



How to avoid regret: What a doctor wishes people knew about living, dying well

Here's what really matters at the end of life and how to avoid the biggest regrets.



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Life is precious because it ends one day, but death is not the enemy. The enemy is a wasted life.

It's a message Dr. BJ Miller, a hospice and palliative care specialist in San Francisco, wants people to remember as they come to terms with their mortality. Miller's own brush with death as a college student left him a triple amputee and an advocate for a dignified end of life.

“There's no guarantee for tomorrow, ever,” Miller told TODAY.

“Watching my patients die helps me think about what’s important to me in my life. So when it’s my time, hopefully I’ll have fewer regrets and, along the way, I hope to have a more meaningful life thanks to their lessons.”

Miller, co-author of the new book, “A Beginner's Guide to the End: Practical Advice for Living Life and Facing Death,” shared his findings on how to live and die well:

Avoid common and painful regrets at the end of life

Miller: There’s usually regret about having been unkind and selfish. It’s shame around having ever been a jerk to anybody, including to oneself.

One of the things dying teaches you is life goes on outside of you, too. You are a grain of sand among a gazillion grains of sand and the sooner you can delight in life outside of yourself, the better you’ll be able to handle your own death and the kinder, more forgiving you’ll be.

Life is just hard and there’s only so much we can get done in it. Forgiveness ends up being a huge theme. If you find yourself in a petty argument that kept you from re-establishing contact with someone you once loved, those get revealed to be practically almost silly at the end of life and people often regret losing contact.

'7 Lessons from Heaven' author talks about life after death

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Participate in your life and your dying

Miller: This is your life. Sometimes patients tell me they got robbed or that this is a huge detour or some anomaly in their life. The reminder is: No, this is your life – this is it. And because time is precious, if you don't engage with your life on a real level, you are squandering your time.

Be an active participant in your own life in every way, including your illness and your dying, because those are parts of your life – your life while you have it. You don't need to control everything, just participate.

Remember what people at the end of life care about most

Miller: If someone is lucky enough to have a family or a group of

friends who are nearby, one thing a dying person really wants to know is that their loved ones are going to be OK. That they're going to keep living, keep trying and going to try to love themselves and the world. That's a really powerful thing.

So as a loved one, one of the kindest things you can do for someone who is dying is to let them know you're going to take care of yourself. That's not a selfish thing; that's something the dying person will often really long to hear.



Take comfort that many people have accepted the end

Miller: In most cases I've been involved with, by the time death rolls around, the dying person is often really done with this body, done

with this life. And whether by force or by choice, acceptance often does come because the fact of dying becomes just so obvious, it's just so clearly coming.

Dying is often harder in some ways on the people around the dying person – harder on the people who have to keep living.

Clean out the skeletons in your closet before the end

Miller: There's a hygiene to the process of dying. You go through life and accumulate all this stuff and all that has to go away when you die. You can leave all this emotional and physical residue of stuff, or you can clean it up and by doing so, leave less of a mess for people who are going to live on.

It's a cleaner grief, in a way, not complicated by finding old letters with secrets in them that can be a source of torture. If you clean up your life on the way out, it can feel wonderful, it can feel very true and it can be an extremely kind gift.

Keep hope going

Miller: I honestly believe that we as a species will do better if we come to terms with our mortality earlier in life. Get used to exercising hope within the framework of life being short and precious.

If my patients come to me and are losing hope, I'll say "OK, let's come to terms with the hope that's being lost. Let's grieve that, but now let's find what we still can hope for."

Diane Blair, a registered nurse with the Visiting Nurse Service of New York Hospice and Palliative Care, opens up about finding joy in a job most people would find difficult. Her goal is to help the terminally ill live, and find joy in their final days.

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As long as you have another breath in you, you can hope for something.

As long as you have another breath in you, you can hope for something: Peace, comfort, the well-being of people you love. It's always a matter of framing your hope.

Simple pleasures, rather than grand moments, are appreciated at the end of life

Miller: It may be simply going outside and feeling the sun on your skin. A shower can be magical, sunlight can be magical. Just delighting in the cool breeze on your face or the sound of laughter. Very basic primal stuff.

Think about what might happen after death

Miller: If you're around folks who are taking their final breaths, you can see life going out of somebody. You can tell the body is just a shell, something is gone now. Where does that life go? Is there a soul? Is there a spirit?