

Death Education: Enhancing Competence Across the Life Span

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ABSTRACT: Life is full of major and minor events analogous to dying and death that few people realize exist. Throughout life there are a variety of loss situations (e.g., death of a pet, divorce, loss of a job, retirement, death of a friend or relative, etc.) that help to prepare individuals for their own death. If death educators can enhance the life skills necessary to cope with these life events, then perhaps, the individual will be better able to cope with their own death and the death of a significant other. This paper will present an overview of the basic tenets of life span intervention, provide a discussion of life skills directly related to dying and death, and suggest key points of positive intervention.

Introduction

Dying and death situations, by nature, are variable interval experiences. We tend not to know when we are going to have to face the reality of our own death or the death of someone close. For this reason, it is often difficult to develop, implement and evaluate a comprehensive death education program that meets the unique problems, needs and interests of students when their interaction with death may occur sporadically across the life span. One method which death educators may employ to overcome this difficulty is to structure activities designed to enhance the students' ability to cope with life events that may be analogous to death. Many of the basic psychological and emotional reactions we experience when faced with change and loss, throughout one's life course, are similar to those reactions evoked by death related situations. Consequently, if death educators can improve the students' ability to cope with these analogous situations, then, the students' ability to cope with their own death and the death of someone close will be enhanced. This paper will present an overview of the basic tenets

of life span intervention, provide a discussion of life skills directly related to dying and death, and suggest key points for positive intervention.

Life Span Intervention

The life span theory of human development is based on the concept that development occurs during each stage of life (infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age), with specific incidents or critical tasks evolving within each phase. This theory also purports that developmental change is not confined to any particular stage and that significant behavioral changes can be pervasive and rapid at all ages. In essence, the life span view of human development suggests that the behavior of the bereaved or the terminally ill patient, as well as individual differences among the bereaved and terminally ill, are functions of each person's developmental history. Therefore, the ability to cope effectively with death related problems encountered at the later stages of the life course is largely dependent on the types of coping skills that have developed throughout the life course.

This intervention model stresses

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the need to promote competence in dealing with life events throughout the life course, rather than to remediate problems when they occur at a later date. The recent proliferation of literature and programs that advocate the promotion of wellness concepts support the importance of prevention as opposed to remediation. Basically, how well we learn to adapt and cope with various incidents and events early in our development directly influence our positive adaptation to similar events at later life stages.

Life Skills Related to Dying and Death

Programs in death education should strive to provide students with techniques and coping skills designed to deal effectively with dying and death related problems prior to, or concurrent with the onset of such experiences. It has been suggested that experience in coping with life events analogous to death will lead to more effective coping ability when death situations are encountered in the future. Although the nature and context of a particular life event may vary from stage to stage, the life skills necessary to successfully deal with the event overlap considerably.

There are a variety of generic life skills which can enhance the individual's ability to cope with dying and death situations. Although numerous life skills are needed to cope with a dying and death situation, only four will be examined in this article.

Decision-Making: Decision-making can best be defined as the process by which students select an alternative, or a course of action from two or more possible choices. The prime reason for clarifying the decision-making process is based on the fact that individuals are more likely to be satisfied with their decision if they use such a process.

Kime, Schlaadt and Tritsch¹ state that there are three basic assumptions related to the decision-making process:

1. There is more than one alternative. If there is only one alternative, there is no need to use a decision-making model.
2. For decisions there are consequences. The consequences are the results of the outcomes of decisions and vary in complexity and severity.
3. For every decision, there is a degree of risk involved. The purpose of the decision-making process is to help individuals reduce the risk of making a bad decision.

Many dying and death related situations require the use of appropriate decision-making skills. The selection of a casket, the writing of a will, the continued use of life sustaining medical procedure, the selection of a mode of body disposal, and the completion of the "Living Will" all require the use of the decision-making process. For example, when selecting a mode of body disposal, there are several alternatives to consider, a traditional funeral, simple burial and memorial service, cremation, body donation or cryonics. It is important to weigh the consequences of each alternative (in this example costs, reaction of family members, and degree of planning necessary) and to assess the risk involved (disapproval of friends and relatives, and inability to carry out plans after death) before making such a decision. Decision-making about dying and death situations is often complicated by emotional trauma and guilt. Therefore, it is important for the individual making a dying and death related decision to have some experience in decision-making related to other analogous life events characterized by emotional intensity.

Coping Behaviors: Because death is

a taboo subject, people in our society rarely communicate freely on the topic. Consequently, effective communications between individuals involved in dying and death situations often lack appropriate interpersonal responses. We tend to avoid the bereaved and the terminally ill because they often make us feel uncomfortable. This discomfort, to a large extent, is not a function of our lack of concern or empathy, but rather, the vague feeling that we will not know what to say or how to act in this situation. The authors believe that enhancing the ability to understand the feelings and needs of the bereaved and terminally ill and providing appropriate communication response in analogous life events, will, in turn, promote a greater sense of confidence when communicating about death in actual situations. The use of role-playing and other structured strategies have often proved useful in developing effective coping skills for dealing with related situations which may arise in the future.

Information-Sharing and Processing: Dying and death related experiences are often wrought with emotional trauma. Nonetheless, those who must deal with these situations need to be able to process information accurately and, in some cases, quickly. The widow who must make funeral arrangements for her spouse often has to determine funeral options, logistics, and procedures, while being in an emotionally depressed state. In essence, the widow must process a large amount of information which may be extremely unfamiliar to her. These processing skills would hopefully encourage individuals to share information concerning dying and death; a practice not currently widespread in our culture. In addition, to enhance this life skill, death educators should assist individuals in processing informa-

Table 1
Suggested Points of Intervention and Life Skills

Life Skills				
Dying, Death and Loss Situation	Decision-Making	Coping Behavior	Information Sharing	Values Clarification
Death of a Pet	The child and family will generally have to make decisions related to disposal of the remains, the type of ceremony, and whether to think about getting a new pet.	The individual and family need to cope with emotional and disposal concerns when a pet dies. On a smaller scale these may be similar to concern when dealing with the death of a significant other or your own death.	This may be an appropriate point for parents to intervene and discuss the life cycle. Also, parents may discuss similarity in the emotional response between the death of a pet and other loss situations.	The child and family need to determine if and when it may be appropriate to get another pet.
Death of a Public Figure	The individual family and community needs to make quick decisions concerning the type of mourning customs to observe (i.e., flying flag at half mast, wearing black arm bands, etc.).	The personal response to the death of a public figure should be examined in terms of the significance of the deceased to society.	Again, this may be an appropriate time to discuss the life cycle and to identify how people and cultures mourn. Also, this may provide an appropriate point to stress the concept that death can occur at any time across the life span.	Generally, if the death of the public figure is the result of violence, this may be an appropriate time to intervene and encourage students to develop a position statement on related issues (i.e., gun control, capital punishment, etc.).
Loss of a Job	During the loss event, it may be appropriate for the individual to assess personal strengths and weaknesses. Also, the loss of employment should be examined with respect to locus of control.	This psychological reaction to the loss of a job is similar to other loss situations. Feelings of anger, depression, denial and guilt are not uncommon in these loss situations.	The individual and family need to discuss what options are available.	At this time, it may be appropriate to reassess career and life goals. Similarly, a terminal individual may have to reassess such life goals.
Death of a Friend or Relative	During the anticipatory grief response and the typical grief response people often have to cope with depression, denial, guilt, anger and somatic distress. These reactions are similar to reaction one may have to cope with when confronted with their own death.	The bereaved often must cope with a variety of basic psychological reactions which often occur in other dying and death situations. Feelings of denial, anger, guilt, depression, hostility are not uncommon.	At this time, it may be appropriate to intervene and discuss the commonality of the human response to death. In addition, in some cases it may be appropriate to share information related to body disposal techniques.	Often, the death of a friend or relative, especially if they died of a prolonged illness, may be an appropriate time to intervene and help students develop position statements regarding use of life sustaining techniques and personal body disposal preferences.
Retirement	Again, it is appropriate to determine the pro's and con's and alternatives to retirement. Also, it is important to discuss the locus of control related to retirement.	Again, retirement can be viewed as a loss situation. As with other loss situations there may be a change in roles and responsibilities that the individual will have to cope with.	The individual and family need to discuss the significance of retirement with regard to finance, housing, socialization, etc.	The retiree may have to rearrange life goals, priorities and activities to correspond with retirement. Often, the reduction in spendable income is a factor in such change.

tion prior to the onset of the dying and death experience. An appropriate cognitive base is often an important prerequisite to the decision-making and coping behavior processes.

Values Clarification: Many dying and death situations and issues are value laden. Decisions surrounding euthanasia, mercy killing, abortion, suicide, life after death and explaining death to children are often

influenced by personal values. But, because we tend to be a death denying society, and the medical technology and information related to dying and death is rapidly increasing and changing, we tend to

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suffer from what has been termed by some sociologists as "moral suffering." This concept indicates that because our parents or older members of our own cohort group have not had to make certain dying and death decisions, we, as a result, have no established value system upon which to base a decision or course of action. For example, the technology necessary to keep people in a "vegetative state" for an indefinite period of time has been developed and perfected in the past several decades. Therefore, people one generation removed did not have to make decisions concerning the use of artificial means of sustaining life because the related technology was not available. To strengthen life skills with relation to value clarification, death educators must provide an atmosphere where individuals can assess opinions and beliefs on the value laden issues surrounding dying and death and arrive at a

personal position statement which will guide their future actions. It is extremely difficult to assess personal opinions and beliefs in times of emotional trauma. Hopefully, if death educators can assist individuals in the development of personal position statements with regard to dying and death and other loss situations, these values will serve as guidelines upon which to base future decisions.

Suggesting Points of Intervention

There are numerous points and life events across the life span conducive to intervention by death educators for the purpose of enhancing life skills. Table 1 outlines some of these points of intervention and discusses which life skills may be strengthened.

As can be seen in Table 1, there is obvious overlapping among life skills and events analogous to dying

and death situations. If death educators can intervene to help individuals cope with these life events, then, perhaps they will be better able to cope with analogous loss and dying and death related experiences in the future.

Summary

The purpose of life span intervention is not to eliminate or avoid critical life events, but to encourage the development and refinement of the skills necessary to cope with these events. Hopefully, by enhancing these life skills throughout the life course, individuals will be better able to apply these skills to cope with dying and death related events.

References

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