

A LINE ON LIFE

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My Death, Your Death *

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Although we are all mortal, most of us try to avoid thinking about our own death. Because of this, when we are told of the impending death of a loved one – or even ourselves – we have greater difficulty in dealing with it. We try to deny the reality of death, especially our own.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross – a **thanatologist** (one who studies death and dying) – is an expert in dealing with the terminally ill. Through hundreds of hours at the bedside of terminally ill patients, she has found five stages that typically occur as death approaches. These stages do not necessarily occur in order, and some dying people do not go through all the stages.

Individual reactions to your own death may vary greatly, depending on your religious beliefs, age, education, emotional maturity, the attitudes of significant others and so on. However, the five stages of Kubler-Ross summarize typical reactions to one's own death.

Suppose your physician told you that you had *less than six months to live*, how would you react? The typical immediate reaction involves **denial and isolation**. "*It can't be! It must be a mistake! You have the wrong medical report!*" While denying reality, you may also isolate yourself from any information that would confirm your impending death.

Once the fact of your death is no longer denied, **anger** may follow. "*Why me, what did I do? I don't deserve to die!*" You may become angry at others who will live beyond you, even close friends and relatives.

The third response is **bargaining**, when you tend to say, "*Just let me live until...*" while promising anything to achieve this goal. "*I'll never drink again! I'll right all past wrongs!*" If the person bargains for a particular event, they may cease fighting death once the event has occurred. For many, this is a chance to say "*good-bye*" to family and friends at Thanksgiving, Christmas or even a birthday gathering.

The fourth response is **depression**. Realizing that you will be separated from family, friends, and all the comfortable routines of life causes profound sadness. The depression is more extreme if the person has many life goals that have not been achieved. Now these goals can never be obtained.

If the dying process occurs over a relatively long time, people may reach an **acceptance** of their death. Their struggle has been resolved. The dying person is neither happy nor sad, but calmly accepts the inevitable.

How can you help the dying person? To answer this question, it is easier if you reverse positions and ask, "*How can others make my remaining time most meaningful?*"

Most of us would want someone to talk with concerning our fears and other feelings related to our approaching death.

However, often relatives think that they are "*protecting*" the dying person by not telling them of their impending death. All too often, the dying person knows s/he is dying, but is too concerned about "*protecting*" relatives to let them know that s/he is aware. In this way, dying people are often isolated in their last days or hours.

Even when all accept the reality of the impending death, the dying person may still be isolated. Many adults – especially those unable to deal with their own eventual death – feel uncomfortable or "*at a loss*" in communicating with the dying person. Even many physicians, nurses and clergy have difficulty in relating to the dying person.

If you or a member of your family is dying of cancer with six months or less to live, **Hospice of Yuma (HOY)** can help you. This organization is part of a national hospice movement dedicated to help make the last days as meaningful and fulfilling as possible. After the death, they also help those close to the deceased person to deal with their loss and readjust to life.

HOY is starting its fifteenth year of service in November. HOY consists totally of volunteers, who perform a variety of functions to help the family and the dying person. They may help care for the dying person, cook meals, baby-sit with children, or do other daily tasks while family members provide the primary care for the dying person. However, HOY always needs more volunteers. Their next training session for volunteers will start on September 7, 1995. Whether you are interested in helping or need help, you can contact them by phoning **343-2222**.

After accepting the fact that you will die, each moment of life becomes precious.

The abbreviation, "*HOY*," is not accidental. "*Hoy*" is Spanish for "*today*," and HOY's motto is "*Live for today*." As sad as it is to think about your eventual death, it can lead to a greater appreciation for today. Enjoy today! If you can't do what you enjoy, then try to enjoy what you do! At least, when your time does come, you can say that you have lived. "*Live for today!*"

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, West Publishing, 1995, pages 437-438.