
Late Adulthood: Death, Dying, Bereavement, and Widowhood

Overview

The experience of dying is one that every human being will experience. Each culture and religion has its own beliefs, attitudes, and rituals regarding death. Death has both physiological and psychological aspects to it.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross was the pioneer in bringing the subject of dying out of the closet in our Western culture. She delineated a series of interrelated stages that dying people pass through. Though not everyone goes through all of these stages, nor not necessarily in the order she outlined, it does provide an interesting framework for understanding the process of dying.

Grief is a highly individualistic human experience that happens when one is dying and/or when one loses a loved one to death. There are stages of grieving, but as with the experience of dying, individuals experience grief in no set order nor in any set time frame.

Widowhood is a state that half of all married people will experience. The death of a spouse is one of life's most stressful events. Men and women who experience becoming widowed have both similarities and differences in how they handle this traumatic loss.

Questions to Consider

1. Considering your own ethnic group, culture, and religion, what are your beliefs and attitudes about death and dying? What rituals are involved, and how do they differ from those of other groups?
2. If you have experienced the loss of a loved one, how did you grieve? Did your grieving process differ from your other family members and friends?
3. Did you experience Kubler-Ross stages? In what order did they occur?
4. If you are married, what do you imagine becoming widowed would be like?
5. If you know any widows or widowers, how, in your opinion, did they handle the experience? Have you noted any gender differences in how they experienced becoming a widow or widower?
6. How could our culture deal with the reality of death in a better or different way?

Vocabulary

Read these terms with their definitions before viewing the program.

Thanatology The field of research on Kubler death and dying.

Denial The first stage of Ross's theory on dying.

Anger Kubler-Ross's second stage in the process of dying.

Bargaining The third stage of Kubler-Ross's theory on dying.

Depression Kubler-Ross's fourth stage in the process of dying.

Acceptance The last and fifth stage of Kubler-Ross's theory in the process of dying.

Anticipatory Grief Grieving which begins before the loved one dies when they are ill for an extended period of time.

Shock and Disbelief The first stage of grieving.

Preoccupation with Memories The second stage of grieving.

Resolution/Recovery The final stage of grieving.

Widowhood The loss of one's spouse.

Anniversary Reaction Grief which reappears on dates of importance to the survivor(s).

Instructional Objectives

When you have successfully completed this module, you will be able to:

1. Discuss the differences in how 7 different cultures deal with death.
2. Identify and describe Kubler-Ross's five stages involved in the process of dying.
3. Describe the grieving process and the stages involved therein.
4. Discuss how men and women experience widowhood the same and differently.

Self-Test

After studying the objectives and watching the video, take the self-test to check your progress.

In most African traditions, death provides

- a. a lower status for elders.
- b. an occasion for affirmation of the entire community.
- c. a community celebration of separation from their collective past.
- d. an affirmation of faith in Allah.

Abdul lives in a Muslim culture. He is likely to view death as a(n)

- a. reminder of his own mortality.
- b. elevation of community elders to special status.
- c. affirmation of life.
- d. affirmation of a connection with the past.

Among Buddhists, death is believed to be

- a. an occasion for affirmation of the entire community
- b. a reminder of one's mortality.
- c. one of the inevitable sufferings of life that may bring enlightenment.
- d. something to hide away in hospitals and ignore, if possible.

Mrs. Cannon has been diagnosed as terminally ill, but she is convinced that her laboratory tests were mixed up with someone else's and that she is going to recover. She is in the emotional stage of

- a. acceptance.
- b. bargaining.
- c. depression.
- d. denial

Mrs. Bartlow has just succumbed to a terminal illness that lasted several months. At one point during her illness, she prayed to God to give her a few more years to live in exchange for promising to visit the synagogue more often and to work with the poor. At that point, Mrs. Bartlow was in the emotional stage of

- a. anger.
- b. bargaining.
- c. denial.
- d. depression.

In terminally ill people, the emotional stage of acceptance is characterized by

- a. feelings of happiness.
- b. an absence of feeling.
- c. a strong fear of death.
- d. a feeling of trauma.

The value of anticipatory grief is that it

- a. eases the pain of loss.
- b. weakens the bonds with the dying person.
- c. makes the parting less conflicted.
- d. helps mourners "keep a stiff upper lip."

Mourners who take steps to remember a dead person - talking about the person, visiting the gravesite, etc.- tend to

- a. jeopardize their chances of recovery.
- b. prolong their mourning unnecessarily.
- c. cope better with their loss.
- d. become too self-involved.

Cultural customs that can help a mourner achieve recovery include

- a. encouraging the mourner to "bear up."
- b. avoiding a large or elaborate funeral.
- c. making memorial visits to the grave.
- d. suppressing expressions of grief.

Sudden surges of sadness felt by the bereaved on holidays, birthdays, or the date of the death are referred to as

- a. anticipatory grief.
- b. anniversary reactions.
- c. bereavement overload.
- d. mummification.

Women have a harder time than men coping with the emotional effects of losing a spouse.

- a. True
- b. False

Widows are more likely to remarry than are widowers.

- a. True
- b. False

As one of the most disruptive experiences in the life span, widowhood tends to have similar effects on most older adults.

- a. True
- b. False

Which of the following is true of adjustment to the death of a spouse?

- a. It is easier for men in all respects.
- b. It is initially easier for men but over the long term easier for women.
- c. It is emotionally easier for women but financially easier for men.
- d. It is determined primarily by individual personality traits, and therefore shows very few sex differences.