



Welcome to Griefline's Courageous Conversations series, where we delve into meaningful dialogues with leaders, organizations, and members of the community, aiming to address the multifaceted impacts of grief and loss.

Our latest courageous conversation is with Catherine Ashton, founder of the Australian death-tech start-up Critical Info. Catherine and Griefline's Chief Marketing Officer, Louisa Smith, explore the death-care industry and discuss how planning your legacy can not only create empowerment but also support you and your loved ones through grief.

**Louisa**

Hello, Catherine Ashton, and welcome to Griefline's Courageous Conversations! Catherine, you are the founder of trailblazing death care and end of life, planning business, Critical Info. And we are just really privileged to have you here with us today.

**Catherine**

Thanks for having me. Louisa.

**Louisa**

So, you were touched by two very significant life experiences that prompted you to develop Critical Info. What is end of life planning? And why is it so important?

**Catherine**

Yeah, the two incidents that sort of led me to be where I am today. Was a car accident in in 2019 and just on my way to work, and was hit from behind, and that led to subsequent spinal surgery and the development of chronic pain, so I unfortunately had to leave my job at the Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria, where I was for 13 years as a producer of events. And I really didn't know what I was going to do. I went through a lot of rehab and really a lot of questioning about, you know what was the next steps and concerns about who would hire me and then, unfortunately, we had my

husband's best friend, Roland die in February of last year, and he was, you know, divorced. He'd moved back from the States and was living in Australia. And I, you know, was trying to sort of get information together. And when he died because his family wasn't here. His 2 adult kids were in the States. And so it took me sort of like 6 days of sorting through his paperwork to work out, you know. Who did he bank with? You know. Did he have a will. Did we? Did we know whether he had any intent to be buried or cremated?

So I think that that's where it was born for me, or or made very apparent from from these experience. Just how important end of life planning is. Because, you know, to go through that experience where you just don't know what your friends wishes are, and you're wanting to do the right thing was really really difficult.

### **Louisa**

And look, it is not something that we think about. It's not top of mind, you know, in in our day to day. While we're living you know our lives. But can you explain how providing people with knowledge and resources to better prepare for and cope with? Death creates a sense of empowerment.

### **Catherine**

Sure.

So, as I mentioned I was trying to put information together for his two adult children that we're flying out here from the States, and what I found through my numerous Google searches was that each organisation was very good at telling its own story. But, there was not one platform that actually brought those those organisations together. And and that's what I found. That I was really needing is so that's what I developed. So Critical Info, is a website. That we, well, part of it is a website that we launched 8 weeks ago. And it has over 200 organisations nationally that have a focus on supporting either end of life, planning death, care, bereavement, or a estate management.

And the reason why we did. That is because for me, you know, I'm all about making informed choices and knowing what my choices are, and I think that when you're in a situation. When someone has died you feel very vulnerable.

And I think allowing people to have access to a platform that provides them with a range of choices that are legally available in Australia. They can then sort of feel like they can do the research and take back some sort of control, you know, in a very emotional, turbulent time.

### **Louisa**

Oh, for sure, and I guess you know we, as you know, firsthand, there's so many ends that need to be tied. Once a loved one passes away, and it can be overwhelming and emotionally draining for most people. And we hear that firsthand on the Griefline Helpline, when people connect to with us after the death of someone that they you know, connected to, and particularly people managing estates and just sort of sifting through you know all the required forms and information that they need to supply in order just to get a death certificate. Say, for instance.

So what would your advice be to ensure self-care is considered during this time?

### **Catherine**

Look for me. I can only go by what works for me, and for many, it's all about breathing and I find that when I just take a moment to breathe and count to 10, it sort of grounds me where I'm at, and sort of reminds me to sort of connect in with how my body is feeling and with, you know, my chronic pain that I've developed. It's all about pacing, you know, and I think that that's a really good quality. That everyone should perhaps remind themselves to do is not be overwhelmed by their to do list with multiple tasks. But just, you know, especially when I have found that I've been grieving. The last thing I need to do is think too much about everything that needs to happen.

So I just suggest, you know, take one task a day. And if you get that done great, and if you don't, it doesn't matter. You know it'll be okay, and I think that was the key.

When I was developing the guide, 'My loved one has died. What do I do now?' is to really make sure that we gave people a roadmap. So when someone dies, they know what are the priorities. And because I find that

that's something that's really, really difficult to understand is like, Okay, well, what do I do now? I don't know where to start. So this guide gives you a roadmap of what's the priority in the first 24 hours, the first days, weeks, and then months that follow after someone dies.

### **Louisa**

Yeah, absolutely. And to integrate yourself, care as part of that process is key, isn't it? So I guess this is sort of a segueway around how you know to avoid our loved ones from being overwhelmed following our own death.

It's you know. Gonna happen? What steps should we all be taking here to ensure our personal affairs are taken care of, and what impact on our family is minimised in that process.

### **Catherine**

Look, I think it comes back to when you think of it as a whole it can be really overwhelming. So again comes back to what you can do. That's really cheap, easy cost, effective. And the best way to start is by having a conversation you know. And you have a teenage, son. I have a 20 year old I kind of liken it to when you have to have the talk about sex. You know it's one of those things that not everyone wants to talk about. It's a little bit uncomfortable. But you're gonna have to have the conversation. So you know, have the conversation in the car. That's what they normally recommend, or around the dinner table. So it's normalised. And it doesn't have to be okay. I want to know all your details right here and now. But you know things along the lines of you know when you do die, you thought whether you wanted to be buried or cremated.

That's a really simple question to start with.

And then, you know, people with the resources that we've got. As I mentioned, the 200 organisations on the website. They're all free. They're all free resources. You know, the information's there. So you know, we've got the podcast where you can listen to other people's stories about what they've been through or advice from experts within the industry. You know, your own website is just comprehensive with information about.

You know how to deal with grieving, but there's just other. There's so many. It links to so many other resources that are available out there. It's a bit of a wormhole. You can go down so there is a lot of support out there that can help you have these conversations, and also, you know. Speak to your doctor. They can be instrumental about giving you advice or giving you the forms for an Advanced Care Directive and Advanced care directive is really, you know, something that we don't have to wait until we get older. I had a car accident, for the the outcome could have been very, very different for me. So we need to have these conversations now, because we don't know what's gonna happen in the next hour or the next day. So you know, documenting, you know. Do you want to be resuscitated?

You know. That's that's a big thing, you know. Would you like to be an organ donor. These are huge conversations that we need to have, but they don't have to be.

I suppose that the conversation doesn't have to be huge, you know it can be. It can be small little conversations, and that's where we start. And then, you know, you can go in further with getting a will getting a a power of attorney. Those sort of documents. That are also great to have in place as well.

### **Louisa**

It's such great advice. And I was shocked that, you know, platform as such as Critical Info didn't exist, and I'm so grateful that you created it, and I'm sure it's going to be really, really well received by so many people throughout Australia, and we'll do our very best to ensure that people are aware of it. And you know, I think the resources you have are really, really important and needed, and just to have everything aggregated in one space. It's just gonna take away a lot of time, but also pain and grief for those people, you know, who are attached to that end of life planning process. So thank you so much for creating Critical Info. You're a trailblazer, and we are just so grateful for you and your time and for sharing your story, and for having a courageous conversation with us.

### **Catherine**

Thanks so much, Louisa. I really take my head off to you. And your team for the work that you do. So, thank you very much.