

The Loss Experience

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The experience of a terminal illness affects not only the patient but everyone who surrounds her or him. From the moment that someone suspects there is something wrong, through the diagnosis and treatment procedures, until the time when death occurs, a person's life is turned upside down. Because death and dying remains such a frightening topic, it is usually not discussed in advance and those who must negotiate this journey do so without a map to chart the enormous changes. They are not prepared for the onslaught of powerful emotions that are overwhelming and often chaotic. It can be a time of terrible isolation and fear as the stability of life crumbles with every new step.

While many have now read about the stages that the dying patient passes through, the actual experience remains remote and intellectualized. Often people who are near to the seriously ill person are unaware that they, too, pass through similar stages as they move through this journey. This workshop is designed to get behind the intellectualizations that protect us from emotional understanding and to provide a glimpse of the myriad decision, emotions, and changes that take place for the patient and those who provide care as they navigate this process. Role playing is used to draw the participants into this charged process so that the feelings can be made understandable.

This workshop is experiential in nature. By using the participants as key figures in the drama, an opportunity is provided to experience what actually happens to people--patients, family, friends, doctors--as a terminal illness unfolds. The struggle becomes a real one. The feelings, often confusing and contradictory in nature, are explored. Our reactions, fears, hopes, and dreams are illuminated. In so doing, we come to better understand death as a part of life.

Crisis workers are often called upon to help people who are dealing with the crisis component of a serious illness. This workshop will provide an "inside view" of the situation and, thus, expand an individual's empathic boundaries. It is our hope that as our understanding is increased so is our ability to connect with the people who seek our assistance--particularly those who are facing their own deaths or the death of someone they love. As we understand the complex and highly-charged emotions that surround this process, we are more able to form the kinds of alliances that help someone else realize his or her own agenda.

Participants will not come away with a script for handling this life event. Rather, they will emerge with a renewed or enhanced comprehension of how we can help others face what is inevitable in a manner that is comfortable for them.