Chapter 17

The Past, Present, and Future of Death Education

The wave of the future is coming
And there is no fighting it.
—Anne Morrow Lindbergh

Objectives

After reading this chapter, you will be able to answer the following questions:

- What is the history of death education?
- What is the role of death education in elementary and secondary schools?
- What are university students' views toward death?
- What lessons have university students learned from death education courses?
- What are some ideas about the future of death and dying?

History of Death Education

Death education arose along with an academic interest in death in the mid-1950s, specifically with Herman Feifel's 1959 book, The Meaning of Death. V. R. Pine (1977) identified three periods in the history of death education: exploration (1928–1957), development (1958–1967), and popularity (1967–1977). It is probably reasonable to assume that death education is still in the popularity period. Pine said that the three periods can be further divided into pure and applied approaches. Applied death education refers to an interest in the management of dying or adjustment following bereavement. The work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross exemplifies the applied interest approach. By contrast, the pure approach involves educating people about attitudes toward death, understanding grief and mourning, euthanasia and suicide, the effect of parental death on children, and the meaning of one's own death.

Thirty years ago, in The Scope of Death Education (1977), Daniel Leviton identified the goals of death education and defined death education as a developmental process in which death-related knowledge and the implications resulting from that knowledge are transmitted. He identified the following goals of death education: primary prevention (preparing individuals for eventual death events), intervention (helping people face personal
aspects of death), and rehabilitation (understanding and learning from death-related crises). More specific goals included promoting comfortable interactions with the dying, removing taboos, and reducing anxiety. In his article, “Death Education: An Outline and Some Critical Observations,” William Warren (1981) suggested, from having read syllabi and course aids used in death-education courses, that the expressed goals of the courses were incorporated to defuse death of the “socially disruptive consequences that might flow from the acceptance of personal mortality” (p. 38).

Sometimes, though, according to Simone de Beauvoir (1964), the goal of death education is to create anxiety rather than to reduce it. In so doing, a student becomes painfully aware of the need to confront death. As de Beauvoir wrote,

There is not such thing as a natural death: nothing that happens to a man is ever natural, since his presence calls the world into question. All men must die; but for every man his death is an accident even if he knows and consents to it, an unjustifiable violation (p. 106).

Knight and Elfenbein (1993) conducted a study to determine anxiety and fear of death among 103 college students, some who had and some who had not taken a course in death education. They found that students enrolled in the death education course reported increased anxiety and fear about death relative to those who had not taken the course. Students from the death education course also reported an increase in thinking about their own death. Whether that thinking was good or bad is unknown. Increased anxiety about death and more thoughts about death might be positive in that it might cause students to appreciate their lives more.

Did this course in death education increase or decrease your anxiety about death and dying?

Death Education in Elementary and Secondary Schools

A growing movement exists among educators to implement death education programs in elementary and secondary public and private schools. One driving force is the incidence of suicide among children and adolescents; one of every three adolescents reports to have contemplated suicide and one in six reports having attempted suicide (Thompson, 1993). According to a government survey (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000), 2.6% of adolescents in grades 9 through 12 attempted suicide in 1999. Because the finiteness of death in seeking solution to a problem is not always clear to adolescents, death education can be seen as a preventive measure because, according to Eddy and Alles (1983), death education causes adolescents to think about death in more realistic ways.

Another important factor driving the death education movement in schools is that the death of a classmate is becoming common among school-aged children. The leading causes of death among children and adolescents are accidents, homicide, and suicide—in that order (USDHHS, 2000). Many students’ peers are dying premature and violent deaths. Along with confronting these deaths, children and adolescents often do not have adequate opportunities to grieve.

Many theorists believe that death education has replaced sex as the “last taboo” (Chadwick, 1994; Wagner, 1995; Warren, 1981). Herman Feifel (1972) pointed out that death education is as necessary as sex education, and perhaps more so because death is universal and sex is not. Even though children understand death to varying degrees, many adults do not believe, as they typi-
cally did and do regarding sex education, that death education is an appropriate subject for discussion at either home or school.

Getting parents to agree to allow death education in schools is important. In a survey of parents of 375 youth, Jones, Hodges, and Slate (1995) found that parents were generally supportive of death education programs in schools. Furthermore, 77% of these parents reported that they did not perceive death education programs as interfering with their parental responsibilities.

To determine whether death education is appropriate for students in the primary grades, Lynn Bowie (2000) conducted a study among students and teachers in an elementary school setting. Results supported the inclusion of death education in the primary curriculum because it is a natural part of life, with one-third of students agreeing. The main ingredient for successful teaching of death education to young children, however, has to do with teachers’ comfort with it. Therefore, it seems important for college students, especially those who plan to be school teachers, to familiarize themselves with the issues of death, dying, and grieving, and to be able to talk about them.

Corr, Morgan, and Wass (1994) reported that death, dying, and bereavement are fundamental aspects of the human experience. By appreciating the reality of death, dying, and bereavement, they argue that individuals can more fully live; without this understanding, unnecessary suffering and a diminished quality of life are likely. Therefore, these authors believe that education about death, dying, and bereavement is an essential component of the educational process at all levels.

University Students’ Views of Death

Have you ever wondered how your thoughts about death compared to your peers? Results from a study conducted by Dennis, Muller, Miller, and Banerjee (2004) revealed that college-age males and females (from a mostly Caucasian population) accepted death as another life experience. Differences existed, however, between male and female responses to the following statements:

- I am less concerned about death than others.
- I am not concerned about the inevitability of death.
- I neither fear death nor welcome it.
- I am not frightened of death like others.

For each statement, males’ scores were significantly higher than females’ scores, meaning that males were less concerned about death and its inevitability; feared death less, but did not welcome it; and were less frightened of death than they believed others are.

When interpreting these results from Dennis et al. (2004), it is important to know that males also reported more often engaging in risky behaviors (e.g., less likely to use seatbelts and more likely to drive a vehicle after drinking, more likely to engage in a physical fight, and more likely to smoke cigarettes). Although males might not welcome death, given risky behavior, death for them appears more probable.

In a similar study, Dennis, Hicks, and Banerjee (2005) asked the same questions of a predominately African American group of college students. Overall, death acceptance scores were similar to those cited previously, although no significant differences existed between African American males and females on the inevitability
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of death. African American males’ scores were significantly higher than females’ scores on being concerned about death or frightened of death.

Generally, research results from studies about death anxiety reveal that females score higher than males, but because African American males have a very high rate of death by homicide (U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources, 2000), it is possible that they know that death is more probable for them.

Lessons Learned from Death Education Course Assignments

In an evaluation survey of a death education course taught by Edwin Stefan (1978), students said that the course was valuable because they were allowed to talk with one another about their fears and curiosities of death. Of the 36 students in the course, 18 said they had a greater acceptance of their own death, and 14 reported that they were more accepting of the death of others. Also, one-half of the students reported that the value of the course was the awareness that life needs to be lived daily.

Asking For Forgiveness

Forgiveness is not easy, whether one is trying to forgive others or oneself. A student in one of my death education courses, a nurse, had the assignment to interview someone who works with death and dying on a daily basis. She chose a minister. The minister told her that there is one question he always asks someone who is dying, “Is there anyone you need to forgive?” Forgiveness appears to be needed for peace in life and peace at death’s door.

The minister’s question implies that many people hold on to emotional pain too long. If you have anyone to forgive, do it now. Possibly, that someone is yourself, as was the case with Tonya, another student in a death education class, who, when asked to write to someone dead for the purpose of resolving an issue, wrote a letter to her aborted baby of 25 years before. I spoke with her after she submitted the assignment, and she told me that, for the first time in her life, she had begun to forgive herself and have peace about what she had chosen to do. There is power in the intent of forgiveness, oneself—or others—for mistakes and hurts. If you have something you want to write or say to one of your loved ones, do it now.

Questions & Answers

Question: Are people of strong religious faith less afraid of death?

Answer: Yes. Religiousness is inversely related to death anxiety. Possibly, the belief in an afterlife or reincarnation helps alleviate fear of death.

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My Story: What I Learned from Death Education

When I, as a doctoral student, took a course in death education with components similar to the ones in this text, my world was opened—to forgive, to say goodbye, and to embrace the inevitability of my own impending death. At the forefront of my experiences in death education, however, was the sense that I needed to fully live my life. Since I began developing and teaching courses in death education, I have been privileged to witness others doing likewise. As others’ learning experiences (e.g., forgiving someone, saying I’m sorry or I love you to someone who is dead or dying, or learning to appreciate life) are presented in this chapter, see if, after coming to end of your course in death education, you have similar experiences.

Coming to Terms with Living and Dying

Another student in one of my death education courses wrote about her learning experience from volunteering at a local hospital. She wrote:

One of the patients in the hospital was close to death, and we [the student and her supervisor] did not want her to be alone. So, I decided to go to provide “support.” It was so peaceful. She exhaled gently and then, in less that a minute, she gently exhaled again. And she was gone. . . . I had another patient who was swinging her arms in the air and screaming, “Leave me alone; I do not want to go!” It just so happened (divine intervention) that her pastor stopped by, and he prayed with her. She calmed down, and then she died. . . . Each day when I leave the hospital, I reflect on life itself. We know we are not here to stay, but facing death can be so devastating. It is one thing not knowing about it, but it is another thing to have to come to terms with it. I hope my hospital experiences will allow me to be able to come to terms with it for myself.

Hector, another student, wrote about what he learned from interviewing an elderly gentleman who spoke about the lessons he had learned through his life. Hector wrote:

After my interview, I looked at many things in life differently. The man I interviewed was four times my age, and he still walks, talks, and lives like he is living life to the fullest. He certainly was a role model. This interview was something that profoundly changed my life forever.

Overcoming Feelings that Death Is Creepy

In addition to lessons in forgiveness, resolving old emotional pains, or choosing to live a better life, an assignment in a death education course can help alleviate fears of death’s strangeness. In her assignment to go to a cemetery and write about the experience, Sarah wrote:

For as long as I can remember, I have thought cemeteries are spooky places, and you definitely...
don’t want to go by yourself at night. I guess I still had those feelings about cemeteries, because I REALLY did not want to do this assignment. Just the thought of being in a place where hundreds of dead bodies below me really gives me the creeps. My aunt loves to go to the cemetery and put flowers on her husband’s grave. Often, she has asked me to go with her, and I go just to pacify her. But I don’t like it. I have to admit, though, that the longer I walked around looking at the tombstones, the more comfortable I got with being there. I couldn’t help but continue to look around and see what the earliest date I could find. The oldest one I found was from a person who was born in 1710 and died in 1742. It’s just hard to imagine that something from so long ago is still around—the tombstone, I mean. I guess this assignment wasn’t so bad after all. I have no plans to hang out in a cemetery any time soon, but I don’t think it will make me nearly as uncomfortable the next time I go.

Thank You for Living

Another assignment, again to write a letter to someone dead or alive, was for the purpose of saying thank you to someone. Sonya, Angie’s aunt, wrote her such a letter:

Dear Angie,

Your unexpected illness and death was devastating for your mommy and daddy and all of us who loved you so much. We anxiously antici-
continue on the right path. Who knows, maybe one day I will be able to have a conversation with Morrie and meet a real-life Sam. With the renewal of my beliefs in myself and others, I do not only think that this could happen—I KNOW it will.

While this student wrote how her life was enriched by taking my death and dying course, another student wrote how the assignment to read the book, Tuesdays With Morrie, came at a perfect time for her. The student wrote:

At first glance of this book, Tuesdays With Morrie, I thought to myself, “At least it is a short book.” Little did I realize that what this book would come to mean to me. At first, I thought the book was going to be slow and boring—not that a story about an old man dying wasn’t necessarily interesting, but old people do die eventually. So what really could be that interesting? I soon came to find out that this book would mean more to me than I ever thought possible.

I was at my parents’ home recovering from a hysterectomy when I noticed this small book on my Mother’s desk. As I examined it, I realized it’s the book that I was required to read in my “death” class. Hum... I was surprised that my mother had that book. I asked her why she had the book and if I could read it. Of course, she told me to read the book. She explained that one of her friends from church brought it to her and suggested that she and my sister read it. You see, my older sister was fighting a cancer battle.

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While reading this book, I came to love this old man. His words of wisdom actually touched my heart as I thought about his feelings, knowing that he would soon die. Some of his moving remarks were: “Accept what you are able to do and what you are not able to do;” “Accept the past as past without denying it or discarding it;” “Learn to forgive yourself and to forgive others;” and, “Don’t assume that it’s too late to get involved.”

While reading the book, I watched my sister gradually deteriorate. My sister had always been so healthy, participating in many athletic endeavors. Also, she had her dignity, you know. Please, don’t get me wrong. The dignity is still there even in the darkest days of her cancer, but the sight of seeing this sickening disease consume her life was very difficult to watch. I soon knew, after reading this book, that there were things that must be said.

I cannot tell you how many people I have recommended to read this book. I realize now that a day, just one day, can make a difference. My sister’s physician explained to my mother how my sister likely had have only two weeks left but that, as many physicians say, “You never know, though, because I’m not God.” Because of reading Tuesdays With Morrie, I began telling my sister some of the things I needed to say, things as simple as, for example, “I love you;” “Thanks for helping pay for my college;” “Thanks for going to see me cheerlead.” Next, I prepared something for my sister’s funeral. I would tell people that Ann Lee loved horses and the Kentucky Derby; she loved to ride a motorcycle; and, she had a hang-up for my Grandmother Carver’s brownies. I would tell them how she played continuously with her grandchildren. I want people to know my sister—not her cancer.

The day came. On one the darkest days of my life, Tuesdays With Morrie helped me tell a group of people the little things I cherish most about my sister. That small, non-attractive book has been such a blessing to me over the last year. I have heard that when the student is ready, the teacher will come. I was ready; Morrie was there.
Those who have read Tuesdays With Morrie will know that Morrie would be happy to know that he made a positive impact on this person’s life. Specific to what one should focus on in life, though, is what Jon wrote on the meaning of life and death:

Nobody is certain about how much life is left to live, and life is too short to be focused on our death. Young people of all ages die every day. The point is that we should live life to the fullest no matter how much is left. I have been hit by death so much in my life. I need to focus on living, enjoying, and doing my best with what I have and whenever it is my time to go, so be it. Negative thoughts almost killed me when I lost my dad, and it made me make bad choices when I lost my first partner at age 27. Death is just a transition. It is scary because we do not know what is afterwards with certainty, but if we were supposed to focus on death, why live then? I treasure my life and because of the inevitability of death, I choose to live!

The Future of Death, with Some Very Odd Ideas

Chronic conditions, such as those related to heart, cancer, stroke, and Alzheimer’s, are the primary causes of death for elders. By 2025, the number of people age 65 and over in the United States is expected to grow to 62 million (Hoyert, Kung, & Smith, 2003) even as 77 million baby boomers begin hitting 65 in 2011 (Samuelson, 2007). Therefore, the number of deaths related to chronic diseases among elders is expected to rise. Care of the dying is likely to become a big health business for Americans, and the future of death and dying, as well as staying alive, might be very different from what it has been.

William Bainbridge (2006) proposes a foreseeable future in which all of a person’s memories can be preserved. Using the technique he describes, it would be possible to record and classify all of a person’s episodic memories and thereby build, in digital format, a network of mental associations connecting all of a person’s life events with his or her related physical and emotional significance, which, in essence, is a process to duplicate a person’s personality and preserve it in digital form. Even after physical death, a person would, in effect, be alive.

Lane Jennings (2005) offers a similar idea. Jennings proposes that the elderly, or those with life-threatening illnesses, could use hallucinogenic drugs and electrical stimulation of the brain to prepare for death. He calls this process statutory death or reversible suicide. The person would, while alive, write and sign a legal will to renounce all worldly rights and responsibilities. The person would act as though he or she was legally dead while physically being alive. At a medically supervised “pleasure hospice,” the person would be maintained in a “twilife” condition. Through drugs/brain stimulation, the person would mimic real-life situations of his or her own choosing. In other words, the person would continue in a physically passive but mentally enhanced state. The procedure would be a reversible in that the patient could go back to regular life in intervals at choice. Jennings believes that one advantage of statutory death is that a person could attend his or her own funeral. When the time for actual death arrived, the person would smoothly and painlessly exit with goodbyes and grieving already done.

Christopher Buckley (2007) has another idea about future death issues that is especially relevant to the increased financial burden of having aging Baby Boomers on Social Security. In his novel, Buckley tells about a plan wherein financial incentives are advertised for elders who agree to kill themselves at the age of 70. Even greater incentives would be offered to elders who agreed to kill themselves at age 65. He calls this suicide plan “voluntary transitioning.” Although this plan exists only in Buckley’s fictional, outrageous, and hilarious novel, Boomsday, the potential issues involving finances are real for Americans. Younger Americans will be faced with paying the bills for increased numbers of elders. Could life, eventually, possibly imitate fiction? If so, death (and health) education will definitely be different than it is today.
SUMMARY

• Death education is a process in which death-related knowledge and the implications resulting from that knowledge are transmitted.
• Death education sometimes creates anxiety about death rather than reducing it.
• Death education causes adolescents to think about death in more realistic ways.
• Parents are generally supportive of death education programs in schools.
• Many college-aged males and females accept death as another life experience.
• Students previously enrolled in college death education courses report learning about important life necessities, such as forgiving, asking for forgiveness, saying “I love you,” coming to terms with one’s own death, accepting the death of a loved one, saying “Thank you,” accepting a regrettable past, and becoming determined to fully live the one and only life each person is given.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books


Movie

CRITICAL THINKING

If your 90-year-old grandparent told you that she wanted to commit suicide to help alleviate the U.S. Social Security dilemma, and thereby help your generation, what would you tell her?

CLASS ACTIVITY

Form groups of five to six students. Each group should make a list of what activities, readings, movies, and/or material in this course about living, dying, and grieving has been the most helpful. Share lists/discussion with all groups.

REFERENCES


