

Death & Loss; What To Do When Death Touches Us?

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Introduction

Death is generally thought of as an almost intolerable idea that requires us to keep as much distance from it as possible. We cannot unconsciously even dream of our own death, and imagining the death of a loved one or a friend is very difficult. This is so despite the times when in anger we may wish them dead, and can even say so when they are fit and well - and we don't expect our words to become reality.



Experiencing the death or receiving a diagnosis of a terminal illness of a person close to us, are among the most taxing emotional experiences that living offers us. The loss of life, with its plans and dreams, or a diagnosis, is hard to comprehend and to bear. The reality is that death is part of normal life and all of us will come across death before our own life is over. As you are reading this, you may be recently bereaved, or anticipating or worrying about an ending of someone's life in the near future. Traditionally, in Western society, death has been greeted in many different ways. As in all walks of life, practices change through time.

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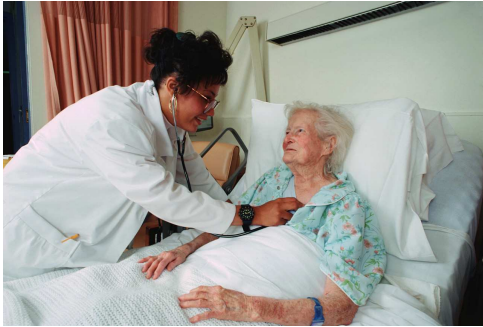
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In Times Past

When I was a child it was common practice to have the sick- or the dying, or an elderly person at the end of their life, cared for at home, by relatives or neighbours. The person had an opportunity to spend their last days in their own, familiar surroundings with people who cared deeply about them. Friends and family, including children, often visited to say their goodbyes and the dying person spoke their last words to those who mattered to them most. Even when people were met by a fatal accident, the person was usually taken home until the burial could take place. After the burial, the mourners would get together, food and drink was served, and the life of the dead person was remembered and their release from suffering celebrated. For the children, this was often a great opportunity to

meet relatives, play games and have fun, as well as participate in the adults' discussions and experience a shared sadness and grief. Children did not feel alone in their grief.

In today's society, the intimacy of death is often swept away and not talked about more than is absolutely necessary. Yet, sometimes the media sensationalises the tragedy of death in a way that we sadly find appealing to our voyeurism. We may even feel as though we personally knew the deceased, when in fact they have been familiar faces on the TV screen, in cinema or the sports field. The debate continues about the acceptability of mercy killing or euthanasia and young people are pictured daily in the news, having died in their prime, for example, whilst fighting in Afghanistan.



Hospital Care

The sick and the dying are often sent to a hospital where strangers care for them. Visiting is limited to specific hours and only a couple of people are allowed by the bedside of the patient who might feel like nothing more than a number to the busy hospital staff. Visiting can feel artificial. There seldom seems to be anything to talk about, in contrast to sitting in comfort

at a kitchen table, having a cup of tea and a natter with family, whilst including the dying person in the conversations. Children may even be denied visiting the hospital in the belief that it is more than they can cope with, or that they should only remember the dying looking healthy. Yet sometimes it is the parent or the carer who fears that they cannot cope with the child's concerns. And yes, a hospital visit is often an uncomfortable experience for the children as they are expected to behave well, sit still in a clinical hospital room and have nothing to do. Today, as many young adults have not grown up with death as part of their everyday reality and have never participated in events leading to and following a death of someone important to them, some young people may worry that they would not know how to behave and what to do.

Rights & Wrongs

Is there a 'right' way and a 'wrong' way to go about these things? It seems best to take our cues from our heart. What feels right often is 'right'. Sensitivity to our own, as well as to other people's needs, is essential and it is helpful to pay attention to the cultural and religious practices of the dying or deceased as well as the bereaved. These can sometimes feel strange to those who are from a different culture. We all know that what helps one can hinder another. This may be one of the reasons why it is so difficult to talk about death. We do not want to hurt those who are already hurting.

Reactions To Death

There are many conscious, as well as deeply unconscious, reasons for the feelings that people experience after a death. This leads to some of the common death related practices, many of which do not make sense at a first glance. For example as **Kubler-Ross** (1969) describes in her book '**On Death and Dying**', the feelings of a child who loses his mother, how he is both blaming himself for her disappearance and being angry with her for not gratifying his needs. This 'child' is within us as adults too. The child loves and wants his mother, and also hates her for depriving him. This conflict creates feelings that are hard to bear and the 'child' in the adult may attempt to discard the unbearable feelings, for example by finding himself angry at the smallest things that in the past would

not have bothered him much at all. **Kubler-Ross** says that the early Native Americans talked about evil spirits and used arrows to frighten the bad spirits away and that this originates from the feeling of anger towards the dead person which is very hard to talk about. It is also possible that the heavy tombstone or practice of cremation helps us to believe that we can control the dead from returning to haunt us, or to revenge our bad thoughts.

Everyone has their own way of coping with death and these can be very different from one person to another, even within the same family. There is much information about bereavement but in this article I've used mainly ideas based on the work of Kubler-Ross who identified five stages that are commonly experienced when bereaved: **Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance**. These stages are part of normal grieving and can take place in any order whilst repeating and returning periodically. These very intense feelings can also arise when one has lost a significant person, not through death but perhaps through a relationship breakdown. All these stages, or perhaps better to think of them as phases, as they do not follow a linear progress, include many other feelings too. A bereaved person may feel shame, guilt, anxiety, sadness or physical symptoms such as tiredness, sleep disturbance or nausea, as well as headaches or other physical manifestations of pain and tension.

Denial

We have all experienced hearing bad news and thinking that this cannot be true or be happening to me. These thoughts can arise if we are told unwanted news about our own life or about a relative or a friend who has a terminal illness or has died. We tend to be shocked and think about ourselves. Can't be happening to me! Sick people for example seek second, third, fourth opinions or faith healers. They deny their ill health or the reality of needing to participate in painful treatments and sometimes even in the daily activities of living. This is sometimes hard to comprehend for others around the person in denial. Denial tends to fluctuate, so that it seems that the person can sometimes for a period, tolerate more of the unwanted reality than at other times. This requires a sensitive approach to allow the person to progress at their own pace whilst being accepted and supported. Maybe denial is used in phantasy as a defence to regulate how much control of our lives we can tolerate to dispense at any given time? The denial is used as a method of coping.



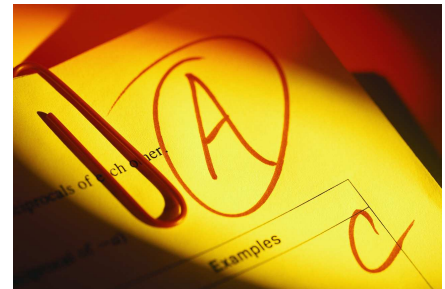
Anger

Anger is a very familiar feeling to most of us when life doesn't go according to our plans. A bereaved person may feel irrational anger about the many changes which are forced on their life as a result of someone else's death. They may irrationally 'kick the cat' for months, sometimes years after the loss. In the absence of the dead person, the recipients of this anger are often friends, relatives, shop assistants or tutors. The bereaved person feels highly irritated or angry at the slightest disagreement, unfairness or mistake and the friends, relatives or tutors then take it personally, feel upset and alarmed and ponder why this should be so. It helps to acknowledge the bereaved person's anger and empathise

with the unfairness, mistakes etc but also not to take it too much to heart, as the wrath is often more than is warranted.

Bargaining

Bargaining is done consciously (and unconsciously) perhaps to soften the blow and to give a feeling of more control. It can be helpful to the bereaved. Bargaining in the case of a bereaved student can include, for example, "If I pass my exams well, mum would be happy (and might come back)." You can see how the student might feel temporarily better for having some control over this unacceptable event in their life, but at times bargaining comes with a high price to pay, as the exam can become very anxiety producing, even crippling, because in the mind of the bereaved student the exam success acquires such tremendous power that is linked to life and death. The attempt to deny separation and death can be understood when the bereaved person wants to join the dead in the grave or bargains to be taken instead.

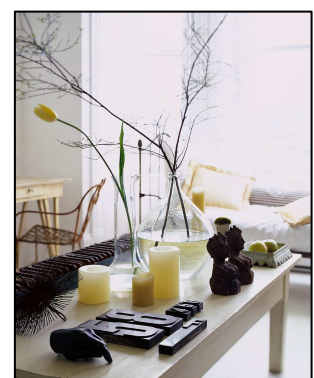


Depression

When the reality of the loss becomes more acceptable, depression and sadness arrive. There are many losses that are obvious to the bereaved person and to the others who are in contact with him or her. Not only has there been the loss of the deceased, and the relationship, but the bereaved person may also have to deal with the loss of dreams of a shared future, effect on finances and housing and so on. Students often feel that now there is no point in studying because the person who has died is no longer able to share the joys of achievement. Questioning the meaning and purpose of life becomes high on the agenda.

Acceptance

Acceptance of the new situation can fluctuate. One moment a person may see hope and new plans but later in the same day they may feel lost and angry again. Little by little the tolerance of reality grows and it becomes acceptable to be the bereaved person.



What Should I Do?

It is clear that there is no set answer to the question of what to do when death touches us. However there are some general guidelines that you may wish to consider. You can find internet links to further info here. As a student, you are also welcome to contact the Counselling & Wellbeing Service at Student Services either at Holloway Road (020 7133 2094) or Calcutta House (020 7320 2370) to discuss your concerns and a way forward. We also have books on bereavement and ideas on how to arrange a funeral, or participate in arranging one. These range from the traditional to the wild.

It is common for the bereaved to share the sad news with friends and colleagues. This is an opportunity to talk about what happened and how you feel. For a student it is usually helpful to let your PAA or course leader know as soon as possible that you have suffered a bereavement. You might feel hopeless and question what the point of continuing your studies. Although you may not feel it, you have to put your trust in just keeping in mind that there is a point, and it is important that you get support to follow the correct procedures, if you are not getting on with your day to day work at university. The Student Handbook states :

*“Your success depends upon full and regular attendance at **all** classes, seminars, lectures, workshops, tutorials and the completion of **all** of your module assessment(s). The University’s Academic Regulations make it clear that attendance and full academic engagement are requirements of your registration on your course and you should inform your Personal Academic Adviser (for undergraduate students) or your Course Leader (for postgraduate students) as soon as possible if you have problems with attendance or coping with your course.”*

The University strongly urges any student who is having difficulties with their course to seek assistance from any of the support services available to you. International students studying on a Student Visa need to meet the attendance requirements for their visa. The University must report non-attendance to the UK Border Agency.

You may feel that as this disaster has happened in your life, it takes priority. Yes, in many ways it does, but you still need to take care of the living and of your own life, so that the disaster does not sink you too.



Colleague or Student

If one of your peers or tutors has died, it is often helpful for the group to meet together to discuss what to do. In the event of death it's usual to feel the need to withdraw from others for many private reasons. Some people want to share their thoughts and feelings and hear others, but some feel that they need time and space to reflect alone. Some people fear that they may 'break down' and cry if they are expected to talk about their feelings. To have feelings

and emotions is just as normal as feeling numb. It is the child in us who fears humiliation of letting go of their emotions in public. In general, it seems helpful, often only on hindsight, to get together with others for support to progress the experience. Having a few tissues in the pocket can come handy at these times. It's important for the group to respect each person's needs and to include the ones who do not attend the group, either by a phone call or e-mail.

It is helpful to share tasks and decide who will be the link person for the group, who will contact the family of the deceased person to offer condolences and how the group will be represented at the funeral. Such immediate practicalities as decisions about a book of condolences and a collection for flowers will need to be planned and tasks shared.

If the death has been a result of suicide or trauma, the bereaved are likely to have more complex emotions, compared with a death which had been anticipated following a long illness. Further complications may incur, if the trauma was a disastrous tragedy at university, or on a field trip which was attended and organised by the peers and tutors themselves. These events need careful thinking through to prevent further escalation of the trauma. Considering, for example who is the most suitable person – and why, to inform the family of the deceased and others who need to know. What is to be said and how? The university has procedures for staff to help in these sad circumstances. Sometimes it is useful to come to discuss plans with the Counselling & Wellbeing Service or it may be helpful to leave the contact to the university chaplains who have much experience in handling death sensitively. The non-denominational Chaplaincy at London Met has Anglican, Catholic, Free Church and Muslim staff available.

**Counselling &
Wellbeing Service**

Student Services
Calcutta House
CMG 48
020 7320 2370

Student Services
Holloway Road
TM1-89
020 7133 2094

References, Further Information & Reading

E. Kubler-Ross (1969) 'On Death And Dying' 1997
Touchstone NY

General bereavement info and support:

www.cruse.org.uk

Support for a bereaved child:

www.winstonswish.org.uk

Support for people affected by a disaster:

www.disasteraction.org.uk

Prevention of a suicide support www.samaritans.org

Survivors of bereavement by suicide: www.uk-sobs.org.uk