



FEN's Fifteen Conversation-Starting Favorites

Most of us haven't spent much time considering the possibility of self-deliverance, and we certainly haven't sat down to discuss it with our loved ones. How do you start that kind of conversation anyway? Voilà, the following list contains a selection of books, movies, and articles for starting to discuss the possibility of actively ending one's own life, the reasons one might consider that choice, and how different people with different values might approach such a decision. These resources won't provide the answers for you, but they will raise a lot of good questions.

Starting The Conversation About Self-Deliverance

On Their Own Terms: How One Woman's Choice to Die Helped Me Understand My Father's Suicide

Book by Laurie Loisel (2019)

A journalist's memoir about two—which turn out to be three—self-deliverance choices. Her father, Paul Loisel, shot himself outside a Maine police station after informing the author and her siblings of his intention. Not long thereafter she was contacted by a local woman, Lee Hawkins, who, fearing the loss of her independence, planned to end her life by not eating or drinking.

Available from Amazon or Levellers Press: <https://www.levellerspress.com/product/on-their-own-terms/>

The Inevitable: Dispatches on the Right To Die

Book by Katie Engelhart (2021)

A veteran investigative journalist uses six cases studies to delve into the right to die debate. For those who wish to shape their end, it is a difficult road indeed. She concludes the introduction with, "Here we are, in the country that spends more per capita on healthcare than any other in the world, and people were begging for a veterinary solution."

<https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781250201461/theinevitable>

The Sea Inside

Film directed by Alejandro Amenábar (2004, subtitles, 206 minutes)

The film is based on the real-life story of Ramón Sampedro, a Spaniard played by Javier Bardem, who was left quadriplegic after a diving accident in 1968, at the age of 25. He fought for euthanasia and his right to end his life, pointing out that, while the able-bodied are able to end their lives if they choose, he needed help. He ended his life in 1998.

Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qqvyzamlns>

The End Of A Life Well Lived – Rational Self-Deliverance

A Debate Over ‘Rational Suicide’

Article by Paula Span (*The New York Times*, August 31, 2018)

The article provides a balanced survey of the “complex web of conditions contributing to late-life suicide, including physical illness and functional decline, personality traits and coping styles, and social disconnection.” In one corner is all the weight of societal and medical presumption that suicide is always a rash and tragic choice. In the other is Robert Shoots, a bottle of Wild Turkey, and his beloved old Chrysler.

<https://finalexitnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/THE-NEW-OLD-AGE.pdf>

Common Sense Suicide: The Final Right

Book by Doris Portwood (1978, 1983)

This no-nonsense book, pioneering, yet remarkably current, argues that the elderly in poor health have perfectly good reasons they might choose to kill themselves, as the author herself eventually did. There is nothing squeamish about Portwood’s refreshingly up-front approach. Fortunately, much better how-to information is available now than when she was writing.

Available from used book dealers such as AbeBooks, <https://www.abebooks.com/>

When Death Won’t Us Part

Living & Dying: A Love Story

Documentary family film by Sher and Rob Safran (2018, 45 minutes)

An intimate family film documenting the last week of Sher’s parents’ lives. Charlie, a retired surgeon with Parkinson’s, and Francie with heart disease, chose to exit together using Oregon’s Death with Dignity Act.

Film: <https://vimeo.com/257939456>

Deciding to Die, Then Shown the Door

Article by Paula Span (*The New York Times*, August 24, 2011)

The article tells the story of Armond and Dorothy Rudolph, a couple in New Mexico who, after years of discussing their end-of-life values, decided to die together before infirmity robbed them of their ability to live independently. They chose to hasten their deaths by voluntarily stopping eating and drinking (VSED). Four days into their VSED fast, they received an eviction notice—for the next day—from the assisted living facility where they resided.

<https://newoldage.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/08/24/deciding-to-die-then-shown-the-door/>

Right of Way

Film directed by George Schaefer (1983, 102 minutes)

Bette Davis and James Stewart portray an elderly long-married couple who must deal with their daughter’s and then society’s reaction to their decision to take control after one of them is diagnosed with a terminal illness. The film is a little dated, but some things don’t change, and this made-for-television movie explores how private decisions can suddenly become everyone else’s business.

Film: Ask your library or search YouTube for “Right of Way 1983”

Facing Dementia

Alzheimer disease and pre-emptive suicide

Article by Dena S. Davis (*Journal of Medical Ethics*, Vol. 40 Issue 8, 2012)

For those who consider suicide to be a reasonable choice in the face of impending dementia, a major barrier is the difficulty of pinpointing the time to act. Recent advances in the creation of biomarkers that diagnose presymptomatic dementia invite revisiting this complex topic.

<https://jme.bmj.com/content/40/8/543>

Still Alice

Novel by Lisa Genova (2007)

Movie directed by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland (2014, 101 minutes)

Alice Howland (in the movie, played by Julianne Moore), a celebrated Harvard professor at the height of her career, receives a devastating diagnosis: early onset Alzheimer's disease. Fiercely independent, Alice struggles to maintain her lifestyle and live in the moment, even as her sense of self is being stripped away.

Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrXrZ5iiR0o>

The Farewell Party

Film directed by Tal Granit and Sharon Maymon (2014, subtitles, 95 minutes)

This compassionate, dark comedy deals with serious issues. A resident of a Jerusalem retirement community builds a machine for self-euthanasia in order to help a terminally ill friend. His wife does not approve, until forced to acknowledge her own developing dementia. Suddenly, he's not so sure about what he has wrought.

Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwdRGUqTTLU>

Facing Neurodegenerative Disease

The Suicide Tourist

Documentary film by PBS Frontline (orig. 2007, 2010, 55 minutes)

Frontline follows Craig Ewert, diagnosed with ALS, as he and his wife, Mary Ewert, travel to Switzerland so he can end his life with the help of Dignitas, an organization that provides medical aid in dying. Mary Ewert is now Final Exit Network's executive director.

Film: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/suicidetourist/>

Blackbird

Film directed by Roger Michell (2019, 97 minutes)

Having decided to end her own life before further decline due to a neurodegenerative disease, Lily (Susan Sarandon) and her physician husband (Sam Neill) summon their loved ones to their isolated beach house for a goodbye gathering. The finality of the moment acts as a catalyst, and unresolved emotional issues keep bubbling to the surface threatening to derail Lily's plans.

Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9kb6ZJre78>

Voluntarily Stopping Eating and Drinking (VSED)

Rosemary Bowen's Fast

Documentary family film by Mary Beth Bowen (2018, 16 minutes)

Several months after suffering a back injury, Rosemary Bowen, 94 and quite frail, decided that she was ready to die. She asked her daughter Mary Beth to make this video to show others that VSED can be a sensible end-of-life option.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=FpEwH6AKeVA&feature=emb_logo

It's My Right: The Handmade Death of Herta Stürmann

Documentary family film by Jan Stürmann (2019, 25 minutes)

With congestive heart failure, Herta Stürmann chooses to die by *Sterbefasten* or Death Fasting, as it is known in Germany. She and her two sons are determined to reclaim dying, death, and mourning for the family by bringing them into the home and out of the hospital.

<https://vimeo.com/359407878?fbclid=IwAR38-MSS3pzvdKXIFNaRXjZUqOHqiHVpVnEBHBNJWbTN6QBuqIqixBCRa2M>

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