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Italy

History of Death Education

The term Death Education refers to a set of training and educational activities aimed at overcoming the taboo of death. The goal is to promote a culture of end-of-life based on awareness, acceptance of one's own finitude, and appreciation of the meaning of life. In Italy, Death Education is a relatively recent but steadily growing field. Its spread occurred later than in the Anglo-Saxon world, where this approach was introduced as early as the 1970s. The reasons for this delay are rooted in cultural and social factors: in Italian society, as in many other Western societies, death is often considered an uncomfortable topic—avoided, repressed, or relegated to specific contexts. However, in recent decades, numerous Death Education initiatives have emerged within the three levels of prevention:

- Primary prevention: targeted at people of all ages who have not recently experienced bereavement, with the aim of promoting conscious reflection on death and dying.
- Secondary prevention: dedicated to those facing the end of life (dying persons and their caregivers), to offer psychological, relational, and spiritual support.
- Tertiary prevention: aimed at people dealing with grief, to facilitate healthy mourning processes and prevent pathological developments.

Schools and Universities

Schools of all levels represent the ideal setting for discussing death and dying. When appropriately handled, reflections on these topics can be undertaken even with very young children. Preschool children often face experiences of loss, such as the death of a loved one or a pet. For this reason, Death Education can begin in early childhood education. During adolescence, such interventions can play an important role in preventing psychological distress, self-harming behaviors, and suicide risk. In Italy, several significant experiences have developed where Death Education has been implemented through expressive and multidisciplinary techniques and tools such as photography, cinema, art therapy, drama, and meditation.

The results of these experiences have shown, in most cases, an increased ability to accept death and a reduction in alexithymia (i.e., difficulty in recognizing and expressing emotions).

University Courses in the Medical and Nursing Fields

The introduction of specific courses dedicated to palliative care and end-of-life support is a recent phenomenon but increasingly recognized as essential in healthcare education. It is very important for healthcare professionals to acquire competencies in these topics to ensure holistic and humanized care for patients and their families, but also to protect themselves from burnout,

compassion fatigue, and work-related stress. A lack of preparation and reflection on these issues increases the risk of professional exhaustion and emotional overload.

Hospices and Palliative Care

Some Death Education projects have also been launched in hospice and palliative care settings, both as support for patients and families and as training opportunities for healthcare workers, volunteers, and students.

However, these initiatives remain relatively unknown and underappreciated in the Italian landscape.

Research

Numerous studies [in English] conducted in recent years have shown that death education does not generate anxiety or discomfort in participants; on the contrary, it enhances awareness, reduces existential procrastination, and increases the ability to live fully in the present moment.

Moreover, Death Education fosters a more serene and realistic relationship with death, supports grief processing, and can prevent the onset of psychological complications related to loss.

Institutions

Today, many institutions and associations contribute to the spread of Death Education in Italy, promoting awareness-raising, training, and support activities.

Among the most active organizations are:

- Fondazione Ant, which provides assistance to cancer patients and also engages in prevention and awareness on death and dying.
- Fondazione Vidas, which offers support to terminally ill patients and their families.

Academically, Italy is distinguished by a highly qualified educational pathway: for over fifteen years, the University of Padua has offered the Postgraduate Specialization Course in 'Death Studies & the End of Life', directed by Professor Ines Testoni. This program is an international reference point in the field of Death Education, offering solid theoretical and practical training to design and implement educational and psychological interventions on death, grief, and end-of-life topics.

Books

Among the most important books on the subject is L'ultima nascita. Psicologia del morire e Death Education by Ines Testoni, which provides, even for non-specialists, valuable insights into

understanding death education and its significance in contemporary society. Another key contribution is Il grande libro della morte, also by Testoni, which explores how the relationship with death has evolved over time, offering a multidisciplinary perspective on its psychological, cultural, and existential dimensions.

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