

## Article

# Nonreligious Afterlife: Emerging Understandings of Death and Dying

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**Abstract:** Death Cafés are informal events that bring people together for conversations about death and related issues. These events connect strangers from across a range of backgrounds, including healthcare workers, hospice volunteers, and funeral directors, among others. Based on an analysis of focus groups and interviews with Death Café attendees, this paper explores how participants construct and express conceptions of the process of dying and what happens after we die. Ideas about the afterlife have historically been shaped by a religious outlooks and identities. However, nonreligious lifestyles have shifted how people understand death and dying. We suggest that notions of continuity of life are not the purview of religious people. Rather, participants in Death Cafés draw simultaneously on many ideas, and reveal ways of conceptualizing life after death—in various forms—without the guidance of religion. Based on conversations with attendees about their outlooks on death (and what may happen after death), our data reveals four main typologies of afterlife imaginaries, which we label cessation, unknown, energy, and transition. Among the diverse perspectives shared, we argue for the emergence of an immanent afterlife outlook.

**Keywords:** nonreligion; death and dying; Death Café; afterlife; nonreligious afterlife



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## 1. Introduction

Death Cafés are informal ‘pop-up’ events where people gather to discuss death, dying, and related issues. The Death Café website boasts that events take place in over 85 countries (Death Café n.d.). However, the majority of events take place in the United States and other English-speaking countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Those who attend come from a range of backgrounds—including healthcare workers, hospice volunteers, and funeral directors, among others—and have various motivations for attending. Some have received a terminal diagnosis and are preparing for their impending death. Others have recently lost a loved one and are seeking a place to understand the emotional impact of that experience. Some are in the midst of caring for a dying friend or relative. Some also participate because they have long been fascinated by death, and seek to explore it from historical, ethical, and philosophical perspectives.

Religion has played an important role in framing social responses to death. It has also been a resource for individuals as they face death themselves, or try to process dying, suffering, grief, and bereavement of those close to them and more generally<sup>1</sup>. Questions surrounding death—what happens to someone when they die, what rituals should commemorate death, what constitutes a ‘good death’—have often been answered by religious texts, institutions, and authorities. However, as a result of declining religious affiliation and participation, and increasing numbers of people identifying as atheist, agnostic, humanist, or spiritual, the place of religion in framing death and dying is gradually diminishing (Walter 1994, p. 3; Dawdy 2021, p. 6). The decline of religion is particularly relevant to Death Cafés, given that they most often take place in Western, English-speaking countries<sup>2</sup>. The countries in which Death Cafés are most popular, including the US, Canada, UK, and

Australia, have all experienced a decline in religious belief, behavior, and belonging (Kasselstrand et al. 2023, pp. 171–80)<sup>3</sup>. As religion's authority on death has waned, space has opened for new or reconstituted possibilities for understanding the existential issues that death raises. As a result, rituals, death-related practices, and beliefs about what happens when a person dies are changing (Beaman 2023a, 2023b)<sup>4</sup>. Death Cafés represent one of the new responses to confronting or understanding death in non-institutionalized contexts.

Although Death Cafés are, to some extent, a global phenomenon, they occur most frequently in Western, English-speaking countries. Richards et al., who track the 'global spread' of Death Cafés, suggest that even when they are held outside of Europe and North America, the organizers often have "strong links to, or recently returned from, the Anglosphere" (Richards et al. 2020, p. 558). This cultural backdrop—in which Christianity was formerly dominant but has since declined—inevitably shapes the perspectives that people bring to Death Cafés and the discussions which take place. Noting the decline of religion, Callum Brown urges reflection on "what people are adopting in lieu of religion" (Brown 2017, p. 9). Similarly, Beaman and Beyer encourage examining "narratives about religion, spirituality and meaningful life events" (Beaman and Beyer 2013, p. 130). As spaces where people from religious and nonreligious backgrounds discuss outlooks on dying and possibilities after death, this paper provides a data-driven investigation of the afterlife ideas that people construct in Death Cafés. We focus especially on the little-researched area of nonreligious conceptualizations of the afterlife, exploring the ways that people make sense of life after death without religious frameworks. We conclude that many people who attend Death Cafés share an immanent understanding of death. William E. Connolly describes immanence as "a philosophy of becoming in which the universe is not dependent on a higher power" (Connolly 2011, p. 43). Participants articulate numerous possibilities for continuing life, with no reference to higher, external forces.

## 2. Death Cafés

Inspired by Swiss sociologist Bernard Crettaz, who developed the idea of 'café mortels' (Crettaz 2010), Jon Underwood formally established Death Cafés in England in 2011 (Miles and Corr 2017). The Death Café website describes its goal as aiming "to increase awareness of death" in order to help "people make the most of their (finite) lives" (Death Café n.d.). Aside from a central website, which contains resources and information about upcoming events, there is very little organizational oversight over the thousands of events that happen worldwide.

Death Cafés have no fixed location or space; hosts rent space in a bar, café, library, funeral home, or church for an hour or two. During the COVID 19 pandemic, they also moved to virtual spaces. There is no vetting process to become a host; anyone who wants to host a Death Café event can do so. What happens at each event is free-flowing, covering many topics and perspectives. Participants may discuss issues in pairs, small groups, or with everyone gathered in a circle. Finally, while most events have a contingent of regular attendees, Death Cafés aim to foster conversation between strangers.

With their provocative name, Death Cafés often capture local media attention (see, for example, Macdonald 2022; Meagher 2022; Mesbah 2023). Often referencing a recent event, media coverage typically describes what happens in a Death Café and concludes that people yearn for greater discussion on the topic of death. There is also a small selection of scholarly literature that explores Death Cafés. Several articles are historical, addressing the development of Death Cafés and the possible motivations of organizers or attendees (Miles and Corr 2017; Nelson 2017; Seifu et al. 2022). Reflecting the contexts in which most Death Cafés take place, research mostly focuses on either the US or Britain (Miles and Corr 2017; Koksvik 2020; Parry et al. 2021; Seifu et al. 2023)<sup>5</sup>. This cultural backdrop generally shapes the participants who attend and the conversations that take place at Death Cafés<sup>6</sup>.

The majority of research approaches Death Cafés from the perspective of healthcare. Several studies suggest that Death Cafés are a useful tool for healthcare students and professionals, addressing stress, trauma, or burnout among people who confront mortality every

day (Adler et al. 2015; Bateman et al. 2020; Chang 2021; Hammer et al. 2019; Nelson et al. 2018). Other studies look to Death Cafés as a model for training healthcare professionals in having more compassionate conversations about death and dying with patients (Laranjeira et al. 2022; Ito et al. 2023). Healthcare workers are acutely impacted by death and dying given the nature of their work, and this may explain why many Death Café attendees have backgrounds in healthcare. Attendees and organizers often include palliative care nurses, people who offer alternative medicine/wellness services, and part-time volunteers in healthcare settings<sup>7</sup>.

Our work extends beyond this focus on the practical benefits of Death Cafés to instead explore how those who participate in them understand death, dying, and what happens after death<sup>8</sup>. Our analysis shows that societal shifts in religious affiliation are reflected in the ways that those who attend Death Cafés understand and talk about death. Rather than understanding death and its aftermath in terms of transcendence, many participants develop immanent narratives of an afterlife.

Thus far, only a handful of researchers have theorized the phenomenon of Death Cafés. Fong (2017) characterizes Death Cafés as a new social movement that helps people develop greater awareness of their mortality and values. Applying Bauman's concept of liquid modernity, Koksvik and Richards (2021) theorize Death Cafés as 'peg communities' that help people to cope with dislocation and loneliness in the (post)modern world. Looking at Death Cafés and other groups that fall under the broad umbrella of 'death positivity', Koksvik (2020) similarly argues that neoliberal forces encourage individual responsabilization for navigating death and end-of-life issues. Bracketing the issue of what sort of community forms through Death Cafés, we focus on the ideas that are shared and the narratives that are constructed. Our research partially builds on that of Koksvik and Richards, who highlight the fact that changing circumstances have caused people to look to new sources for answers to longstanding questions. In contrast to their focus on modernity and neoliberalism, our research examines the substantive content of nonreligion and asks how this shift has opened the possibility of finding answers to existential issues in new places. Our research also aims to address a gap which has hitherto been under-examined in research on Death Cafés: the role of religion. There are a few exceptions, such as Baldwin, who addresses the religious affiliation of facilitators (Baldwin 2017, p. 3). Koksvik and Richards (2021) and Seifu et al. (2022) also draw attention to the decline in religious affiliation and participation, and argue that this forces people to find alternative solutions for issues that were typically the domain of religion. However, their research largely attends to other themes, and this is the extent of their engagement with religion. Our project builds on this limited but important literature to more closely observe the religious and nonreligious discourses that circulate in Death Cafés. This includes exploring ideas and practices at events, mapping narratives of death and dying, and critically examining the circulation of transcendence and immanence in reflections on life after death.

### 3. Nonreligious Afterlives

In much of the research on afterlife, the dominant lens through which outlooks are understood is terror management theory (TMT). This popular theory argues that people ameliorate the anxiety caused by confronting mortality in two ways: subscribing to belief in literal immortality or living virtuously in alignment with cultural values (such that one is remembered fondly, achieving symbolic mortality) (Ai et al. 2014, p. 316)<sup>9</sup>. Extending from the comforting promise of literal immortality—often presented in the form of an afterlife—TMT posits that religion reduces death anxiety (Vail et al. 2012, 2020). Our work acknowledges the important research conducted through this lens, though we resist this theory for various reasons.

First, empirical research on TMT historically ignores religion (Jong 2021). When it comes to studies that attempt to map religious afterlife outlooks, efforts are occasionally flawed in how religion is framed. Scholars may default to orthodox views of a given religion (Ai et al. 2014). In other cases, restrictive definitions of religious outlooks only extend to

Christian beliefs in heaven (Cicirelli 2011). Such classifications fail to account for how many religious individuals understand the world<sup>10</sup>. Scholars also sometimes misrepresent (or ignore) nonreligious imaginaries. For instance, since nonreligious people do not believe in “a heavenly paradise waiting after death”, Cicirelli assumes that such people must desire to make “a paradise on earth” (Connolly 2011, p. 129). This may sometimes be the case, but it is hardly a default lifestance among the nonreligious. Rather than inquiring more deeply into how atheists understand death, Christel Manning notes that most studies set up “religion as normative belief vs. atheists’ denial of that norm” (Manning 2023, p. 3). If religion is conceptualized as the default, nonreligious people are imagined to have a religion-sized hole that must be filled, or one that they long to fill.

Despite its popularity, TMT also ignores the fact that nonreligious people develop ways of understanding, coping with, and accepting death. Several researchers attend to afterlife beliefs and practices among nonreligious people (Cave 2015; Engelke 2015; Copeman and Quack 2015; MacMurray and Fazzino 2017; Haimila and Muraja 2021). Some studies specifically measure the level of death anxiety among the nonreligious (Sawyer et al. 2021; Vail et al. 2020) and generally find that this population does not have greater death anxiety than religious believers. Other studies directly compare belief and anxiety among religious and nonreligious people (Wink and Scott 2005; Wilkinson and Coleman 2009; Cicirelli 2011; Vail et al. 2012; Ai et al. 2014). Again, such studies generally confirm that nonreligious people do not face higher levels of death anxiety.

Recognizing that there are diverse religious and nonreligious ways to imagine death, some scholars attempt to map the conceptions of the afterlife that people hold. In its simplest iteration, the possibilities are binary: either something happens, or nothing happens. The opposing sides of this binary are given various names. DeSpelder and Strickland (2015) pose the question of whether death represents “a wall or a door” (p. 565; see also Feifel 1959, p. xiv). Walker (2000) describes an “extinctionist–survivalist debate” which plays out differently in various societies (14). Haimila and Muraja (2021) mark a broad division between annihilation and continuation<sup>11</sup>. Positing that death represents the complete cessation of our physical and mental existence, extinctionism or annihilation is generally framed as the ‘secular’<sup>12</sup> or materialist view (Walker 2000, p. 6). In contrast, survivalism or continuation posits that life carries on in some form. This is generally framed as the ‘religious’ view.

The binary of extinction/annihilation and continuation—and subsequently labelling these ‘secular’ and religious outlooks—fails to capture the more complex ideas that people have about life after death. For instance, a survey of healthcare workers and students found that 85% of the respondents possessed “hope or belief in some form of afterlife”, but only 53% believed in a “specific type of afterlife”, and less than 15% held “traditional religious concepts about eternal life for the soul” (Walker 2000, p. 15). The grey area of precisely what happens is highlighted in two studies that asked the participants questions about a short story where the central character died (Beri et al. 2005; Georgiadou and Pnevmatikos 2019)<sup>13</sup>. While the participants generally agreed that a dead character would no longer feel hungry (biological continuation), even the nonreligious participants hesitated to declare that a character no longer missed or cared for their loved ones (emotional and epistemic forms). Afterlife outlooks are messy, and not always strictly logical or internally consistent. Although several studies acknowledge the complexity of continuation (breaking it down into sub-categories corresponding to soul, mind, and body), they nonetheless analyze their results in ways that reify ‘secular’ versus religious binaries (Burris and Bailey 2009; Haimila and Muraja 2021).

We approach our data from the beginning point of complexity, avoiding this binary to capture the nuance of our participants’ experiences and beliefs<sup>14</sup>. Abby Day highlights that even self-proclaimed atheists may possess outlooks which incorporate supernatural phenomena (Day 2011, p. 99). Similarly, Tim Hutchings writes: “Experiencing and communicating with the dead is not (necessarily) religious, because it is not (always) embedded in a worldview that connects the individual to gods and divinities” (Hutchings 2019, p. 7).

What happens after death is an issue where boundaries between religion and nonreligion often blur.

Recognizing the need for more nuanced analyses, Christel Manning explores afterlife ideas among nonreligious elders. Beyond this population's predominant outlook—"death marks the end of individual consciousness" (Manning 2023, p. 4)—Manning identifies three specific ways that participants imagine death: lights out, recycling, and mystery. Where much previous work has mapped ideas about continuation after death, Manning offers the valuable contribution of expanding the multiple ways in which extinction is understood.

Based on conversations with Death Café attendees, our work both builds on and extends from Manning's to identify categories of afterlife imaginaries. The three categories Manning outlines—lights out, recycling, and mystery—often align with the perspectives that our participants shared. Indeed, some even use the exact same words. Shannon says, "I think the lights go off and that's it", while Mya views death as "the last big mystery"<sup>15</sup>. Less developed in Manning's work, however, is an examination of the complex possibilities that exist within her second category: recycling. While our participants expressed ideas which reflect this concept, we suggest ways to broaden this category. Some of our participants posit that our bodies break down and re-enter the ecosystem like any other dead matter. Others envision recycling as their energy continuing to emanate throughout the universe, in ways that are unseen but sometimes *felt*. Further, contrary to Manning's findings, some of our participants allow for the possibility of continuing individual consciousness. Building on Manning as well as the traditional typologies of extinction versus continuation, we propose a typology that accounts for these nuances, using the categories of cessation, energy, unknown, and transition.

Rather than making declarations about which views are or are not religious, we explore the "in-between-ness" of afterlife beliefs and the "multitude of intersecting social identities" that shape people's outlooks (Day et al. 2013, p. 4). Following Beaman and Stacey (who build on Benedict Anderson and Charles Taylor's work), we are concerned with imaginaries surrounding death. "The power of the term imaginary", they note, "is in its ability to traverse distinctions between religious and nonreligious ways of understanding the world while avoiding thinking of either as unified systems" (Stacey and Beaman 2021, p. 4). To be clear, we are not arguing for a 'religion-like' understanding of afterlife or that, in the end, everyone is spiritual (nor is Manning). We are interested in how people frame and articulate their own understanding of where their beliefs about the afterlife come from, and how ideas about death relate to participants' identities and lifescapes.

#### 4. Methodology

The Nonreligion in a Complex Future Project is a 7-year international study focused on examining the social impact of increasing nonreligion. One area that is particularly rich with possibility is that of death, dying, and afterlife. Approaches to palliative care, rituals of remembrance, burial, and even obituaries are changing. The Death Cafés study is part of this broader program of research. Seeking to focus on Death Café attendees, in early 2023, we contacted Death Café facilitators across Canada and asked them to assist in circulating our invitation to participate through their events and mailing lists. In total, we conducted 9 focus groups with 48 participants, as well as 31 follow-up, one-on-one interviews<sup>16</sup>. The focus groups were held over Zoom, involved between 3 and 7 participants, and lasted one hour each<sup>17</sup>. All focus group participants were invited to participate in a follow-up interview, which lasted anywhere from thirty minutes to one hour.

Conversations covered a range of topics, including how people became aware of Death Cafés, why they attend, and if/how these events have changed their perspectives on death. We also explored broader outlooks on death and dying, such as attitudes towards palliative care and medical assistance in dying (MAID), preferences for body disposition, and most germane to this paper, ideas about what happens when we die.

Our participants were overwhelmingly white, comprising 85.71% of our sample ( $n = 42$ ), and 79.59% identified as women ( $n = 39$ ). Most participants were older, with



44.90% aged 50–69 ( $n = 22$ ) and an additional 32.65% over 70 ( $n = 16$ ). Nearly half of our participants had attended 7 or more Death Cafés (44.90%,  $n = 22$ ), while many had attended at least 3–6 events (36.73%,  $n = 18$ ), and some had only attended 1–2 (18.37%,  $n = 9$ ). The majority of participants had attended Death Cafés in-person (79.59%,  $n = 39$ ), but a large number had also attended virtually (57.14%,  $n = 28$ )<sup>18</sup>. Although our study used convenience sampling, we believe our population is fairly representative of the people who attend Death Cafés in Canada<sup>19</sup>.

Participants represented both religious and nonreligious perspectives. Over one-quarter of participants identified as Christian (26.53%,  $n = 13$ ). Small numbers also identified as Jewish ( $n = 3$ ), Buddhist ( $n = 3$ ), and Baha'i ( $n = 1$ ). Nearly one eighth of participants identified as agnostic (12.24%,  $n = 6$ ), while a small number identified as atheist ( $n = 3$ ). Many participants listed their religion as 'Other' and gave further context in their own words. We combined these participants into a category that we designated spiritual but not religious, or SBNR (24.49%,  $n = 12$ )<sup>20</sup>.

One of these participants explained that they possess: "spiritual beliefs not related to organized religion", which is a nearly exact definition of this broad nonreligious category. More in-depth explanations from these participants include the following: "I hold space for all religious belief, but do not consider myself religious, I lean into spirituality and deep connection to the natural world". Another explains, "I am a spiritual person that believes in a higher power and have a deep connection with nature". When describing their spirituality, several of the participants reference existing in and being connected to nature. Nature is also central to what we describe as an immanent life stance. Whatever happens after death is often considered to occur through connection with the natural world or natural forces rather than intervention from a higher, external power.

Our sample reflects the religious make-up of Canada to some extent, in that the participants were both religious and nonreligious<sup>21</sup>. However, our understanding of religious and nonreligious is much more textured than that encompassed by the relatively rigid categories used in surveys. Since our research is qualitative, there is no sense in which this data set should be or aimed to be representative, but our data offers insights into the broader shifting trends of declining religious (and particularly Christian) affiliation and the rise of nonreligion.

The interviews, both focus group and one-on-one, were transcribed verbatim. We then used open inductive coding, developing codes to account for the themes we identified. We manually coded all transcripts and then analyzed the codes in relation to broader themes. For this paper, we focus on outlooks on afterlife, but as noted, this is only a small portion of the data from the interviews and our codes and themes.

## 5. Findings

Our participants' responses reflected four broad categories of afterlife imaginaries: cessation, energy, unknown, and transition. As noted, some of these reflect Manning's findings in her study of afterlife beliefs among nonreligious elders. Other responses were somewhat similar to those of her participants, and some were entirely novel. In what follows, we outline each category in-depth, along with examples from our data. First, a brief explanation of each type is in order. Cessation maps onto Manning's concept of 'lights out.' In brief, death is final and is the end of individual consciousness. What we term 'energy' is similar to Manning's 'recycling.' However, we identify variations of energy, which point to slightly different ways in which people understand the universe. 'Unknown' also mirrors one of Manning's categories—'mystery'—which suggests that no one knows what happens after death. Finally, we discovered a fourth possibility, which we call transition. This posits some form of continuation after death, which participants imagine as a transition to a new way of being. Although, unlike Manning, our sample includes some religious participants, this outlook was also shared by non-religious people, and therefore points to ways that the lines between religion and nonreligion blur, especially when it comes to death and dying.

### 5.1. Cessation

Several participants see death as the end of human experience and consciousness. This reflects the outlook of extinction, annihilation, or ‘death as a wall’ used in much afterlife research (Feifel 1959; Walker 2000; Cave 2015; DeSpelder and Strickland 2015; Haimila and Muraja 2021), as well as the ‘lights out’ category that Manning identifies (Manning 2023, p. 5). Shannon shares: “I don’t think anything happens. I think the lights go off and that’s it”. Those whose posited cessation often framed their responses through references to science. Vanessa explains: “I’m a scientist by training and so definitely feel like the conscious experience is the product of the brain”, adding, “so when the brain stops working, it seems likely. . . that will be the end of my own personal experience”. Kyle notes, somewhat more briefly, “there’s no scientific evidence that there is [an] afterlife”. Buttressed by references to science, death is seen as very matter-of-fact. Like all other human functions, any form of consciousness will cease upon death.

This category was the most rare, held by only a handful of participants, and most (but not all) identified as atheist. Considering their rejection of supernatural forces and commitment to evidence-based beliefs, cessation is a logical extension. Kyle, however, identifies as a Buddhist, but does not believe in the concept of reincarnation. This suggests that we should reconsider whether annihilation/extinction (or in our words, cessation), is necessarily the ‘secular’ outlook (Walker 2000). The blurry lines between religion and nonreligion go both ways. When it comes to death, some participants who have religious identities reject fundamental concepts from their religion for which they have seen no evidence.

### 5.2. Energy

The most common category we encountered was one we term energy. This posits that human matter or consciousness has resonant effects after death. While this resonance takes various forms, our participants consistently used the term energy. In many ways, energy matches Manning’s concept of recycling. However, we highlight the complex ways in which people imagine and describe energy. For some, energy is a strictly scientific concept. Others describe energy in ways that connect to the natural world, but view nature and energy in idealized, romantic ways. Finally, some draw on energy much more abstractly. To unpack these variable forms of energy, we highlight illustrative examples.

Scientific frameworks supported one variation: imagining energy in a very materialist sense. This reading of death builds on the idea that human bodies break down and produce energy like any decaying matter. Even when participants see death as the end of individual consciousness, decomposition energy is one way that human activity carries on. Vanessa explains: “as a scientist, I also love poetic naturalism. So thinking about my atoms and that I will become all of the things that I love, like waterfalls and sunsets. . . is definitely something that’s comforting to me”. Showing her practical side, she adds, “I might also become a parking lot, which would be far less romantic”. Focusing on the materiality of the human body, and more specifically, the ways it will break down and be “absorbed back into something bigger than myself” is one way that people take comfort in this otherwise clinical reading of death.

Other perspectives within our energy category also reference science, but much less directly. Critiquing past studies of nonreligion and death, Manning writes: “the non-religious are often said to believe in science, but there is little exploration of what that means” (Manning 2023, p. 3). Likewise, participants often indicate that science informs their outlooks, without expanding on what this means. Diana describes her outlook: “I would go probably with quantum physics and just say I continue as energy”. Paul says: “there’s evidence that we’re all energy, as science understands”. Explaining her belief that “we’re all energies and we live within energy”, Abigail adds, “I guess that’s my science-y side”. Granted, participants may avoid expanding on scientific principles for the sake of brevity. Regardless, referencing capital-S Science (Latour 1999) helps one indicate that their belief in continuation after death is based on deep and critical thought about all (scientific and supernatural) possibilities.

Others who reference energy place less emphasis on science, and instead frame their continuing existence within nature. Jordan explains: “I’m very comfortable with the idea that when we die, we become energy and it goes back to the natural world”. Describing why she wants a natural burial, Abigail says, “put me in the ground, just in the ground. . . Like, I’m part of the Earth, I want to be with the Earth”, adding, “I’m great fertilizer”. For Abigail and others who want their remains placed in nature, there is a material emphasis on the human body breaking down and mixing with other organic matter. Death offers an opportunity to become reintegrated with the materiality of the natural world. For others, continuation takes on more supernatural forms. Diana elaborates: “I have this affinity with trees. Well, I would even say I’d like to come back as a tree, but I’m hoping I evolved beyond the tree”. Positing a form of reincarnation, Diana draws on the language of energy, and her desired next form is part of the natural world.

In addition to science and nature, many participants reference energy in fairly abstract ways. This less-specific interpretation is evident in Emily’s explanation: “I believe we’re energy, and I believe there’s a source, whether we call it God or whatever. There’s lots of names for it”. Lance says: “right now this is our energy that we have and we’re manifested in a physical body. And when that body passes away, that energy is going to be going somewhere and hopefully be useful in some places. It’s going to have some bounces here and there”. These participants do not have a clear idea of what happens next, and leave themselves open to a range of possibilities. While they lack clarity, energy best approximates what they consider to be the most likely outcome.

We propose energy as an update to Manning’s typology for two reasons. First, this more accurately reflects the emic language of those who attend Death Cafés. When someone raised this term during a focus group, others often latched onto it, then explained their own understanding of energy. We also propose this slightly reworked category because it makes space for the complex possibilities that people propose. Manning argues that the nonreligious view death as the end of individual consciousness ([Manning 2023](#), p. 10). For some participants, this is surely the case. However, for many, there seems to be a grey area where people posit some form of continuation. We encountered many who believe their energy will continue to resonate; with the people they leave behind, with non-human animals, or with the natural landscape. These explanations are more in line with the soul, mind, and body sub-categories of continuation put forth in other studies ([Burris and Bailey 2009](#); [Haimila and Muraja 2021](#)). Although most posit that the physical body becomes vacant after death, this does not mean that death is considered the end of individual consciousness. For many, consciousness takes a new shape, in the form of energy.

Referencing science, nature, or religious concepts, energy is a concept that is open to multiple lifestances. Energy is a vague concept, yet in the space of Death Cafés, it is recognizable to others. Energy offers a language to capture the clearest articulation of what someone thinks will happen after death. Another possible reason behind this concept’s popularity is the functions it fulfills. First, this outlook reduces the anxiety provoked by death ([Ai et al. 2014](#)). Justine explains: “you know, energy never dies. And I think that’s very comforting”. While not quite the same as religious concepts of eternal life, scientific principles surrounding energy suggest that death might not be final, which can make it less scary. By extension, if energy ‘never dies,’ this leaves space for continuing bonds between the living and the dead<sup>22</sup>. Louise reflects: “I think that energy never dies. So that means that the person’s energy is still always with us. . . I see my dad in the wind, my sister in robins, my niece in water. So I think that kind of gives me comfort”. Other participants shared stories about being able to sense the energy leave someone’s body when a loved one died. Notably, people do not perceive energy as ceasing, but simply leaving the body. Where that energy goes, or precisely what it looks or feels like, is unclear. But for some participants, they can at least still sense that it exists, which brings some comfort.

As a concept, energy exists both within and beyond science. Any scientific evidence that dead matter produces energy (through decay, for instance) supports the idea that dead bodies transfer energy to other living matter. Building on this foundation, some



also understand energy in ways that are not evidence-based or strictly observable, such as ‘sensing’ the energy leave a dying body or connecting with a loved one’s presence in animals and nature. Of all of our categories, energy most strongly reflects an immanent afterlife outlook. The various transformations that might occur after death are made possible through nature, not a higher, external power, reflecting an immanent conceptualization of life after death.

### 5.3. Unknown

Some participants are certain that death represents a significant moment, but what happens afterwards is entirely unknown. Joe says: “if there’s one thing I kind of sense, what one might experience is a loss of all reference points. But what it is, I think it’s beyond thought. And it’s something we cannot wrap our minds around”. Several people note that while they once struggled with having no clear answer, they are now more comfortable with this ignorance. Whitney explains: “I don’t know. And I am, as I am in my mid-life, I am totally softening into that being okay”. Similarly, Justine reflects: “I think it’s okay to have the mystery. And I think that we really don’t have that many mysteries left in life”.

This is yet another of our categories which almost wholly mirrors Manning’s work. She labels her category mystery, a term which many of our participants use specifically. Manning notes that some people find excitement in this mystery, which also reflects our findings. Whitney describes “excitement about the mystery”, adding, “that’s what carries me”. Similarly, Diana says, “I’m fascinated with all of the possible outcomes. . . and I’m really quite excited about when the experience comes”. Rather than causing anxiety or fear, the unknown mystery of death is a source of excitement<sup>23</sup>.

We propose the term ‘unknown’ because, while mystery suggests a puzzle that one can potentially solve, many participants feel that whatever happens after death is truly unknowable (at least while they are alive). Another key way in which our participants differ from Manning’s category is in the possibilities to which they are open. Manning reinforces that in her category, death “surely marks the end of conscious existence” (Manning 2023, p. 10). Among our participants, however, this certainty just does not exist. Kyla says: “it’s a mystery. . . I don’t know what it looks like, but I do believe there is something else”. Brooke explains: “I don’t know exactly what happens. I don’t think our minds can actually conceive of it with the limited way that our minds work in this body”. She then adds: “But I think there is no way the energy stops, right? It moves on in some way. And I’m excited to find out what happens”. Finally, while some participants within our unknown category identify as agnostic or SBNR, others are Christian or identify as practitioners of Indigenous Spirituality. This reinforces the blurriness of afterlife imaginaries between the religious and nonreligious. If death is truly unknown, then for some, every possibility is in play, including the extension of our consciousness.

### 5.4. Transition

The fourth and final category we identify posits that human consciousness carries on after death. The biggest difference between this transition category and those who simply imagine continuing as energy is a stronger vision of the distinct self. Sally says, “I’m fully convinced when I die. . . I’m going to see everybody that’s gone before me. I know that. Even if I don’t see them in person, I just think I’m going to have all their spirits there”. Sally and others do not only imagine their own identity carrying on, but also see reuniting with loved ones. Brandon tells us about the parting words he told his dying mother: “See you next time, mum. . . This life for our next life”. Angela similarly reflects: “I take great comfort in an image that has come to me. . . there’s a sense of them pushing off the shore and being greeted on the other shore”.

Participants express slightly different visions of what the afterlife might look like. The core idea is that death marks a transition between life and some unseen world. Prunella draws a comparison between death and a baby in the womb before birth, adding: “then when we are birthed to the next world, depending on how much we prepared in this world,

we will be ready to live in that world". Other explanations include waking up from surgery or wandering through the wardrobe to Narnia. In all of these descriptions, death marks the beginning of a journey. While the destination or mode of transportation differs, most agree that a transition will take place.

Many of the people who anticipate a transition speak with a high degree of certainty. For some, certainty is supported by threshold stories or near-death experiences (NDEs)<sup>24</sup>. These narratives appear with some regularity in Death Cafés, and they came up in several focus groups. Three participants had experienced NDEs themselves, while several people knew others who did, or they had spent time reading about them. NDEs provide confirmation that (a) something does indeed happen after death; and (b) that 'something' is a fundamentally different sort of existence. These narratives thereby support belief in a transition. Beyond just confirming that consciousness continues, NDEs are often described as peaceful and calm. Eileen reflects on two experiences she heard during Death Cafés: "they said it was so wonderful, it was so peaceful, it was so joyful, they weren't sure they wanted to come back". Positive experiences reflected in NDEs likely further reduce death anxiety, since whatever happens after death will be peaceful.

One's certainty in transition was also occasionally bolstered by experiences of connection with people who have died. Charlene spoke extensively of lengthy conversations with her deceased daughter. Diana similarly referenced her ability to "contact the other side". While there is not always a clear vision of what the afterlife looks like, personal experiences can provide certainty that one's consciousness will transition into some other form of existence.

This category is the most obvious way in which our categories differ from Manning. Her data suggests that nonreligious people definitively see death as the end of human consciousness. While several of our participants who fit into this category identify as Christian or with another religion, some of these participants described their religion as 'none,' agnostic, or spiritual. Similarly, our participants who had experienced NDEs represented religious and nonreligious backgrounds, as were those who mentioned drawing inspiration from these stories. These participants highlight the blurry lines between religion and nonreligion when it comes to afterlife imaginaries. When ideas about transition arose in focus groups, they were not always embraced, but they were always echoed as a possibility that many participants had considered. This mirrors the conversations at Death Cafés themselves, as the attendees ponder a range of ideas about 'what happens when you die.' The categories that we outline represent the ways that the participants in our study talk about the end of life. However, it is important to also recognize the complexity, uncertainty, and adjustments that shape afterlife imaginaries.

## 6. Discussion

In her research on nonreligious elders, Manning outlines three main outlooks on death, which she labels lights out, recycling, and mystery. By proposing our own set of four typologies—cessation, energy, unknown, and transition—our study builds on Manning's work, and also seeks to complicate and expand on it. Manning's concept of 'lights out' strongly overlaps with that of cessation, which was shared by our participants. Many of our participants also reflected Manning's latter category, mystery. The largest overlap, and the most prevalent response among our participants, reflects Manning's recycling metaphor, or what we call energy. We propose our own category to make room for the complex ways in which energy is described. Some approach energy in a strictly practical sense of dead matter decomposing, while others have a more poetic understanding in which they somehow reverberate throughout the universe. Our findings depart from Manning's regarding the concept of human consciousness. She suggests that most nonreligious people see death as the end of human consciousness. In contrast, our (religious and nonreligious) participants are considerably more open to human consciousness continuing.

Notably, our study is based on a different population than Manning's. The elderly participants she spoke with had not necessarily confronted death by choice, but as a matter

of life course. In contrast, while some people begin attending Death Cafés after grappling with aging or their own health concerns, most elect to start exploring death when they still have many years ahead of them. In other words, our participants more actively and more consciously confront death. Further, Death Cafés are not solely a space for the non-religious. When combining atheists, agnostics, and SBNRs, over 40% of our participants identify as nonreligious. However, many of these people consider that their individual consciousness may continue after death. Likewise, our participants who identify as religious possess afterlife imaginaries that mirror the nonreligious. Unlike previous studies which establish a binary between secular and religious outlooks, the imaginaries that circulate in Death Cafés reflect an exchange of ideas from various sources of inspiration.

As noted, our concern is not to define which of our categories are religious versus nonreligious. Nor were we necessarily always concerned with each participant's religious/nonreligious identity. However, it is worth at least mentioning the different frameworks on which people draw to construct their imaginaries. Many participants referenced both religious and nonreligious sources of inspiration<sup>25</sup>. For example, Ellen talks about the fact that while she was raised agnostic, she has also “dabbled in many different things”. Similarly, Diana has “varying beliefs depending on the time of my life and whether I’ve been studying Buddhism or yoga or Catholicism or talking to anybody from other religions”. Even when people no longer affiliate with religion, the traditions in which they were previously involved can impact how they imagine or understand the world. Jeffrey explains: “Depending on what you were taught, I think it’s very hard to liberate yourself from your early experience. . . of what you witness the beliefs are in a society. They’re sort of imprinted”. This fits in line with general findings that the surrounding context continues to shape the lifestances of the nonreligious (Brown 2017; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2020; Blankholm 2022). In the Canadian context, this means that while many have drifted away from visions of God, heaven, and hell, afterlife imaginaries still often reflect the possibility of continuing on in some form. Concerning other sources of inspiration, both religious and nonreligious participants reference science, nature, and literature as informing their perspectives. Participants often explore a multitude of ideas on their own, and Death Cafés offer exposure to additional perspectives. By encouraging conversations between people possessing different lifestances<sup>26</sup>, Death Cafés allow people to reflect on the ideas that they hold and the perspectives that other adopt. Many attendees settle on afterlife imaginaries which reflect a blend of various sources.

Beaman describes immanence as the idea that “something must be done here and now, by us, urgently” (Beaman 2020, p. 245). In addition to the types of afterlife imaginaries that people possess, immanence also highlights participants’ motivation to attend Death Cafés. In response to what they see as a ‘death averse’ North American society, people seek to actively confront and come to terms with mortality (Koksvik 2020; Incorvaia 2022). Participants deem this outlet necessary because there are so few other places to have what they call “deep” or “real” conversations. Though the focus of this paper is what happens after death, it is worth emphasizing this driving force among Death Café attendees. People who attend Death Cafés feel that something must be done here and now, by themselves, since no other spaces exist to reflect on death, the afterlife, and a host of other issues in this manner.

Death Cafés are also an example of how people express their beliefs through belonging. Abby Day argues that belief “does not exist pre-formed in the individual but is relationally produced” (Day 2011, p. 193). By attending regularly, talking with others, and sharing ideas, people enact their belonging to the “loosely defined death-positivity movement<sup>27</sup>”. Beyond this broad belief that it is important to talk about death, people express and construct the finer details of how death and dying are understood. The topics discussed at Death Cafés include end-of-life care, mortuary practices, and outlooks on the afterlife, which are important life issues with complex possibilities. Whether people discuss the afterlife through a philosophical lens or explore the legal and ethical issues associated with end-of-life medical care, people navigate issues that are marked by many grey areas. As Day

notes, “one of the ways people resolve the ‘grey’ is through talking with other people” (205). Conversations at Death Cafés allow people to reflect on and construct their outlooks and “resolve the grey”.

We do not suggest that Death Cafés are the only spaces or communities where people reflect on these ideas. Participants often told us that they do considerable research and reading outside of the interactive space of a Death Café. Many also work in death industries (as funerals directors, death doulas, healthcare professionals, or hospice volunteers), meaning they confront death on a fairly regular basis. Finally, most participants have rich social lives with family, friends, and other communities. Nevertheless, as a community that spotlights death and dying specifically, Death Cafés offer an outlet for exploration and reflection.

Religion was traditionally a powerful force in understanding and coping with death (Moreman 2018; Cann 2023). Nonreligious people are sometimes characterized as lacking an institutionalized death culture (MacMurray and Fazzino 2017). Research indicates that simply turning to religion at the end of life is neither sufficient nor effective for nonreligious people confronting death (Bakker and Paris 2013; Brewster 2014). By making space for religious and nonreligious people (and ideas) to come together, Death Cafés allow people to share and cultivate outlooks that cohere with their broader life stances. There are also various other frameworks, including religion, science, popular culture, and what some people describe as spirituality, which shape how people arrive at their afterlife outlooks and practices. These diverse ideas and more all circulate in Death Cafés. Reflecting this blend of attendees and discourses, we found an overall convergence in the types of afterlife imaginaries that circulate. MacMurray and Fazzino (2017) suggest that nonreligious people see themselves as being different from religious people, especially when it comes to death. For the most part, however, and as evidenced in the four categories we outline, we find considerable agreement between religious and nonreligious participants, with perhaps the cessation option standing out as the primary difference. However, as we have noted, the number of those who understand the end of life in that way is small, and this number includes religious participants as well.

Among our four typologies of afterlife imaginaries, the most prevalent idea was energy. For some, energy reflects the scientific concept of decomposition, in which energy is released when organic matter (dead bodies) breaks down. Some also use energy in more abstract ways, such as feeling the presence of deceased loved ones in nature. Reflecting Day’s work on belief and belonging, we believe this is partly a result of how this discourse circulates in a space that our participants regularly attend. ‘Energy’ gives language to express an idea that many people *more or less* agree on. This term is also more open than ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’, which might seem to reflect Christian ideas about resurrection. Energy includes the idea that people might carry on in supernatural ways, but it also encompasses frameworks including science, nature, and poetry.

Overall, our participants reveal an immanent understanding of death. William E. Connolly describes immanence as “a philosophy of becoming in which the universe is not dependent on a higher power” (Connolly 2011, p. 43). Participants express the idea that death is a significant event, and they believe that important transformations occur after someone dies. The ways that people imagine this continuation or transformation are often dependent on nature. This includes Vanessa, who simply sees her atoms breaking down once she dies. This also includes Abigail, who is not quite sure what will happen to her energy after she dies, but knows that she wants to “be with the Earth” when she is buried. Nature is also central to Louise, who senses continuing bonds with her family through the wind, water, or animals. Even Charlene or Sally, who see themselves reuniting with loved ones who have already died, imagine and describe these processes without making recourse to a higher, external power. The natural forces of the universe, as they understand them, will facilitate continuation.

## 7. Conclusions

Religious decline has transformed the impact of what was once a major influence on people's outlooks on death. The participants in our study are keenly aware that these issues were formerly understood through religion, but no longer. Abigail explains: "You know, in the Golden Days, you found your community with your church, or any end-of-life ritual was in church. But that's not the reality anymore. The reality is, you find your community in your sports groups or your board game nights or your neighbours". In this new social context, Death Cafés become one space where ideas about death, dying and the afterlife circulate. In Canada and other Western contexts, conversations at these events reflect the specific religious and nonreligious backgrounds of attendees. When it comes to shaping afterlife imaginaries, people reflect on and integrate any ideas which appeal to them. We identify four categories of afterlife imaginaries: cessation, energy, unknown, and transition. Each of these categories encompassed people who include religion in their lifespaces and those who do not. While some people fit best within a given category, there is also considerable fluidity between them. The eddy of ideas that circulate in these discussions suggests that religion does not have a monopoly over informing imaginings of the afterlife. Instead, a nonreligious discourse of immanence shapes the dominant narratives on death and what comes after. A remaining question and area for future research is how, if at all, do these changing ideas about life after death change how one lives one's life?

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Concerning the powerful and longstanding relationship between religion and how groups and individuals understand and confront death, see for example (Moreman 2018; Cann 2023).
- <sup>2</sup> As of November 2023, the official Death Café website lists 223 upcoming events. Of these, 136 are in the United States, as well as 34 in the UK, 16 in Australia, 11 in Canada, and 3 in New Zealand.
- <sup>3</sup> In Canada in particular, from 1985 to 2019, religious affiliation declined by roughly 20% (from over 90% to less than 70%), as did regular participation at religious activities (from over 40% to just over 20%) (Statistics Canada 2021).
- <sup>4</sup> Again, these effects are especially apparent in Western countries, given the rapid decline of religion. As just one example, cremation was previously outlawed in many Western countries, reflecting Christian beliefs around the holiness of the body (Long 2018, p. 42). However, cremation is now the most common form of bodily disposition in the US, Britain, and Canada (Dickinson 2018, pp. 12–13; Woodhead 2017, p. 248; CBC 2020). This shift is connected to religion's decline, and more specifically, changing



views on death and the afterlife. For further discussion of evolving nonreligious rituals around death, see for example [Copeman and Quack \(2015\)](#), who discuss body donation among atheists, and [Engelke \(2015\)](#), who discusses humanist funerals.

Concerning how this geographic context dominates research, it is noteworthy that in [Koksvik and Richards' \(2021\)](#) study, which intentionally recruited participants worldwide, 23 of the 43 participants were from Europe and 5 were from North America. One-third of all the participants were from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and South America, combined.

Though not addressed in most publications, the cultural location where most research on Death Cafés is conducted (again, mostly the US and Britain) also shapes the cultural backdrop of attendees and research participants. More specifically, most Death Café attendees (whether they are religiously affiliated or not) exist in a cultural milieu that was formerly dominated by Christianity but is witnessing a rapid decline of religion ([Kasselstrand et al. 2023](#)).

This employment background in healthcare was also reflected among our sample of participants.

For the sake of brevity, we will hereafter use the term 'afterlife' to encompass all ideas surrounding what happens after death. We acknowledge that the term afterlife is occasionally presumed to indicate that something indeed does happen after death (that is to say, afterlife negates the idea that death is the total end of existence). We reject this assumption of the term and to what it refers, and seek to employ 'afterlife' as a neutral, concise term to refer to the period following physical death.

For a more in-depth overview of terror management theory, its development, and applications, see ([Greenberg et al. 2014](#)).

For instance, ([Kasselstrand et al. 2023](#), p. 136). Instead, people find comfort in their "secular beliefs and values" (p. 136). Their work pushes back against arguments that religion is the only available or desirable compensator to which people will inevitably turn when a crisis or tragedy (like death) occurs, or that people will become more religious as they age (and start to contemplate or confront death) (p. 134).

Several studies also extend beyond this binary approach to make room for greater complexity in the outlooks people possess. For instance, ([Ai et al. 2014](#)) developed a Connection of Soul scale with three categories, including secular, cosmic-spiritual, and God-centered outlooks. [Burris and Bailey \(2009\)](#) constructed an Afterdeath Belief Scale with five variations: Annihilation, Disembodied Spirit, Spiritual Embodiment, Reincarnation, and Bodily Resurrection. [Haimila and Muraja \(2021\)](#) similarly nuance their division between annihilation and continuation with various sub-groups that align with the body, spirit, or social ties.

We use the term 'secular' in scare quotes to highlight that while it is not our preferred way of characterizing that which is not traditionally religious, it is the preferred term/concept in much of the literature on nonreligious afterlives.

Although one was directed towards adults ([Georgiadou and Pnevmatikos 2019](#)) and the other towards children ([Berl et al. 2005](#)), both studies employed fairly similar methods and had similar findings regarding how people evaluate possible levels of continuation.

We find [Furseth's \(2018\)](#) notion of religious complexity a particularly useful framework for understanding the overlapping and sometimes contradictory ways in which religion, nonreligion, secularization, and differentiation/de-differentiation (among other factors) simultaneously shape individuals, groups, and societies.

The names of all participants have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Due to scheduling conflicts, some of the participants were unable to attend a focus group. These participants were instead asked to participate in a one-to-one interview. The total sample of participants was 49 people.

The focus groups and interviews were conducted over Zoom in an effort to include perspectives from across Canada and maximize convenience for the participants. Most of the focus groups included participants from at least two different provinces (and in most cases, three or four), allowing for more diverse conversations. Since many Death Cafés also take place via Zoom, this was a format with which participants were comfortable.

Becoming especially popular during the COVID-19 pandemic, many Death Cafés are offered via Zoom, increasing the accessibility of these events and allowing people to attend events 'hosted' anywhere in the world. Participants generally agreed that attending Death Cafés in-person or virtually produce different experiences, though each setting has its own advantages and disadvantages.

One of the authors has attended several Death Cafés hosted in Toronto, southern Ontario, and Halifax and confirms that this demographic (white, female, and middle-aged or senior) generally reflects the average attendee at these events. Additionally, several participants spoke about how these events are predominantly white, female, and older spaces. Finally, this make-up of participants generally conforms to the samples in other studies on Death Cafés ([Richards et al. 2020](#); [Seifu et al. 2023](#)).

SBNR is a scholarly label used to describe people who are concerned with spirituality but prefer to explore these interests outside of organized religion ([Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2020](#)).

For context, the 2021 Canadian census found that 53.3% of the population was Christian, while 34.6% reported having no religion ([Statistics Canada 2022](#)). In our sample, 26.5% of participants identify as Christian ( $n = 13$ ) while 18.3% identify with some other religion. In contrast, 42.85% of participants identify as atheist, agnostic, or as SBNR. An additional 12.24% responded with 'Other' or 'Prefer not to Say.' This means that nonreligious identities are over-represented among our participants, while Christians are slightly under-represented. Other groups in our sample were also over-represented relative to Canada's population. For instance, Jewish people make up 1.1% of Canada's population ([Statistics Canada 2022](#)), though 6.12% of our sample identify as Jewish. Meanwhile, the second-largest religion in Canada, Islam, was entirely absent from our sample. Hindus and Sikhs were also notably absent.

- 22 Within research on grief and bereavement, the theory of continuing bonds suggests that it is typical and even healthy for people to maintain a relationship with “a significant dead person”, like family and friends, after they have died (Klass and Steffen 2017, p. 4).
- 23 It is worth noting that this is one way in which our findings challenge TMT, since these participants do not have a clear idea of literal immortality, but greet this mystery with excitement rather than anxiety. Granted, TMT suggests that death anxiety may also be mitigated by trying to gain symbolic immortality or leaving a lasting impression (Vail et al. 2020). However, this goal was not mentioned by all participants, suggesting that some are truly comfortable with the unknown possibilities after death.
- 24 Near-death experiences (NDEs) describe people who have been resuscitated following a period of clinical death or an event in which they nearly died. In the stories that people share, they may report having out-of-body experiences (e.g., looking down on the scene surrounding their own body) or witnessing a bright light. Others report speaking with or hearing from other beings or disembodied voices. For a more in-depth discussion of NDEs, see (Shusan 2018).
- 25 This reflects the findings of Klůzová Kráčmarová et al., whose study of non-religious Czech adolescents found that participants who believed in continuation combined Christian concepts with ideas from Eastern and New Age religions (Klůzová Kráčmarová et al. 2019, p. 68). Singleton’s study of young people in Australia similarly finds that people blend various ideas in constructing their outlook on death (Singleton 2012, pp. 459–60).
- 26 A note regarding how religious ideas are welcomed at Death Cafés is in order. The Death Café organization actively encourages openness to diverse perspectives, with the caveat that people should not promote or ‘push’ their own beliefs on others. The guidelines on their website (which many facilitators read before events) indicate that discussions should have “no agenda, objectives or themes” (Death Café n.d.). Elsewhere, they state that attendees should have “no intention of leading people to any conclusion, product or course of action” (Death Café n.d.). Our participants also discussed the importance of maintaining openness. Many mentioned the diverse backgrounds of the attendees and the ideas shared, and few reported negative experiences of being coerced to adopt a given belief or agenda. Overall, participants shared the outlook that they are open to hearing ideas, but dislike views being forcefully asserted. They enjoy the freedom of being able to ignore or engage with whatever they choose.
- 27 The ‘Death Positive’ movement is a broad term used to describe loosely organized groups and individuals who seek to reverse the institutionalization and de-personalization of death through events, lobbying, media, and other forms of community connection. Death Cafés are one group/activity that fits within this wider umbrella (Koksvik 2020). For a more in-depth background, see (Incorvaia 2022).

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