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End-of-life doula empowers clients to face their death

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Buck Ennis

Virginia Chang, who lives in Greenwich Village, decided to become an end-of-life doula in 2018 to empower people to have more say in their own dying process.

VIRGINIA CHANG**GREW UP** Mount Vernon, New York**RESIDES** Greenwich Village**EDUCATION** Bachelor's in chemistry, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; master's and Ph.D. in organic chemistry, Stanford University**PAST LIFE** Earlier in her career, Chang was a research scientist. She worked for pharmaceutical companies to research drug development but shifted to environmental conservation work in the early 1990s. When she had her first child in 1998, Chang became a stay-at-home mom.**MUSIC LIFE** Chang is a trained harpist, and she hopes one day to bring the art of music into her death work.**MOM LIFE** Chang has a 25-year-old daughter who lives in Washington, D.C., and a 22-year-old son, who resides in New York City.

After Virginia Chang's father died in September 2016, the inconceivable happened: Her mother-in-law passed the following January, and her mother died just four months later.

"It was back to back to back," Chang said. "I never even had a chance to catch my breath."

In the months after, Chang, who lives in Greenwich Village, said she felt like a zombie walking the streets of New York City. She previously thought it was lucky that she didn't have to think about death for the first 54 years of her life. "But when it happened, I was so ill-prepared," Chang said.

She leaned into meditation to escape her grief. It was through her meditation community that she learned about end-of-life doulas, non-clinical professionals who act as guides through the dying process, helping people choose how they want to die and educating families and caregivers on how to cope.

End-of-life doulas are not all that different from birth doulas, Chang said. Both advocate for their clients in formal medical settings, educate individuals and families on their options and coping mechanisms, and help with logistics — just at opposite ends of life.

"I thought, Why wasn't someone like that there for me?" Chang said. At the time, she recalls, she felt like a bystander in her family members' deaths, powerless against the medical establishment and hopeless in her own grief. Those two emotions, Chang said, encouraged her to "change her whole life."

She spent the rest of 2017 researching the end-of-life field. In the new year, she attended the New Jersey-based International End-of-Life Doula Association and the University of Vermont's Larner College of Medicine.

Chang received her certification in 2018. She volunteered with hospice provider VNS Health to get clinical experience, and built her own private practice by 2019. She helps her clients decide whether they'd like to be buried or cremated and advises them on care. She also walks them through the fears that arise during their final days and attempts to help them understand the meaning of their own existence.

Around six months into building her small business, the Covid-19 pandemic provided another life change.

The pandemic, because of its resultant casualties, brought increased awareness to the end-of-life-doula industry, Chang said. Initially, Chang's work shut down with the bulk of in-person medical care. But she was ultimately able to provide her services remotely.

Since she's become an end-of-life doula, Chang has worked with 94 dying people and their families, roughly two-thirds of which resided in New York City. She typically works with three to five clients at a time, but her caseload depends on how much support a family needs. Sometimes she helps a dying person find a funeral home or develop a living will. But other times she serves entire families; she recently provided counseling support to a family of 10 as their grandmother approached the end of her life.

Chang offers payment options on a sliding scale and has offered services to half of her clients at no cost. The average compensation for end-of-life doulas varies. Many charge an hourly rate, which can range from \$75 to \$150, said Loren Talbot, director of communications and partnerships for the International End-of-Life Doula Association. Talbot added that doulas may charge additional fees for packages such as legacy projects, and she emphasized that pricing is dependent on a doula's unique set of skills.

As more people become aware of end-of-life doula services, Chang has shifted her focus to advocacy. She's part of a group advocating for the [Medical Aid In Dying](#) bill, which would allow physicians in New York to prescribe patients with terminal illnesses medication to end their life.

"Nobody wants to die," Chang said, "but to realize that someone is making that kind of choice because of the amount of suffering that they're living in ... it's awe-inspiring."

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