

Join a life-affirming conversation about death

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BRATTLEBORO -- Let's talk about death.

If that doesn't sound all that inviting to you, you're not alone.

We have an uneasy collective cultural squirm about death. We don't like to talk about it, thank you.

The folks at Brattleboro Area Hospice would like to change that a bit.

On Thursday, June 13, Brattleboro Area Hospice will hold Vermont's first Death Café, from 6 to 8 p.m., at Amy's Bakery Arts Café, 113 Main St.

Members of the public are welcome to take part in a night of conversation with friends or strangers seated at tables in Amy's, enjoying food and drinks and sharing thoughts about any aspect of death, from fears of facing it, to hopes for the after-life.

If that all sounds a little grim to you, take heart. In other places around the world where death cafés have been tried, participants leave feeling uplifted.

"Death is about life. In Western culture and certainly in American culture, we like to hold back. Dying is living. Dying informs living," said Cheryl Richards, hospice care coordinator & bereavement care counselor at Brattleboro Area Hospice. "If we can, as individuals, groups or communities, start letting in the concept of death in easy little increments, we start to learn how to live more meaningfully."

At Thursday's Death Café, people will be seated at tables and encouraged to talk about death, dying, grief, bereavement, near-death experiences and anything else. People from Brattleboro Area Hospice will be on hand to help guide the conversation and perhaps get people started.

From there, the conversations will flow where they will, in a safe, respectful, relaxed and confidential atmosphere. A Death Café is not a support group, or a counseling session or even a workshop. It's simply a group of community members coming together in a relaxed atmosphere, sipping drinks, munching treats and sharing thought-provoking and life-affirming conversation.

The Death Café is open to all ages -- some parents have even brought children, thinking it a good introduction to the topic. It is not recommended for people who are still deeply grieving; Brattleboro Area Hospice has other services that can help those people.

The event is free -- drinks and treats will be sold -- and space is limited to 35, so people are asked to RSVP to Richards at cheryl.richards@brattleborohospice.org or 257-0775, ext. 108.

Those taking part will join a growing international movement. Swiss sociologist Bernard Crettaz is credited with pioneering the concept of a death café. He hosted the first such events in 2004 in conjunction with his research. He later incorporated the results of his studies and these events into his book.

Soon after publication of Crettaz's book, the idea of hosting death cafés spread. Jon Underwood, of London, England, reportedly read about the death café concept in *The Independent*, and decided to host a death café in his home in 2011. They have since become very popular in England.

In 2012, Lizzy Miles, an American thanatologist and licensed social worker, organized and conducted the first death café in the United States, which was held in Columbus, Ohio.

When Richards heard about them, she felt strongly that hosting one would be consistent with Brattleboro Area Hospice's mission of providing programs to dying and grieving community members based on the belief that no one should die alone.

Thursday's Death Café is the first in Vermont.

"One of the things I hope we do more of is get us out there in the community," said Andrea Livermore, Brattleboro Area Hospice development director.

Brattleboro Area Hospice is one of only 200 volunteer non-profit hospices left in the United States providing volunteer-staffed programs to dying and grieving community members. All services are free of charge.

To request hospice care support or grief counseling, to volunteer or to learn more about services offered by Brattleboro Area Hospice, call 802-257-0775 or visit www.brattleborohospice.org. For more information on the Death Café movement, visit www.deathcafe.com.