

TALK ABOUT DEATH WITH LOVE ONES

We are such a death denying society that it seems impossible to talk about our own death. A wise Chaplain noted that most of us think we have at least five more years to live, no matter how old we are. I believe death should be an open topic among family and friends, that the freedom to speak of this subject makes it easier to bear, not more difficult. I have a strong bias that even the most difficult of conversations should be attempted. We need to share in the truth, however unpleasant it might be. As a grief therapist, I see how much telling the truth relieves and ultimately helps everyone involved whatever the trying circumstance.

First, it's useful to have opened the topic of death before anyone in the family is seriously ill and or facing life's end. It helps everyone to know each other's wishes about end of life concerns such as heroic life saving measures or not. This information may be needed later on.

Most of us cannot imagine ever having to announce our impending death to loved ones. In the midst of a life-threatening situation, who of us can imagine saying, "I am very sick, and I am going to die." Even if we are ill and know our time is limited, we may feel unable to speak explicitly about our own death. Envisioning such a dialogue might bring tears to our eyes

One of the most difficult aspects of my mother's dying of cancer was that she pretended for a long time that she was not dying. She would start each day by telling me she was getting better. But I couldn't ignore her distended belly, her swollen ankles, her skinny frame. I couldn't ignore that she no longer could digest solid food. Each time she announced, "I'm getting better," I would be near tears of sadness and frustration, going through another day of pretending. My family has always had a tendency to cover up and protect each other from unpleasant facts,

the antithesis of my style. Then, I would remind myself that this was my mother's survival mechanism, whether I liked it or not. She was postponing the inevitable. She was being courageous in her own way.

One day my mother was leaving the house to go to the beauty parlor in a wheelchair, a recent concession to her difficulty walking on her swollen feet. I couldn't get her shoes on her feet. I tried several different pairs at her urging, but finally, my elegant mother had to leave the house in bedroom slippers. I felt so badly for her. As I was pushing her swollen feet into her slippers, she said to the top of my head, "I'm dying, you know."

I said I did know. Did she want to talk about it? She said "No." I felt more bereft than ever. Now I knew for sure she was closing me out. I was wrong. A day or so later she began talking with me about dying, her wonderings about life after death, and her wish to be cremated. We were close again, and my feelings of alienation from my beloved mother disappeared.

I want to remind any silent, stoic sufferers that silence may cause a painful sense of estrangement from loved ones at a time when they want to be closest to you. For me this was immediately relieved once mother was honest with me. So often the patient and family members do know what's going on, even if no one tells them. It's a relief to bring out the truth.

I had a client who didn't want her adult children to know she was so ill. Still I encouraged her to tell them. I know she hated my advice, but I suspected some, maybe all of her family knew something was more seriously wrong. It was a risk. She didn't know how they'd react, or how she'd feel afterward.

I asked her what concerns or fears were stopping her. Her biggest fear was that she couldn't tolerate their grief. She was afraid she would have to console them, when she could not begin to console herself. She thought she might feel more guilty for leaving them than she could stand. She was scared to confront

whatever feelings she might provoke in herself. I suggested maybe sharing wouldn't make her feel worse.

Her concerns were justified, and there is also an "up" side. I offered that out of her sharing there might be more intimacy, and maybe less to do. It isn't her job to handle her adult children's grief. But by talking with them ahead of time, she is giving them a chance to grieve, to cope with the reality, to get professional counseling, if they need that. Helping them prepare was a gift she could give.

As painful as anticipating these kinds of honest conversations about illness and death may be, they may actually serve as a kind of preventative medicine. Most of all, she is giving her family a chance to have quality time with her and to feel complete by saying or doing what they need to do before she is gone. So many of my clients with unresolved grief have felt self - recriminations and despair over what they never got to complete with dead loved ones.

Like all of us, this mother wants to protect her already grown children from the facts of life threatening illness and of death. We think a "good mom" is a good protector. However, mom's job isn't only to protect, but it is also to educate and to allow children their own experience. This is an opportunity for learning, for intimacy, for closure and healing.

Sometimes it takes great courage to tell the truth, but invariably with the telling comes great relief, a strong sense of intimacy, and heartfelt and mutual appreciation and love.