

INTERNATIONAL WORK GROUP ON DEATH, DYING,
AND BEREAVEMENT
A Statement of Assumptions and Principles Concerning
Education about Death, Dying, and Bereavement

Developed by the Education Work Group of the International
Work Group on Death, Dying, and Bereavement

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Preamble

Death, dying, and bereavement are fundamental and pervasive aspects of the human experience. Individuals and societies achieve fullness of living by understanding and appreciating these realities. The absence of such understanding and appreciation may result in unnecessary suffering, loss of dignity, alienation, and diminished quality of living. Therefore, education about death, dying, and

bereavement, both formal and informal, is an essential component of the education process at all levels.

General Assumptions

Education about death, dying, and bereavement is important for:

1. Optimizing the potential for human development throughout the life span.
2. Understanding the impact of technology on human life.
3. Achieving equitable allocation of scarce socioeconomic resources.
4. Coping with social systems and social changes.
5. Coping with cross-cultural movement and interaction.
6. Helping to cope with global issues (e.g., nuclear processes and dangers, terrorism, war, world hunger, and population growth).

Therefore, education about death, dying, and bereavement needs to be directed to all segments of populations worldwide.

Goals

The aim of education about death, dying, and bereavement is to contribute to general education as a basis for personal development and responsible social participation. It must also contribute to the specific education of those who, as a result of personal or professional circumstances, are closely associated with dying, death, and bereavement.

The following assumptions and principles have been prepared as an aid for those who are planning or implementing educational program about death, dying, and bereavement. They are intended for those involved in education about death, dying, and bereavement in society at large in local communities and education systems.

Assumption: A statement accepted as fact on the basis of commonly observed experience.

Principle: A collective judgment as to the proper response to the assumption.

Assumption	Principle
1. In the human life cycle, encounters with personal mortality, life-threatening situations, dying, loss, and bereavement are centrally important.	Because of their central importance, addressing such encounters should be integral to education in society at large, local communities and educational systems. Such education should address: (a) the universality of death (all living things will one day die), (b) the irreversibility of death (the physical reality of death is permanent), and (c) the human limitation and vulnerability revealed within such encounters.
2. Encounters with personal mortality, life-threatening situations, dying, loss, and bereavement have potentially profound psychological, physical, spiritual, intellectual, behavioral, social, and cultural impacts on the individual.	Education should address: (a) the subjective significance of these encounters, (b) the variety of impacts on individuals, and (c) factors influencing the form, strength, and duration of these impacts.
3. Death, loss, and threat to life are often experienced as unpredictable, unchosen, and uncontrollable. Still some forms of choice and control are often possible as persons and societies define appropriate and meaningful responses.	Education should: (a) speak to experiences of helplessness and hopelessness, (b) identify forces influencing these experiences, and (c) address possible means to counteract such forces, identify possible choices, and recover hope through promotion of choice and control where they are possible.

4. The manner of coping with personal mortality, life-threatening situations, dying, loss, and bereavement is pivotally important for sustained individual well-being and meaningful living. Education should address: (a) the importance of individual coping, (b) a range of alternative coping responses, (c) the fact that for individuals some responses are more effective than others, and (d) the value of a social support system for effective coping.
5. Awareness of and sensitivity to the needs of others who are encountering personal mortality, life-threatening situations, dying, loss, and bereavement are fundamental to enhance sustained quality of social life. Education should: (a) promote awareness of and sensitivity to the needs of others encountering death-related phenomena and (b) develop abilities to respond effectively in word and deed to those needs.
6. Social context, technology, cultural values, traditions, rituals, and policy influence patterns of individual and collective responses to death-related phenomena. Because no loss occurs in isolation from these influences, education should: (a) address the variety of social and cultural influences on individual and collective responses to death-related phenomena, (b) promote understanding of influences on the patterns of death and dying themselves within societies, and (c) promote understanding of global issues (e.g., nuclear processes and dangers, terrorism, war, world hunger, and population growth), their death-related consequences, and alternative approaches.

7. People make choices, the consequences of which affect both quality and quantity of life for themselves and for others. Education should: (a) address moral responsibility for decisions about life and death (such as accepting or refusing and providing or withholding life-saving treatment, suicide, and active euthanasia), (b) the rationality of such decisions, (c) the ethics of such decisions, (d) the implications of proxy decision making, and (e) the appropriateness of governmental and institutional policies and practice related to such decision making.
8. A curriculum is a statement of priorities in education. Education should: (a) draw on the assumptions and principles contained in this document in setting its priorities, (b) be based on the current state of knowledge from a variety of disciplines, (c) integrate theory and practice, and (d) provide emotional support and foster confidence.
9. Individuals bring to their educational programs experiences that have emerged from a diversity of social, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Educational approaches should be appropriate to audience, subject matter, context, and goals. Education should provide for: (a) appreciation and utilization of individual differences, (b) sharing of experiences, and (c) promotion of personal growth.

10. Individuals have a range of exposure and responses to loss and death-related experiences. Education needs to develop appropriate strategies to increase meaningful exposure to loss and death-related experiences. Educators have a responsibility to anticipate and be sensitive to the death-related experiences of their students and should be prepared to provide appropriate support.
11. Encounters with loss and other death-related phenomena are a part of human experience from earliest childhood. Education for dealing with death-related experiences should begin in early childhood and become an integral part of formal education.
12. Individuals' understandings and patterns of coping with loss-related experiences vary along the life span. Whatever the context, education should: (a) reflect sensitivity to level of intellectual development and (b) support the development of coping capacities in an age-appropriate manner.
13. Individuals who offer informal or formal education in this field provide instruction to teach children and adults about encounters with personal mortality, life-threatening situations, dying, loss, and bereavement. Preparation for these responsibilities in informal and formal education about death, dying, and bereavement should: (a) promote awareness of and sensitivity to distinctive needs and responsibilities of the diverse populations to be served, (b) develop knowledge bases appropriate to distinctive instructional missions, and (c) develop skills essential to effective instruction.

14. Research and evaluation are means for assessing the effectiveness of education efforts. Research should systematically describe the educational process in the field of death, dying, and bereavement to permit replication of successful educational efforts. Research should examine the effect of education about death, dying, and bereavement on knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Research findings should be used to revise educational efforts to improve their effectiveness.
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