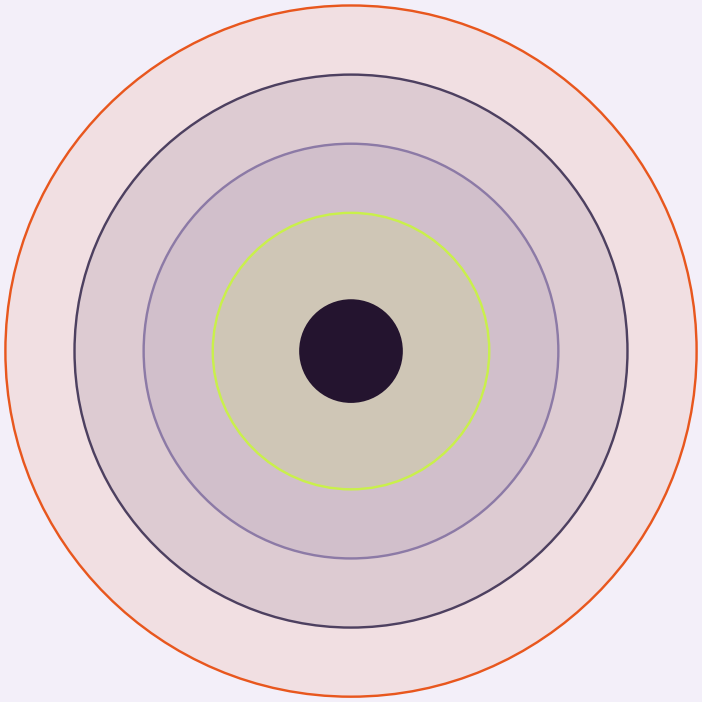


Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End

A reading of the book by Atul Gawande (2014)

1. ACTION BOOK

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ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Atul Gawande is a surgeon in Boston and a staff writer for The New Yorker. In Being Mortal he argues that modern medicine treats ageing and dying as problems to fix, and often fails to help people live well to the end. He looks at nursing homes, the rise of assisted living, the Eden Alternative and hospice, and asks what care would look like if it served a person's own priorities rather than only their safety and survival. The practical core of the book is the hard conversation: asking people what they understand about their illness, what they fear, what they hope for and which trade-offs they will accept. The stories run from his own patients to his father, a urologist who lived with a tumour in his spinal cord.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Medicine is built to add time, but most people want something else from their last years: a life that is still their own.

Gawande admits that his training taught him to fix problems and to say very little about the end. The book follows patients, families and his own father to ask what good care looks like when a cure is no longer on the table. Its answer is that the goal is not a longer life at any cost, but a good life all the way to the end.

2 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Ask what matters most before you decide what to do.

The hard conversations in the book follow a few plain questions: what the person understands about their illness, what they fear, what their goals are, and what they would trade for more time. Palliative care doctors such as Susan Block treat this conversation as a skill, and the skill is mostly listening.

3 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Keeping someone safe is not the same as letting them live.

Nursing homes kept residents fed and safe, but often at the price of privacy, routine and choice. Keren Brown Wilson's idea of assisted living began with her own mother, who wanted a place of her own rather than a ward. The idea was simple: your own room, your own things, and the right to run your own day.

4 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Boredom, loneliness and helplessness can be treated too.

Bill Thomas, a young doctor running a nursing home in upstate New York, called these three the plagues of nursing home life. His answer, which became the Eden Alternative, was to fill the home with dogs, cats, birds, plants and visiting children. It gave residents something alive to look after again.

5 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

People need a cause beyond themselves, right to the end.

Gawande draws on the philosopher Josiah Royce, who argued that loyalty to something outside yourself, such as a family, a community or an idea, is what makes a life feel worth living. Care that only keeps the body going leaves no room for that. Good care protects it.

6 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

When the horizon gets closer, what people want changes.

The psychologist Laura Carstensen found that when people sense their time is limited, at any age, they care less about achievement and new contacts and more about the present and the people closest to them. This is a change of perspective, not giving up. Families and doctors who see it can stop pushing goals the person no longer holds.

7 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The best doctor helps you work out what you want, then helps you get it.

The book describes three kinds of doctor. The paternalistic doctor decides for you, and the informative doctor hands you the facts and leaves the choice to you. Gawande argues for the interpretive doctor, who asks what matters most to you and helps you choose in light of it.

8 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Hospice gives up some of tomorrow to make today as good as it can be.

Standard treatment often trades the present for a chance at more time. Hospice turns that around and aims for the best possible day today: comfort, time at home, and the things the person can still enjoy. Gawande shadows hospice care and shows how much of it is built around the patient's own priorities.

9 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

How a story ends shapes how the whole of it is remembered.

Gawande uses Daniel Kahneman's work on the remembering self, which weighs the peak and the end of an experience far more than its length. A life's ending matters for the same reason. It is a strong argument for choosing the ending on purpose instead of leaving it to the momentum of treatment.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Ask one person the first question
- [ ] Write down your own answers
- [ ] Name who would speak for you
- [ ] Bring written questions to the next appointment
- [ ] Change one thing at home that keeps someone independent

KEEP UP DAILY

- [ ] Ask what would make today good
- [ ] Protect someone's reason to get up
- [ ] Listen before you reassure

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

Ask one person the first question

Pick someone whose wishes you would want to know.

This week, ask them only this: what is your understanding of where things stand with your health? Then listen more than you talk.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Write down your own answers

Work through the guide on this page for yourself, even if you are well.

Print or copy the summary and keep it where the people close to you can find it.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Name who would speak for you

Choose the person you would want making decisions if you could not, and ask whether they are willing.

Tell them where your notes are, and look up the legal form for this where you live.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Bring written questions to the next appointment

Before a doctor's visit, write down your three most important questions, including what the best and the worst cases look like.

Take someone with you to listen and take notes.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Change one thing at home that keeps someone independent

Look at the home of an older person you love, or your own.

Change one thing that lets them keep doing something for themselves: a grab rail, a brighter lamp, a chair at the right height, a shelf within reach.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Ask what would make today good

When you visit or call someone who is ill or ageing, ask what would make today a good day.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Protect someone's reason to get up

Help an older or ill person keep one responsibility they care about: a plant, a pet, a grandchild's reading, a weekly phone call.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Listen before you reassure

In a hard conversation, hold back the urge to fix things or cheer the person up.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

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December 2026

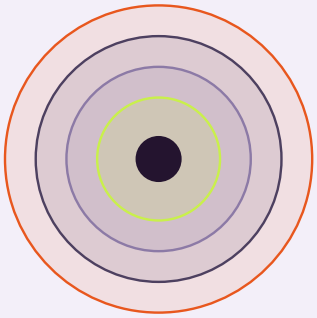
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



Ask what a good day looks like. Then build the care around the answer.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER ATUL GAWANDE