



## Accepting the Reality of Your Death

**M**ichael watched what he ate and exercised regularly, and annual physical examinations showed he was in good health. But all that was not enough to keep him from becoming a statistic. One day, as he was jogging with his dog, Michael's heart gave out. He was one of at least 130,000 people worldwide to die that day. Some died of disease; others from thirst, starvation, murder, accidents, or the easing away of the body after a life well-lived. Some of these deaths were violent, others were peaceful.



**D**eath may lurk just around the corner. Although we don't like to think about, each of us has a terminal condition. The meter runs. Some have five weeks. Others, five decades. But every one of us has only so much time to live.

It's important that we come to terms with our own death. Unless we do so, we will have a limited ability to assist and understand those who are dying and those grieving the death of a loved one. Accepting your death will help to ease your fears and enable you to offer more peace and comfort to those struggling with death and loss.

Coming to terms with your own death also puts life in perspective. You see more clearly what's important and what's not. As a result, you are more likely to focus on values and goals close to your heart. Surprisingly, you may even find that you feel calmer and more alive.

### **MAKING PEACE WITH DEATH**

Take some time alone to ponder several or all of

the following items. Go slowly, so that you can visit with the questions in a heartfelt way. Then discuss your responses with a good friend or family member.

- If you discovered you were going to die later today, would you make any phone calls? To whom? What would you say?
- Do you believe in God or another higher power, or a vision that lends purpose and meaning to your life?
- Do you have a philosophy on life? On why we exist?
- Are you willing, given the limited time available to you, to say what's on your mind? To do what you think is important? To stop hiding behind pretensions and facades and be the real you?
- What things are most important to you? Does the way you use time and set priorities reflect your most deeply held values?
- Are there changes you would like to make in the way you live routinely?



- Can you imagine your own death and write an obituary that expresses how you would like to be remembered?
- Do you sense in your most important relationships any unfinished business? A troubled relationship you'd like to heal? Loved ones to whom you might better express your feelings? Someone to whom you want to apologize or express thanks?
- Does the thought of your own death frighten you, or are you at peace with the idea? What do you believe happens after death? What could you do to better prepare yourself for dying when the time comes?
- What do you like best about your life? Consider how you are blessed. Ponder opportunities you might want to pursue.

### **USING DEATH TO ENRICH LIFE**

Lawrence LeShan, author of *Cancer as a Turning Point*, believes each of us has a dream that burns brighter than all the rest. Those who have the courage to follow their heart live significantly healthier, richer lives, LeShan says. He suggests the following three-part exercise as a way of exploring and perhaps living your dream:

- Imagine that 6 months from now, your outward life — the work you do, the place you live, the person or people you live with, the way you spend your time — can be exactly the way you want it. Describe what your ideal, outward life is like.

- Think about your ideal inner life. Six months from now, what attitudes, gifts and abilities would you like to have acquired, developed or strengthened?
- Consider your responses to the first two items. What efforts have you made recently to realize these things? What elements of your personality make such changes difficult? How might you overcome these internal obstacles?

Properly understood, death becomes an exquisite teacher, throwing life into sharp perspective and encouraging us to achieve our fullest potential. Death reminds us our time is limited, that it's important not to put off those things we value most, that each moment is a fresh and precious opportunity.

*Prepared by Sam Quick, Human Development & Family Relations Specialist, University of Kentucky; Jane Hildenbrand Rudat, Human Development Specialist, Indianapolis, IN; and Julie Quick, M.S., Grief Specialist in Private Practice. For his editorial assistance, we extend appreciation to Robert L. Kaiser, Jr., Journalist, Lexington, Kentucky. (# 3 of 33, 1996)*

This GriefWork publication is one of 33 fact sheets on topics related to death and dying. For more information about the GriefWork Project, contact your local Cooperative Extension Office. Although this publication is copyrighted, you are free to reproduce it in its entirety for non-profit, educational purposes.

Educational programs of the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service serve all people regardless of race, color, age, sex, religion, disability, or national origin.

