

## *Dealing with Death and Bereavement*



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## Intertwined Aspects of Death

- Biological Fact
- Social/Cultural
- Developmental
- Historical
- Religious
- Legal
- Psychological
- Medical and Ethical

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## The Mortality Revolution



- With better health care, death became increasingly a phenomenon of late adulthood
- In the process it has become 'invisible and abstract'
- Today, violence, drug abuse, and natural disasters have made it harder to deny the reality of death

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## Hospice Care of Dying

- Focus is on palliative care
  - Relief of pain and suffering
  - Allowing the patient to die in peace and dignity



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## Terminal Drop



- Also called 'Terminal Decline'
- A widely observed decline in cognitive abilities shortly before death
- Predicts death as much as 11 years later
- Related to depression

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## Five Stages of Coming to Terms with Death



- **Denial** - This can't be happening to me!
- **Anger** - Why me?
- **Bargaining**
  - for extra time
  - If only I can.....I won't ask for anything else.
- **Depression**
- **Acceptance**

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## Bereavement and Grief

### ■ Bereavement

- The process of adjusting to the loss of someone whom is close

### ■ Grief

- The emotional response experienced in the early phase of bereavement

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## Classic Grief Work Model

Includes 3 Stages:

1. Shock and disbelief
2. Preoccupation with memory of dead person
3. Resolution

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## Grieving: Three Patterns

### ■ Commonly Expected

- Mourner goes from high to low distress

### ■ Absent Grief

- Mourner does not experience distress immediately or later

### ■ Chronic Grief

- Mourner remains distressed for a long time

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## Exploding Common Grieving Myths

- Depression is far from universal
- High distress at outset does not mean long-term problems are avoided
- Not all people need to 'work through' a loss
- Not all people return to normal quickly
- Not all people can resolve grief and accept loss

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## Grief Therapy

- Treatment to help the bereaved cope with their loss
- Therapists help survivors express:
  - Sorrow
  - Guilt
  - Hostility
  - Anger



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## Understanding Death in Childhood

Learning that death is:

- Irreversible
- Universal
- Inevitable
- A dead person is nonfunctional



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## Understanding Death in Adolescence

- In many communities death is a part of daily life
- Other adolescents take heedless risks
  - Driving recklessly
  - Experimenting with drugs
  - More concerned with 'how' they live than 'how long' they live

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## Understanding Death in Adulthood

- **Young adults**
  - Mortality at this stage can lead to frustration and rage
- **Middle age**
  - More acceptance of mortality
- **Older adults have mixed feelings**
  - Fear
  - Denial
  - Acceptance

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## Surviving a Spouse



- Because they live longer, women are more likely to be widowed
- Especially difficult for a woman whose identity was built around husband
- Elderly widowers 4 times more likely to remarry than elderly widows

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## Losing a Parent in Adulthood



- Today, this loss normally occurs in middle age
- A majority of bereaved adult children still experience distress
- Often a maturing experience
- Often brings changes in other relationships
  - Taking more responsibility for surviving parent
  - Keeping family together

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## Losing a Child



- A parent is rarely prepared for this loss
- Generally feels like a cruel and unnatural shock
- Parents often fail they have failed the child
- If marriage is strong, the loss may draw a couple closer
- If marriage is weak, the loss may tear the couple apart

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## Mourning a Miscarriage



- Mourning the loss of a child 'never known'
- Unlike other deaths, this death has no mourning rituals
  - Coping strategies are difficult to generalize
- Men may be overcome with frustration and helplessness
- Many people find comfort with family members

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## Suicide Statistics

- Approximately 30,000 per year
- Third leading cause of death in 15-24 year-olds
- Rates rise with age and are higher among men
  - Highest rate is white men over age 50

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## Suicide Warning Signs

- Withdrawing from family or friends
- Talking about death or suicide
- Giving away prized possessions
- Abusing drugs and alcohol
- Personality changes
- Unusual anger, boredom, or apathy
- Symptoms of depression

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## Euthanasia: Aid in Dying

- **Active Euthanasia**
  - Action taken directly to shorten life
- **Passive Euthanasia**
  - Withholding or discontinuing treatment
- **Assisted Suicide**
  - Helping a person bring about self-inflicted death

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## Advance Directives

- Instructions about when and how to discontinue medical care
- Living Wills
  - Durable power of attorney
  - Medical durable power of attorney

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## Arguments For Assisted Suicide

- Based on autonomy and self-determination
- Relief of suffering
- Preservation of dignity
- Regulation of existing practices to provide compassion for suffering patients

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## Arguments Against Assisted Suicide

- Based on two principles:
  - 1. Taking a life is wrong
  - 2. Concern for protecting the disadvantaged
- Possibility of misdiagnosis by doctors
- Starts a 'slippery slope' of who can and should engage in assisted suicide

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## Other End of Life Issues

- What about newborns with incurable diseases or poor prognoses for quality of life?
- What about infants under similar conditions?
- How should death be brought about?
- What about cultural values?
  - Planning for death is inconsistent with Navajo values.

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## Life Review

- Remembering process that enables a person to see the significance of their life
- In older age this can foster ego integrity



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## Methods of Life Review

- Writing or taping an autobiography
- Constructing a family tree
- Looking over scrapbooks and old letters
- Trips to childhood locations
- Reunions with friends and family

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## Development: A Lifelong Process

- Dying can be a developmental experience
  - Time with, and for, those whom we are close
  - Helps them and us achieve an enduring sense of self-worth



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