

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Why Do People Die? Questions About Death

October 13, 2017

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[Jane] This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids. I'm Jane Lindholm. Today's episode is a serious one.

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[Jane] We're going to talk about a difficult topic: Death. Adults who are listening, you might want to give this episode a preview on your own to make sure it's right for the little ones in your life. Or, at least stick around and listen together; your kids might have questions and we're actually going to include a couple of quiet breaks inside this episode in case your young companions have questions or want to start a conversation with you.

Over the months that we've been doing this show we've gotten a couple of questions from you all about death: why we have to die? why people die of old age? what happens when we die? Sometimes adults might tell you, "Oh, you don't need to worry about that," or, "Let's not talk about it." But it's natural to wonder about what death is, especially if someone you know or maybe a pet that you love has recently died. So, we want to take some time to explore your questions today and we asked Jana DeCristofaro for help. She works at a place called the Dougy Center in Portland, Oregon. The Dougy Center helps kids and families deal with the death of someone they care about or families who have someone they love who's very, very sick. Jana helps kids learn to deal with something called grief: that's the reaction your mind and your body have to the loss of someone you love. Jana agrees that it can be really difficult or sometimes uncomfortable to have these conversations. But she also says it's really important because it's something we're all going to have to deal with. The first thing we asked Jana to do is to explain a little bit more about what death is.

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[Jana] Death is a hard thing to talk about for a lot of people and I'm always really happy when kids want to know and learn a little bit about it. And death, in the most simplest language, is really when someone or somebody, an animal or human's body stops working so they no longer have a heartbeat and their brain isn't working anymore; they're not breathing anymore; they don't need to drink water or eat food; they don't go to the bathroom. So their body really just stops working completely. Then the person's body is there, but their life force - their spirit, their soul - the thing that really makes them "them," like their personality, like what makes them like green versus blue or dogs versus cats, that's not there anymore because the body has stopped working.

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[Jane] Sometimes people will say, "death is a part of life." And by that they mean death happens to everybody. It's something that's natural.

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[Jana] Exactly. At some point, everyone and everything will die. So every year, you know, you might look outside in the fall and you see leaves on a tree that are changing color and they fall off. And so the leaves have died. You may have a pet, a hamster or fish or a dog or a cat, at some point that dies. And then every person, every family member at some point dies.

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[Jane] Let's get to our questions so that we can start to get into these ideas about death that our listeners have for you. And then we can talk a little bit about how you can deal with it when somebody that you care about dies.

Our first two questions are from Lennox and Pippa, who's asking for her brother, Hollis.

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[Lennox] Hi, my name is Lennox. I am eight years old and I live in, Minnesota. And my question is, why do people have to die when they get too old?

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[Pippa] My name is Pippa and I live in West Lake and I'm five. My brother's question is, why do people die of old age?

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[Jana] There's a lot of different reasons. One of the main things is that our bodies have parts that work, and sometimes when people get older, those parts stop working. So, sort of like, if you have a car and, you know, the tires, after awhile, they wear out. And with a car you can get new tires. But for people and their bodies, their heart might get tired and stop working. And the doctors and the nurses will do what they can to help that heart. But at some point, they aren't able to repair it anymore. So they aren't able to fix the heart and the heart stops working. And for a lot of people as they get older, it's a natural thing that happens that the parts of their body stop working.

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[Travis] My name's Travis and I live in Butte, Montana, 6 years old. And I was wondering, why do people have to die?

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[Jane] Why do people have to die at any age? Because sometimes they're not old. Jana, do you have thoughts on that?

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[Jana] Well, that is the question that people much smarter than me have been talking about and thinking about and writing about for thousands of years. So it's a really big question. And, you know, it's one of those things that I think everyone kind of comes to their own answer about that. And sometimes it might mean talking to the people in your family, talking to your parents or your caregivers, your grandparents, even with your siblings about what their thoughts are about that and that you might come to your own conclusion and reason for it. From a medical, biology, the way things are in the world is that everything in the world has what we call a life span and that people's or animal's or thing's lifespans come to an end. But what makes that end? That's a question that, it's a really big one.

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[Jane] So I'm going to turn that question over to you. Why do you think people have to die? If you're listening with an adult why don't you pause this podcast for a minute and take some time to discuss this. Ask your adult what he or she believes and then tell them what you think. Or, maybe just take a break. These are really big questions and

sometimes it helps to have a few moments to just think and reflect and breathe. I'll play a little music for you.

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[Jane] OK. Back to our questions. The next one is from Hoby.

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[Hoby] I am 4 and my question is, what happens to people when they die? And I live in Fairfield, Vermont.

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[Jane] What happens to people when they die?

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[Jana] Well, Hoby, that's another big question. Thank you for asking it. And you know, there's two things that we think about. When someone dies there's the, like, what actually happens to their body? And, when someone dies, it means that their body has stopped working, so all the things that you might be feeling in your body - like if you put your hand on your chest, you might feel your heart beating or if you put your hand over your mouth, when you take a big inhale and exhale, you'll feel yourself breathing - those things all stop when somebody or an animal dies. So they're not breathing, they're not sleeping and waking up anymore they're not needing to eat breakfast. So everything that makes their body move, that stops. So that means that a body has stopped working. So that's one part of the question. And then the other part that a lot of kids wonder about is, like, well what happens then to that person's body when they die? And there's lots of different things that families choose to do when someone's body has stopped working. And a lot of it will depend on, you know, what does your family do traditionally? What does the person who died, do they have a wish that they wanted to have happen to their body when they died? And the most important part in all the different things that can happen to a body is that the person can't feel anything anymore. So the body doesn't feel pain and doesn't feel cold or hot or any of those things. And, you know, there's a lot of different things that people do. Some of the really common ones are some people will choose to be buried, which means that the body goes into a box of some sort, often called a coffin or a casket, and that can get buried under the ground. Some people will choose to have their casket or their coffin put in a building called a mausoleum, which is a building where lots of other people's caskets and coffins are put sort of into a wall and they might have their name or a picture on the outside. And then some people choose something called natural or green burial, which is where they are buried in the ground without all of the boxes and the caskets and the coffin. And then they, their body, goes back into the ground. Some people choose something called cremation, which is a really big word. And it really just means that the person's body- that can't feel anything or sense anything anymore- goes into a room that gets really, really hot. And then after a while, what's left behind are things that they often call ashes. And sometimes it looks like sand or it looks like kitty litter. So they'll be about, you know, about the size of a bag of flour or so, of those what they call ashes. And some families will take those ashes and they'll bury them in the ground or they will keep them at their house in a special container called an urn, or they might take them and scatter them in different places; maybe the favorite place of the person who died.

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[Jane] Jana, you mentioned that something called green burial, where a person's body is put in the ground and the body, you said, returns to the earth. And maybe this is helpful to think about when pets die, too. Often, if you have a dog or a cat or a hamster, you might

bury it in the ground. And what happens next, when you say, “returns to the earth,” can you describe that for people?

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[Jana] So with the natural burial as the body does something we call decompose, which is a really big word for that, all the different parts of the skin and the hair and the bones, they change. And so they don't look the same way. And they turn into basically, like the dirt, just like as you would if you have the leaves that fall off the tree, and if you leave them on the ground, they also decompose and become soil again.

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[Jane] One of the wonderful things about that is that's how new life grows; new trees grow out of the dirt. And as you said, it's plants that have died and have gone underground and they become that earth again and so then new things grow out of it, which is a pretty wonderful way to think about it.

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[Jane, cont.] If you've lost someone you care about, it's OK to ask the grownups around you “What happened to their body?” The most important thing to remember is that death means that their body has stopped working so they can't feel anything anymore, including pain. Our next question is from Silas.

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[Silas] I live at Andover and I'm five years old. My question is, what does it feel like when you are dead?

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[Jana] Well, Silas, that again is another question that people have been wondering about and thinking about forever and ever and ever. And my honest answer to that is: I don't know because I haven't died. So I don't actually know what it feels like. And I haven't had a chance to talk to anybody who has died and asked them what it feels like. What we do know is that because the body stops working the person isn't feeling any of the same things that you would feel when you're alive; like you won't feel the air on your skin or you won't feel hot or cold; you won't feel pain. But in terms of what does it feel like once you are dead, that's another good question where it might be helpful to talk to the people in your life and your family. Talk to your parents and your caregivers, other people in your community about what they think and you might come to your own decisions about that.

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[Jane] What happens after we die to our consciousness? Or, some people would say, “our soul is very much a mystery.” We just don't know the answer. A lot of people, and different cultures and religions, have tried to answer that question and they've come to different conclusions. Some religions believe in something called the afterlife, or heaven. Others believe in reincarnation: that's the idea that you come back for another life as a different person or an animal or a thing. Or, some people believe that death is simply the natural end of a person's spirit. The one thing that everyone agrees on is that when someone dies they do leave something behind with the people who are living, and that's the memory that you have of that person, or the good deeds they did in their life, or the things that they taught you. We can always think of a person we're missing and what they meant to us and tell stories about that person; share smiles and laughter and memories and even tears. Even though they're dead, we can keep them close to us. As Jana said, if you're wondering about this, please talk to someone. You might realize that you're

adults don't always have a good answer for you, though, because no one really knows what happens after we die. There isn't a right or wrong answer and it's as difficult for adults as it is for children. So let me ask you, what do you think might happen to someone's spirit when they die? And how do you think you can keep the memory and the best things about that person in your heart? Do you have any questions you want to ask the adults right now?

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[Jane] Jana, some of the kids who are listening now will have experienced the death of a family member or someone they cared about very much and we've been talking about some of the science and some of the very matter-of-fact things that happen when people die. But, there are a lot of different feelings that people who are still alive have after someone they care about dies. Often, we call those feelings grief. Can you talk a little bit about what grief is like?

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[Jana] Yeah. Grief is something that everyone experiences when someone in their life or an animal in their life dies. But what grief feels like and looks like can be really different. So there's no one thing that you should or shouldn't be feeling. And grief is also more than just feelings; it's thoughts that we have; it's questions that we have; it's maybe ways that our body feels. So, a lot of things that are, even though it's different for everyone, there are some things that people tend to experience a lot; so some things that are pretty common. So some kids might feel sad. They might feel confused. They might feel really angry. They may feel kind of numb, like they can't feel anything. And some kids will even feel relief, which can be a kind of a weird feeling to have when you're grieving. But for some kids, if someone in your life was ill for a long time and they were in pain, when that person dies, there can be a feeling of relief for that person that they're not in pain anymore. So, you can feel all those feelings, you can feel none of those feelings, you can feel them all at the same time; it can be kind of confusing. The other thing for grief is people can sometimes have changes in how their body feels. So they might have, maybe their sleep gets kind of messed up. They're not sleeping as well as they used to. Or, they might not have, they might not be very hungry, might be hard to find food that sounds or tastes good. They might just feel kind of run down, like maybe they feel extra tired or they have a headache or a stomachache. So there's lots of different ways that people can feel when they're grieving. And it doesn't just look like sadness and tears.

[Jane] And it's all okay? All of those feelings are okay?

[Jana] Absolutely OK. And for kids, sometimes it can be kind of scary, like, "I'm feeling this feeling like maybe I feel pretty angry, but all the adults in my life are crying, so they look sad. Is there something wrong with me that I'm having this feeling?" And all the feelings are okay. What's important is to find something you can do with those feelings. So, if you're feeling angry, it's not okay, you know, to hit or kick your brother or your sister or the cat. But, it is OK to go outside and run around the yard, or kick a soccer ball, or yell at the top of your lungs as long as it's not in the middle of maybe your class or your school time. So, it's really important to figure out: what can I do with this feeling that's going to help me feel comforted? One more thing that comes to mind, Jane, is that for some kids, they can worry that they did or said something that caused the person to die. That's a common fear that kids have, and adults do sometimes, and just to remember that there's really nothing we did or said that caused somebody to get an illness, if that's how that person died. So even if we, you know, say our grandfather dies of a heart attack, and in talking to your

adults, you hear that stress was part of what caused that heart attack- it's not a child's fault if that kid was up late yelling one night. So just a reminder that, you know, we don't have that much control and we aren't causing other people to die. And if you do have those thoughts and feelings like, "oh, I wore that shirt my grandmother hated and then she died the next day. And I'm wondering if that had something to do with it.," maybe go to your adults and talk with them and they can reassure you that it was not your fault.

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[Jane] Who should you talk to if you are confused by your feelings?

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[Jana] I would say to find an adult in your life that you feel comfortable talking to. So, maybe that's one of your parents; maybe that's an older brother or sister; maybe it's somebody at school or at daycare or a grandparent or someone else in your family. And it's OK to just share with them, like, "I have this feeling I don't really know what it means. Can you tell me about a time that you felt this way?" Because you can learn a lot from the other people in your life of what they do when they're having big feelings.

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[Jane] You know, death can sometimes seem really scary to kids and to adults. And part of that is, as you said, we don't know what happens after we die. And part of it is we don't always know when someone is going to die or when we are going to die. So, for any kids listening who are worried or scared about this topic of death, what should they do?

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[Jana] Well, I think you make a really good point that we don't know when people are going to die. And so that can be really scary and can start to think, "oh, my gosh, you know, at any point, anyone could die." And to know that most people live a very long time before they die; it's more of an unusual thing that someone might die younger, but, knowing that it does happen. One thing you can do is ask questions. A lot of times we get scared because we don't have information or we're confused about something. So you might go to your adult and ask them the questions that you have. You can also check in with your adult to find out like, "OK, so what do we do if somebody does have something happen with their body?" and they can remind you that you'll go to the doctor, you'll go to the nurse, that we have medicine that we can take. You can also talk with them about what are the things they do to take care of their bodies. Do they eat food that is good for them? Are they drinking lots of water or are they getting lots of sleep? Are they exercising? So, you can just check in with your adults. And as a family, maybe talk about what are the things we do to stay as healthy as we can?

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[Jane] Sometimes we are friends with people who are feeling grief and it can be really hard to know how to help someone else who's feeling sad or angry, or who has lost someone they care about, or someone they care about has died. So, do you have advice for people on how to be good friends to somebody who is grieving?

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[Jana] Well, I'd start by saying that being a good friend to someone who's grieving is really an amazing gift. So even just thinking about what you can do to be a good friend is a great place to start. And one of the first things you can do is to think about yourself, like, what feels good to you when you're feeling sad or angry or scared? What are the things that you like? That's a good start there. But, remembering that we're all so different, you

might just ask your friend, just say, you know, “I heard what happened to your aunt and I just want you to know, I want to be your friend. So what would feel good? What would you like to do?” And remember, that for a lot of kids who are grieving the thing that feels really good is just feeling like a normal kid. So maybe they just want you to come over and have a sleepover like you would any other weekend or they want to make sure you can just go play soccer together. So, knowing that you don't have to always do something that's really different, sometimes just showing up and being the friend you've always been is enough.

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[Jana] Being a good friend is a really special gift you can give to someone who's sad or hurting. And you can be a good friend to your parents or caregivers or other adults, too, you know. A hug or a kind word, maybe just trying to be understanding if your friend seems a little bit different for a while, those are all really great ways to support the people you care about. All right, that's all for this episode. Remember, please talk to your adults if death is on your mind. They want to hear what you're thinking and they may be able to help explain things that were confusing to you if anything didn't make sense in this episode. And we want to hear what you're thinking, as well. You can tell us what you thought about what we talked about today, or, send us questions on any topic you're wondering about. Send them to questions@butwhykids.org. Have an adult record you on a phone using a memo function or if speaking is difficult for you, or you feel too shy to do it, you can have an adult e-mail us your question. I also want to tell you two things about where you can find this podcast: if you use Apple podcasts to get your episodes you can now find a new landing page just for kid's podcasts. Go to [Applepodcasts.com/kids](https://applepodcasts.com/kids). It's just for kids shows and it's an easy way to find a lot of really good programs, including ours. Another way to do that is to download a new app called The Kids Listen app.

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[Jane, cont.] That's one where we're in it, and a bunch of other kids podcasts, and there are curated lists of episodes. There are also podcasts for kids that are grouped by age group. So, if you're four or five and you want to find some podcasts that are great for four and five year olds, there's a list there. And if you're eight, nine, ten, eleven and you want a different set of podcasts, there are ones that are geared specifically to you.

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[Jane, cont.] So you can find all of that information by downloading the Kids Listen app. But Why is produced by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm, at Vermont Public Radio. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. Other music in this episode comes from Podington Bear. We'll be back in two weeks. Until then, stay curious.