

# Existentially speaking: Older adults and issues of meaning in later life

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# What does existential mean?

- ▶ Pertaining to purpose and meaning
- ▶ Personhood: what it means to be human
  - the bigger issues of life – and death – as they pertain to who one is: Who am I? What does life mean? Will I cease to exist after I die?
- ▶ Spirit: one's essence, life force, "breath of God"
- ▶ Spirituality: the expression of the spirit





# Why are existential issues prominent for older adults?

- An increase in life losses
  - Social isolation for some older adults
  - Societal attitudes towards older adults (within the westernized countries)
  - A growing sense of the finality of their own lives
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# What are the existential transitions in later life?

- Attaining integrity, rather than despair (Erikson, 1982)
  - Moving from “doing” to “being” (Byock, 1997)
  - Resolving inner and outer conflicts:
    - with self
    - with others
    - with the Transcendent
  - Diminished capacity/dignity?
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# What are the existential transitions in later life (cont'd)

- ▶ Facing into an unknown future
- ▶ Legacy – How will my name/memory be continued after I am gone?

# When death is imminent

➤ Fundamental Principle: It is the needs of the dying person that take precedent. "Meaning and purpose" are central to the dying process.

- Presence
  - Value of touch
  - Expressions of love
  - Consideration of the dying person's needs
    - Who is present? (Circle gets smaller)
    - What is happening in the room?
    - Speaking and/or noise/activity

**Please note: cultural/religious considerations may impact the fundamental principle.**



# ...When death is imminent...

## Religious/Spiritual Rituals

-dependent upon faith/life paradigm – of the dying individual and/or the family

## Unfinished business?

(typically, not an involved discussion, rather, expressions of love/forgiveness [Lane, Hirst and Reed, 2013])


## Releasing/blessing of the dying person




# After death


- The principle of “what would the dying person want?” begins to shift to “what does the grieving family need?”
- Rituals, as per appropriate for the individual and/or family (prayer, wailing, silence, etc.)
- Gatherings
- Funeral services
  - a funeral is for the living, not for the one who is passed. Is very important for the grieving process.
- Handling of the body





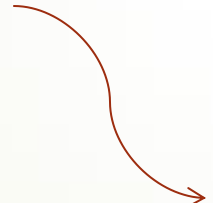
## How can professionals help older adults with existential transitions (both the dying and their loved ones)?

- “Be” with older adults
  - Establish a trusting relationship
  - Validate personhood
  - Assess for spiritual distress
  - Address issues of meaning and purpose in life
  - Help engage in life review (reminiscence therapy)
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# How can professionals help...?

- Recommend activities that foster meaning
- Assess hope and activities that foster hope
- Examine and attend to internal dialogue
- Address issues of forgiveness



**Older adults can experience profound growth in their latter years by attending to “the existential”. Professionals can aid in that growth even in their last days.**



# A few final thoughts...

- ▶ “Old age is like climbing a mountain. The higher you get, the more breathless and tired you become. But your view becomes much more extensive” (Ingmar Bergman)
- ▶ “Dying strips you of all pretense, carves you down to the essentials.” (Elaine Hussey, in *The Sweetest Hallelujah*, p. 77)
- ▶ “Look at every path closely and deliberately...Then ask yourself...one question.... Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn't, it is of no use. (Carlos Castaneda)