

Meaning in Life Eases Transition

Embrace an empowering approach to death and dying

by Dr. David K. Allen, MD

We live in a death-denying society. Most of us act as though death is a temporary inconvenience that we can work around like a nuisance in our life. In rare moments of honest reflection we understand that death is inevitable—we just don't fully believe it. Many forces have conspired to bring about this unsuccessful view of the cycle of life, including the following:

- ◇ Medical science offers a vast array of treatments and technology, which can forestall death and sometimes add quality time to life. This often creates the illusion that we can cure death.
- ◇ Death now usually occurs in the ICU or skilled-nursing facility, not at home with extended family closely involved.
- ◇ Our society values youth, possessions, vigor, productivity, independence, and living for the moment. It devalues age, family, interdependence, and spending time in search of meaning or purpose.
- ◇ Ethical and legal issues have often confused, rather than clarified, choices available to those facing the end of life.
- ◇ Our fierce individualism, which seems to work so well to achieve “success”, is a miserable failure when we face death.
- ◇ We have been taught invalid assumptions about life, which are shattered by terminal illness. We find that the world is not always benevolent, good things do not always happen to good people, and people don't always get what they deserve.

Since death is an inescapable consequence of living, it is essential

to find a way through these dysfunctional concepts and then embrace an empowering approach to death and dying. We need to work through the anger, fear, and sadness to find peace and resolution. We can then find meaning in the living that remains and celebrate the life already lived.

Fortunately many who have worked in this area have given us insights that can help. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's important writings have made this once totally avoided topic at least acceptable to talk about. Her "Five Stages" can help us understand the collage of thoughts and emotions that surround dealing with these issues. Denial, anger bargaining, depression, and acceptance might occur in any order or several elements can occur simultaneously.

Dr. Cicely Saunders, founder of the modern hospice movement, says that the suffering of the person experiencing the dying process is multi-dimensional: physical, emotional, social and spiritual. Each component must be addressed to successfully manage the suffering.

Viktor Frankel has shown that we can discover meaning in life in three ways: by creating a work or doing a deed; by experiencing something or encountering someone; and by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering. He asserts that this unavoidable suffering can "bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement."

By applying these empowering concepts we can transform death and dying from a horrible experience to a healing process.

Hospice

Find help through Hospice, an organization that can provide the assistance of professionals, i.e. nurses, physicians, counselors and chaplains as well as trained, dedicated volunteers to help those traveling this path. Initial efforts are directed towards effective

control of any distressing physical symptoms. Then team members offer an empathic ear and supportive dialogue, as well as assistance with personal needs. Seeking the person's specific goals and actively involving them in treatment choices helps to maintain his dignity. Every effort is made to foster hope by drawing on the individual's inner power to transcend the present situation.

Facing death or dealing with a terminal illness, even in its earlier stages, can undermine the very basis of our personhood. When individuals are unable to maintain their usual roles because of increasing weakness and dependence, they feel their worth is diminished. To regain personhood one must reconstruct meaning. This often requires discarding society's concepts, which work in times of health but fail in times of illness.

Finding purpose

The most important task is to reestablish purpose. It is best to focus on short-term, achievable goals. At times, the dying person can find meaning through insights about living that he has gained throughout his life. Priorities sometimes change during the dying process. It helps to enlarge one's sense of fulfillment and happiness by appreciating the gifts of ordinary life such as seeing the beauty of nature and embracing the love of family and friends. By reminiscing about past sources of joy and fulfillment, one can set new goals, which then build on these sources of enjoyment.

One can learn to find meaning in being rather than just in doing. Friends and loved ones can assist by expressing interest in the person's concerns. Being an active listener can validate his thoughts and fears and help reestablish self-worth. Acknowledge that illness is stressful and that a sense of being overwhelmed is natural. Remember that unfinished business is a fact of life. Offer to assist the individual so that he can reconcile with family and friends, when possible. Allowing an opportunity to explore higher meanings and spiritual issues can bring comfort to many. The

person may be able to imagine an ending to the story of his life that includes some sadness but still has a sense of fullness and completion. The social workers, chaplains, and grief counselors at Hospice can provide compassionate assistance in these efforts.

This reconstruction of meaning is not unlike the process that individuals facing long-term or even short-term disabilities may face. Similarly, the grieving process after the loss of a loved one often follows a similar path.

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Further Resources:

Hospice of Larimer County 663-3500

Frankle VE. *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York: Washington Square Press; 1985.

Kubler-Ross E. *On Death and Dying*. New York: MacMillan; 1969.