

A DYING EXERCISE FOR VOLUNTEER ORIENTATION

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Based on “A Grief and Bereavement Exercise for Small Groups” by Reverend Ronald R. Peak and Reverend James C. Wooldridge, the Hospice of Marin model and a revision by Hospice, Inc. of Larimer County and Utah Heritage Hospice

Preparation: The facilitator should have a room set up with as few distractions as possible. Remember to put a tissue box on the table. Lighting should be warm and inviting. The facilitator should have prepared beforehand (for each participant) twenty (20) slips of paper (roughly 1” by 3” for each sheet size). Each participant should have a pen or pencil. About 25 - 40 minutes is needed for this exercise. The facilitator invites participants to the table and asks that everything be put away except a pen/pencil.

Narration:

The exercise that we will be participating in is a chance for you as individuals to examine your own personal feelings on dying. This is a personal exercise and I won't be examining your responses nor will the other participants. This is a quiet exercise that will require you to consider your own feelings and thoughts throughout the exercise. Talking should be limited.

You will write something on each slip of paper as I give you instructions. Please count out five slips of paper now.

On the first five slips of paper, I want you to write down five items or possessions you own that are very, very important to you; one item on each slip of paper. These must be material things, tangible items, that you consider highly and that you value very much. These could be things such as a journal, a home, a car, or piece of jewelry. Perhaps you value your stereo system, your Serta Mattress or a family heirloom. You may not include people, as they are not possessions. Please write only one item on each slip of paper, five pieces of paper with one item on each sheet.

Please don't feel rushed. Take the time you need and look up at me when you have finished so I know we can continue.

[Wait until all have completed writing and are waiting for you to continue]

On the next five pieces of paper, please write down five things that you value highly in nature. Five pieces of the world around you that brings you joy. These could be things such as a beautiful sunset or the smell of the air after a rainy night. Perhaps you value lightning storms or a sunny beach. Please write down one item on each slip of paper, one piece of the world around you on each slip of paper.

[Wait until all have completed writing and are waiting for you to continue]

On the next five of paper, please write down five things that you consider being important activities such as work, hobbies, leisure time activities and so on. Perhaps you value reading, swimming, running, or knitting. Remember to write only one item on each slip of paper.

[Wait until all have completed writing and are waiting for you to continue]

On the last five pieces of paper, please write down five individuals – five people who are very important to you. Please remember to write down only one person on each piece of paper. You can't write the word "family," but you can put an individual family member on each sheet. These can include living or deceased people. You may also include pets as well.

[Wait until all have completed writing and are waiting for you to continue]

Please place all of your sheets of paper in front of you so you can see all of them at one time. As you place them in front of you, contemplate the importance of these in your life. The good memories and experiences, and the joy they bring you.

[Pause for about 15 seconds.]

I'm now going to tell you a story. This is a story about you. I want you to consider what you would be feeling and thinking about as these events happen to you.

It's a warm summer day and you have worked hard and played hard all day long. You're feeling good about yourself and about life. You head home and decide to take a shower before heading off to bed. As you are drying yourself off after your shower, you notice something that was not there before. It is a lump where one should not be. It is small, but painful. Fear strikes you deep. You brush it off thinking that you're just imagining it to be something it's not. You find you cannot sleep much tonight.

Despite your wishes, the lump continues to enlarge and to become more painful. The fear about this lump begins to affect other areas of your life; you feel anxious and worried. You tell a loved one about the lump and you call the doctor for an appointment. The process has begun – it's time for you to give away something in your life. It is time for you to give up one of your slips of paper and toss it into the center of the table. Please choose a slip of paper, crumple it up and toss it to the center of the table now.

[Wait until all have tossed a paper to the center of the table.]

For the next several days you worry and then you find yourself in the doctor's waiting room. You feel nervous – your senses are heightened. You notice everything in the room: the ticking clock, the receptionist clicking her pen, the worn out magazines, and the fish tank gurgling air bubbles. You realize that you're feeling anxious. You tell yourself that you're making a big deal about nothing. Your name is called and you jump a little. Your heart is beating faster now as the doctor takes a history and you try to second-guess why he is asking all of those questions about malignancy in your family history. "Oh, it's probably nothing," he says with a look of worry on his face "But we ought to do some further tests just to be sure." As these things run through your mind, more loss and more fear occurs, so take three slips of paper now, crumple them up and toss them into the middle of the table. "We'll know by Friday," says the doctor, smiling reassuringly. "I'll call you."

[Wait until all have tossed a paper to the center of the table.]

You get into your car and drive the few miles home. It's two more days until Friday. You try to keep your mind off of what might happen, but no matter how many other ways you try to distract yourself, you keep coming back to the lump. Your family is helpful – too helpful as a matter of fact. You think

a lot about “What if?” and “How would they make ends meet if I really got sick?” It’s only Wednesday night, and time is dragging on slowly. A tear comes to your eye – life is *really* precious . . . your family means so much . . . Please give away two more slips of paper.

Thursday plods along and Friday is finally here. You didn’t sleep too well last night. “Oh, it’s nothing,” you tell yourself, but deep down you wonder. The day seems to drag on and you wonder why you haven’t been called yet. At about two o’clock in the afternoon the phone rings. It is the nurse at the doctor’s office. “Could you come in at about 3:30?” she asks, “The doctor wants to speak with you.” Fear strikes you deeper this time and you worry about what sort of news it is that the doctor can’t talk about over the telephone. Slowly, methodically, you prepare to go into the doctor’s office. The lump is still there and you feel it has grown larger just this week. It is time to give up yet another slip of paper, another thing of value.

The doctor’s examination room is colder this time and feels more sterile. He examines the lump again and does some routine tests, then asks you to dress and come to his office. As you walk to his office, your heart begins to beat faster and your legs feel like rubber. The doctor sits in a chair next to you and the words you have dreaded to hear are finally spoken: “I’m afraid I have some bad news for you.” You can’t remember all that the doctor says in the next few minutes, but the words “surgery,” “radiation,” and “chemotherapy” stands out. You thought you could take this bad news. You thought you’d be strong. But now loss, grief, fear, anxiety and loneliness all have a new meaning. [Pause] Please give up three more slips of paper and toss them into the center of the table.

A week goes by.

The surgery goes well, so the doctor said, and he prescribes a mixture of radiation and chemotherapy as a proper course of action. You have a leave of absence from your work (“or school”) responsibilities and the doctor talks in terms of six to eight months of recuperation, but won’t be much more specific than that. Money is a problem, sure, but it’s a stress you hardly have time to think about what with appointments, medications and adjusting to having good days and bad days. Things are different now, and it’s hard to realize that so much of your life has changed in just a few short weeks.

A month goes by.

The friends that were so supportive at the time of your operation are strangely silent now; it’s not that they dislike you; it’s just that they avoid you, like your disease was contagious or something. “Maybe it’s the way I look,” you say to yourself, as you look in the mirror and see the gaunt features that are only a shadow of what you once looked like. “My skin, my hair – will I ever look the same?” you ask. You have lost weight and you cry more now. Your life seems to be slipping away: the body has lost a great deal of its energy; recreation activities have lost their pleasure now. Why, even going to the bathroom is difficult. You have changed. Life has changed. Now it is time to give up two more slips of paper and toss them to the center of the table.

Several months pass and you know somehow, deep inside, that you’re not getting any better – one clue was that the doctor stopped all treatments today. He tells you that they have worked as well as they can, but you wonder if he isn’t just abandoning you because there’s nothing left for curative medicine to do. You are confined to bed most of the time; the yard outside is full of weeds and the early signs of winter are coming on. Your family and friends from out-of-state come more often now and it begins, slowly at first, to dawn on you that the end, your death, is in sight. Please give away three more areas of your life now, three more precious slips of paper.

One February morning, the doctor comes by and orders your pain medicine to be increased; you are nauseated all of the time now and your days and nights are hard to keep separated. Sometimes you awake at night wondering if you are dead or still alive after all. Life has lost much of its meaning. Life seems to be spinning out of your control. [Go around to each participant, quickly take two of their sheets of paper, crumple them up and toss them to the center of the table. (Do not look at the sheets when you take them.)]

You wake up early one morning not even sure whether it's morning or night. You faintly hear birds chirping somewhere in the distance. Your breathing has become more labored, more difficult. You somehow sense that this may be your last day. Please crumple up two more slips of paper . . . you slip into a deep sleep . . .

Your breathing becomes slower, more difficult. You awake to complete silence . . . you feel disoriented, nor sure where you are. "Am I still alive?" you wonder . . . You take a long, deep breath . . . holding it in, and then letting it go. Take another deep breath, hold it in, and let it go. This last breath was your last breath. You have died. Please crumple up your last remaining pieces of paper and give away your last possession from this earth.

[Pause for about 20 seconds.]

Remember to breathe, keep breathing. With each new breath sense your energy, your health. You are alive and well. You are whole and you can return to the world of living things and living people.

This exercise is over, but at some point, whether later today or later this week, I'd like you to really think about the thoughts and feelings you've had. Think about the things that were truly important to you, the things you held onto the longest.

When you volunteer for our patients, grieve a little for what they've lost; for relationships built up over time, for possessions and pieces of the world around them that have been taken without permission. And remember that now is the time for you to live life to it's fullest, to embrace the things and people who are most important to you.

The facilitator should allow for group sharing, debriefing, coming down, and invite sharing and caring within the group.

Potential questions to guide discussion:

- a) What were some of your thoughts and feelings as we went through this exercise?
- b) What kinds of things did you hold onto the longest? Why?
- c) How did you feel when I took items away without your permission?
- d) Did anyone put down "Going to the Bathroom" as one of the activities that you valued highly? Why not?
- e) In what ways was this exercise different than a real dying experience?

Close: Thank the volunteers for their participation in this intense exercise and excuse them for a break before continuing orientation.

Variations:

- a) Give participants 5 sheets each of white, blue, pink, and yellow, or some other color scheme to make up the 20 sheets. “On the white pieces of paper, please write items of nature that you value...”
- b) Some people like to hold this in a circle or on the floor. I generally hold my orientations in rooms with a table so they can have an easier time of writing on the slips of paper.
- c) Instead of letting the volunteers choose which “items of value” to let go of, I’ve also tried having them put these slips of paper in a paper sack and randomly drawing them out of the bag. While this method is effective in showing that our patients don’t usually get to choose what they give up (the disease process does this for them), I’ve found that the volunteers just end up very frustrated and don’t get as much “thinking” done than in the above method.
- d) Background music can be played before and during this exercise to help sooth and set a contemplative mood.
- e) I adapt this script according to the size and needs of the group. I have presented this to groups of 50 by just adjusting the number “items of value” and/or having them write down all the items on a piece of paper and just scribbling through the items.