Categories: Death education,

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United Kingdom

Death education covers all aspects of the end of life, death, and bereavement. The aim of death education is to enable people, including the general public, to navigate the complex systems around death, dying and grieving. Being as well prepared as possible for your own or someone else's death reduces the burden of what is inevitably a challenging period.

History of death education

Death was at one time seen as a taboo topic, not worthy of scholarly research. In the 1960s pioneering professionals like Herman Feifel, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and Cicely Saunders spearheaded the death awareness movement. encouraging behavioural scientists, clinicians and humanists to study death-related topics. New programmes of care were developed for the dying and bereaved, and new research was carried out into death-related attitudes.

Schools and colleges

In the UK there is a movement for death education to be taught in schools — currently it is not an established, standardized part of the curriculum.

Produced in conjunction with the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, the document A Whole School Approach to Supporting Loss and Bereavement looks at the process of bereavement, noting that approximately 1 in 25 children and young people have experienced bereavement of a parent or sibling. A Bristol university report 2023, [in England] recommended that all children should receive grief education at school.

In 2023 John Adams, President of the National Association of Funeral Directors, supported a petition in favour of death education being added to the national curriculum. This has been signed by over 10,000 people. His stated ambition was 'to help children understand death as a part of life'. The Sue Ryder organisation, which offers bereavement support, is also calling for the inclusion of grief education in the syllabus.

In acknowledging the petition, the government has responded: 'We know that schools have a role to play to help children deal with the emotional impact of such a loss . . . The Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) statutory guidance makes clear that teachers should be aware of common adverse childhood experiences, including bereavement. The Department of Education is set to launch a review of the RSHE curriculum . . . and will consider the points made by this petition. As part of the review process, the DfE will undertake a public consultation.'

The Compassionate Friends supplies a PDF for schools and colleges which makes suggestions on what to do when a pupil or student dies, while The Childhood Bereavement Network also offers resources for schools when teaching about death and loss. The charityWinston's Wish supports grieving children.

In 2018 the Resilience Project developed five lessons covering the subjects of death, loss and grief. The Resilience Project aims to introduce death as a normal part of the life cycle and develop children's skills and awareness to cope when someone dies. The curriculum is located on the

comprehensive website Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief, which supports educating and supporting children around death, dying and bereavement. It suggests that schools have a role in preparing children in how to manage death and bereavement.

Higher education
In the UK, death is also the subject of some academic courses such as this Open University module. This course looks at the experiences of dying people, bereaved people, those who work with them, and their carers. It explores the social context of death and dying, and considers end-of-life care and bereavement support.

Grief and bereavement can also be studied on this counselling diploma course. The course explains how to support bereaved individuals including those who have lost a loved one through suicide. It also considers terminal illness, sudden and violent bereavement and end-of-life care.

Medical and nursing programmes
The General Medical Council produces Outcomes for Graduates which uphold standards and promotes excellence in the area of death education. All students in UK medical schools are taught about palliative medicine and other aspects of end of life care and preparing for bereavement. In response to the variability of course content (2016 article), the number of hours spent on these topics has increased and curriculums have broadened with more attention to the psychological and emotional support aspects expected of health-care workers.

An International Survey of death education trends in teaching faculties of nursing and medicine in Canada and the UK similarly promoted a more structured approach to teaching about palliative care and end of life. Planning is continuing to provide high quality and person-centred end of life care training for nursing schools.

Hospices and palliative care
Cicely Saunders founded the first modern hospice, St Christopher's, in 1967 in south-east London, linking care, teaching and research. The institution still leads the way in palliative care.

The role of staff training was addressed in the 2021 study How do hospice nurses prepare to give end-of-life care? A grounded theory study of nurses in one UK hospice.

In recent years hospice education has become more public-facing and person-centred. The impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic saw greater public awareness about death, and the Nuffield Trust reported in 2022 on a simultaneous move towards hospices delivering more services within the community.

The 2016 study Integrating palliative care into the community: the role of hospices and schools paid attention to social aspects of death and dying. The 2015 thesis: Advancing education and support around death, dying and bereavement: hospices, schools and health promoting palliative care looked at educating the public and sharing knowledge between hospices and schools. Hospice UK supports the annual Dying Matters Awareness Week which focuses on community involvement.

Organisations involved in palliative care in the UK include the Association for Palliative Medicine, Hospice UK and Marie Curie.

Studies

Death education has also been the subject of academic study. Valerie Clark's 2006 Death Education in the United Kingdom three-part paper looks at the development of informal death education since Gorer's post?war survey of attitudes in his 1965 book Death, Grief and Mourning. She notes how many of the responses made to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, are part of such developments.

Institutions
In the UK, Community Education in Death Awareness and Resources (CEDAR) offers death education courses. The organisation was created to help people understand, accept and respond to death appropriately within their families, workplaces, neighbourhoods and communities.

CEDAR's one-hour introduction to death education explains what the subject is and why it matters, and explores why talking about death is important within the communities in which people live. CEDAR offers this class free to charities and community groups around Shropshire and further afield.

The organisation states that talking about death and loss does not have to be difficult, uncomfortable or frightening. It believes that once you learn how, it can be rewarding and fulfilling.

The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust provided an introduction to thinking about loss, death and dying as part of its 'Grief, loss and dying during Covid 19' course. The course looked at the stages of grief model and the importance of choices at end of life.

Death education is promoted in some institutional settings. The NHS Scotland site Support Around Death provides guidance to health and social care staff working with families and carers before, at and after death. The Brighton and Hove Education and Enterprise Marketplaceoffers bereavement resources for educational settings, including guidelines and example policies and letters.

Books
The 2007 book Research Methods in Palliative Care surveys the field of study. The 2011 title Let's Talk About Dying investigates changing attitudes to hospices, death and dying.

This Routledge series comprises eleven academic books on aspects of dying, grief and bereavement including Caring for Life and Death, Children and Death and Ethnic Variations in Dying, Death and Grief: Diversity in Universality.

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