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Death education

Death education throws light upon a historically taboo area: the occasion of people passing away, and the grief and loss that accompany bereavement.

Death education focuses on the human and emotional aspects of death. As well as explaining and demystifying processes around the end of life and in particular about dying and death, it seeks to answer existential questions about what it is like to be alive, and centres around the human search for meaning.

It can be either formal or informal; today some educational institutes and workshops provide courses in the subject. It is officially known as thanatology.

The historical background

In her seminal book On Death and Dying (1969), Elisabeth Kübler-Ross suggested five stages of the dying process – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – based on the feelings of terminally ill patients around their impending death. Today, many still recognize the value of the approach, but consider it critically or in a more nuanced way. For example, the stages may occur in a different order or overlap, and some contest them as not being empirically validated or accurate.

Cicely Saunders was another pioneer who encouraged clinicians to pay attention to death-related topics in the 1960s with her emphasis on palliative and hospice care. Along with the work of Herman Feifel, these authors stimulated the academic study of death and promoted new attitudes and openness towards the subject.

What does death education cover?

Death can be seen as a natural part of life we will all go through, with death education today linked to the conquering of fear and an improved quality of life in the present.

Death education may cover: understanding the dying process; decision-making for the end of life; dealing with loss, grief, and bereavement; and traumatic death.

There is an argument for teaching death education in schools so that young people can be better informed about end of life issues: children face the death of loved ones or pets as a part of life, which can be unexpected.

Death education for both doctors and patients

Death education is not just for medical professionals; the general public benefits from it too, and its study fosters positive changes in attitude and behaviour.

Medical personnel are taught about the fears and anxieties of patients facing death and how to reduce these emotions. They must also familiarise themselves with the ethical issues around terminal care and aim to establish a trusting relationship with the dying patient and those close to them until the end and beyond.

Death education enables individuals to make their own grief process an opportunity for personal growth. Patients can become aware that their own life is limited and discover the preciousness of the time left to them, while meditating on their own death. Death education helps individuals to develop and communicate new meanings and attitudes towards death.

An enriching discipline Death education enhances lives and informs and guides individuals in their roles as responsible physicians and citizens. Addressing the taboo around death, one can live more serenely and consider the realities about the end of life and beyond, for oneself and others. Indeed, death education encourages us to re-evaluate our human relationships and minimize ‘unfinished business’. Death is therefore not the enemy of life; instead it restores our understanding of the value of living.

Plenna’s approach – death education country summaries

Plenna helps people to consider and prepare for the rest of their life and to undertake death planning. Death education is central to this and involves awareness raising and provision of information. Plenna’s country-by-country death education summaries aim to collate the main information within a country, to provide ready access and a means for comparison and exchange across borders.

See bellow

Australia

Canada

India

Italy

Japan

United Kingdom

United States of America

Date: 2025-07-01