

Death Acceptance & Grief Counselling through Meaning Transformation

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Overview

- Review & Introduction
- Meaning in living well and dying well
- How to engage with life while dying
- How to transform grief into meaningful living

Review & Introduction

- Viktor Frankl teaches us what is meant to be a human being.
- Logotherapy is about how to maintain human dignity & how to live responsibly.
- These points are especially important for the terminally ill and the dying.

Review & Introduction

Wong's Meaning Therapy focuses on:

(1) Meaning is all you have in coping with boundary situations, and

(2) Relationship is all you need in order to engage with life

Dealing with Death & Dying

The above basic concepts equip you to minister to the dying.

You can help them realize that

- They have lived a life of purpose & significance
- Their life stories are worth telling
- That they have made a difference
- That they can accept death with inner peace

Working with the Bereaved

- Meaning Therapy prepares you for grief counselling
- Transforming through meaning from grieving the loss to meaningful living
- Empowering the bereaved to live with greater passion and sharper vision

The Life-Death Connection

- “To solve the problem of death, one must first solve the problem of life, living life”
(Dennis Yoshikawa).
- “To be prepared for death is to be prepared for living; to die well is to live well”
(Konosuke Matsushita).

“Living well and dying well involve enhancing **one’s sense of self, one’s relationships with others, and one’s understanding of the transcendent, the spiritual, the supernatural....** And only in confronting the inevitability of death does one truly embrace life.”

(Kuhl, 2002)

What is a Good Death?

- A comfortable & pain-free death
- A harmonious death
- A meaningful death
- A hopeful death
- A peaceful death

Dying Well

- Dying *can* be a positive and rewarding experience
- It can also be a time of personal freedom and growth
- Dying well begins with Death Acceptance

Dying is Hard Work

- Dying is more than a physical process
- “It is a process that includes one’s whole being – physical, psychological, and spiritual” (Kuhl, p. xvii)
- One needs to resolve psychological and spiritual issues

Death Fear & Existential Anxiety

- Human beings alone are burdened with the cognitive capacity to be aware of their own inevitable mortality and fear what may come afterwards
- Human beings' capacity to reflect on the meaning of life and death creates additional existential anxiety
- “The existential fear of death, the fear of not existing, is the hardest to conquer”
(Goodman, 1981)

The Bases of Death Anxiety

1. The Finality of Death
2. The uncertainty of what follows
3. Annihilation anxiety or fear of non-existence
4. The ultimate loss
5. Fear of the pain & loneliness in dying
6. Fear of failing to complete life work
7. Worrying about the survivors

Samuel Oliver (1998) on death denial

“I have seen a profound difference between dying patients who are fighting their illness to the end and dying patients who surrender themselves to a spiritual life beyond their present physical life.... Some try to hold on to a false hope that they will remain physically alive as though life in the physical domain will remain the same if ‘they will do so.’ Along with this false hope often comes anger and frustration in the dying patients’ words and actions”

Negative consequences of death fear & death denial

- Clinging to life at any cost
- Unnecessary financial & human costs
- Failure to seek/receive important information
- Unprepared for death and aftermath
- Unprepared to explore transcendental reality

Consequences of death fear & denial (cont.)

- Unprepared to resolve significant existential issues
- Too many wasted opportunities
- Too late to live a meaningful and fulfilling life
- Unnecessary frustration and stress
- Anger, depression, and anxiety
- Shame, guilt, despair and regrets

Coping with Death Anxiety

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' s (1969) five stages of coping:

Denial – Death avoidance and extreme sports

Anger – Aggression, violence and terrorism

Bargaining – Doing good deeds or worshipping gods

Depression – Disengagement and isolation

Acceptance – Engagement in life

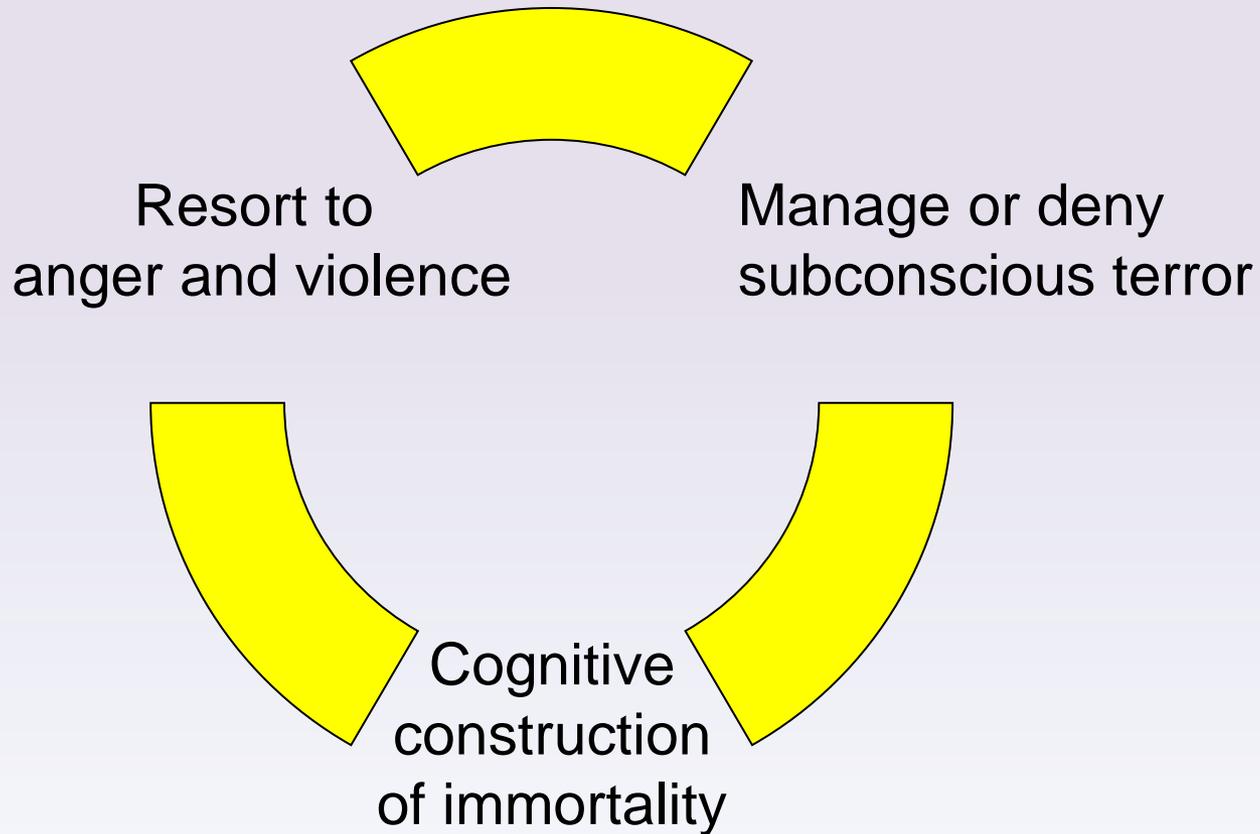
Terror Management

- Unconscious defense mechanisms against the terror of death
- Cultural worldview defense mechanism
- Self-esteem defense mechanism
- No longer adequate in the face of impending death

Terror management (cont.)

- Need to accept our personal mortality
- Need to connect with the continuity of life
- Need for symbolic immortality

Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon's (2002) Terror management theory



Various Kinds of Symbolic Immortality

- Biological
- Religious/Spiritual
- Creative
- Natural
- Institutional

Meanings of Death Acceptance

- Awareness of the presence of death
- Acknowledging the biological reality of death
- Confronting death without fear and hostility
- Actively engaging what we fear most
- Embracing death in a constructive manner

Meanings of Death Acceptance (cont.)

- Accept our own imperfections
- Recognize the spiritual values in life and death
- Celebrate the completion of our life's mission
- Enter into full experience of life and death
- Explore the transcendental, spiritual reality
- Live life to the fullest right up to the final moment

David Kuhl (2002) on Confronting & Accepting Death

“In confronting death, death and life take on new meanings.

In accepting death, we experience the fullness of life. We become more aware of nature and neighbors. We experience love without fear and forgiveness without guilt. It awakens us psychologically and spiritually.

It is like being reborn.”

Three Types of Death Acceptance

(Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994)

1. **Neutral** - facing death rationally as an inevitable end of every life
2. **Approach** - accepting death as a gateway to a better afterlife
3. **Escape** - choosing death as a better alternative to a painful existence

Neutral Acceptance

- A rational and scientific approach to accepting death as part of the biological process
- There is no afterlife, but there is symbolic immortality
- Creative & significant contributions make life worth living
- Meaningful relationships reduce death anxiety

Approach Acceptance

- Belief in God and an afterlife
- Heaven is a better place than this world
- Readiness to let go things of this world
- Recognition of the spiritual connection with a transcendental reality
- Hope in sharing spiritual life with loved ones for all eternity

Escape Acceptance

- Life is unbearable; death is a better alternative
- Death sets me free from pain & suffering
- Death seems to be the only way out of a terrible mess
- No more quality of life, no meaning for continued existence

Suicide & Euthanasia

- No human being should have to live in pain
- Patient's right to die
- A matter of personal choice
- Personal control over when and how we die
- Quality of life vs. sanctify of life
- Dying with dignity, peace, and love

T. Quill (1991) on Physician-Assisted Suicide

“When the struggle comes to an end and no meaning can be found or recovered, take the bed to the window and let me fly as quickly and painlessly as possible.”

Lonny Shavelson (1995) on Euthanasia

“Residing in a deep, drug-induced coma while awaiting death can be, from the patient’s point of view, no different from death itself.”

But Dr. Byock points out the benefits for family members to care for a patient in a prolonged coma.

Kübler-Ross (1997) on Physician-Assisted Suicide

“Even with all my suffering I am still opposed to Kevorkian, who takes people’s lives prematurely simply because they are in pain or are uncomfortable. He does not understand that he deprives people of whatever last lessons they have to learn before they can graduate. Right now I am learning patience and submission. As difficult as those lessons are, I know that the Highest of the High has a plan. I know that He has a time that will be right for me to leave my body the way a butterfly leaves its cocoon. Our only purpose in life is growth.” (p. 281)

Ten Pathways to Death Acceptance through Meaning

1. **Attitudinal** – Maintain a courageous & hopeful stance
2. **Experience** – Receive and appreciate beauty & love
3. **Creative** – Give ourselves to creative work
4. **Generative** – Give ourselves to future generations
5. **Relational** – Maintain connections and repair relationships

Ten Pathways to Death Acceptance through Meaning (cont.)

6. **Narrative** – Construct meaning through stories & narratives
7. **Symbolic** – Enrich life with rituals, images, & poetry
8. **Spiritual** – Practice and internalize religion/spirituality
9. **Nature** – Become attuned to the rhythms of nature
10. **Internal** – Develop an inner sanctuary

Dalai Lama (2002) on Spiritual Practice

“To avoid being depressed about dying, take refuge in your respective religion within compassion for all beings; reflect on the importance of extracting the essence of this present life, which is endowed with both the leisure and the necessities of spiritual practice, and reflect again and again on impermanence.”

(p.115)

Dalai Lama (2002) on Preparing People for Death

“When another person dies, be careful not to upset him or her by causing more attachment or stirring up anger and hatred. Do not bemoan their departure, grasp at them, or cry in their presence. Help them to depart meaningfully by reminding them of deeper practice.”

David Kuhl on the Spiritual Transformation of Dying

“People speak of a spiritual component to their experience of living with the knowledge of having a terminal illness. They may call it Nature, the Creator, Allah, God, Jesus, Buddha, or some ‘higher power;’ for others, it is couched in terms of meaning, purpose, and value”

David Kuhl on the Mystery of Transcendence

“Transcendence has to do with mystery, which inherently contains some element that cannot be defined...Yet people who know they have a terminal illness, who know they are dying, speak about the spiritual, the transcendent, as though it were real. Their conversations range beyond the boundaries of religion as they explore their connection to something greater than themselves. This spiritual experience is described variously as love, forgiveness, resolution, self-acceptance, gratitude, and inner strength – all based upon a deep-felt connection to a higher power.”

Transforming Suffering and Pain

- Consider suffering as a gift for personal growth
- Do not fight against the pain and suffering
- Paradoxical intention may lessen pain's grip on us
- Self-discovery elicits an opening for healing

Transforming Suffering and Pain (cont.)

- Form a new relationship with pain
- Observe our pain in an objective mindful way
- Allow pain to evolve and change its qualities
- Allow compassion to flow from our hearts to those who suffer more

Hospice & Palliative Care

- The National Hospice Organization in the United States “rejects the practice of voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide in the care of the terminally ill” and “championed the ideals of relief of suffering, freedom of choice, and death with dignity.”

Comfort Care

- Ira Byock as a healer with a mission
- Comfort-care versus life-sustaining interventions
- Patient's right in end-of-life decisions
- Morphine administration and terminal sedation
- Socially approved and prescribed good death

The Four Things That Matter Most for the Dying (Ira Byock)

- 'Please forgive me'
- 'I forgive you'
- 'Thank you'
- 'I love you'

<http://www.thefourthings.org/>

Questions dying people struggle with:

Who am I?

Have I lived the life I really want?

What is the meaning of life?

Has my life been worthwhile?

What is the point of living in pain?

What is the meaning of death?

What happens to me after I die?

How can I find and give forgiveness?

How should I spend the remaining days of my life?

How can I find peace, comfort, and hope in the face of death?

TOP 5 REGRETS OF THE DYING

FROM THE GUARDIAN NEWS REPORT: TOP FIVE REGRETS OF THE DYING

1
I WISH I'D HAD
THE COURAGE TO
LIVE A LIFE TRUE TO
MYSELF, NOT THE
LIFE OTHERS EX-
PECTED OF ME.

2
I WISH I HADN'T
WORKED SO HARD.

3
I WISH I'D HAD THE
COURAGE TO EX-
PRESS MY FEEL-
INGS.

4
I WISH I HAD STAYED
IN TOUCH WITH MY
FRIENDS.

5
I WISH THAT I HAD
LET MYSELF BE HAP-
PIER.

Samuel Oliver (1998) on Ministering to Dying Patients & their Families

- Every encounter with the dying is a holy moment
- Our inner selves and inner voice matter more than spoken words
- An opportunity for the soul to transcend space and time
- Encourage faith – the basis for hope and strength to go on
- Reassure dying patients of the meaning of their lives

Samuel Oliver (cont.)

- Tears of painful emotions and words of grief provide opportunities for healing
- Opening up the inner life to connect with others at the spiritual level
- Spiritual connection becomes more important than physical attachments
- Validate eternal values of the shared inner lives
- Encourage humanness – shared stories connect and awaken us

Samuel Oliver (cont.)

- “Trust in the eternal dimension of relationships can give hope to the dying”
- “Internally, we shift from what we can do to what God can do through us”
- “The moment a patient takes one last breath, our focus moves internally and awakens the soul”

Samuel Oliver on How to Utilize Spiritual Resources in the Community

- Churches can be a physical reminder of the hope and faith we have in God
- Our faith communities can be a support group and connect us to eternal ways of understanding life beyond the physical
- We want to provide positive social, emotional, and spiritual support to keep the magic of their spirits alive, when the patients are dying physically

Spiritual Resources (cont.)

- Encourage the process of shifting the focus away from earthly attachment to thoughts of God and afterlife
- Spiritual care gives our spirit a physical expression and expands our awareness of inner connections with others
- “Spiritual care allows us to surrender our entire being and paint pictures we cannot see”

Need for Palliative Counselling

- Counselling makes a big difference when individuals are struggling with end of life issues
- Request for assisted suicide means “I don’t want to die in pain; I don’t want to die alone.”
- Terminally ill patients are desperate for some reasons for struggling to stay alive

Need for Palliative Counselling (cont.)

- Help them explore the big questions and discover the meaning of life, suffering, and death
- Facilitate inner healing and transformation
- Need to be part of hospice and palliative care
- Doctors, nurses, chaplains, hospice workers, and funeral home staff can benefit from training in palliative counselling

Grief is an Inevitable Part of Living

- Grief is a universal and common experience
- So much of life is about attachments and losses
- Everyone will experience bereavement at some point in their lives
- It is difficult to live a life without any attachments

Grief is both Common and Unique

- Although Grief is common, it is highly specific for each individual & for each relationship
- Each individual may experience the loss differently because of different histories, relationships, and current conditions

Grieving is Hard Work

- Grieving touches every aspect of the person
- Grieving can be intensive & extensive
- Full recovery may not be possible
- Some death could mean the loss of meaning for living and the shattering of one's fundamental assumptions about life (Janoff-Bulman, 1992)

Internal Struggles

- Emotional tumult, mental disorientation, flooded memories
- The loss may trigger an existential crisis and a spiritual quest
- Desperately seeking to fill the inner void

External Struggles

- Practical demands and adjustments in life
- Funeral arrangements, settling the estates, taking care of personal effects
- Dealing with relatives and re-igniting past conflicts
- Colliding cultures as a source of external stress

The Nature of Grief

- Bereavement grieving involves a complex pattern of coping processes in reaction to the disintegration of existing structures of meaning
- The loss may disrupt one's continuity with the past and trigger an identity crisis
- Grief work involves the transformation of meaning structures

Rando's (1988) Process Model

- (a) The goal of mourning is to adapt to the loss of the loved one, while maintaining a connection through memory
 - (b) The process involves three main phases: Avoidance, Confrontation, and Accommodation
 - (c) The grief process is not linear, but rather circular
- ❖ Healthy accommodation is not defined by the absence of grief or mourning, but the ability to accept the reality of death and move forward

Wong's Process Model

Four Parallel but Interacting Processes

1. Mourning the Loss
2. Accepting the Loss
3. Adjusting to the Loss
4. Transforming the Loss

1. Mourning the Loss

- This involves primarily the affective process, beginning with numbness & shock, moving through intense emotions, and finally settling into a residual sense of sadness
- The cycles may become less frequent and less intense
- Guilt, anger, shame, regrets, hostility, sorrow, and pain are commonly experienced emotions
- Clarifying, sorting out, and reconciling conflicting feelings contribute to recovery

2. Accepting the Loss

Acceptance of the loss at different levels:

- **Cognitive:** more than an intellectual understanding; also cognitive resolution to reduce ruminations
- **Social and behavioural:** concrete manifestations of acceptance and “letting go”
- **Spiritual:** establishing a spiritual connection and experiencing an inner vision of a spiritual union
- **Emotional:** emotional resolution & release

3. Adjusting to the Loss

- Involves the process of making a series of mental and behavioral changes to adapt to the new dynamics within the family and in the larger social network
- Involves working through personal and interpersonal issues, such as forgiveness of self and others, resolving interpersonal conflicts, and re-establishing some relationships

4. Transforming the Loss

- It moves from struggling with the loss to incorporating it into the new reality
- It involves redefining one's self-identity & life goals
- It involves reinvesting one's psychological energy, making new friends, developing new projects, and engaging in productive activities
- It involves the discovery of new meanings and the reconstruction of existing meaning structures
- Transformation is necessary for resolution, restoration, & personal growth

The Paradox of Transformation

- The pain will never go away completely
- Positive and negative transformation
- Positive changes through memories and the transformation of meanings
- The dead are weaved into the fabric of life
- The past and the present are integrated with the future
- Tragic optimism & post-traumatic growth

Grief Counselling

- Grief may be a symptom of something deeper
- Deal with trauma before grief
- Create a safe and trusting environment
- Grief may have a deep-seated root system involving painful memories & one's own death anxiety
- Recognize people's capacity for resilience

Meaning Therapy & Grief Counselling

- Acceptance and letting go
- Learning how to live with loss
- Reconstructing the meaning-systems
- Life review, re-storying, & myth-making
- Transforming the loss
- Integrating the loss with the future
- Creating a preferred future
- Addressing existential and spiritual issues

Conclusions

- Meaning plays an important role in coping with death and grieving.
- Death acceptance is the best antidote to death anxiety and grief.
- We need to decide what matters most in life and death.
- What is worth dying for reveals our ultimate concerns.