

Lesson 1 Notes

Why Think About Death and Dying? Many people in our culture avoid this subject. We are fortunate to want to help to relieve suffering around death, grief, and loss. When we are with someone who is in pain, we feel compassion for them. We wonder how to help them. We want to be effective in serving the dying, their families, and friends. We are also aware that we could die at any time.

Death Is a Fact of Life. Everything that lives will die. As much as we might try to avoid it, death is coming at some point. Life is fleeting. Life is short. Death is certain. We may not know when or how, but we are all going to die. Those of us who help people to navigate through death must acknowledge our own mortality and come to terms with it. We must prepare for our own death so we can help others who are going through it.

There Are Many Ways of Dying. Some people go through a long slow death. Some die suddenly without any advance warning. Some die a violent death, whether intentional or unintentional. We are baffled when the young die first. Some deaths are mysterious, others traumatic. There are mass casualties which leave us with collective grief and trauma.

Long Slow Dying. In the long slow dying process, death usually occurs due to serious illness. This way of dying may involve painful and expensive life prolonging efforts in the medical system. An agonizing journey eventually ends in death, despite great effort to keep the person alive. Our attachment to the dying person can interfere with the ability to relax and accept the dying process. Sometimes a slow death is simply due to the natural decline of advanced age or failure to thrive.

Sudden Unexpected Death. We wake up on a seemingly normal day and there is a swift, sudden, unexpected death due to accident, violence, or injury. We are blindsided by the phone call or the knock by police on our door. We're numb, in shock. We heard that it happened but can't believe it. It can be like an out-of-body experience where we disconnect from our senses.

Intentional Death. Suicide, murder, war combat, street violence, police involved killings, mass shootings, and terror attacks all come with their own unique set of issues. Whether it's an act of random violence or directed at the person, this kind of devastation cannot be measured. It takes a terrible toll on our communities. The sense of injustice makes it extremely hard to deal with. And those who are supporting the grievors are also in grief, so intentional death is very complicated.

Unintentional Death. Situations where serious injury or death results from a mistake or lack of judgment can be extremely agonizing, especially in cases where it takes the life of a helpless, dependent person. There are parents who love their children deeply and must live with the fact that they unintentionally caused their child's death.

Out of Order Death. We tend to expect old people to die before the young ones. When the young die first, it can shake our world, because we expect things to happen in a certain natural order. Baby death is unexpected, and it seems so wrong. We don't know why things happen the way they do.

Mysterious Death. There are unsolved mysteries which sometimes result in a body being found. Whether it's a prisoner of war (POW), a missing loved one, a runaway teen, a kidnapped child, or natural disaster, we suffer greatly when there are unanswered questions in this kind of death.

Traumatic Death. Unfortunately, many people are killed by law enforcement officers. Some officers are killed in the line of duty. In the military, occasionally service members are accidentally killed by

“friendly” fire. These kinds of devastating events are very hard to live with. People feel so unprotected and vulnerable. They lose faith. There is little we can do to lessen the impact of traumatic death. We must be willing to learn to listen. We must be trustworthy. We must acknowledge the pain and sorrow. We must validate the griever in their unbearable pain.

Collective Grief and Trauma. Events such as the terror attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City on September 11, 2001, leave ongoing wounds and scars for many survivors. A beautiful memorial was built in remembrance of that terrible event. Many individuals have made great effort to rebuild and support the survivors. There is always room to improve our understanding and ability to provide deep, lasting, meaningful support.

One World Trade Center. Years after the terror attacks on the Twin Towers, in addition to the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, One World Trade Center was built. Opened in October 2014, it is the tallest building in the Western hemisphere. There is a 90-minute guided tour of Ground Zero and the Museum one can take. Despite great efforts and compassion, though, wounds from the attack still linger.

OC87 Recovery Diaries - Beneath the Vest. Ron Griffith was an officer with NYPD when the terror attack occurred in New York City on September 11, 2001. OC87 Recovery Diaries produced a series of videos titled Beneath the Vest. Here is a link to Ron’s story when he was at Ground Zero on 9/11. To access the Beneath the Vest series, visit: <https://oc87recoverydiaries.org/btv/>

Hierarchy of Grief. We understand that grief is grief, and that grief hurts. However, the intensity of situations varies greatly and there is a hierarchy of grief. For example, someone who is grieving because they ran over a squirrel while driving has a lower intensity of grief than a parent who mistakenly backed out of the driveway at their home and killed their child or a doctor who caused the unintentional death of a patient.

Let Us Explore and Learn Together. Surely you have heard many of these ideas before. These existential questions have been examined by many people in all kinds of ways. We are building a community of people who can learn more so we can help others, share our experiences, and apply them to our daily lives in practical ways.

The Three Agreements.

1. Complete Confidentiality - Never reveal what someone said in the session
2. Emotional Honesty - Allow yourself to express the emotions you feel
3. Mutual Respect - Remember everyone is different, so don’t judge or criticize

What Is Grief? Grief is a normal, natural response to any unwanted change. It’s not getting what you want. It’s getting what you don’t want. We feel fragile and alone. Grief is isolating. It’s hard to navigate. We aren’t trained in how to live with grief.

14 Grief Experiences, 12 Painful Emotions, 84 Kinds of Losses (see PDF documents)

“How Do You Help a Grieving Friend?” YouTube video by Megan Devine. <https://refugeingrief.com>. Here is a link to the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2zLCCRT-nE>.

This is the end of Lesson 1. Please go to Lesson 1 Homework.