

CASS-SCHUYLER AREA HOSPICE

MY JOURNEY THROUGH DYING: AN EXERCISE IN UNDERSTANDING (Instructor's Guide)

Ask the group to remain absolutely quiet during this exercise. It is best if they can be sitting at separate tables or at least a couple of seats between them for maximum impact. You will need approx. 45 min. to complete.

MATERIALS NEEDED PER PERSON (Fill these out BEFORE you start reading):

8 slips of pink paper	(On these you will write the names of 8 loved ones)
8 slips of blue paper	(On these list 8 Personal Possessions that are important to you)
8 slips of white paper	(On these, write 8 things you have not done yet that you want to accomplish before you die)
1 sheet notebook paper	(They will use it to write a letter at the end of the exercise. They will take these letters with them.)
Kleenex for everyone	

Tell the participants to fill out each sheet with the designated names or items. This will take some time. Wait until everyone is finished to begin.

Read the following out loud to the group and ask the group members to follow your directions. Please read slowly in order to allow each person to absorb the words and feelings of what you are reading. Allow them plenty of time to make their decisions. Do not proceed until every person has made their decision.

Begin:

You haven't been feeling well for awhile, so you decide to go to your doctor for a check-up. They do a complete physical, draw blood, do x-rays, and tell you they will call you within a week for an appointment to go over all the results. The day arrives for your next doctor's appointment.

Sitting in his office, you are stunned to learn that you have Oat Cell Cancer. The doctor goes on to tell you with great honesty and compassion that this is a highly malignant and fast growing cancer, and that he does not recommend aggressive treatment, but that there are ways of keeping you comfortable. Seeing the fear in your face, he gently holds your hand, and urges you to live your life as fully as you can, not dwelling on impending death, but concentrating on quality living in the present.

In your shock at this news, only two pieces of information stick in your mind:

"Whatever it is you really want to do should probably be done now."
and
"We do have things to keep you comfortable."

From this information, three thoughts come instantly:

"I am going to die soon."

"There may be considerable pain."

"I have some loose ends in my life to tie up as quickly as possible."

At this time, go through your categories of loved ones, personal possessions, and personal goals, and give up two in each category. This is the beginning of the process of letting go. (Allow time for everyone to finish.)

A couple of weeks have passed, and you have had good days and bad days. You spend considerable time recalling happy memories, good times, and loved ones. You have updated your will and legal affairs so that your loved ones will be cared for. You have contacted people with whom you had lost touch to bring gentle closure or reconciliation to those relationships. Still, you cannot believe how rapidly these weeks have slipped by. It seems that you have a tremendous urgency to live life as you have never lived it before. You ponder what you have done with the life you have been given, and what sort of mark you have left on the world. But, you realize that the past is irretrievable and that this is no time for regret; rather it is a time to live fully.

You must now give up two more loved ones, two more personal possessions, and two more personal goals.

In the second month that seems to have flown by, you are now aware that medical technologies do provide for your comfort. The bulk of your pain is reduced to a manageable level. Your real pain is of an emotional nature, rather than a physical one, as there is still so much to do and say and so little time left in which to do it all. Although your family and friends smile and try to be cheerful, you sometimes catch a glimpse of a tear in the eye of your spouse, your children, and other significant people in your life. Plans of long standing have been cancelled. You feel compelled to say all the words of love which were never fully expressed, and sometimes these words are so painful that those to whom they are directed cannot bear to hear them. You never realized before how much you took these beautiful people for granted.

The initial stages of your dying process are over. The denial, the anger, and the bargaining are no longer effective. You experience some depression as you become more and more occupied with your impending death. You ask your family to keep visitors to a minimum and to admit only those to whom you feel a special closeness. You have a need to talk about what is happening to you, and to express your fears and concerns. You do not expect your friends and family to solve your problems – you simply need to share your experiences with them, and to bring them into this new, uncharted territory with you. AS your strength wanes, you continue to hope for strength and peace for you and your loved ones, but you also ask others for their good wishes to bolster your spirit as well as their own. When you wish to speak with your spiritual advisor, you are relieved to note that no one tries to tell you how busy that person is, but rather makes the call and allows your advisor to make his or her own decision.

Although the days seem to become shorter, there is a paradoxical elongation of your emotional, spiritual, and physical distress. Your once vigorous body lies weak and wasted on the bed. You still have much that you wish to share, but speech has become an ordeal because of your shortness of breath and your tiredness. Your bodily functions are no longer fully under your own control, and you are at times embarrassed by this seeming regression to infancy. You are now very much aware that your family can no longer conceal their concern, fear, and pain of loss as they recognize the closeness of your impending death.

You must continue setting your inner house in order. As difficult as this process is, it requires that you must once more let go of two loved ones, two personal possessions, and two personal goals.

Most of your waking moments are now spent contemplating death with quiet expectation. You doze frequently, and for long periods. It pleases you that every time you awaken, there is a loved one next to you, quietly present and holding your hand. There is a growing desire now to simply let go. Good-byes have been said; all the love has been expressed. You are too tired for sorrow. There is no fear. You are ready; you are at peace.

Of the remaining slips of paper, take one from each category and let go of it.

Awakening from one of your naps, you quietly become aware that you are nearly there, that this is the day you will leave what we know of as life. There is no fear, there is no doubt that all you have sought in your time of dying has been achieved, and you have no regrets. The people you love are with you. They are tending to your comfort, and you have the satisfaction of knowing that they know they have done well in caring for you.

You devote your remaining energy to an analysis of your body and what is happening to you physically. You still perceive the world around you, even though your loved ones may think you are not aware. But it is more important now to you to experience fully what is happening to you internally.

Your arms and legs become cool and you know your circulation is beginning to slow down. You are covered with a light, warm blanket as your loved ones realize what is happening. You are no longer as easy to arouse; this is due to changes in your body's metabolism. You feel somewhat confused when you do awaken, and your loved ones gently remind you that they are with you and that they understand that you must take this journey of dying, and they offer you their support.

You now need to let go of your last personal possession and your last personal goal.

Your confusion increases, and you often search your memory to place a name to a strangely familiar face. You are told the day, time, and identity of the person with you, and your discomfort eases. As you become weaker and your fluid intake decreases, you are unable to cough up normal saliva; the oral secretions collect at the back of your throat, creating a "death rattle" as you breathe through them. For a moment you are frightened that you will strangle in your own saliva, but then someone gently elevates your head and your breathing becomes easier. Your lips and mouth are dry, but have been wiped with lemon –glycerin swabs and this makes you more comfortable.

Your vision and hearing are less acute, although you find that you hear better than you see. Someone who understands or senses what is happening to you keeps the light on in the room to help you as much as possible.

Simple and loving messages are said to you clearly in a normal voice, with each person identifying themselves, and you are grateful that you do not have to strain to understand. At times, you become restless, picking at the bed linens, and you see things and people which cannot be perceived by those around you. Your brain is not receiving all the oxygen it needs, and your metabolism is continuing to change.

There is a gentle voice of one of your loved ones, assuring you that you are not alone, and giving you permission to let go, to die. Your breathing slows without causing you any distress. There may be 10-30 second periods in which you do not breathe. This is another indication of the continued decrease in your circulation and the build-up of the waste products in your body.

You feel this life slipping away, and there is nothing now to hold you to this world. You feel the love and support of the people around you, and your spirit moves gently from this existence into this unknown mystery which we call death.

You now need to take the white sheet of paper and write a letter to your last remaining loved one.

When all the letters are finished encourage everyone to keep their letter to read a year from now. Have everyone dispose of their slips of paper. Try to get everyone's feed-back about this exercise a week later after they have had time to think about it.