

A Roper Center Data Review

Facing Death

In medieval times, earthly existence was regarded as a “vale of tears,” a trial to be endured until you reaped your real reward: eternal life in a far better place. To make a modern analogy, life then was kind of like standing in a drab train station, waiting for the express that would take you (you hoped) to Paradise.

I knew a man once who, I am told, spent his final days letting go little by little of things that had tied him to this world. First he ceased to recognize people, in reverse order relative to the time he had known them; then he abandoned the English language and reverted to his native Italian. Finally, just before he stopped speaking at all, he demanded directions to a place he had not been to in over fifty years. Which way, he kept asking, to San Marco Station?

Was he, like some twelfth century burgher, catching a glimpse of promised glory at life’s end?

Or was he simply going home?

I’ll never know, of course, any more than any of us can know about what Shakespeare called “that undiscover’d country from whose bourn no traveller returns.” Of all the subjects explored by polling, none yields views as entirely subjective as death.

Are we afraid of death? We claim we’re not, and the older we get the less frightened we say we are. Dying, however, is a different story. Most of us dread the prospect of great physical pain and of leaving our loved ones behind. We express worries across a whole range of medical, emotional, practical and spiritual considerations, and are most deeply troubled by the possibility of being reduced to a vegetative state, or of not being able to tell someone goodbye before the end.

The shortcoming of these data, though, is that all of the responses are purely hypothetical. How much are they a reflection of people’s cultural upbringing, or of their wishful thinking, or of a desire to appear brave? It is impossible to say, of course; but we can at least gain an alternate perspective by setting these attitudes alongside answers from others who stand much closer to death.

When asked to rate the importance of a similar series of considerations pertaining to the end of life, a sample of seriously

ill patients had strikingly different priorities than the general population. For instance, where more than half of the latter worried very little about having other people make medical decisions about them, for the very sick choosing a decisionmaker was near the top of the list. And while three-quarters of Americans declared a preference to die at home, this desire ranked last on the long battery presented to the patients.

What was first? Being kept clean.

There are, of course, other ways to die besides of chronic disease, but the polls are silent on most of these. The literature, on the other hand, reveals us as culture that demands control over most aspects of life; we extend that imperative to death. Take, for instance, our near-compulsion to find ways to prevent accidental death, death by violence, or, that worst of American nightmares, the death of a child.

In recent years this desire for control has been manifested most clearly in Americans’ growing acceptance of euthanasia. Hoping not to stop death but rather to direct the way it happens, a large majority now supports a person’s right to take his or her own life if that person has an incurable disease, where 24 years ago little more than a third was willing to condone it. Half can imagine a situation in which they might want a doctor to end their own lives painlessly. Still, we continue to reserve this degree of choice for the time when all hope is gone.

Finally, most Americans do not think of death as being the end; and of those who believe in some form of afterlife, the expectation is for a journey of some kind, continued spiritual growth, and a different experience for different people, depending on how they lived their lives. Those lives, we hope, will terminate in a “good death,” one in which we are kept clean, have someone nearby who will listen to us when we talk, have someone to talk for us when we no longer can—

And, maybe, one in which we are given at last the directions to San Marco Station—or whatever is the easiest way to get home.

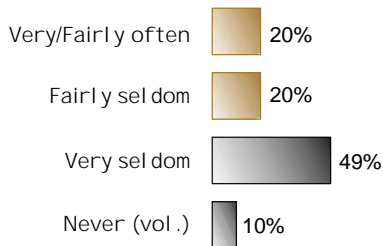
—Lisa Ferraro Parmelee, Associate Editor

Data follow—pages 14-19

Americans Look to Life's End

Question: Most people think about death sometimes. Do you think about death very often, or fairly often, or fairly seldom, or very seldom?

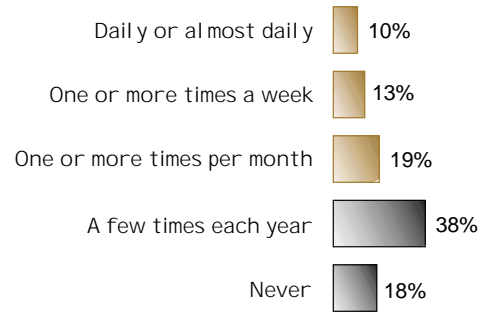
Think about death



Source: Survey by the *Los Angeles Times*, October 20-23, 1999.

Question: Which of the following best describes how often you think about your death... daily or almost daily, one or more times a week, one or more times per month, a few times each year, or never?

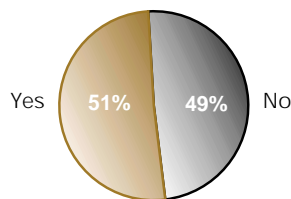
Think about own death



Source: Survey by Yankelovich Partners/*Time*/CNN, September 6-7, 2000.

Question: Have you experienced, or are you currently experiencing, the death of a parent, close friend, or other relative?

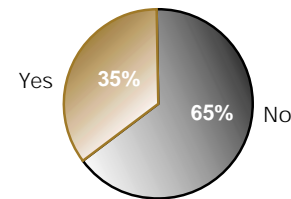
Experienced death of someone close



Source: Survey by Yankelovich Partners/*Time*/CNN, September 6-7, 2000.

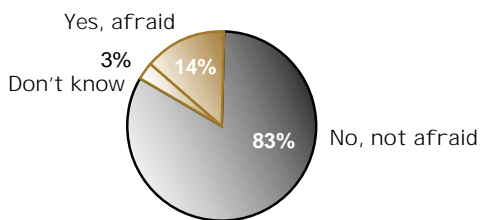
Question: Have you, yourself, ever had a "close call" in which you thought your death was very near?

Had a "close call"

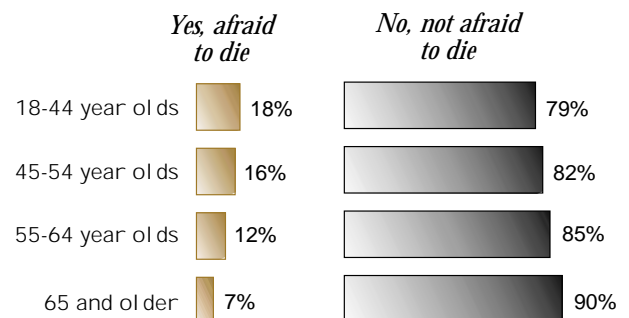


Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for the Nathan Cummings Foundation and Fetzer Institute, May 1997.

Question: Are you afraid to die, or not?



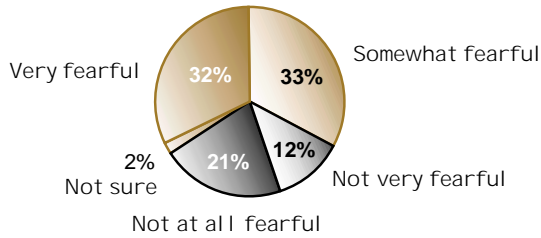
Source: Survey by the *Los Angeles Times*, October 20-23, 1999.



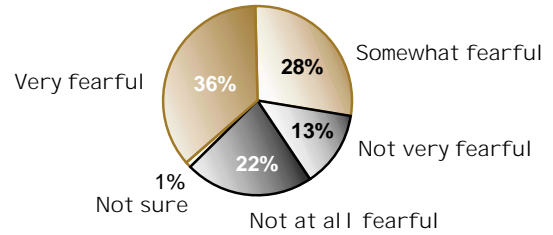
Feared Outcomes

Question: Here are some specific concerns people have about their own death. Please tell me whether you are very fearful, somewhat fearful, not very fearful, or not at all fearful about each of the following when it comes to your own death....

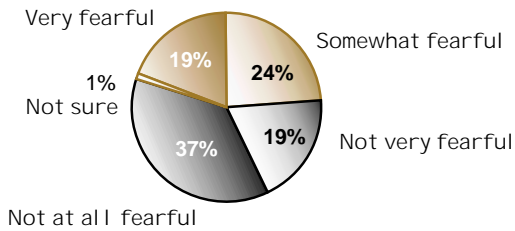
Dying in pain



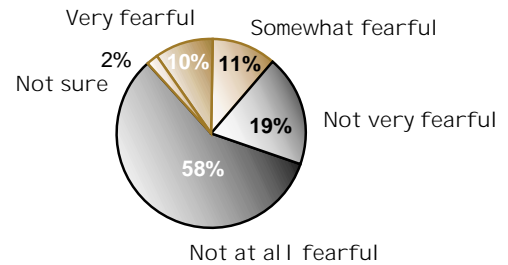
Leaving your loved ones behind



Dying alone



Not knowing what will happen to you after you die

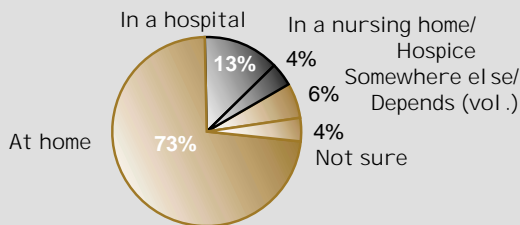


Source: Survey by Yankelovich Partners/Time/CNN, September 6-7, 2000.

Controlling the Where

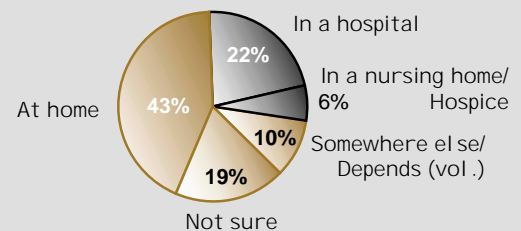
Question: If you had a choice, where would you prefer to die... in a hospital, in a nursing home, in a hospice, or at home?

Prefer to die



Question: Thinking about your own death, where do you think you are most likely to die... in a hospital, in a nursing home, in a hospice, or at home?

Likely to die



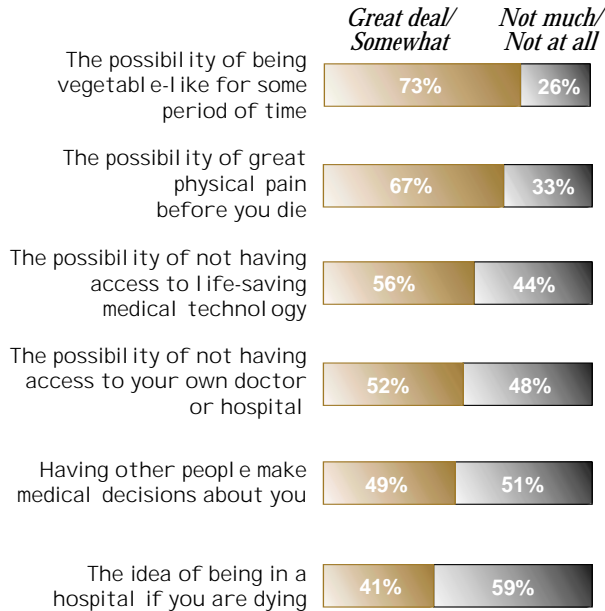
Source: Survey by Yankelovich Partners/Time/CNN, September 6-7, 2000.

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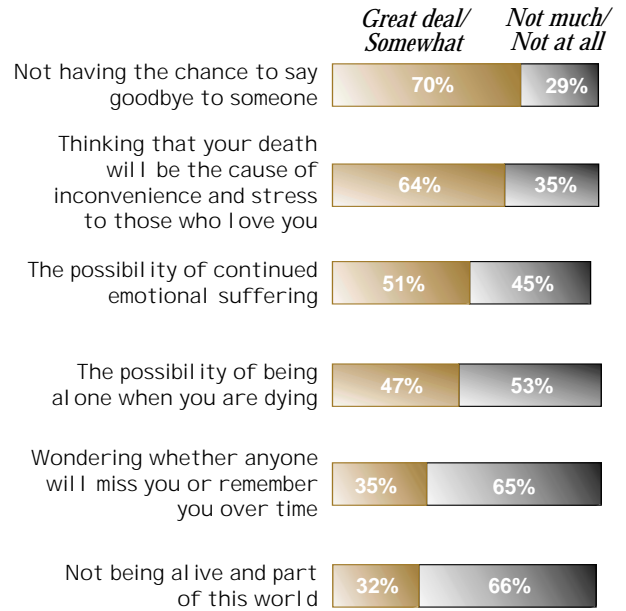
Hypothetical Questions

Questions: ...How much, if at all, does each of these [medical/emotional/practical/spiritual] matters worry you when you think about your own death... a great deal, somewhat, not much, or not at all?

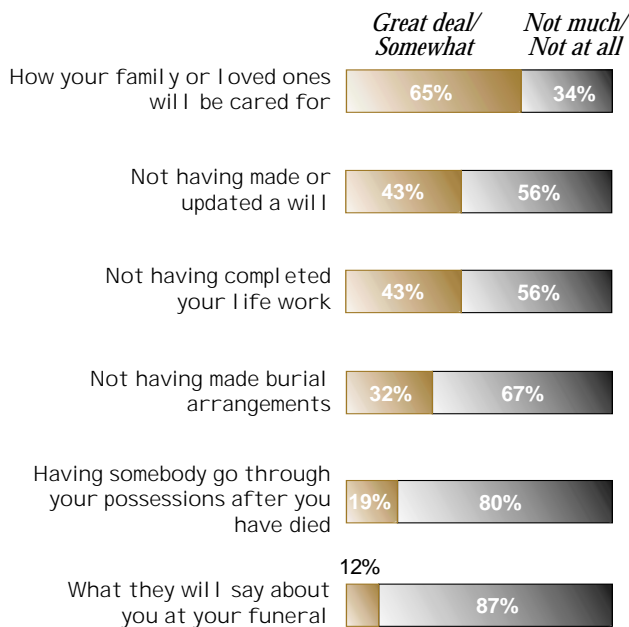
Medical matters



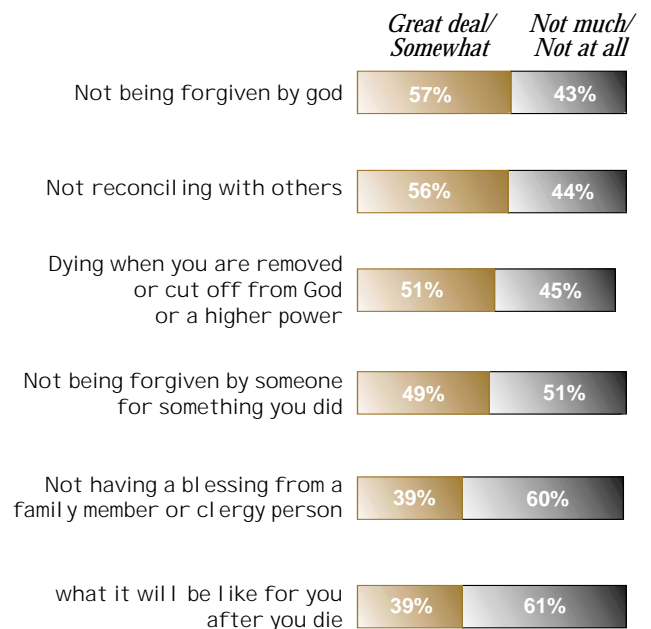
Emotional matters



Practical matters



Spiritual matters

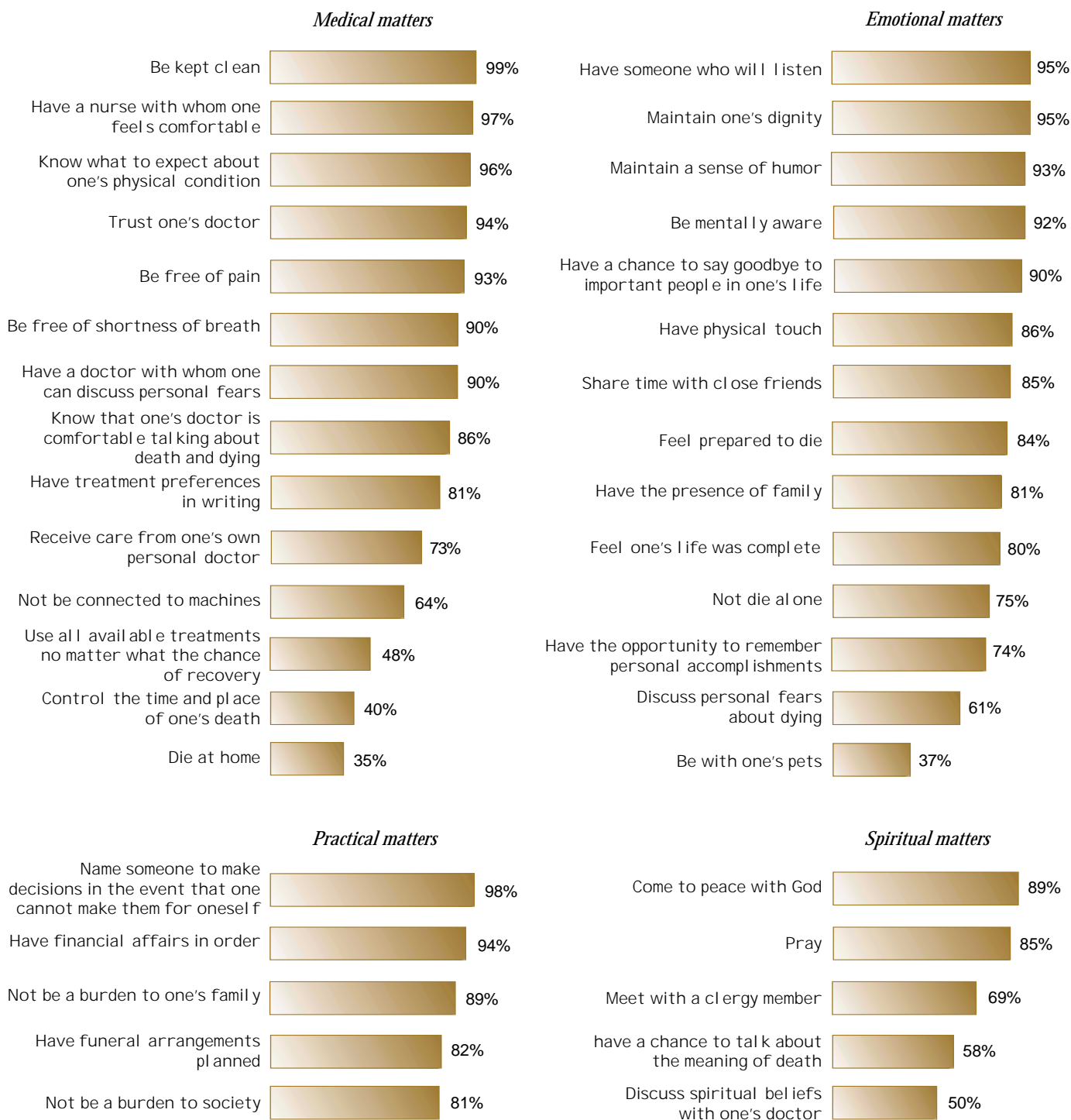


Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for the Nathan Cummings Foundation and Fetzer Institute, May 1997.

Closer to Real

Question: We are interested in learning what you believe, from your experience, to be the most important considerations at the end of a person's life. At the end of each statement, please circle the rating which best reflects your feelings.

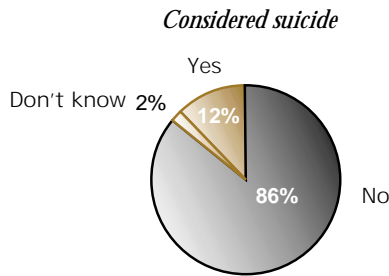
Percent responding strongly agree or agree



Note: Sample of 340 seriously ill patients who were randomly selected from the National Veterans Affairs Patient Treatment File database. Criterion for selection was hospitalization within the past year for an advanced chronic illness.
Source: Survey by Karen E. Steinhauser, et al., Program on the Medical Encounter & Palliative Care, March-August 1999.

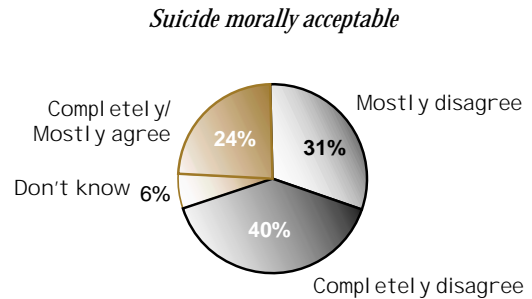
Dark Night of the Soul

Question: At any time in your life, have you considered suicide, or not?



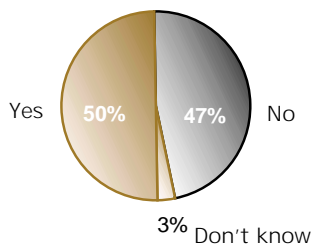
Source: Survey by the *Los Angeles Times*, October 20-23, 1999.

Question: ...[Do you agree or disagree] Suicide is morally acceptable because a person has a right to do whatever he wants with himself.



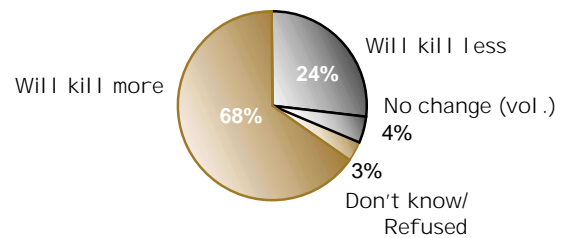
Source: Survey by the Center for Survey Research, University of Virginia/ Post-Modernity Project, January 27-April 14, 1996.

Question: Can you imagine any situation where you yourself might want your doctor to end your own life intentionally by some painless means if you requested it?



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for the Nathan Cummings Foundation and Fetzer Institute, May 1997.

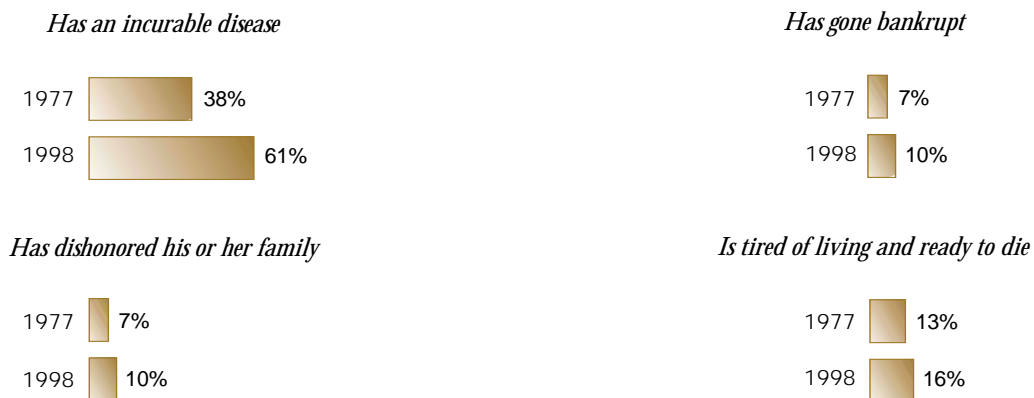
Question: Of course everyone must die of something, but in the future some diseases will kill more people in the US and some will kill less people. As I read you a list, please look forward ten years and tell me if you think each one will kill more or less Americans than it does now... Suicide?



Source: Survey by Harris Interactive, December 2-7, 1999.

Questions: Do you think a person has the right to end his or her own life if this person... ?

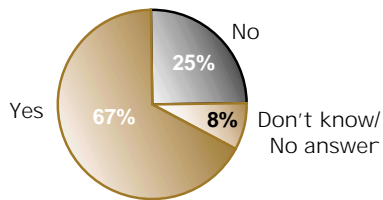
Percent responding yes



Source: Surveys by the National Opinion Research Center-General Social Survey, latest that of February 1-June 19, 1998.

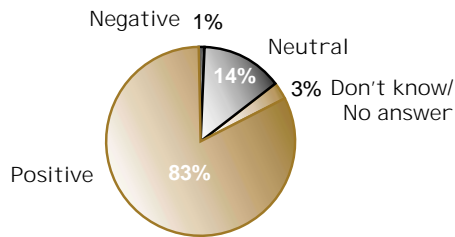
Afterworld

Question: Do you believe you will exist in some form after your death?



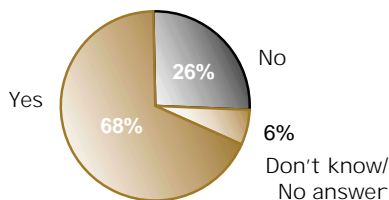
Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for the Nathan Cummings Foundation and Fetzer Institute, May 1997.

Question: Do you think existence in the afterlife is a positive, negative, or neutral experience?



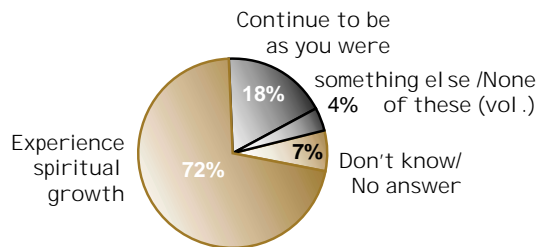
Note: Asked of those who believe they will exist in some form after their death.
Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for the Nathan Cummings Foundation and Fetzer Institute, May 1997.

Question: Do you think of your existence in the afterlife as being a journey of some kind or not?



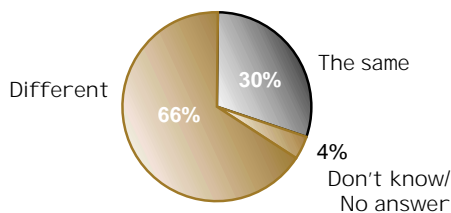
Note: Asked of those who believe they will exist in some form after their death.
Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for the Nathan Cummings Foundation and Fetzer Institute, May 1997.

Question: Do you think that in life after death... you will experience spiritual growth or you will continue to be as you were spiritually when you died?



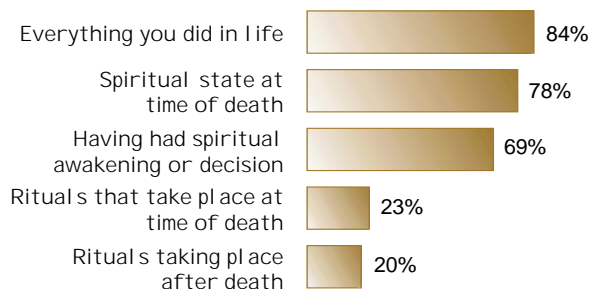
Note: Asked of those who believe they will exist in some form after their death.
Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for the Nathan Cummings Foundation and Fetzer Institute, May 1997.

Question: Do you believe that the quality of existence after death is different for different people or the same for all?



Note: Asked of those who believe they will exist in some form after their death.
Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for the Nathan Cummings Foundation and Fetzer Institute, May 1997.

Question: Which of these, if any, do you believe will affect the quality of your continued existence after your death... everything that you did in your life, having had a spiritual awakening or decision, your spiritual state at the time of your death, rituals that take place at the time of your death, or rituals taking place after your death?



Note: Asked of those who believe they will exist in some form after their death, and they believe the quality of life after death is different for different people. Adds to more than 100% due to multiple responses.
Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for the Nathan Cummings Foundation and Fetzer Institute, May 1997.