

What is helpful to learn about our needs for living and dying well?

<https://www.news24.com/life/wellness/mind/live-by-design-what-is-helpful-to-learn-about-our-needs-for-living-and-dying-well-20240630>

Helena Dolny

If we were more literate about the signs of a dying person's readiness to die, would that support our easier acceptance and lessen the psychological pain of witnessing decline?

Live by Design is a weekly News24 column by Dr Helena Dolny and Mapi Mhlangu on mortality and the conversations around it.

I appreciate how much more becomes available for us to read about how to live more healthily – the school curriculum I was offered at school missed this completely. There are thankfully more scientists writing accessibly for the layperson, offering us evidence-based findings (not woo-woo ideas), and making recommendations based on years of research.

Matthew Walker's *Why We Sleep* is one such book, and his series of short TED Talks is readily available for those who do not have an appetite for a whole book. A complimentary book published this year is Monty Lyman's *The Immune Mind: the hidden dialogue between your brain and immune system*.

Lyman debunks the Cartesian divide between mind and body. Instead, he invites us to consider the interconnection between our minds, our immune system and microbiome. Microbiome, a new word for my vocabulary, is the collective state of all the microbes, the bacteria, fungi, viruses, and their genes that live inside our bodies. What is especially important is our gut biome because research shows strong links between the state of our gut and our well-being.

Lyman invites us to consider the constant drip-feed of stress present in our lives, big and small: the inattentive driver almost causing an accident, the e-mail about a challenging work situation, news of family member who has lost their job, another diagnosed with cancer, another struggling with depression.

Lyman also invites us to consider that the combination of what we eat, our quality and length of sleep, together with our daily drip feed of stress, creates the ideal conditions for allergies and auto-immune disease to flourish. How many of us now have family and friends with dietary requirements? I used to notice people avoiding sugar because of their diabetes or salt because of high blood pressure. But dietary preferences are reaching a whole new level. Last week, for example, I met friends at a restaurant, one was simply vegetarian (a philosophical choice), another had celiac disease (causes an immune reaction to gluten), and another (with rheumatoid arthritis) was not eating gluten, eggs, dairy or nightshade vegetables (potato, aubergine, tomato).

The waiter, taken aback, called the chef. I take my hat off to that chef. He arrived with a can-do attitude, menu in hand, "what changes can we make here that will meet everyone's needs?" He made it a fun challenge for himself and his staff instead of an unwelcome problem. Three hours later, after eating great food, we left a handsome tip.

Long story short, Lyman confirms food, sleep, mindfulness, exercise and the presence of loving relationships as the essential ingredients for dealing with modern stress, promoting a healthy gut, a calm mind and less everyday pain in our bodies.

I wish more doctors or hospice workers would also write accessibly for us to become more literate about what to expect from our mind and body as we die. The two most accessible offerings that I have come across so far are *Finish Strong* by Barbara Coombs Lee and the late Michael Holmes' *Crossing the Creek: A Practical Guide to Understanding the Dying Process*. Holmes' offering is [a freely available PDF](#) – just google and download it. Coombs Lee's book distils her insights from decades of work, invites you to anticipate the end of life and to not only draft a living will but also to supplement it with a video. She also offers many helpful observations such as what to expect as dementia progresses.

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I have been witnessing people struggling with both recognising and or accepting the signs that a person is on track to dying. Sometimes I've found it hard to be a compassionate, non-interfering witness as I have watched the dying person being coaxed to drink high-protein energy drinks. Yes, the person is skeletal, but isn't that to be expected after several years of cancer and having reached the end of the road of any treatment able to stop the progression of the disease? And yes, the person says they feel very tired. Their nearest and dearest offering oxygen and wanting them to eat, to keep up their strength, is their chosen intervention at a time when they are not yet ready to let go.

If we were more literate about the signs of a dying person's readiness to "cross the creek" – those are Holmes' words for passing – would that support our easier acceptance and lessen the psychological pain of witnessing decline?

There are three things I have most valued learning as I have accompanied those dying of old age or disease. Firstly, a person whose body is shutting down mostly does not have great appetite for food and, what is more, digestive functions can be compromised. It could be kindest to respond to requests for food and not try to coax the person to eat.

Secondly, it is observed that dying persons often "time travel". I hear people say the dying person is hallucinating, losing their mind. Holmes, in distilling his thirty years observations as a hospice nurse, describes people's process of reviewing their lives, reliving moments as if they were happening in real time. Listening to the dying person ramble can be unnerving if we are not ready for this possibility.

Lastly, I have witnessed doctors set up intravenous hydration. There is another approach, followed by our ancestors, that a person dying may be physically more comfortable without water – but with careful comfort care to keep lips moist.

Mind and body are intertwined both in life and in death.

When loved ones are dying, it may well be that doing less could be our last act of kindness. There's the rub, for us to understand and accept that less can be more.

Fatherhood: What's the legacy you aspire to leave your children with?

Helena Dolny

Father's Day is being marketed this week. My devices are full of adverts for what could be "the perfect gift." The airwaves carry adverts encouraging us to celebrate fathers, stepfathers, grandfathers and fathers-to-be. It is a simple celebration for me. I had a dad. When he wasn't working overtime shifts at the factory on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings and Saturday mornings he was very present. He did a lot of DIY tasks around the house and I was his shadow and learnt some skills that have stood me in good stead in my adult life. In womanhood, his patriarchy offended me – "Now I'm really a grandfather," he exclaimed when a boy grandchild was born – the third grandchild – the first two were girls.

I didn't let it go, but asked, as the mother of one of the girls, "How do you think that makes me feel?" I forgave him for his patriarchy; he was, simply, unquestioningly repeating the social norms of his generation. What is more important to me was that I grew up feeling loved and cared for.

In terms of "Living by design" how do you want to be remembered as a father? What implications does that have for time and money?

A client of mine works in a town that is a three-hour drive from the family residence. Four nights a week he is not home. Much of the weekend is spent relaxing in front of the television and then on Sunday evenings he opens his laptop to be on top of things for the week ahead. In conversation, he revealed that he is troubled about the quality of his relationship with his children – he is not feeling connected enough – he feels that he is seen as the ATM – the parent his children go to when they want money for something.

We discussed intentionality, our way of living with the end in mind, and that if he aspired to a different quality of relationship then his weekends needed a redesign. What could he do with his children that would contribute to memory-making and, hopefully, significantly modify the quality of their relationship? I'm curious as to what he'll try.

I understand I was one of the lucky children – others are less fortunate. There are many children who grow up not knowing their fathers, are afraid of them or, even worse, they are abused. This Sunday will not be a day for them to celebrate their fathers – hopefully, they can mark the day as another of having survived what their family of origin offered to them.

And what about the complications of when you either do not know your father or you have two of them, a stepfather and a biological father. Who will represent you during rites of passage occasions?

In 2023 when the Johannesburg inner city held its annual artists' studio open day I was drawn to a print, "*Ozimelayo*", created by Molefe Thwala oa Makhele. The image created is of two feet in a pose which suggests the person is standing. I was curious and Molefe explained this work as an outcome of his exploring identity and self-awareness.

"I am born of two men. Thwala, the man whose surname I bear and carry – a proud Nguni and a great man, my stepfather. Makhele, the man whose genes I carry, with historical ties to Basotho, my biological father. Traditionally, as an African man there are rites of passage and responsibilities I have and they stem from my father, his father, his father before that, etc. With limited or no representation, who and what I am becomes problematic because I cannot be properly represented in our family's *umsamo* (altar). In dealing with my frustrations, I thought, I will represent myself, I will do this myself: '*Ozimelayo* – the one who stands up for or represents themselves, as one would in a court of law.'"

My colleague Mapi never knew her biological father. She was a much-loved child. Her mother, Busisiwe, once broached the subject and suggested that father and child might meet. It didn't happen, Mapi wasn't interested; and then when she was, it was too late, her father had passed.

Mapi tells me of the presence of a truly wonderful man who was present in her childhood, who her mother treated as a son, who was the MC and spoke at her mother's funeral. Mapi tells me that whenever she needs representation in family matters, any rites of passage discussions, that her mother designated this person to stand for her.

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Biological or non-biological – what matters most?

Another friend of mine who never got on with her biological father speaks fondly of her godfather, and how important it was that she had the positive male anchor.

Therapists tell us that what matters most is that we are loved (the biological relationships notwithstanding) and that we are nurtured to become wholesome adults. What matters most is that when we, in turn, choose to become parents we're thoughtful in living our lives as parents and what we want our children to experience of us.

As important, if not more important, as creating the material conditions will be the time spent together as parent and child, creating those opportunities for memory-making. Memory-making doesn't necessarily cost money, being dad's DIY helper is likely to be a source of warm memories in years to come – as precious as any gift or holiday.