

WSJ Print Edition



KATHY WANG The author, left, with her mother, Joanne Wang, in 2024.

I Used to Hate Talking to My Mother About Her Death. Now We Do It All the Time.

ABOUT FACE

I see that these grim chats are a way for her to seize some control over a haunting process.

"About Face" is a column about how someone changed their mind.

BY KATHY WANG

TEN YEARS AGO, a bold pink sign went up inside my mother's garage: In Case of Emergency Do Not Resuscitate. Five years later, she put another one on her fridge and another on the wall by her front door.

In my mother's otherwise austere, neutral-toned and clutter-free house, these taped declarations stood out.

When I turned 18, my mother, who was then 58, started speaking with me about death. Her own, specifically. The concept terrified me.

I'm an only child, with older, divorced parents. My father died in my 20s, and I'm close to my mother—a woman who arrived in this country with nothing and forged a livelihood as an engineer. The idea of a world without this capable, essential person was horrifying at the time. It is horrifying still.

My mother's advancing age—she is now 80—has only intensified her morbid musings. She now wants to talk about *how* she might die and *where* she will be buried (she bought a cemetery plot at a discounted rate years ago). She regularly insists that she does not want to be resuscitated (don't be sentimental, she says).

I tried to tolerate these discussions. But when my mother introduced the matter of money, I'd shut down.

My mother has a relationship with money shared by many immigrants. Supporting herself and building a secure retirement has given her life meaning and become a source of pride. Money, her money, is important to her. She wanted to talk about where it was and what to do with it.

But speaking about it at all felt disloyal. After all, we were discussing what I would do with my mother's estate but without my mother—a trade I would never make if I had a say in the matter.

"We don't need to discuss that," I would say. "That's *never* going to happen." It's not that I didn't know death would come—for her, for me and for everyone I love—it's just that I didn't see the point of talking about it.

She relented for years, but one day she pushed back. "I want to talk about this," she insisted. "You know how much I like to plan."

I acquiesced, and we spoke. We hashed out how she wanted to die and what this meant for her assets. We walked through various trajectories and contingencies. We created plans and backup plans.

I thought that would take care of matters, but we have returned to the subject again and again. Everyone has certain stories and topics they take comfort in repeating. For my mother, it's plans A, B and C for her death and estate.

My mother is retired now and sits in her garden for hours and plays games on her iPad and never checks the price tag on a menu. She earned that freedom herself. But there were many things in her over eight decades on this earth that she could not control. Her health, her marriage, the stock market, my choices.

I now understand that our conversations about her death are a way for her to take command of an otherwise haunting and uncertain process. She can take inventory of her accomplishments and approach the eventual end of her life with some peace. The point is not catharsis but a sense—illusory or not—of agency. ✖

The more we talk about death, the more satisfied my mother appears. I've learned to talk about whatever she likes. Kathy Wang's latest novel, "The Satisfaction Cafe," will be published by Scribner on July 1.

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