



One New Year's idea: Have dinner and talk about death

Kim Painter, Special for USA TODAY December 28, 2013

Organizers hope hosts around the country will gather friends and families to talk about what matters in death and in life.



- Death-themed dinners planned for Jan. 1-7
- Website helps hosts start the conversation
- Ultimate goal: better end-of-life planning

On one of the first evenings of 2014, Rosemary Lloyd, a Unitarian Universalist minister from Lincoln, Mass., plans to have a few people over for dinner. She says she will "light a nice fire, open a bottle of wine" and, if all goes as planned, get her guests talking about death.

The organizers of a project called [Let's Have Dinner and Talk about Death](#) hope many such meals will take place around the country between Jan. 1 and Jan. 7. They have paired with an educational campaign called [The Conversation Project](#) to encourage people to mark the new year by digging into death.

While the ultimate goal is to get people to plan for decisions they and their loved ones may face near the end of life — decisions such as whether to use aggressive medical interventions — a shorter-term goal is just to get people talking and thinking about what's important to them in life, and in death, organizers say.

In a recent poll, 90% of respondents agreed such conversations with loved ones are important, but just 30% said they had participated in one, says Ellen Goodman, the veteran journalist from Boston who started The Conversation Project in 2012.

"Here's a New Year's resolution," she says. "Let's close that gap."

Using a dinner for that purpose is not a new idea. For the past several years, a project called [Engage With Grace](#) has urged families gathered for Thanksgiving to talk about end-of-life wishes. The "Let's Have Dinner" campaign is an offshoot of that effort, but broadens the idea and makes the conversation more interactive.

Those who go to the website deathverdinner.org can plan an evening that might include friends, family members or even strangers. Hosts click on a list of possible intentions — such as discussing their own terminal illness, a recent loss or a philosophical interest. They then choose from a menu of brief readings, videos and audio clips to send to guests in advance. The choices range from a chapter of *Charlotte's Web* to a commencement speech once given by the late Steve Jobs.

Hosts also get an e-mail with suggested wording for an invitation, some conversational prompts and encouragement to share experiences on Facebook and Twitter.

But the most important interactions will happen around tables, says Michael Hebb, an artist and activist who has made a quirky career of staging food-centered events. The death dinner idea was developed in a class he co-taught in the communications department of the University of Washington-Seattle.

Human beings "have a long history of gathering around fires, praying and singing, and using dinner as a place to ask the important questions about what it means to be alive," he says.

"I'm in love with the idea of these dinner parties," says Rebecca Sedore, an associate professor of medicine at the University of California-San Francisco. She has no

association with the project and is the lead developer of a different approach to educating people about end-of-life planning: a [website called Prepare](#) that uses how-to videos and materials written at a fifth-grade level to reach a diverse audience.

"Different things work for different people," she says, and for some, a special dinner will be just the thing to inspire thought and action.

Lloyd, 58, who has worked as a nurse and hospice volunteer as well as a minister, says she wants to make talking about death "a more common conversation, a more ordinary conversation."

You never know what you will find out, she says. "One friend who is coming to dinner has already said, 'I can tell you right now, don't lean over me when I'm dying and say you can go now dear — I'll go when I want to go.' "