer in the world of the dead. She describes how she swept ashes from the machines and reveals the strange history of cremation and undertaking, marveling at bizarre and wonderful funeral practices from different cultures. She demystifies death, leading us behind the black curtain of her unique profession.” -[Good Reads](#)



The Best Care Possible, Ira Bock (2012)

“A palliative care doctor on the front lines of hospital care illuminates one of the most important and controversial ethical issues of our time on his quest to transform care through the end of life.” -[Good Reads](#)





The Beginner's Goodbye, Anne Tyler (2012)

“Crippled in his right arm and leg, Aaron grew up fending off a sister who constantly wanted to manage him. So, when he meets Dorothy, an outspoken, independent young woman, she’s like a breath of fresh air. He marries her without hesitation, and they have a relatively happy, unremarkable marriage. Aaron works at his family’s vanity-publishing business, turning out titles that presume to guide beginners through the trials of life. But when a tree crashes into their house and Dorothy is killed, Aaron feels as though he has been erased forever. Only Dorothy’s unexpected appearances from the dead—in their house, on the roadway, in the market—help him to live in the moment and to find some peace. Gradually, Aaron discovers that maybe for this beginner there is indeed a way to say goodbye.” -[Good Reads](#)



The Brief History of the Dead, Kevin Brockmeier (2006)

“The City is inhabited by those who have departed Earth but are still remembered by the living. They will reside in this afterlife until they are completely forgotten. But the City is shrinking, and the residents clearing out. Some of the holdouts, like Luka Sims, who produces the City’s only newspaper, are wondering what exactly is going on. Others, like Coleman Kinzler, believe it is the beginning of the end. Meanwhile, Laura Byrd is trapped in an Antarctic research station, her supplies are running low, her radio finds only static, and the power is failing. With little choice, Laura sets out across the ice to look for help, but time is running out. Kevin Brockmeier alternates these two storylines to create a lyrical and haunting story about love, loss and the power of memory.” -[Good Reads](#)



The Conversation: A Revolutionary Plan for End-Of-Life Care, Angelo Volandes (2015)

“Dr. Angelo E. Volandes believes that a life well lived deserves a good ending. Through the stories of seven patients and seven very different end-of-life experiences, he demonstrates that what people with a serious illness, who are approaching the end of their lives, need most is not new technologies but one simple thing: The Conversation. He argues for a radical re-envisioning of the patient-doctor relationship and offers ways for patients and their families to talk about this difficult issue to ensure that patients will be at the center and in charge of their medical care. It might be the most important conversation you ever have.” -[Good Reads](#)



The Last Lecture, Jeffrey Zaslow and Randy Pausch (2008)

“When Randy Pausch, a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon, was asked to give such a lecture, he didn’t have to imagine it as his last, since he had recently been diagnosed with terminal cancer. But the lecture he gave, ‘Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams’, wasn’t about dying. It was about the importance of overcoming obstacles, of enabling the dreams of others, of seizing every moment (because time is all you have and you may find one day that you have less than you think). It was a summation of everything Randy had come to believe. It was about living.” -[Good Reads](#)





The Sense of an Ending, Julian Barnes (2011)

“This intense novel follows Tony Webster, a middle-aged man, as he contends with a past he never thought much about—until his closest childhood friends return with a vengeance: one of them from the grave, another maddeningly present. Tony thought he left this all behind as he built a life for himself, and his career has provided him with a secure retirement and an amicable relationship with his ex-wife and daughter, who now has a family of her own. But when he is presented with a mysterious legacy, he is forced to revise his estimation of his own nature and place in the world.” -[Good Reads](#)



When Breath Becomes Air, Paul Kalanithi (2016)

“At the age of thirty-six, on the verge of completing a decade’s worth of training as a neurosurgeon, Paul Kalanithi was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. One day he was a doctor treating the dying, and the next he was a patient struggling to live. And just like that, the future he and his wife had imagined evaporated. When *Breath Becomes Air* chronicles Kalanithi’s transformation from a naïve medical student ‘possessed,’ as he wrote, ‘by the question of what, given that all organisms die, makes a virtuous and meaningful life’ into a neurosurgeon at Stanford working in the brain, the most critical place for human identity, and finally into a patient and new father confronting his own mortality.” -[Barnes & Noble](#)



White Noise, Don DeLillo (1985)

“White Noise tells the story of Jack Gladney, his fourth wife, Babette, and their four ultramodern offspring, as they navigate the rocky passages of family life to the background babble of brand-name consumerism.” -[Barnes & Noble](#)



Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs? Big Questions from Tiny Mortals About Death, Caitlin Doughty (2019)

“In *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*, Doughty blends her mortician’s knowledge of the body and the intriguing history behind common misconceptions about corpses to offer factual, hilarious, and candid answers to thirty-five distinctive questions posed by her youngest fans. In her inimitable voice, Doughty details lore and science of what happens to, and inside, our bodies after we die. Why do corpses groan? What causes bodies to turn colors during decomposition? And why do hair and nails appear longer after death? Readers will learn the best soil for mummifying your body, whether you can preserve your best friend’s skull as a keepsake, and what happens when you die on a plane. Beautifully illustrated by Dianné Ruz, *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?* shows us that death is science and art, and only by asking questions can we begin to embrace it.” -[Barnes & Noble](#)





Your Caregiver Relationship Contract, Debra Hallisey (2019)

“In *Your Caregiver Relationship Contract*, Hallisey, discusses how caregiving changes the everyday lives of the caree, the caregiver, and their circle of loved ones. She uses examples from her own life, as well as many of her clients, to help you work through your elderly parents’ expectations, how to set caregiver boundaries, the need to structure hard conversations with mom and dad, and how to pull together a support network for caregiver self-care. Her book aims to bolster these ever-changing roles and provide guidance in navigating the caregiver contract.” -[Google Books](#)



Check your local library’s website to see which books they have available. You can also find free e-books or books to rent or purchase from the following sites: [Amazon](#), [Barnes & Noble](#), [Biblio](#), [Open Library](#), [Target](#), and [Thriftbooks](#).



Do you have a recommendation for this list? Please reach out to [Dapa Wilcox](#), Community Coordinator, at info@NJHCQI.org; and for more information about COYL, how to join your local COYL task force, and access to additional resources, please visit our [COYL page](#).

Conversation of Your Life (COYL) aims to engage communities in conversations around advance care planning. Learn more [here](#). COYL is generously supported by [The Horizon Foundation of New Jersey](#).

