

# Not the Easy Way: The Reality of a Planned Exit

BY DEBORAH ALECSON, FEN VOLUNTEER

I have been a volunteer for Final Exit Network for over four years. My tenure is coming to an end in that I have applied to the Exit Guide Program and have been accepted. I want to share some of what I have learned from hundreds of conversations with strangers in despair about their desire to no longer live given a wide range of reasons, including medical, socioeconomic, and diminished quality of life. Many are seeking what they might once have thought was unthinkable for themselves, support in having a chosen death, while others have been lifelong supporters of death with dignity, making their interest in the Exit Guide Program in alignment with their cherished beliefs about self-determination.



It is necessary to say upfront that ours is a death-anxious and death-denying culture. Most of us do not contemplate our mortality until something happens to us. The cultural mantras are life at all costs and encouragement to fight whatever ails you. The understanding that the right of someone to determine for him- or herself when and how to die is radical. There are also religious taboos against taking such action. Finally, and what I consider to be most significant, is that just talking to others about one's decision to have a chosen death triggers death anxiety and denial, conscious and unconscious.

While many family members who will be directly affected by their loved one's chosen death are supportive and understanding, there are many who challenge this choice. The sort of things expressed can range from, "There are people in worse shape than you," or implying that whatever the person is challenged by is not so difficult to live with. The person may be told that they have not exhausted all treatments or sufficiently adapted to the progression of their conditions. Some loved ones may react by insisting that unless the condition is terminal, that bad, there is no reason to end one's life. In other words, suck it up.

One of my adult son's earliest reactions to my decision, for example, was that I am "...taking the easy way out." My response to him was, "No, actually, it is not easy to end one's life." Deliberately crossing into the unknown, nonbeing, takes courage and determination. Here, it is important to make the distinction between a suicide out of desperation and emotional imbalance and a planned exit based on personal beliefs and commitments. The sentiment of taking the easy way out is pervasive in our culture because suffering to the bitter end is pervasive in our culture.

What is the solution to resistance from others? I would like to think that talking, listening, and the passage of time can move loved ones to a place of acceptance. Clearly, there is grief involved, and

grief is probably one of the most wrenching states of the heart to endure. There is anticipatory grief for the individual and for the loved ones. So, the acceptance of others also depends on the capacity or willingness to feel grief. And grief sucks. But grief is the price we pay for loving someone, and it is the most powerful way to enrich us with the capacity to feel empathy.

Grief is what matures us.

I will end this piece by writing about the emotional process of planning a chosen death. The initial reach-out to Final Exit Network often comes from a place of suffering and an overwhelming exhaustion. It has been astonishing for me to hear about the degree of suffering and the number of years, sometimes decades, of suffering a person has endured before concluding that enough is enough.

Ending one's life is an impetus but also a concept. Moving through the process makes this possibility increasingly real, and that reality is a shift. Even for those who have thought for most of their adult lives that they would want this, trust me, it is a massive shift. Saying goodbye to one's life and loved ones is sobering, to put it mildly. You can have your affairs in order and have made practical decisions, but still, you are embarking on the most consequential decision of your life. There is no coming back from that act, at least that I am aware of.

So, be prepared for the grappling that comes with such a decision and be kind to yourself and those you love and who love you.

*Editor's Note: Deborah, a dedicated volunteer coordinator and mentor to new volunteers, exited in November 2025. True to her nature, it was a well-organized journey. She spent a great deal of time with her son in the final month and had a going-away party with close friends who all signed the shroud given to her by Rande, pictured above, who is a fellow coordinator with a specialty in fiber art.*



Photo at left, Deborah and Pam Bankert at a FEN gathering in 2022.

Photo above, center: FEN volunteer Ann Mandelstamm, Deborah, and FEN board member Rande Laikind at a FEN event.