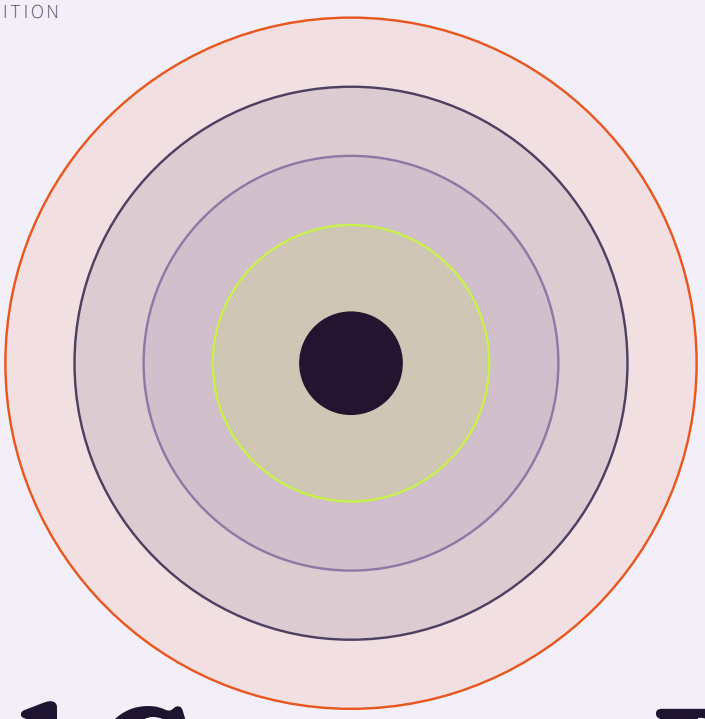


Dead Center: Behind the Scenes at the World's Largest Medical Examiner's Office

A reading of the book by Shiya Ribowsky (2006)

1. ACTION BOOK

CONTENTS

Inside this edition

The book in a minute 4

The takeaways 5

Your action book 7

Before you go 8

PART TWO · THE ACTION BOOK

The setup checklist 10

Check on someone who lives alone 11

Review your file on your birthday 12

Report the hazard you notice 13

ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of Dead Center: Behind the Scenes at the World's Largest Medical Examiner's Office, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Shiya Ribowsky trained as a physician assistant and then spent fifteen years at New York City's Office of Chief Medical Examiner, first as a medicolegal investigator and later as its director of identifications. Written with the author Tom Shachtman, the book follows the investigators who go out to sudden, unexplained and violent deaths across the five boroughs. The first part moves through the cases he worked, from Bowery flophouses to Upper East Side apartments, and shows how the real job differs from the version on television. The rest of the book covers the effort to identify the people killed at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, which Ribowsky helped organise and run. His case is that careful death investigation serves the living: it gives families answers, supports the courts and can expose dangers to everyone else.

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

Most of a medical examiner's work is not murder. It is the sudden, the lonely and the unexplained.

The cases in the book run from Bowery flophouses to Upper East Side apartments. An investigator is sent to any death that is sudden, unexpected, violent or unattended, and most of those turn out to have ordinary causes. The job is to find out which ones do not.

2

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Real death investigation is slower, plainer and more careful than the television version.

Readers come to the book for the gap between the job and the crime drama. The investigator's work is mostly looking, asking and writing it down: the scene, the medical history, the people who knew the person. Ribowsky later advised television crime shows, so he knows both versions well.

3

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

A death certificate is only as good as the care of the person who filled it in.

Ribowsky is sceptical of causes of death written down without a real look at the case. A careless certificate can hide a crime, an accident or a pattern. Treat a cause of death that nobody investigated as a best guess, not a finding.

4

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Careful death investigation is a way of protecting the living.

When an investigator notices that several deaths share a cause, the finding can point to a disease, a dangerous product or a hazard in the home. One death, looked at closely, can stop the next one. That is the public health side of the office that most people never see.

5

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Getting a name right matters more than getting it fast.

After September 11, some remains were found with identification that belonged to someone else. A wrong match would mean telling one family their loved one was found, and another nothing. The office chose proof over speed, even when families were desperate for news.

6

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

In a disaster, the system you build in the first days decides what is possible for years.

The office had to invent a way to log every remain and every piece of information from families almost overnight, while the site was still burning. Because each item was catalogued with care, it could be checked again later as the science improved. The formal effort ran until 2005.

7

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Families give the evidence that science needs to bring someone home.

Identification by DNA works only when there is something to compare against. The office collected samples and details from thousands of families and matched them to what was recovered. The people who were grieving were also the ones who made the names possible.

8

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Every grieving family deserves the same care, whatever uniform their person wore.

The book describes how families of firefighters and police officers were sometimes treated differently from civilian families, and the hurt that caused. Ribowsky's work was to name everyone with the same rigour. Fairness to the grieving is part of the job, not an extra.

9

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Choosing the work nobody wants can be its own form of care.

Ribowsky trained to treat the living as a physician assistant, then chose to work for the dead. The book is as much about his own path and choices as about the cases. It shows that this work is done by ordinary people who decided someone had to do it well.

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

- [ ] Set an emergency contact on your phone
- [ ] Write a one-page health summary
- [ ] Tell one person where your papers are
- [ ] Record your organ donation decision
- [ ] Name someone to decide for you

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Check on someone who lives alone
- ◯ Review your file on your birthday
- ◯ Report the hazard you notice

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

Set an emergency contact on your phone

Open your phone's medical ID or emergency information and add one or two contacts, plus allergies and key conditions.

Turn on the option that lets it be read from the lock screen.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Write a one-page health summary

List your medications, conditions, allergies, and the names of your doctor and dentist.

Put it somewhere your emergency contact knows about, and keep a copy in your wallet or phone.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Tell one person where your papers are

Pick the person who would be called first.

Tell them where your ID, insurance details, will and key account information live. It takes ten minutes and saves days.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Record your organ donation decision

Whatever you decide, register it with your local donor registry and tell your family.

A decision they already know is one less thing to guess at in a hard week.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Name someone to decide for you

Choose a health care proxy or power of attorney for health decisions, and fill in the form your state or country uses.

Talk it through with them before you sign.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Check on someone who lives alone

Pick a neighbour, parent or friend who lives on their own and agree a simple weekly check-in, a text or a knock.

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

Review your file on your birthday

Once a year, on a date you will not forget, reread your emergency card, health summary and contacts.

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 ○
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Report the hazard you notice

When a product or a fixture nearly hurts someone, report it to your national consumer safety agency instead of only throwing it away.

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 ○
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December 2026

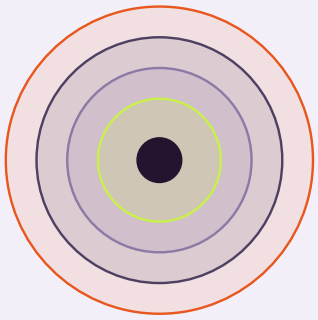
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



Every death deserves a careful answer, and every family deserves to hear it from someone who took the time.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER SHIYA RIBOWSKY