



A Case in Point:

Nate Lewis died on Aug. 29, 2003. His is not the story of how someone fought an incurable disease to the very end, refusing to ever give up. Instead Lewis did something more difficult: He shut down the anger and desperation and moved on with living and controlling his life. He refused chemotherapy to treat his multiple myeloma after trying it once, and chose to spend his last months at Zen Hospice in San Francisco. There he learned that contemplating his death can be a rare opportunity to explore and examine the wondrous nature of his life.

Nate would often sit out in the garden smoking his medicinal marijuana that helped alleviate the pain that seemed to be overtaking his body. He was OK with the fact that he was dying and felt that he had experienced a good life but inside he was deeply troubled by the grief he felt towards leaving his family.

While Nate was seeking closure on his life, his family, mostly his seven daughters, were in denial that he was really going to die soon. When he tried to discuss funeral arrangements, they put him off and kept telling him he was going to be all right.

Nate soon realized that his focus was not going to be dealing with his own death but rather helping his daughters to get through the ordeal.

While Nate was able to effectively maintain his fatherly role until the end of his life, making such a transition can be a very difficult proposition under circumstances where troubled relationships are involved or the dying person feels they have lived a less than meaningful life.

The dying often feel a deeply inspired need to make sense of what went wrong with their life and perhaps mend those troubled relationships before they die. Life reviews are often a very effective means of facilitating resolution of such issues.

Case study adapted from:
On His Own Terms
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By C.W. Nevius

Caring for a Terminally-Ill Loved One: Grief of the Dying Person



The loss of a loved one is the most common context for discussions about grief. However, it is important for us to remember that the person who is dying will also be grieving the loss of their own life and *everything* in it. This issue looks at some effective ways that caregivers can help a loved one to cope with the anticipated losses from their impending death. Encouraging family and friends to participate in the process can help their grieving process as well.

Life Reviews – Soren Kierkegaard said the following about understanding and experiencing life “...life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.” Reviewing one’s life seems to be a natural process that begins once people know they are dying. It is an opportunity to articulate the wisdom they have acquired and, as such, is a positive and constructive experience. It is a process by which they make sense of their past with a desire to understand who they are, find meaning in who they have been, and find hope for the future. For most people a life story includes a component of grief while at the same time it offers them an opportunity to express the love, joy and gratitude they have for the many facets of their lives.

Life reviews can also give your loved one an opportunity to reflect upon death experiences life has presented to them. This can help them confront their own death and find a place of peace with the process. A suggested resource on Life Reviews is *Guiding Autobiography for Older Adults* by gerontologists James Birren and Donna Deutchman. In this book they have developed an effective structure for performing and recording a life review process.

Memorial Service Planning – participating in funeral or memorial service planning is a means of allowing the dying person to consciously reflect on their life, then collect and express these reflections as final thoughts about life’s lessons. Facing death brings amazing insights that can inspire generations. It is not uncommon for those who are dying to suggest music or poems that will be part of their memorial service. By proactively planning the service with the dying person, an incredibly inspiring collection of thoughts can be preserved and later conveyed to all of their friends and family at a time that will find them listening most attentively and reflecting deeply.

Today’s technology provides the ultimate in possibilities for preserving the memories of our loved ones. For example, recording the readings of favorite poems or collecting a set of favorite songs on a compact disc is a lasting treasure for friends and family to remember the memorial service and their loved one.

Self-Inquiry and Self-Realization – Our sense of self and sense of identity experience profound and relentless changes during the course of a terminal illness. What we learn from the process can propel us to a deeper search for our true self and a search for healing. A young woman dying of cancer said, “*In some ways, [dying] really isn’t so bad. I never knew how loved I was. If you leave yourself open to the love and care and concern that’s around you, you have the opportunity to really learn something about yourself.*”

This time of self-inquiry and life review often leads to a self-realization, a connection with our inner self that recognizes who we really are and affirms our core values. We eventually realize that we are not so much the details of our biography but more the awareness that lives the life.

First, let’s remind ourselves that grief is a privilege that comes with the capacity to give and receive love.

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