The DINNER PARTY HOSTING GUIDEBOOK
WE ARE
DINNER PARTIERS
WE KNOW WHAT IT IS TO LOSE A LOVED ONE AND WE'RE NOT AFRAID TO TALK ABOUT IT

We hold the following truths to be self-evident:
Life after loss is forever different than life before, grief isn’t linear, and moving forward is not the same as moving on.
There is no roadmap, no gameplan. You’re your OWN BEST EXPERT.
This journey is yours alone, but you are not alone in journeying.

YOU’VE GOT THIS.

The commitments we make to each other are simple:

We will abstain from BULLSHIT
No whitewashing loss. No standing on platitudes. No pitying.

We will speak our own TRUTH
and listen deeply, openly, thoughtfully as others share theirs.

We believe in thriving... not just surviving. We will not avoid the pain, but we will also seek out the joy. We will see each other through our worst days, and use them to create our best days. We’ll TAKE DAMN GOOD CARE of ourselves and of each other. We will:

EAT WELL
BE WELL
LIVE WELL
LOVE WELL

LOOK AROUND THE TABLE AND PULL UP A CHAIR. CHEERS!

thedinneparty.org
For most of us, loss is the ultimate conversation-killer. We see the deer-in-headlights expressions on the faces of those who’ve never been there, and quickly change the subject. Without other examples to draw upon, we fear we’re not doing it right, or that there’s something wrong with us. We learn to hold back and hold in what for many of us has been among the significant events in our lives to date.

Here at The Dinner Party, we believe it doesn’t have to be that way. We’ve found that talking openly about loss with others who’ve been there can inspire some of our most profound conversations and deepest relationships. Paradoxically, we’ve found that when we make more space to talk about loss and life after, we actually make more space in our lives for other things, too.

We invite you to gather a table of people you know who’ve also experienced significant loss and to share a meal. We’ve pulled together everything you need to know to host your own Dinner Party—from checklists and hosting tips to pointers on how to #makeitnice and how to break the ice.

Let’s get cooking.
In the following pages, you’ll find a series of tips and guiding principles that have emerged from dozens of dinners and loads of trial-and-error. This guide is intended to be neither static nor complete: figure out what works for you, flag what doesn’t, and record tips of your own—and don’t forget to share your wisdom with the rest of us.

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What Does a Dinner Party Look Like?

The Dinner Party is unstructured by design: there is no formula or script, and just as no two stories are ever exactly alike, no two dinners will ever be quite the same. Feel free to make it your own.
Consider this something akin to that favorite family recipe passed down through the generations, with new flourishes and personal touches added by each new cook. We’ve found that additional zest and spice always work well.

**INGREDIENTS**
Good people
Good food (potluck-style)
Open minds + open hearts
Optional: Candles, flowers, ornamental gourds, and/or whatever you do to #makeitnice

**DIRECTIONS**
1. **Put a date on the calendar, and send out an invite.** Have folks sign up to bring a dish (ideally one with a story behind it).
2. **Set the table and get cooking.** As Dinner Partiers arrive, welcome everyone by pouring drinks. Spend a few minutes in casual conversation as folks filter in, and keep folks busy with last-minute prep tasks.
3. **Plate up.**
4. **Raise those glasses high.** Toast the men & women who brought you to the table, and the sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, partners, and friends gathered round it.
5. **If it’s your first dinner, set the context.** Briefly explain what The Dinner Party is, and set loose expectations. If everyone has been before, skip ahead to Step 7.
6. **Do introductions.** Have everyone share a bit about what brings them here, and where they are right now. As host, share first.
7. **Let the conversation flow organically, popcorn-style.** People may cry. They should definitely laugh.
8. **Listen intently, connect the dots, and ask follow-up questions.** Have a couple of topics in your back-pocket to stir up conversation, in the event that conversation lags.
9. Fifteen minutes before the scheduled end (or thereabouts), **serve dessert.**
10. **End the night by asking people how it went for them:** What felt good? What didn’t? What was most memorable? What would you want to see more of?
11. **Repeat!**
Is Hosting for Me?

A great TDP host has similar qualities to any great dinner party host: warmth, openness, ease starting and coaxing along conversations. Our tables are peer-to-peer, so our hosts are participants, too, rather than outside facilitators.
You’d Make a Great TDP Host If...

1. **You’ve personally experienced a primary loss.** Real talk requires real experience—the kind of expertise that comes of losing someone you love. Whether that loss was a parent, a partner, a sibling, or a close friend, whether it was six months or six years ago, what’s key is that it had a significant impact on your life.

2. **You want to #realtalk.** We’ve found that sharing your own story gives others permission to share theirs. This isn’t about giving advice, or sharing lessons learned through your own experience: To become a successful Dinner Party host, you have to be willing to be vulnerable, and to reflect deeply on your own story. You have to want what everyone else at the table wants: a space to talk openly about the person or people you’ve lost without killing the mood, to explore all the ways good and bad loss continues to color your life, to eat awesome food, to make new friends, etc.

3. **You can open your doors.** You have space in your home to host a dinner or the creativity to find another cozy spot (e.g. gallery, park, or friend’s backyard).

4. **You love to #makeitnice.** You like to impress, without being all pretentious about it. You don’t have to brew your own artisanal beer or maintain a food blog with a gazillion followers, but you do have to dig not-ordering-Chinese-takeout, and creating a space with a little bit of that je-ne-sais-quoi.

5. **You find it easy to make conversation.** Dinner Parties are all about connecting through conversation and storytelling, so you’ll need to be comfortable chatting, prodding, questioning and laughing with other people while discussing sensitive stuff.

6. **You listen. Deeply.** A big part of being a host is simply listening, asking follow-up questions and resisting the urge to “fix” something for someone else. The most important thing hosts do is create space at the table for every person to be heard.

7. **You’ve got (enough) time.** Hosting one dinner in no way commits you to hosting more: We encourage you to try out hosting and see how things go. But know that Dinner Parties aren’t designed to be one-time affairs: just as Rome wasn’t built in a day, community isn’t built in a night. Over time, we’re able to go beyond the stories we’ve told again and again, and dive into more unexplored territory. We begin to talk less in the past tense and more in the present, and discover shared passions, interests, and other points of commonality. Though you don’t have to stick to a rigid schedule (in fact, we find it’s better if you don’t), you should aim to host a dinner every 6-8 weeks.

8. **You take care o’ you.** The Dinner Party is not a replacement for therapy or other forms of healing. When you’re a host, it’s important that you can be a participant AND a rock for others. Obviously, we’re all works-in-progress, but Dinner Party hosts have a strong sense of self-awareness, and tools at the ready to help them move through stress or emotion, so they can be the host or hostess with the most or mostess.
Got Any Tips for Planning?

Like the food we place upon our tables, the way we choose to share a meal represents one of the most enduring human rituals. Dinner parties are the events we look forward to at the end of a long week: chances to break bread, toast the future, and enjoy the company of friends.
DINNER PARTY PREP

• **Spread the word:** Start with people you know and branch out from there. We find tables of 5-8 people are ideal for a dinner. That means each host or host-pair can accommodate a list of 10-12 people total, which will typically result in a group of 6-8 on any given night. We’ve had successful dinners with as few as three or four people, so we recommend starting small.

• **Pick a date:** We like Sundays, though weekdays can work well too. Fear long email chains? Try Doodle.

• **Send an invite:** Once the date is finalized, send an email inviting guests that includes a link to a digital sign-up sheet for food and drinks. Free trick: Try Fotor for creating more visual invites and a Google Docs spreadsheet for the sign-up sheet.

• **Prepare your guests:** We recommend sharing our manifesto, a quick overview on TDP, and a link to our FAQs with guests before sitting down for your first dinner, so they know what this is all about. OPTIONAL: If you’re meeting someone for the first time (say, a friend-of-a-friend), we recommend having a brief call or grabbing drinks prior to the dinner, so they feel less like strangers and more like new friends. It’s a good way to tell them a little more about what to expect and to answer any questions they might have.

TIPS ON THE FOOD

• **Make a Dish with Meaning:** For the first dinner, we’ll often serve something that reminds us of the person we’ve lost: a family recipe, a favorite food, or something we cooked together. It immediately invites a story.

• **Stick with Potlucks:** We recommend potlucks as a general rule, which in addition to being a cost-saver, adds a sense of co-ownership among dinner guests. Hosts should generally prepare a main dish to anchor the meal, and to ensure you have enough to go around. Having folks RSVP with the type of dish or beverage can help, but surprisingly, winging it has always worked too.

• **Don't Forget the Vino:** We’ve had dinners where bottles remain corked, of course, but you should be sure to have a few at the ready just in case.
DON’T FORGET!

• **Make them feel comfortable:** Our tendency is to have a million things to do at the last minute, so a word of hard-earned advice: Don’t. Be sure that you’re able to invest real attention in every person as he or she walks in the door.

• **Enlist help:** While folks are filtering in, intentionally leave a few things unfinished: save lighting the candles, for instance, or setting the table. Especially for the first dinner, it helps to give people something to do as they’re waiting for everyone else to arrive.

• **Document the dinner:** Capture photos of the food and table, not faces, and collect recipes from participants to send out afterward. Tag us on Instagram at @TheDinnerParty or Twitter at @DinnerPartiers, and we’ll share your creative inspiration with our social network. After the dinner, jot down a few notes on what went well and what didn’t: favorite moments, themes that came up, what you’d like to see more of next time, etc. Share your story and tell us how it went by emailing us at info@thedinnerparty.org.

• **Close the dinner with a brief reflection:** Ever wondered why your college professor was so big on journaling, or why every workshop leader always closes with a reflection session? Science has shown that taking a few minutes to reflect at the end of an experience can help us internalize it. A few minutes before your stated end-time, ask everyone what felt best for them, what was most memorable, and their suggestions for the future. Have a suggestion or a question you’d like to share with other hosts? Send it to info@thedinnerparty.org, and we’ll get back to you with thoughts based on what we’ve seen work at other dinners.

“And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before mass), when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane. The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it. And all from my cup of tea.” —Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*
What’s My Role During a Dinner?

Hosts are responsible for scheduling, sending invites, prepping, and hosting each Dinner Party. They also create space for people to #RealTalk. Co-hosts are recommended—to lighten the load and make the whole experience more fun for you.
GRoUND ruLES

While Dinner Parties are informal, there are a few ground rules to ensure a safe space for all participants.

• All conversations are confidential.
• Being here is participating. You are, at no point, under pressure to talk. We welcome silence just as much as we welcome speech, and ask only that when you speak, you do so intentionally. Here there’s no such thing as an awkward silence.
• We’re asking you to be non-judgmental of yourself and others. Try to avoid filtering yourself, and don’t feel as though you should or shouldn’t be feeling something at any given moment. Your experience is yours and please honor and respect that others’ is theirs. Try to stick with “I” statements, and avoid advice-giving; simply speak your truth.

TiPS FOR hOSTiNG

• Model it: A host is every bit as much of a participant as the other dinner guests. We’ve found that the best way to get people to go below the surface is to model that behavior ourselves: by admitting you’re struggling with something, you’re giving permission for other participants to admit the same.
• Dot-connect: Take the role of active listener seriously. What themes are coming up consistently? Keep an eye out for moments to follow-up, and prompts that can elicit deeper dives. Don’t be afraid to relate things back to your own story, but do be careful of dominating.
• Bring it back to the present: It’s easy to philosophize, which often becomes a crutch for avoiding real experience. Have someone who can call bullshit if things start to feel inauthentic.
• Have a few themes you could talk about in the back of your mind: In the event that conversation stalls, you can easily jump-start it again. “One thing that keeps coming up for me is X. Have other folks have had a similar experience?”
• HAVE FUN: Yes, you’re creating a space for people to #realtalk. And yes, you should have a box of tissues at the ready. But we’ve found the way to talk about heavy subjects is often via humor and a tone that’s light, particularly in the beginning. Give people the space to laugh.

PRO TIP: Dinner Party conversations will naturally have a mix of gravity and levity. We have more resources on “how to have difficult conversations” on our website at thedinnerparty.org.
What’s Next?

We hope you now feel ready to host your first Dinner Party! Here’s a checklist to help you prep.
HOST CHECKLIST

PLANNING A DINNER
- Recruit a co-host (optional)
- Recruit participants
- Set the date and location
- Create potluck sign-up sheet
- Prepare your guests for what to expect (FAQ's, pre-dinner calls)
- Think up a few themes you’d like to discuss during the dinner
- Make a menu

DAY-OF PREP
- Pick up ingredients
- Set-up the space
- Cook the main dish (Alternatively: Feel free to invite dinner guests over early to cook together)
- Kick off with a toast
- Do introductions
- Talk, listen, eat, & drink
- Reflect
- Document dinner with photos of table and food

POST-DINNER
- Send thank you, photos and survey to guests
- Complete host survey
- Start scheduling next dinner party

More resources for hosts are available at thedinnerparty.org. If you have any other questions, reach out to us at: info@thedinnerparty.org