Unthinking Mortality: The Design and Implementation of a Community Workshop for End-of-Life Exploration through Conversation, Art, and Reflection

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Abstract

With the goal of providing community members a starting point for conversations about the end of life process, (living wills, advance directives, their concept of a “good death,” hospice care, palliative care, “death with dignity,” spiritual and religious needs, grief, etc.), an advanced care planning specialist and an artist were recruited to work with the author to develop a half-day, hands-on workshop on these topics. The free workshop was offered three times in the fall of 2019 and each session was open to the public. The workshop curriculum was designed to provide an opportunity to normalize death, dying, and grief and to reshape common cultural denial of mortality in conversations that can be continued with friends and family. Active acknowledgement of the natural human end allows for better preparedness, theoretically happier lives, and healthier grief processing; it also aids in setting achievable goals for a good death. An additional desired outcome was to help the community form a better understanding of expectations for a typical end-of-life, including options available for handling of the deceased, questions that can and should be asked of professionals in the death field, and resources available in the area. After facilitating the workshops, observing reactions, and receiving feedback, it seemed apparent to the author that attendees were grateful for the opportunity to open up about the somewhat taboo and often scary topic of death and dying. The author’s conclusion is that there is a very real need for the continued expansion of this type of work.

Making Meaning from Mortality

The workshop session opened with facilitated discussion on making meaning from mortality. The facilitator introduced the topic by reminding attendees that we all have an expiration date, and asking if we are all living our lives with that in mind. This was followed by introducing the idea that we all have something outside of ourselves that gives our lives meaning, and perhaps we should be spending more of our time focused on those activities. The conversation at every workshop then, without fail, organically flowed to a variety of topics ranging from dealing with the fear of death to loss of the family structure after the death of a matriarch or patriarch. Attendees tended to be open and frank, felt safe and comfortable in the environment, and offered support and encouragement to one another. The time allotted for this segment of the workshop was invariably too short.

Hands-On Exploration of Grief through Art

The hands-on exploration of grief through art was led by Brent Harris, pictured kneeling above, and was a welcome break from the morning conversation. Participating in a communal rope making exercise demonstrated how interwoven our lives are, and how every life lost leaves an impact on the world.

Reflecting on Our Lives and Leaving a Legacy

 Attendees Share Feedback

“The first daylight to darkness seminar I attended was so powerful. The speakers are knowledgeable and compassionate. Each offering their own unique perspective based on their professional backgrounds. We shared stories while also participating in activities that foster processing of grief. I didn’t even know all the grief I had suppressed within myself until that day. My tears flowed freely but I felt accepted by everyone.”

“I found the Unthinking Mortality workshop very insightful in all aspects of death, from the fear and anticipation of death to coping with the inevitable, both from a personal and familial viewpoint. I took something away from everyone involved, as everyone was allowed to speak openly and candidly about a subject which is not normally afforded such treatment, and I feel it was a positive and productive experience for everyone there.”

Advance Care Planning

Hilary Kerr of Bronson Hospital gets attendees out of their seats again for a death and dying version of “Would You Rather?” and then discusses the importance and how-to of advance care planning.

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All photos by the author unless otherwise noted.