



The Athena Wellness Podcast
Episode 095 – The Gift of End of Life Planning with Lee Atherton
December 5, 2021

00:05

Welcome to the Athena Wellness podcast, the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that's dedicated to supporting you on your journey to live more wholeheartedly.

00:30

Hello and welcome to Episode 95. Thanks so much for joining me.

Like many things related to wellness, today's topic is one of those things that we can easily put off until a later date. But our guest today takes the counter position, explaining how taking care of end of life planning sooner rather than later is not only a gift to our loved ones, but an empowering act of wellness and care for ourselves.

I'm joined today by Lee Atherton, a first responder chaplain, and an end of life, grief and resilience coach, also known as Coach Rev. Lee is also an author and speaker who helps people "live their dying" by journeying with them through the grief and chaos until they reach a place of stillness. Coach Rev also supports those who are in the helping professions, offering programs and support to enhance their own resiliency.

Here's what we cover:

- What end of life planning entails;
- How to reframe the preparation from dread to empowerment;
- How to incorporate lessons learned during end of life reflection;
- The grief journey and how to turn it into resilience; and
- The beauty and gift of supporting those at the end of life.



We end this episode with our Dose of Inspiration segment, where Lee shares some of the things that are lighting her up these days. And as always, I'll put links to Coach Rev's website and email, as well as the items she mentions during our conversation, in the show notes. I also put a link to a PDF ebook that Coach Rev offers on her website about grieving during the holidays.

I know this may be a difficult topic for some, but I know you'll appreciate Coach Rev's warmth and wisdom. And now on to the show. I hope you find the conversation helpful.

02:39 Kathy

Coach Rev, welcome to The Athena Wellness Podcast. Thank you so much for being here today.

02:45 Lee

Thank you, Kathy. It's an honor to be here.

02:48 Kathy

So please share a bit about who you are and what you do.

02:53 Lee

I am Coach Rev, with Coach Rev at the Crossroads. And that name, Coach Rev, comes from being a coach and an end of life grief and resilience coach, and Rev for reverend, because I do bring that with what I do, that's my background. Although people who I don't tell that to usually don't even know that.

03:19 Kathy

(laughs) You go undercover.

Lee

(laughs) I go undercover, yeah.

Kathy

So tell us a bit about the journey that led you to the work that you do today.

03:29 Lee



It's a long story, let me not be too terribly long with it. But as a second career, I wanted to go into ordained ministry. I thought I would be serving a local church with the United Church of Christ, a very liberal denomination, which is important for me because I welcome, you know, it doesn't matter who you are, what color your skin is, or what your religion or anything else is, in my book.

I didn't have my bachelor's degree, though, so I needed to go back and get that before I could go to seminary. And while I was there, I met another woman who was there for the same reason I was. She wanted to get her Master's of Divinity. Only she knew at the time that she wanted to be a hospice chaplain. And that was back in 1999. We have become fast friends since then and I blame Donna for getting me where I am.

04:29 Kathy
(laughs) Her fault.

Lee
(laughs) It's her fault. Way back, she said to me, "I really think you'd be a good hospice chaplain, you should think about it." "Yeah, no thanks. That's not for me at all." I kept saying it.

You know, our journeys were parallel, so our paths kept crossing along the way of our bachelor's and then master's degree and every time she mentioned it, "Yeah, that's not really what I want to be doing."

Fast forward, we graduated, we both were ordained. She had her job in hospice and I was serving a local church. My position there ended and I hadn't started a new one yet. And Donna was going away on an extended vacation. She needed someone to cover her and wasn't finding someone who could do that.

She said, "Will you?" And I said, "I don't know." She said, "Come on, you can do anything short term, can't you?" "Yeah, you're right. I can."

So I did. I jumped in and did that for her. And to use that old phrase, the rest is history. I fell in love.



It's such an honor, Kathy, to be with people as they're living their last chapter of life. To help them, I use the phrase, "Live their dying." Because we have a terminal diagnosis doesn't mean that everything ends. Even if you're in bed and near the end, there's still so much we can do in terms of the conversations we can have and the people we can meet. And I've got some really neat stories from my hospice time that remind me of that.

06:13 Kathy

Mmhmmm. So you gave me the chills when you were talking about how this all turned around. And so I'm envisioning you walking up to that first house. You're just doing a friend a favor.

Lee

(laughs) Exactly.

Kathy

Something happens though. And what was that thing that made you realize that, huh, there is really a lot of depth here, there's something for me here?

06:41 Lee

What is that thing? You know, it's hard to identify any one thing. I think it happened over the time of several visits. And just... It's a profound experience, to be let into someone's life at this moment. And they don't know me from a hole in the wall. And to be able to offer a safe place for them to talk, to share, to grieve, any number of things. And know that in some small way, I might be making the journey easier for them.

07:28 Kathy

Mmhmm. Wow, okay, I'm getting the chills again. It's just gonna be one of those conversations (laughs) Settle in here.

So before we get into the specifics of your practice and what you offer, let's talk a little bit of a big picture. So in general, when we say end of life planning, what does that entail?

07:51 Lee

When I think of end of life planning, do it as early as possible. I told my kids when they were teenagers, you need to start thinking about this. One of the workshops I offer is



based on a document, it's a legal document in most of the United States and even internationally, called The Five Wishes.

So many of us, when we think of end of life, we think of our medical wishes, we think of who we might want to be our healthcare proxy. But there's so much more than that, even in terms of the health care choices. I think a lot of us don't spend lots of time digging deeply, because what we choose is based on our values and what's important to us.

So that piece is there. But it's also thinking about what do you want spiritually? Do you want a visit from your priest or imam or other religious leader? Do you want them to stay away? I talked about a woman I met. Think about the pain that you want and your modesty, that's not the word I'm looking for, but it'll fit. Many of us when we're nearing the end of life, we can't take care of ourselves, right? And so people think of family members as their caregivers. But think about that. Do you want one of your children to be taking on that role? And maybe it's fine, but a lot of people don't think about that when the time comes, they're mortified.

Think about where you want to be. Do you want to be in your home, which a lot of people do, or do you want to be away from home so that you're not in a place that's going to be, from some people's perspective, tainted with that experience? Are there people that you want to be sure you're able to say goodbye to, resolve things, mend bridges? What do you want?

What do you want in terms of quality of life? The reason I tell kids to think about this is because a lot of us think of end of life when we're older, what we expect to be the natural course of life. What happens if you get in a traumatic accident?

There's a story of a young man who, he was single, he was adventurous, extreme sports. And when he was skiing, he hit a tree and broke his neck. In the hospital, they had induced a coma for his brain swelling and such. And the doctors told his family, "We don't know what his brain will be like. But we do know that he will never be off of a respirator. He will never walk again. He will be confined to a bed and in a facility. He won't go home."



And they all wondered, "What should we do?" And at one point, one of the doctors had this great idea. "We can take him out of the coma so that you can have a conversation with him."

Kathy
Wow!

Lee
Right? They did that. They told him, "This is what your life will be like." And he said, very clearly, without hesitation, "I do not want to live that way."

Kathy
Wow.

Lee
"Please take me off life support." And that saved the family a whole lot of angst, trying to figure out what he'd want. And conflict, because inevitably, there's going to be someone who says, "Take him off life support." And there's going to be someone else who's going to say, "But maybe he wouldn't want that."

Kathy
Right, right.

Lee
And when you think about it at a young age, it doesn't mean that you can't change it 100 gazillion times throughout your life, yeah.

12:13 Kathy
Right. For folks that are used to listening to this podcast, it's always this very, you know, wellness focused, very empowering. And they may be thinking, "Why are we having this conversation?"

But exactly to that point, it is a very empowering conversation. And end of life is really just a continuation of having that self respect to take good care, not only for yourself, but for your family as well.



Lee
Right.

Kathy

And so exactly to your point, my personal experience with this, knowing people's end of life wishes, has made our lives and the lives of my family, it's much easier when that time comes. And so if there is a takeaway, it's just to plant that seed and know that just like you're doing good things for your own health, this is really an extension of that. Is that fair?

13:03 Lee

Yes, yes. And it's a tremendous gift to your loved ones in many, many ways.

13:11 Kathy

Yeah. And it's also been my experience that outside of my immediate family where we can have these conversations, a lot of people seem to dread them or put that off. What is the reason behind that? What's been your experience?

13:26 Lee

We don't want to talk about death at all. We don't, we want to pretend it's not going to happen. It can be scary. It can be really difficult to begin the conversation. And it's hard to think those deep, challenging thoughts about what really matters to you. But once you get started and once you really come to some decisions, it's incredibly freeing. Part of the work I do is not only helping people make these choices and decisions, but I help people initiate the conversation with their parents, their children, their doctors. Yeah.

14:17 Kathy

Let's talk about that. Let's talk about some of the services that you provide for your clients. What would that look like? If somebody is listening to this and they're curious and they wanted to reach out, what are some things that you could help them with?

14:28 Lee

I do a workshop on planning for end of life and that's actually a free workshop that people are invited to. I do individual coaching to work with people one on one to really dig in and have a - I was gonna say a non-vested person joining them in the discovery - I am



vested. It does matter to me how people walk through this. But I'm not gonna be mad at you if you choose something, I'm not going to judge you, I'm not going to criticize you. And often, that's the place where it's easier to dig into what matters.

After the workshop, two or three times a year, I do a six week course on that. So that's also available. And then going along that continuum, I do end of life coaching. And that's typically one to one coaching with the person who's facing the end of their life. But we bring in family members occasionally. And then I officiate services and/or help plan what a celebration of life or funeral or any of the many ways that we can mark that passing.

And then I have a lot of grief support. Grief groups, both drop-in groups and topic related short term, that folks would commit to the four or six weeks. In doing a lot of the work that I do. I've met a lot of people, funeral directors, hospice employees, who do similar work, and are weighed down by it. And that is where my resilience coaching comes in. Every one of us, first responders, professionals who work with others at end of life, and many of the other helping professionals, we feel called to this work that we're doing. And we have incredible passion and energy and drive. But over time, if we don't take care of ourselves, it becomes a real chore to go to work. And so my resilience coaching is helping folks get back to that passion and drive, and then feel that, and bring that to the work they do.

17:00 Kathy

It's quite an array of activities that you get involved in there. You mentioned ceremony, do you find that there's a shift away from formality and more, shall I say, creative celebrations at end of life? Is that...

17:16 Lee

Yes, yes, very definitely. When I was first in hospice, to go outside the norm of what many of us think of for a funeral, wear black, it's somber and all of that, has definitely changed over the years.

And I have services that are very creative, that have the deceased's favorite poem or favorite piece of music, doesn't have to be religious, or weepy, or whatever. It can make us laugh. I tell folks, the most important thing is to do what helps you and feels good to you, but that you don't not do some type of service. It's important that we have that, that



ritualistic marking of the death. And then I'll do anything that feels right for you unless it's going to be offensive to someone else.

There was a woman, Lois was her name, and she sang on Broadway for much of her life. So music was really important to her. When I met her, she was able to sing, you know, the old favorites. As time went on, she wasn't able to remember the words, but she would hum the tunes. My last visit with her was singing her very, very favorite song, On the Good Ship Lollipop. And she, again, she couldn't remember the words, but she was able to hum and that was the only one that she remembered the tune to.

I had the honor of officiating her service. The closing song, and I collaborated with the funeral director, so it was extra fun. The closing song that everyone left to was On the Good Ship Lollipop. And the funeral staff was at the back of the funeral home handing out lollipops. And what a neat way - sure, there were tears, there were a lot of tears. But people also left feeling uplifted.

19:33 Kathy

Mhmm. Well, I'll tell you, as you're saying that, one of the benefits of doing this work ahead of time is being able to give that some thought. And me being Irish and Italian, it wouldn't be lollipops, but you're giving me some ideas here which is very helpful.
(laughter)

I also know that you do some work with the LGBTQ community and I'm curious if there are any specific considerations.

20:01 Lee

My heart often breaks for them. So many things that those straight community takes for granted, our LGBTQ community has to fight for, even if that is my loved one being there holding my hand as I die. The rights that are given to same sex partners, in so many places, are so far away from what is just and right.

I will advocate for them, I will do everything I can to keep that ugliness at bay. And I, as I said at the beginning, I accept you, no matter who you are, where you are on life's journey. And I just wish the rest of society could be that way. Doesn't mean you have to agree with it. But they're humans just like everyone else. They deserve that dignity.



They face, at times, their own families not supporting them. Funeral homes or funeral directors who have said, "We don't feel comfortable serving you." Much as the LGBTQ community experiences life outside of dying and death, it's only highlighted at that time. I've seen doctors or medical staff, just their demeanor completely change when they discover this about their patient. So unfair.

22:00 Kathy

Yeah. And again, why the work that you do is so needed to be able to have somebody there to advocate in difficult times like that.

Lee

Yeah.

Kathy

Can we talk a little bit about the grief journey, and in particular, how unique it can be for different people?

22:20 Lee

It can be so unique. I was just writing a blog post yesterday about the emotions of grief. And one of the great images that I use to talk about it, it's a yellow ball like this and it's got all it looks like a maze and all the emotions that grief brings. And it's just a big tangled kibosh of emotions. And it's a great illustration to show that there's so much that goes into grief and mourning. And it is all tangled. And there's not one right way to go through grief.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross is a name that many people are familiar with. And she spoke about the five stages of grief. And wonderful, fabulous information. Unfortunately, many people took her book, *The Five Stages of Grief*, and came to the conclusion that there was a very rigid pattern of these five stages and you would cleanly finish one and go to the next and finish that and go to the next.

And it doesn't happen that way. Not everyone experiences all five stages. Some may have a little bit of anger reaction, which is a stage, and others that might be what dominates their whole grieving process. And I think that's one of the most important things to



remember for anyone who's grieving or supporting someone who's grieving. There isn't a right way to do it. There's your unique way to do it.

24:02 Kathy

You're a proponent of using journaling to help in turning grief into resilience. Can you speak to that a little bit?

24:11 Lee

Sure. People hear journaling and they think they need to sit down and do a lot of writing. So I like to preface it by saying, it might just be thinking about things in your head. But taking time to consciously think about something.

And I've written a book, *Tossed Pebbles, A Grief Journal*. And what this is, here's an example of a page. And I've got quotes about grief, and then words of encouragement, and three questions for each one to get you thinking.

One is, "Grief and memory go together. After someone dies, that's what you're left with. And the memories are so slippery, yet so rich." Mike Mills wrote that. And I talk about being in the stillness, being in the quiet. My questions for that one are, "What gifts do you find in the stillness?" Take a moment to really think about what's there. There are gifts if you take a minute to dig for them. "What surprises you in the stillness?" "When do you feel most confident in you? And why?"

And my questions are meant to encourage you to think about the things that just... you're gonna go day by day without digging in. It doesn't necessarily have to be a lot of digging. But when you stop and you think about, "What is my answer to that question?" you find a little nugget that helps you heal, helps you move into the next day.

25:51 Kathy

Mmmmm. It's a great title, *Tossed Pebbles*. I love that. And the image that came to mind as you were talking about those questions is that for many, it may be the first time they've asked themselves questions like that, or experienced stillness like that. And to have the quotes as a way of, it's almost like a soothing balm, you know? You're feeling less alone in that moment. And then being able to ask, not the questions that you would anticipate, but almost the other side of it, in the gift.



On a similar topic, we hear the lessons learned from those who are experiencing either a life debilitating illness or coming to the end of life. And a lot of what we hear of people like yourself that have the privilege of sitting with folks like that is there many times is a wish that they had lived differently. It's not about the things and more about how they embraced life. The things that come to mind are a wish to live more freely or love more deeply or take on more risk, as examples. Has that been your experience?

27:00 Lee

Yes, yes. I think too often, we get to the end of this amazing gift we have called life. And we're faced with all the coulda, shoulda, wouldas. I think part of the planning ahead, "What do I want the end of my life to be like?" reminds us that we need to think in the moment, what do we want between now and then to be like?

There's a website called, I'm trying to remember, I think it's just "Bucket List." And it's a great website from a gentleman who encourages you to... what's your bucket list, what's stopping you from getting those things accomplished?

We don't want to get to the end and say, "Have I wasted it all?" Or "Have I not taken advantage of all of the opportunities that I should?"

28:05 Kathy

Do you think that's what makes this topic so difficult? It's not so much the topic of death, as it is how we're currently living?

28:14 Lee

I hadn't thought of that. But, you know, you are probably right, that that does play a part in it, for sure.

28:22 Kathy

I just got chills again. It's also been my experience that there is a real beauty in walking these journeys with others. And along with the poignancy and the pain, as you mentioned before, there's an opening for presence and for healing and for completion.



So you're seeing people change profoundly when they think life is over, but that's not the case. Can you think of instances where you have witnessed such a profound change that almost made the end of life experience life affirming?

29:02 Lee

I was just speaking with someone yesterday. She has had a sister who was a little bit older than her. And the sister was not all that kind to her throughout life. And the sister died in the spring of this year. She was over 60 years old, I don't know her exact age. And the person I was speaking with had felt all her life, you know, "We had our good times and bad times, but I felt like she always disliked me or resented me or there was always something there. And I just remember how mean she was to me when we were kids."

As her sister was dying, they spent a lot of time together. And she learned, she had never known this before, that at one Christmas, the younger sister got a beautiful doll, I don't even remember the exact thing. And the older sister got something practical. And she hated that mom and dad had taken the time to find a special gift for her little sister and not for her. And she held onto that her entire life.

And so for the living sister to have an answer, "No, it's not that I did something." She said it transformed her relationship with her sister or their relationship with each other. And put a lot to rest.

30:44 Kathy

Mm hmm, yeah, at ease. I'm curious, you know, this was a calling for you, even though you resisted it at first, as most hero journeys are. You get the call and you resist, right?

Lee

(laughs) Right.

Kathy

But how have you changed as a result of doing this work?

31:01 Lee

Oh, my goodness. In lots of ways, lots of ways. For myself, I'm not afraid to talk about death anymore. I'm at peace with that.



I take my days, not every day I sit and say, "Remember now, this could be the last day of your life. So make the most of it." But I do spend a lot of time looking at what's important in my life, am I spending the time I want doing that?

One example is my grandson, I have a new grandson. He's seven months old.

Kathy
Congratulations.

Lee
And I take care of him two days a week. And for a while I was overwhelmed because those two days were taken away from Coach Rev. And I was beginning, just a little bit, to resent him being here, because I'm still trying to really build this so I can retire someday.

And I stopped, I caught myself and I said, "Dang it, Lee! He's only going to be seven months old for another month. He's only going to be little and giving you these grins like this for a short amount of time." And I found, you know, that was just last week I thought of that. And yesterday when he was here, our day was so much better.

Kathy
Ahhhh.

Lee
I wasn't feeling the angst to, you know, "I've got a reply to all those emails and he just wants my attention." So it's things like that - what matters most to you.

32:42 Kathy
What a good role model you'll be for him when he gets older with that attitude, too.

32:46 Lee
I hope so, yeah. One of the questions I ask in the work I do with my resilience folks, "What do you love most in life? What's your favorite thing to do?" There are all kinds of answers, fun things. And I see people's faces just light up as they're thinking about this. And then I



say, "When's the last time you did that?" And many people can't even name the last time they did it. How sad.

33:24 Kathy

Yeah. But also, too, they get the chance to do a little course correction, right? It's a wonderful question, wonderful question. It's a nice way to very quickly reprioritize. (laughs)

33:39 Lee

(laughs) Yes, yes.

33:40 Kathy

An empowering way of doing that.

33:43 Lee

And how much better we are for all the people in our lives when we do that.

33:51 Kathy

Yeah. So you help a lot of folks that are in the same line of work that you are with resilience. How do you keep yourself well?

34:03 Lee

(Takes a deep breath.) Lots of deep breaths like that. And just sitting and enjoying the moment.

I start every day with my cup of coffee all by myself, in my comfy chair, with my big black lab on my lap. And I make a point of just sitting and being and not jumping in and rushing into the start of the day.

I take time out in my yard. It's a tiny postage stamp of a yard, but it is paradise for my partner and I. It's finding those things that feed my soul and making sure I do them.

I just thought of this. The place that I've moved into, I've been here, oh gosh, eight years now, only has a shower stall. And I used to take baths all the time, nice bubble baths, that were part of my being resilient, just coming back to it and feeling renewed.



A few years ago, my daughter got me an inflatable bathtub for Christmas. (laughter)

35:09 Kathy

(laughs) Nice, good for you!

35:13 Lee

At least once or twice a month, that bathtub comes out and I have in my glass of wine with my bubbles.

35:23 Kathy

All right! I love that. That's a, talk about a wonderful wellness practice. That's great. That's a first on this podcast. I love it. It's wonderful. (laughter)

Well, we like to wrap up these episodes with something we call Dose of Inspiration. It's a way for our listeners to get to know you a little bit. So what new thing or experience are you looking forward to trying?

35:46 Lee

What new thing? I am looking forward to, this is work related, to creating a three day event. It's a virtual event where I will be inviting speakers of all sorts, experts in the areas of grief, of death and of resilience to come share their wisdom. It should be a lot of fun.

36:13 Kathy

Nice, that's new on a lot of different fronts, between putting it together and finding the folks and getting it out there. It's exciting stuff.

36:20 Lee

It is, it is, yep. So my goal is to have that scheduled in January or February.

36:30 Kathy

Nice, excellent. Envision the perfect road trip. Where do you go? What do you do?

36:33 Lee

The perfect road trip would be in my RV with my partner. And we just go wherever the spirit moves us. It would be places of nature, places away from, you know, that to do list



that sits at home all the time. New experiences. So I'm from Massachusetts, I haven't ventured too far away from Massachusetts in my whole life. I would love to go out west, love to just travel the roads and experience life from all those different perspectives on no time schedule.

37:14 Kathy

Mm hmm, beautiful, I love it. What has you feeling inspired these days? What's lighting you up?

37:22 Lee

(breathes deeply) There is so much.

I want to take this journal that I've created and make it a much bigger experience for folks. And that is invigorating to me to think, "Oh, I can do this. I can have a book on Amazon."

Kathy

Absolutely.

Lee

Right? Fun things like that.

There's a mastermind group that I'm in. The leader talks about a 17 week process and he's got this whole system. So you've got three 17 week sections in your year that you work, and three weeks of vacation in between. Oh, how cool would that be? (laughter) Right?

So that's one of my goals for the year, I had to do that. And I just find a lot of excitement in creating and discovering ways to take what I do, what I know, and who I am and make it a broader impact.

38:26 Kathy

Nice. And then lastly, what has you optimistic about the future?

38:32 Lee

My grandson.



38:34 Kathy

Yeah, there you go! (laughs)

38:39 Lee

(laughs) Absolutely. My little Isaac.

38:42 Kathy

Ah, wonderful, I love it. Well, tell us the best way for our listeners to get in touch with you should they want to try your workshop or just get in touch.

38:53 Lee

Yeah. My email is Lee@CoachRev.com. Coach, like a soccer coach, Rev is short for reverend. And it's l-e-e. My website is CoachRev.com and that's where you can learn a lot about me. I've been going through adding an awful lot there recently, so it's ever changing.

39:15 Kathy

Mmhmm, excellent. Well, I'll link all that stuff up in the show notes and Coach Rev, I can't thank you enough for helping us through what would normally be a difficult conversation, but you made it so uplifting and so accessible and we're really grateful. Thank you so much.

39:31 Lee

Oh, thank you, Kathy. It's been great chatting with you. And thank you everyone for listening. Be well.

39:40

Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.

If you know anyone who could benefit from today's episode, please pass it on. And many thanks for supporting the show by subscribing and leaving a review. It means a lot and it helps others find their way to our circle.



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Until next time, be well!