DEATH & THE HEALTH PROFESSIONAL

A Practical Guide to a Difficult Topic

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# Table of Contents

## Introduction

- Worldviews on Death
  - Appreciating the Diversity of Worldviews
  - Reflections
  - Noetic Experiences and Beliefs About the Afterlife
  - Noetic Death Experiences
  - Noetic Experiences and Personal Transformation
  - Reflections
  - Expanding Your Worldview
  - Reflections
- Transforming the Fear of Death
  - Making Peace with the Inevitable
  - Reflections
- The Practice of Dying
  - Talking About Death
  - Talking About Your Own Death Experiences
  - Talking About Death with Patients & Families
  - When Death Approaches
  - When Conflicts Arise
  - When Someone Dies
  - Reflections
- Grief and Transformation
  - Finding a Wisdom Path
  - One Hospital’s Story of Transformation
  - Reflections
- Conclusions
  - About the Authors
  - References & Resources
INTRODUCTION

This guide is an offering to nurses, doctors and other direct care providers, for you have more experiences with death than any other group of people. It has been inspired by the book *Death Makes Life Possible* and its accompanying documentary film.

In this guide, we apply the ideas in these resources to your work as a person serving on the front line of living and dying. It aims to support you in your complex role within and around organized healthcare. It is an invitation to explore this difficult topic and offers practical tools for better understanding death from your own personal point of view and from that of your patients and their families.

*Death Makes Life Possible* is a call for deep and lasting transformation. This is true both for you as a dynamic human being who holds a great deal of responsibility, as well as for healthcare systems as they change in response to many factors in today’s complex world.

These Include:

- Shifts in demographics
- The care of our aging population
- The diversity of the populations we serve
- What people want and expect from healthcare
- Traditional and alternative approaches to treatment
- Our growing understanding of healing and dying
- The search for financially responsible healthcare

By the very nature of your work you may often find yourself in the presence of death. In some cases you may be trying to help someone avoid death. In some instances you are actively supporting someone who is making the transition from life to death. At other times you are support-
-ing others who are coping with the death of a loved one, offering compassion and guidance or simply bearing witness as death comes to pass. Within your experiences with and around death can be myriad situations that range from peaceful and gentle to violent and traumatic. These experiences accumulate to settle either peacefully or restlessly within your being. They become a part of who you are, what you think, and how you react.

Experiences surrounding death can influence your core beliefs and how you see the world around you. With the potential of such far-reaching influence on yourself and your work with others, it only makes sense that death should be a subject you explore, contemplate and grow to deeply understand.

Death is not an easy topic. It is, however, one that is long overdue to come out into the open. Within organized health care, it should be discussed, wrestled with and managed in ways that honor the death experience for patients and families. Death experiences must also be understood in light of how they impact you as a healthcare professionals so that your needs are honored and well supported in your role as caregiver.

Through opening up conversations around death there is the opportunity to rethink and refine how we approach it, support it, educate about it, staff for it and experience it. If we can be better prepared to manage how we take in and process these experiences, they are less likely to become a burden that weights us down or closes down our hearts in self protection.

Instead, our experiences with death can be held safely and gently in our hearts. In the process of redefining your relationship to death, you can contribute to your growth and expansion as a professional caregiver and as a complete human being. It is then that you can embrace death as a natural part of the cycle of life and in turn strengthen your capacity to support others in and through death situations.
We are all going to die. In 100 years from now, almost no one who is alive today will be alive then. Death is something we all have in common. It does not differentiate between any of the things that express our uniqueness: cultures, beliefs, race, age, sexual preference, gender, social status, talents or education.

On the other hand, all of these things that death ignores are real and powerful influences on how different people approach, experience and respond to death. As a healthcare provider you are called upon to have rich understanding of, and compassion for, the diversity that exists among the people under your care.

“With seven billion people on the planet, there are seven billion ways to die.” — Janet Quinn, Nurse Educator
Appreciating the Diversity of Worldviews

World views are fundamental to our lives. They are the lens of perception through which we experience, understand, and interpret ourselves and the world. They inform and are informed by our beliefs about and perceptions of our human experience and the cultural and physical environments around us.

Practicing healthcare in the early days of the twenty-first century offers unique challenges and opportunities. Never before have so many worldviews, belief systems, ways of engaging reality, come into contact. We have all the enormous successes of science and technology that shape healthcare. We also now have access to the world’s wisdom and spiritual traditions through a few strokes of a computer keyboard or a flight across continents. The diverse ways that humans can express themselves are now coming into contact at an unprecedented rate, as we can witness in any public healthcare institution.

Developing an appreciation for diverse worldviews includes an understanding of different customs, histories, values, languages, healing systems, concepts of wellness, disease models, treatment modalities and approaches to death. Worldviews around death offer glimpses into different beliefs and practices.

The wide diversity of traditions and worldviews that interface in the practice of healthcare can be inspiring and mind expanding. They can also lead to conflict, confusion and misunderstandings. This can be especially problematic if your own beliefs and values are at odds with your patients. It is clear that Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, atheists, and others all adhere to different ways of understanding our
human experience, including beliefs about death and a potential afterlife.

For the health professional, your own cultural competency can have a beneficial impact on patient care delivery. It enables you to respect and respond to a broad array of needs that arise when you are dealing with dying patients.

The more you can cultivate admiration and reverence for the diversity of views that make up the richness of our world, the better prepared you will be to assist in death experiences that are most meaningful to those involved. Some may include ceremonies, rituals or ways of being you are either unfamiliar with or don’t understand. With an open mind and open heart, you can navigate the many different cultures and belief systems that inform death experiences. These are opportunities to deepen your understanding and expand your worldviews.

“With an open mind and open heart, you can navigate the many different cultures and belief systems that inform death experiences.”
Reflection: Appreciating Worldviews

Take a few minutes to center yourself. Think about a time when you were with a patient from a different culture or worldview. Were you able to communicate with the patient and their family? Were there aspects of the experience that made you curious to know more about their worldview? Did bringing death awareness to the foreground in the context of cultural competency help you to broaden your sense of empathy and compassion for your patient? Spend ten minutes journaling about what comes up for you as you consider these questions.
The great American philosopher William James defined noetic as “states of insight, unplumbed by the discursive intellect.” Being on the front line of care, you may hear stories of, or witness, noetic experiences that offer glimpses into spiritual or mystical dimensions that transcend logic or reason. Having an understanding of these experiences can be helpful to you as a health professional, especially during exchanges with patients who report such encounters.

Many things inform what we hold to be true in our lives, including our belief in what happens when we die. For example, sensory empiricism is the method of understanding objective reality that grounds modern science. From this perspective, what is true is what we can experience and measure with our five senses. By defining death based on its physical nature, we are real only in terms of our own embodiment. Other dimensions of existence are seen as unreal by or are excluded within the scientific medical worldview.

Standard science and medicine typically treat mystical states and contemplative or intuitive knowing as the result of delusion or superstition. Because of this, such experiences often remain unexplored or ignored. Yet insights and experiences that transcend easy physical explanations play a powerful role in how people understand death and what may lie beyond. As such, they are an important part of how people approach death and what they believe will happen after.
Throughout his long and distinguished career, Peter Fenwick, a neuropsychiatrist from London, has documented people’s experiences at the moment of death. Using scientific discipline, he has collected many case studies in which dying people report insights into life after death. His goal has been to chart what happens to people when death comes and consciousness disintegrates. Many of Fenwick’s patients report having otherworldly guides—departed relatives or friends—who come to seemingly help usher the person into the spirit realm.

Such experiences, according to Fenwick, suggest that people may have access to alternative realms of reality. In particular, he has studied cases of cardiac arrests and near death experiences in which people’s brains are not functioning but they have nonetheless had vivid personal experiences. In many instances, people report being visited by dead relatives who they believe have come to meet them and help them through the dying process. During this transitional phase, some people seem to transit in and out of another reality.

Ultimately, these near death and at death experiences move people from a strictly materialistic view of their existence to one that has ineffable, spiritual, or mystical dimensions. Many people report rich and compelling states of consciousness that shape their understanding of death—and what may lie beyond.

These encounters are a way of experiencing reality that transcends logic and reason. In the context of death and dying, such experiences may be painful, rocking people from their natural steady state. Noetic encounters with death can also offer inspiration, hope, and mindfulness in the face of life’s ultimate transformation.

How we respond to direct encounters with death and existence beyond the physical is very personal. Developing the capacity for equanimity in
the face of difficult or out-of-the-ordinary encounters can lead to feelings of connectedness and balance.

Questions of life beyond death can be met with curiosity and inquisitiveness, and our questioning may occur within or outside of spiritual practices. Having an experience with death can have profound transformative potential, regardless of our spiritual orientation.

Noetic Experiences and Personal Transformation

Jean Watson is a distinguished professor and dean emerita of the University of Colorado College of Nursing in Denver and founder of the Watson Caring Science Institute. She had a life changing experience, involving the death of her father, when she was sixteen.

He died abruptly of a heart attack. I was at high school, so I missed his death. When I went home, he wasn’t there. I kept having this fixation about wanting to see him and saying good-bye to him. All I wanted was to see my father again. The night of his funeral, he came to me in my bedroom. I remember looking up and seeing him as an apparition in the doorway of my bedroom. I was startled. I closed my eyes, ducked under the covers, looked up again, and he was still there. It was scary and also comforting, as if he had come to let me know that it was okay.

Because she was frightened by her vision of her father, Watson sought out a trusted mentor. She asked her biology teacher if he thought it was possible to see people after they die. As she recalled, “He told me we
could. I was so relieved.” Her teacher helped Watson understand and integrate her noetic experience. In turn she began to reformulate her worldview. Her willingness to explore her direct personal experiences of the noetic realm cultivated the direction of her life’s work in caring science.
Reflection: Afterlife and Noetic Experiences

Find a comfortable place to settle down and turn your attention toward your own inner awareness. Think about a time when you experienced, read about or heard about a noetic event. What was your immediate response? Were you able to approach it with a sense of interest and inquiry? Did you allow your imagination to explore the other person’s experience? Spend ten minutes reflecting on your worldview in your journal.
Expanding Your Worldview

How you show up around death with patients and families will be largely influenced by your own feelings and worldviews about death. Exploring your own attitudes and beliefs about death will better equip you to support patients and families. It can also be imperative to maintaining your own health and well-being.

As you begin to understand and dive more deeply into seeing death as a rich and complex aspect of life, you have an opportunity to look at your own assumptions, beliefs, and expectations. This makes room for consciously transforming your worldviews and appreciating the many ways in which people experience life and death.

Developing your appreciation for the power of diverse worldviews may be understood as developing a type of literacy. Each of us can learn to better understand and appreciate our own worldview and those of others.

Harnessing your capacities to listen and examine multiple perspectives can open you to new ways of being. Understanding and engaging in worldview literacy can aid you in reducing health disparities and improving the quality of care. It can also help you to communicate more fully with your patients and their families about their needs, fears and desires.

This does not require that you adopt the worldview that is expressed by your patient. It does, however, suggest that you engage with your patients and their families with openness and curiosity about their beliefs and how you can support them.

By examining your own beliefs and assumptions, you may begin to bring the fear of death out from the shadows of denial and into your lived discourse. Knowing yourself well around this topic can help equip you to
navigate death experiences with mindfulness and compassion for those you serve — and for yourself.

Developing skills to manage social and emotional situations around death gives you tools for resilience and enhanced communication. It can help you to support your peers in doing the same. Building a healthy relationship with death can be freeing inside yourself as well as an invaluable asset to your professional role.
Reflection: Afterlife and Noetic Experiences

Take a few moments to relax and center your body. Bring a smile to your face. Feel it in your cheeks. Take three long breaths, using the in breaths to feel the nourishment of life. Use the outbreaths to release any stress or anxiety you are holding. Now consider how you feel about death? How have death experiences you have witnessed come to sit within you? Who do you talk with about your experiences with death? Where do you find guidance when these experiences are unsettling or overwhelming? Take ten minutes to record your observations in your journal.
TRANSFORMING THE FEAR OF DEATH

“The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time.”

– Mark Twain

Few topics invoke fear and anxiety as readily as that of death. Much of the fear around death exists because, in general, we do not embrace death as a natural part of the cycle of life. We don’t need to look far for evidence of our attachment to life or to what lengths we will go to avoid death.

In the western world, aggressive medical interventions to try and avoid death are prevalent today. In the United States, for example, twenty-eight percent or 170 billion Medicare dollars in 2011 were spent on the last 6 months of patient’s lives. Spiraling costs and financial pressures are causing healthcare leaders to rethink approaches to end of life care.

While it may be sad that money is a primary motivator to change, how we approach end of life is an area in much need of new thinking. Moving in a direction of deep and lasting transformation around death will require change on many levels. Fundamental to change is opening up to new ways of being around death and to do that, fear must be addressed.
Fear is a part of the human experience. It is as unavoidable as death. Without it, we would not survive. It triggers physiological responses that save us from danger or the threat of harm. When fear takes hold in a person’s mind, its influence can have a wide range of expressions. These include a nudge that focuses their attention, to a strong emotional and physiological reaction, or all the way to overwhelming and consuming, overriding any rational thought.

In many cases, when fear is triggered, a message from our brain goes to our whole body, preparing us for danger. This fight or flight response has also been referred to as Amygdala hijacking. This is because when we are emotionally aroused, the amygdala in the brain takes over the prefrontal cortex or rational mind. Finding the triggers for Amygdala hijacking can offer valuable insights for yourself, both as you feel reactive and for understanding what is going on in the minds and bodies of those around you.

When people are in the grips of fear, communication can be very difficult. Being able to recognize how fear is manifesting in someone, including yourself, can help inform how you can approach them. If someone is being consumed by fear, offering empathy, compassion and understanding may serve the situation best. This can open doors for more logical and practical conversation once fear subsides.

People take in and process fear in different ways. Some of us hold it inside and are not comfortable talking about it. Sometimes people don’t know how to express fear, so it manifests in behaviors like irritability or anger. Having a keen sense to recognize when fear is present can help you to help yourself, your patients and their families. A withdrawn patient may have just as much need for support as a patient who is actively acting out their fears.
Making Peace with the Inevitable

Fear around death is not going to save us from the inevitable truth: we are all going to die. This very basic fact of life, if given the same level of attention as so may other aspects of our life experience—career, family, vacations, etc.—may help us shift our feelings and attitudes about how we approach death. Exploring your views on death can offer fresh perspectives and a healthy sense of inquiry and wonder at the mystery of it all.

Fear is something that we need to find peace with, no matter how challenging. Acknowledging it and letting it move through you provides a vital opportunity for growth and transformation for you as well as those you care for. One of the most precious gifts you can give another person is support in helping them find their way to the other side of fear.

Bringing death and how we avoid our fear of it into conscious awareness can deepen our self-inquiry. As we begin to bring death out of the realm of the unspoken, we may better integrate our understanding into our everyday experience.

Staying in the present helps us to be fearless. Without striving, we may get out of our own way as we face the inevitable. With an open heart, contemplating death can help refocus fear into inspiration.

There are simple tools that can help you manage these complex and challenging situations. These basic practices can be useful and enriching to your work and daily life. They include such simple activities as deep breathing, centering of your mind and body, acknowledging gratitude, or watching your own emotions from a neutral perspective.
Reflection: Transforming Your Fear of Death

Sit quietly and allow your thoughts to explore the role that fear plays in how you see and respond to the topic of death. Sit with the fear and acknowledge its presence. What are the tools or forms of support you need to move past fear and anxiety so you can contemplate the mysteries and wonders of the cycles of life and death? To engage this kind of exploration, consider sitting by the ocean and watching waves form then merge back into the oneness of the sea. When you feel ready, take ten minutes to write in your journal about your own worldview around death and how you may want to transform fears that you may be holding within your body and mind.
THE PRACTICE OF DYING

“While I thought that I was learning how to live, I have been learning how to die.”

– Leonardo da Vinci

Talking about Death

Talking about death can be unsettling. It is a topic immersed in timeless questions and a wide range of feelings and beliefs that most people prefer to avoid. By opening up the conversations about death we can bring forward a much-needed shift in how we experience and hold death within ourselves and how we support others.

For those in the healthcare professions, there are two aspects to talking about death. There is talking about your own experiences with and feelings about death, and talking with patients and families in your professional role.
Talking About Your Own Death Experiences

Caregivers see and experience things that others rarely, if ever, see and experience. Because of the uniqueness of these often powerful and impactful experiences, it may be difficult to feel comfortable in sharing what you see and feel with others. This can create a sense of isolation. You may feel you have no one to talk with who would understand, or your experiences are such that you feel words could not express what’s going on inside of you.

Unattended to, these feelings can become like wounds that you carry and like any wound that is not treated, it may be difficult to heal. As more and more unattended experiences accumulate, their weight can become toxic to you and your work.

Each caregiver must find their own ways to process their experiences. It may be hard to share some of the things you witness or participate in. You may even feel that nobody can understand what you have gone through unless they have been there. If you feel this way, it reaffirms the importance of having a professional community with whom you can talk. You may well discover that others have wisdom that can bring light and understanding to the moment.

Another thing to consider is that sometimes it is important that those close to you have a window into what you experience. While they may not completely understand, they can offer support, compassion and even guidance. Sometimes talking to people a little distant from the situation, while honoring the confidentiality you are entrusted with, can offer new insights or perspectives that are helpful in thinking things through.
Talking About Death with Patients and Families

Death is not a topic everyone is willing to talk about. Some people feel the topic is too private. Others feel that to talk about death is a declaration of giving up. Still others may very much want to talk about death, but not know how to approach the subject.

To effectively approach the subject of death your highly developed observation skills will help you to recognize when a person is ready to talk about death and when they are not. For some, you may need to help them work their way towards such a difficult topic. This requires both empathy and compassion for all concerned, including yourself.

These conversations take time. This can be very challenging to find in today’s healthcare environment. Do not hesitate to call upon other team members to help you out so you can bring your full presence to these moments.

Because of your trusted role, you may find that patients and family members are willing to talk with you about death more easily than with their own loved ones. By creating an environment where compassion, active listening and absence of judgment are experienced, you are setting the stage for deep and meaningful conversations about death to unfold.

When Death Approaches

As someone you are caring for approaches death, many things can be going on at once. You may have responsibilities associated with their physical care. You may be involved in taking heroic measures to fight off death to the very end. You may also be providing comfort measures,
supporting family members, or just bearing witness to life’s transition.

At times the technical and practical aspects of your job may be very demanding. They may challenge your ability to be attentive to the emotional and spiritual needs going on around you. This is a time to be fully present. It is also a time to remember the powerful impact and comfort that can result from a kind look, a gentle touch, and some reassuring words.

It is so important to be authentic and truthful in the face of death. “Everything is going to be ok” is not the best choice of words in moments like these; they may discredit you to those on the receiving end. On the other hand, words like “I am here with you” can be very comforting. This is true even if it appears that the person is unresponsive, or you think that they can no longer hear you.

There is plenty of evidence that they can still hear you, with the auditory system being one of the last dimensions of awareness to shut down in the dying process. Offering comforting words and reminding others in the room to bring mindfulness to their communication can help support a gentle and loving transition.

When death is approaching you have the opportunity to help create an environment for a gentle and loving death experience. You may have to draw upon your patient advocacy skills to assure that time is allowed to fully support a patient, their family, and members of the healthcare team through the death experience in today’s fast paced healthcare settings.

Sometimes you may create distance between you and the pending death situations. If you find yourself doing this, you should ask for help from others so that the death experience for the patient and family is attended to well. Later explore this within yourself and try to deepen your relationship with death so that you have the opportunity to show up from a stronger place in the future.
Sometimes when death approaches you can feel a sense of helplessness. You may have feelings of failure because your efforts to save someone are not working, or things have not turned out the way you hoped. Maybe you feel badly that you have let the person and their family down. When you invest in a deeper understanding of death as a natural part of the cycle of life it will help you to honor these thoughts and then let them go. By releasing these feelings they don’t become toxic or weigh you down.

It is often the case that our policies, though well intentioned, may create barriers to honoring the beliefs of the people whom you are treating. This is again where your highly developed problem solving and advocacy skills can come into play. You may help find creative ways to safely allow for flexibility in honoring the diversity of expression and individual needs of a given death experience, even if it is not a worldview that you share.

When Conflicts Arise

Health professionals are no strangers to dealing with conflict. When conflicts arise around death, the difficulty of making your way through these situations may be intensified. This is certainly understandable given that death is a subject that touches so deeply to the core of people’s fears and beliefs about how to care for the body and what may happen after bodily death.

In any given death situation you may be dealing with not only your own feelings but also those of multiple other people—and they can all be pointing in different directions. You may face countless possibilities in the life and death of your patients. These can grow exponentially with the complexity of the case.

Different cultures and belief systems may limit effective communication if not approached with sensitivity. The number of other people involved
When Someone Dies

No one really knows what happens when someone dies. We have a great deal of knowledge about the physiological process of death, but the bigger questions - the ones about what happens to the person and their spirit, not just the body - are questions as timeless as human experience itself. You will find your own expanded thinking and openness to the beliefs of others will best equip you to mindfully navigate through the range of experiences you will encounter.
When someone dies it is natural to turn your attention to those in attendance or those who need contacting. Before getting swept away in the needs of others or the tasks at hand, take a moment to give your full attention and presence to the one who has passed. This can bring a sense of peace and allow you to take on what is next with profound awareness and compassion.

Silence, anger, outrage, denial, grief, peace, relief, even celebration are just some of the many ways you will see people respond to death. Your presence and how you are feeling, what you are thinking, brings an energy that is felt by others. It contributes to the overall experience. Being present without judgment and immersed in compassion are precious gifts you can offer.

Each situation will be different. With deep listening and observation, you will know in your heart how to proceed. You may offer comforting words. Or you may sit in silence and hold someone’s hand, knowing that there are no words needed at that moment.

Being the professional and strong for others does not mean that you don’t honor your own inner guidance in these situations. You may be inspired to get down on the floor and cry with a mother who just lost her child, or a husband who just lost his wife. That’s ok. These are profoundly personal moments not just for those you are supporting, but for you as well. You need to respect that.
Reflection: Loving Kindness Meditation

There is an ancient practice that helps to find centering and calm. It involves repeating three statements and repeating them with more inclusivity each time. This is a practice you can do anytime and anywhere. Simply think to yourself: “May I feel safe. May I feel strong. May I live with ease.” Repeat these statements a few times, feeling a shift in your body and mind with each round. Now generalize the practice to others. “May all beings feel safe. May all beings feel strong. May all beings live with ease.” Repeat this a few times, finding a place of peace and serenity within yourself. When you are ready, take ten minutes to write in your journal about your experience.
GRIEF AND TRANSFORMATION

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In order to really negotiate this path, the first thing that a person has to do is commit to doing the work. Then people have to have humility enough to let go of what has served them in the past and be willing . . . to be open and innocent again to what is coming. There’s a lot of hard work in transforming yourself.

— Luisah Teish

When confronted with the death of someone we care for, we can be overtaken by a multitude of emotions. As a health professional, you have been trained that you cannot let death rock your world. And yet there may be places in your mind and body that are triggered by feelings of loss. Breathing into these places and acknowledging your feelings can help you renew yourself.

There are many ways of transforming grief. You can harness your capacity to grow in the midst of suffering. By engaging your feelings and
responses to the death of a patient, you may begin to transform your own fear of death and loss into life affirming values. You can think about the qualities that you bring to your personal growth.

You may begin by helping yourself, your patients and their families to see that loss and grief can be catalysts for new beginnings. Through loss you and others can find opportunities in grief, rather than as only part of the tragedy of life.

Finding a Wisdom Path

We all know that grief may be painful. For Karen Wyatt M.D., her personal pain became an opportunity for growth. Wyatt is a leader in the area of whole-person healthcare and a family medicine physician. Wyatt found herself struggling after the tragic death of her father by suicide.

Still early in her medical career, she found herself overwhelmed with grief and guilt because of his death. She struggled to recover from these disturbing feelings. Ultimately, she started volunteering for a local hospice. She had the idea that if she exposed herself to dying, death, grief and sadness, she could find her way through and out of her suffering.

Wyatt reported that she’d felt numb, just going through the motions of life every day, even as a busy mother, wife and doctor. She desperately wanted to change, to grow, to heal the grief she was experiencing.

As a hospice doctor working with the dying, she wanted to get to the peaceful place she saw in many of her patients obtain. What she aspired to was a place of reverence, gratitude, and appreciation for life. A wounded healer herself, Wyatt set out to learn what it was that her dying patients understood about life that she was somehow missing.
In this process, she found a path for herself to personal transformation, a path that ultimately healed her grief and shifted her pain, although the process wasn’t simple. It also helped her wake up to life—and to appreciate the joys and beauties, as well as the suffering and pain. What she found is what she described as a wisdom path.

Over time, Wyatt became a seeker of wisdom and insight about the nature of who she is, the meaning of existence, and the essence of living and dying. Hearing about her own personal story may offer you insights about your own wisdom path and how you can transform grief by addressing your own death awareness.

Wyatt’s experience involved a process of transformation. Her first-hand experience of pain forced her out of her steady state. She chose to reevaluate her life in the midst of her grief, questioning herself about what gives her meaning and purpose. She pursued a process of exploration and discovery, trying to understand the ways death makes life possible.

As a physician Wyatt had plenty of knowledge from her medical studies, reading, workshops counseling, and yoga. Despite this knowledge about how people can heal from grief, she didn’t have the wisdom she needed to apply it in her own life. Lack of insight prevented her from healing from her pain. Working with dying patients who had faced their own mortality, who were at the end of their lives, gave her the wisdom to live fully in every moment.

Just as we need to develop advanced skills in mindful listening to support those who are dying and their loved ones, we need to use these same skills to listen deeply and then attend to our own needs so that we find peaceful and loving ways to hold our experiences with death.

As a healthcare professional, you may feel you have different needs when it comes to death, that it’s “just part of your job”. You may get very good at setting aside your own needs and feelings to attend to others.
You might try to manage death experiences on an intellectual level by pushing aside the feelings and emotions that death inspires. You may even find yourself engaging in behaviors that desensitize you. These are acts of self-protection that can be useful in times when you need to bring your full attention to a situation. They can become unhealthy however if you never take the time to attend to your own humanness.

If you deny yourself the opportunity to process loss, grief and at times confusion, these experiences can become a burden you carry within yourself. Over time, these unattended needs can become heavy on your being. You close down your heart and create barriers between yourself and these life experiences. If this happens you may lose touch with your purpose as a caregiver. You suffer and the care you give to others suffers.

One Hospital’s Story of Transformation

As a healthcare professional you may have been trained or believe that you should conceal or restrain your emotions and reactions in death situations. Pediatric doctor, Betsy McGragor, experienced this when she and her colleagues faced the death of children. “We just went on to the next child, to the work to be done. When the child died we didn’t honor that experience, didn’t honor the child and didn’t honor our selves for having cared.”

She describes a transformational case in one hospital when what she described as “enlightened administrators” began to observe the problems. They noticed the impact on the staff when they lost someone who they had given themselves so fully to caring for.
If you treat death as a great mystery, you may see it as an adventure and an opportunity to engage the unknown.

The healthcare administrators in the hospital decided to make a change. After a child had died, they put up a big poster board somewhere in the ward, and everybody who had some contact with that child wrote something on that poster board. It could be some little experience they had of the child, or some wish they had for the child, or some expression of caring for the parents. When that poster board was filled up by all of the people who had something to say, they took it down and gave it or sent it to the parents as a gift.

This simple practice became a treasured practice in their department. Many times the team, including nurses and doctors, had a memorial together and would tell each other their stories about having cared for the child or some moment with the child that was special to them. This formed a sense of community around the experience of the grieving the loss of someone they had bonded with and cared about. Together they could honor opening their hearts to another and share the burden of loss.

If you treat death as a great mystery, you may see it as an adventure and an opportunity to engage the unknown. Instead of denying death, help your patients and their families to create a positive awareness around it. Open to a new understanding of yourself and others, appreciating the depths of human experience that can be a doorway into your own evolution.

Allowing yourself to be fully present with your feelings and experiences can be so much harder than learning the effects of a new drug or treatment. But we can’t shy away from the hard stuff. That is what is there when we leave work. That is what is there when we are alone and quiet, when we step out of our health professional role and just be.

Honoring your humanness is not a weakness. It is the humanitarian aspects of yourself that is foundational to effectively serving others. It is okay to not just embrace, but celebrate your humanness. When you do this well your compassion expands and you give care from a place of strength and harmony in your own being.
Reflection: Grief and Transformation

How do you think that sharing your grief in a clinical setting helps to support you and make you a better healthcare provider? If appropriate, consider getting a poster board and colored pens. Post it in a shared area in your work environment. Invite your colleagues to share their thoughts and feelings about a patient who has recently died and to share stories with one another. Encourage people to make the poster board a work of art, inviting them to express their own feelings through a drawing, a short poem, or some short narrative. Later, take ten minutes to journal about the experience and how sharing your grief is empowering and healing.
CONCLUSIONS

Bringing intention and awareness to your and others’ worldviews around death can turn a painful experience into a gift. It may lead to alterations in your goals, values, and priorities. Perhaps the great work of the twenty-first century is to develop our shared capacities to hold multiple ways of knowing and appreciate the diversity of perspectives that make up the whole of our shared human experience.

Each of us brings a piece to the puzzle. There is no one experience, no one model of reality that trumps all the others. Pluralistic views invite each of us to bring a sense of humility and compassion, appreciation, gratefulness, and interconnectedness to our relationship to death.

By engaging in regular personal renewal practices, you can build new ways of being to your own feelings about death and grief. You can see death as a fundamental catalyst for living a full life. This may take hard work, but in the end it is worth it. Ultimately, there is the gift of acceptance to what life has to offer on its own terms, noting that transformation is not so much about shifting the outer world, but changing the ways we respond to what is so.

We end with a quote from Lee Lipsenthal, a physician and practitioner of mind-body medicine. Before his death, Lee shared his own experiences in his book, *Enjoy Every Sandwich*. Reflect on his insight and good wishes for his readers.
Someday you will face your own mortality. At that moment, I hope you see that your life has been well lived, that you hold no regrets, and that you loved well. On that day, I hope that for you, it has become a good day to die.

– Lee Lipsenthal
ABOUT
THE AUTHORS

Marilyn Schlitz, Ph.D. is a social anthropologist, researcher, award winning writer, and charismatic public speaker. She serves as President Emeritus and a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Noetic Sciences. Additionally, she is a Senior Scientist at the California Pacific Medical Center, where she focuses on health and healing, and board member of Pacifica Graduate Institute. For more than three decades, Marilyn has been a leader in the field of consciousness studies. Her research and extensive publications focus on personal and social transformation, cultural pluralism, extended human capacities, and mind body medicine. She has a depth of leadership experience in government, business, and the not-for-profit sectors. Her broad and varied work has given her a unique ability to help individuals and organizations identify and develop personal and interpersonal skills and capacities needed by 21st century leaders. Her books include: Consciousness and Healing: Integral Approaches to Mind Body Medicine; Living Deeply: The Art and Science of Transformation in Everyday Life; and Death Makes Life Possible. She also wrote and produced a feature film, Death Makes Life Possible, with Deepak Chopra, that has appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Network. She is currently creating enrichment programs for life long learning and health professionals.

Kathy Douglas is a nurse, an entrepreneur, a healthcare executive and filmmaker. She has been on the executive team of several start-up companies bring cutting edge technology solutions to the healthcare industry. Kathy was recently feature on the cover of Nurse Leader magazine as a Leader to Honor. Among other film projects she wrote and directed the internationally distributed film, NURSES If Florence Could See US Now, an intimate look into the world of nursing in today’s world. Kathy has authored many published articles, was editor of a regular column called Staffing Unleashed for Nursing Economics and sat on their Editorial Board. She has a long history of speaking and a passion for the health and well being of our healthcare workforce. Her clinical background is intensive care nursing. She holds a masters degree from the University of San Francisco and is a graduate of Stanford Business School’s Executive Program.
REFERENCES


RESOURCES

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