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Handout - a culturally sensitive approach to dealing with finiteness.

If we are familiar with death in our thoughts,
we accept every week, every day as a gift,
and it is only when we allow life to be given to us
life becomes precious.

Albert Schweizer

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Foreword

For many people, dying is a (taboo) subject in life that really has no place in life. How is it possible to talk about something that is filled with fear, uncertainty, pain and loss? In our search for a healing approach, we came up with this little handout, which we have prepared for you using different cultural perspectives, rituals and traditions. We would like to encourage all readers and invite you to gently and mindfully remove the taboo from dying and accept it for your own life, so that acceptance of it grows and at some point it becomes normal.

If this little handout makes a tiny contribution to this, it will have fulfilled its purpose.

Introduction This handout is the result of our Erasmus+ project: "Education about death - learning for life".

Finding words that help people to deal with finiteness and encourage them to integrate dying into their lives is highly sensitive and, in our view, requires different approaches. We have therefore compiled our own experiences, poems and pictures for each topic, which comfort and help to give space to our own feelings. Some of the texts are very personal, while others are more factual.

Reflecting on living and dying/ Reconciling with the truth of having to die

Dying has become a taboo subject in our civilisation. But only removing this taboo and recognising it as a process that everyone will inevitably go through can help us not only to

say a proper goodbye to the people we love, but also to prepare ourselves to go without fear when our hour comes.

"The art of dying has become a forgotten wisdom, but every deathbed is an opportunity to recover that wisdom for those who will live to learn from it and be ready for the times when they will encounter another death in the future, including their own," Catherine Mannix.

Caring about dying itself leads to a deep reflection on our own mortality. It is a way of looking it in the face and working with it. When we care for the dying, we can come to a firm decision, a clear understanding of what is most important in our lives. Really learning to help the dying means giving up the fear of our own death, looking at it with the necessary responsibility, discovering in ourselves the beginning of the infinite compassion whose presence we did not even suspect.

A Bulgarian fairy tale: The road to heaven has long been overgrown with grass.

- Are you the blacksmith? - The voice behind him sounded so sudden that the blacksmith even flinched. He also didn't hear the workshop door open and someone enter.
- Didn't you try knocking first?" - he said rudely, a little angry with himself and the customer.
- Should I knock? Hm ... I didn't try, - said the voice. The blacksmith wiped his hands and slowly turned round to face the stranger. But his words remained somewhere in his head, because this was a very unusual customer.
- Can you fix my scythe? - the guest asked in a feminine but slightly hoarse voice.
- Is that all? - throwing the rag somewhere in the corner, the blacksmith sighed.
- It's very bad, you see, - said Death. - Logically, - he agreed,
- you can't argue about it. - What should I do now?
- Straighten the scythe, - Death repeated patiently.
- After that?
- And then sharpen it if possible.

The blacksmith looked at the scythe. There were indeed a few nicks on the blade, and the blade itself was quite warped and wavy.

- That's understandable - he nodded - and I, what should I do? Should I pray or collect things? This is my first time ... so to speak.
- Ah... you mean that, -Death's shoulders shook in silent laughter, - no, I'm not coming for you. I just need my scythe fixed. May I?
- So I'm not dead? - the blacksmith asked himself gropingly.
- You know better. How do you feel?
- Well, normal.
- Do you have nausea, dizziness, pain?
- No, - listening to his feelings, the blacksmith said uncertainly.
- Then you have nothing to worry about, - said Death and handed him the scythe.

The blacksmith immediately took it in his numb hands and began to examine it from all sides. Work for half an hour, but knowing that Death would be sitting behind him waiting automatically extended the deadline by at least two hours. Hesitantly, the blacksmith walked to the anvil and picked up the hammer.

- You ... sit down. You're not going to stand like that, are you? - said the blacksmith, putting all his hospitality and friendliness into his voice. Death nodded and sat down on the bench, leaning against the wall.

The blacksmith finished his work on the scythe and looked at his guest.

- You'll forgive me for being blunt, but I just can't believe I'm holding something in my hands that has taken so many lives! No weapon in the world compares to this. This is amazing. Death, sitting on the bench in a relaxed posture and examining the inside of the forge, visibly tensed. The dark oval of the hood slowly turned towards the blacksmith.

- What did you say? - he said quietly.

- 'I said that I don't believe that what's in my hands is the weapon that...'

- A weapon? Did you say weapon?

- Maybe I didn't express myself correctly, I just...

The blacksmith couldn't finish his words. Death jumped with lightning speed and stood in front of the blacksmith in an instant. The edges of the hood trembled slightly.

- How many people do you think I've killed? - he hissed through clenched teeth.

- I ... I don't know, - the blacksmith barely muttered and lowered his head.

- Give me an answer! - Death grabbed him by the chin and raised his head. - How much?

- I don't know ...

- How much? - he shouted.

- How can I know how many there are? - Trying to look away, the blacksmith said.

Death let go of him and was silent for a few seconds. Then he returned to the bench and sat down with a heavy sigh.

- So you don't know how many they are? - he said quietly and without waiting for an answer.

- So you don't know how much they are? - he said quietly and without waiting for an answer, continued: - What if I told you that I never, do you hear? I have never killed a single person.

What would you say?

- But how ...?

- I have never killed people. Why should I, when you yourselves are doing an excellent job on this mission? You kill each other. You! You can kill for documents, in the name of anger and hatred, you can even kill just for fun.

And when that becomes too little, you can organise a war and kill each other - hundreds and thousands, millions. You just love it. You're addicted to other people's blood. And you know what the worst part of this whole story is? You can't afford to admit it! It's easier to blame me, - he paused for a moment - you know how I used to be? I was a beautiful boy, I welcomed people's souls with flowers and escorted them to where they needed to go. I smiled at them and helped them forget what had happened to them. It was a very long time ... But look what happened to me! - he shouted the last words, jumped off the bench and threw the hood away from his head. A face full of wrinkles appeared before the blacksmith's eyes, the face of a very old man.

The sparse grey hair hung in tangles, the corners of the chapped lips had fallen down in an unnatural way and showed the lower teeth, which protruded from the lips in curved pieces. But most frightening of all were the eyes. Absolutely faded, expressionless eyes stared at the blacksmith.

- Look what I've become! And do you know why?" He took a step towards him.

- No - he shook his head.

- Of course not - he smiled. - You've made me like this! I saw a mother kill her children, I saw a brother kill his brother, I saw how one person can kill a hundred, two hundred, three hundred other people in one day! I cried when I saw this, I screamed with incomprehension, with the impossibility of what was happening, I screamed with horror ... - the extraordinary eyes of death flashed. - I changed my beautiful clothes into black clothes so that the blood of the people I was accompanying would not be seen. I put on a hood so that people wouldn't see my tears. I stopped giving them flowers.

You turned me into a monster. And then you accused me of all my sins. Of course it's as simple as that ... - he stared unblinkingly at the blacksmith.

- I'll go with you, I'll show you the way, I don't kill people ..

Give me back my scythe, you fool!

Death took his tool from the blacksmith's hands, turned round and walked to the door.

- May I ask you something else? - the blacksmith murmured quietly

- You want to ask, why do I need the scythe? - he said, stopping at the open door but not turning round.

- Yes.

- For the path to heaven ... It's been overgrown with grass for a long time.

Reflections on living and dying/ Reconciliation with the truth of having to die Thoughts by Lydia Völcker

"You have to live to be able to make friends with death....." Astrid Lindgren

1) Farewell processes accompany us throughout our lives. Our most personal first farewell is when we come out of our mother's womb. We all slide into an unknown existence, out of warmth and security. This is a first farewell for us.

Perhaps this first experience is very formative for us and further farewell moments in our lives will follow and characterise the way we deal with each subsequent farewell.

2) We have the chance to practise saying goodbye almost every day, to accept farewells, and we are surrounded by experiences big and small.

3) In my life so far, I have said goodbye to several people, let them go and accompanied them in their dying. The steps of dying were and are as varied as life itself is varied and yet I have observed similar farewell developments "You have to live to be able to make friends with death....." As

- At first, there is often great hope that an illness can be overcome, that finiteness can be postponed.

- Sometimes the belief in doctors,

- in self-healing is very great and the

- sometimes there is a great deal of faith in doctors, in self-healing, and the spiritual paths that give/can give us strength and confidence.

Or, there is also the suppression of a possible finiteness of our being in this life, which is then there to protect us. I have learnt that every person needs their OWN time to sense this final path, to understand it, possibly also to be allowed to rebel against it, in order to then be able to accept this path.

- For me, being allowed to accompany a loved one means going along with them on their journey, being attentive to who is in which farewell process and when, and then accepting them when and how my accompaniment does them.

Sometimes I was just there, very quiet and waiting, other times I prepared my favourite meal, laughed about shared memories, cried, talked, did the shopping, washed, read, listened, slept next to the loved one and cried with them. Some people want to know and understand all the processes of the illness, others want to know very little. Support means trying to give what the person in question says they need.

4) Rituals that we know in our culture or that we develop during this time can give the dying person and us carers strength and confidence. I have learnt that our support can consist of caring for what we have been given, just that, and without ever being overbearing.....

Singing songs, reciting poems, listening, stroking, taking care of the authorities, praying and holding hands can be good ritual support. Lovingly decorating the room where the death may take place, with pictures of life, candles, flowers or leaves, can give everyone comfort and hope, always waiting for a sign as to whether this is what is wanted or not.

5) Ultimately, end-of-life care is a bit like being a midwife, and we carers are the recipients of this gift. We are allowed to accompany loved ones into a new world. I have personally experienced that I was able to familiarise myself with the many steps of saying goodbye in amazement. Even in the most serious illness, with pain, fear and grief for the loss of the dying, I have observed that we humans are, could be, gifted within ourselves in dying, who can go their last journey here, consciously and alone with themselves. That was my consolation when the person was no longer there as I knew them.

6) What does our culture give us as rituals during these times of life? For some, it is faith in God, in eternal life, spirituality, the belief in being reborn, poems, books, songs, community, remembrance corners, candles, unction, prayers for and to the person who is leaving or has left.

As my small final word, I would like to add that with deep gratitude for all the loved ones I have been able to accompany, I can keep infinitely unspoken things within me, so my heart is filled with "legacies".

7) In all the despair, the cry of the heart that wanted to hold the dearest person, the eternal hope for recovery, the grief for the future loss that can already be felt and sensed, and that the intimate moments of farewell remain with us forever. I was able to experience how difficult and hopeful every farewell can be, and yet how letting go and consensus usually grows. All the deceased whom I love, whom I was allowed to meet in life, whose death moved me, have also taken away a little of my fear of dying. They have travelled this path a little ahead of me.

8) The very last moment and path - each of us goes it alone, letting go of all the people who are there.

And after all the experiences that have been and will be, I would like to encourage all people to dare to take the path of accompaniment, to dare to do this despite all their reservations and weaknesses, because I am sure that we all grow inwardly and gain wings in these situations.

Lydia Völcker

I imagine dying
Like a bright gate through which we once pass

..... Away from discord, fear and suffering,
In peace and serenity, missing nothing
And it is comforting, I find, Who have gone before us,
And whom we love, to know there.
And the thought of one day
To go through this gate too
Then nothing threatening, it just reminds us
Every minute until then
A gift, with an alert mind,
To experience in deep breaths.....

Reinhard Mey

A culturally specific look at the different traditions and rituals practised in the dying and grieving process

What unites us humans is the certainty that we are born to die. We do this in very different ways, depending on where we come from and which tradition has culturally characterised us. In the following, we would like to introduce you to some of the dying and mourning rituals practised in Bulgaria, Greece, Belgium and Germany.

In Bulgaria!

Christians in Bulgaria believe that the type of death is determined by the lifestyle of the believer. The righteous die easily, while sinners suffer an agonising death. Usually, relatives try to alleviate the onset of death by lighting a candle, saying a prayer and pronouncing forgiveness. It is believed that Archangel Michael takes a person's soul by handing them a golden apple or removing it with a sword. This is why the archangel is also called the soul guide.

An obituary for the deceased is placed on the door or gate of their home. It is actually an information sheet whose purpose is to inform others of the loss and to have the opportunity to say goodbye to the deceased and to know when and where their funeral will take place. Its name, the word obituary, comes from the Greek - νεκρός - dead and λόγος - word.

However, since the grief of the relatives is very great, they turn the obituary into a farewell, create the text - a dedication, a thank you or a farewell with the deceased loved one, which becomes their only and last connection with the loved one who has taken his eternal path in timelessness. No photo should be included in the obituary until the 40th day. A service will be held in the house. Those who come to this farewell bring flowers, fruit, small gifts, etc., which they leave in the coffin at the feet of the deceased. The relatives of the

deceased also add a coin, salt, grain and bread. After the prayer, salt, wheat and bread are taken "so that the happiness of the house is not lost". Forgiveness involves kissing the deceased with their arms folded across their chest and lighting a candle.

At the funeral and memorial service, a certain number of loaves of bread are kneaded with different decorations and names. There are also small. A certain number of loaves with different decorations and names are kneaded for the funeral and memorial service. Small loaves with prosphoric imprints are also prepared and distributed at funerals. Cooked wheat must also be prepared for a funeral. It is distributed at cemeteries after the burial.

An obligatory part of a traditional Christian funeral is the funeral service, which takes place in the cemetery church or directly at the grave. The funeral table must be served by a priest, when the food and drinks are served on the table, it is said "God forgive!" and everyone pours a little of their drink on the ground for the deceased. At some points, they place another utensil because they believe the soul is there. The meal begins solemnly, but can later turn into joking and good times - this is not contrary to tradition, as there should be no more weeping and wailing after the deceased has been lowered into the grave. The family donates towels, fabrics and sometimes crockery to those present. It is assumed that the donation will benefit the deceased in their afterlife.

The family donates towels, fabrics and sometimes crockery to those present. It is assumed that the donation will benefit the deceased in their afterlife.

A memorial service is held for each deceased person after the funeral. The purpose of memorial services is to ease the transition "into the next world" for the deceased. Boiled wheat, ritual round bread and wine are served. These are the obligatory products that must be present at this memorial service. The incense symbolises our pure prayer ascending to God, the lighting of the candle - our fervent faith, and its flames remind us of the immortality of the souls of the deceased. It is customary to serve boiled wheat, ritual round bread, wine, fruit, sweets or candies. Why exactly wheat and wine, what do they symbolise? The grain of wheat "does not come to life unless it dies first" (1 Corinthians 15:36), so the cooked wheat reminds us of our future resurrection, and the wine symbolises the life-giving vine of Jesus Christ and his pure blood in the sacrament of Holy Communion. (John 15:4)

Commemorations take place on the third, ninth, twentieth and fortieth days after death - hence they are also called thirds, ninths and so on. After the critical 40th day, when it is assumed that the soul has finally gone to the other world and stopped hanging around there, memorial services become less frequent - three, six, nine months and one year after death. The duration of mourning is determined by the degree of closeness to the deceased - the closer they are to us, the longer we mourn them. A piece of black cloth is placed on the front door - a lament. When the mourning is over, the cloth is hung on the monument in the cemetery.

It is believed that after a year of death, the deceased has finally taken his place in the other world - there he is among his relatives and among all the ancestors of his family. Candles are no longer lit individually in his memory, but he is honoured at the Days of the Dead, which are prepared together for all deceased family members. It is believed that spouses recognise each other in the afterlife by the rings they exchanged on their wedding day.

Literature: Genchev, St. 1985. Customs and rites in connection with death and burial. - In: Ethnography of Bulgaria. T. III. Sofia: BAS Publishing House.

In Greece.

Funeral practices in Orthodox cemeteries in Greece

The funeral ceremony is a way of expressing the love of the living for the deceased. As Christians believe that the body is destined for resurrection, they bury the deceased with every honour and tribute. They therefore bathe him before the funeral, decorate and dress him in a white robe and lay him uncovered in a "bed" (coffin).

The law stipulates that the deceased must remain unburied for at least 24 hours after the diagnosis of death in the home of a relative or, in the case of serious illness, in a special ward. The mourning lasts for one day. Before the funeral, a blessing from the eulogy of the Serapion is read in the home of the deceased. During the funeral and up to the entry into the funeral temple, a "Tris-Agion" (three holiness) is sung on the way as an exorcism, perhaps as a confession of the faith of the deceased or as an indication that he is already close to the angels. At the same time, the "Tris-Agion" hymn to the life-giving Trinity is sung. The relic is carried in the hands of relatives or friends to express appreciation for the deceased. In the temple, the deceased is placed facing east, as this is where the Saviour comes from and where the paradise of Eden lies.

The funeral service is then sung in more detail and the last bow is taken.

After the farewell, the deceased is led to the grave. Before the burial, a short funeral service with the Trisagion is sung again and the deceased is buried facing east, in the expectation that Christ will appear from there to judge the dead and the living. The priest sprinkles the corpse with oil and earth in the shape of a cross.

Memorial services - prayers in memory of the dead

According to ancient custom, coins were distributed at memorial services. The distribution of coins - or "kollyuba" - was associated with the giving of alms during the Christian era. The poor, the relatives and friends of the deceased, the elders and the deacons received these alms from the possessions of the deceased. Today, "collyva", small cake-shaped sweets made from wheat with nuts, almonds, sultanas, hazelnuts, etc. are distributed.

Dates of the commemorations

Since the time of the apostles, there has been a specific form of commemoration. The fixed days for its celebration from the day of death are

- the third (symbolises the Lord's three-day stay at the tomb)
- the ninth day (on the ninth day the flesh of the body is dissolved)
- the fortieth day (the resurrection of the Lord took place after 40 days, or when the heart has decayed)
- the three months (Holy Trinity)
- the six months (Holy Trinity)
- the nine months (Holy Trinity)
- the year (Resurrection) and
- the memorial anniversary each year.

The burial customs originate from ancient Greece and had a special meaning, e.g. (the coin that was put on the dead person to pay Charon (from Greek - Roman mythology the gloomy, old ferryman to take him to Hades (ruler of the underworld)). Further information can be found in the ancient tragedy Antigone by Sophocles.

The last day of the "Anthesteria", at the end of February, is today's Sunday of the Dead. Nowadays, burial customs on the Greek islands and on parts of the mainland are differentiated and varied.

In Belgium!

Traditions and rituals in the dying and mourning process

A culturally specific look at the different traditions and rituals practised in the dying and mourning process - which can still be experienced today, anno 2023, in the intercultural community of Belgium.

What unites us humans is the certainty that we are born to die. We humans do this in very different ways, depending on where we come from, which culture and tradition has shaped us...

Most people only know the customs in their own culture. But it is also worth knowing how other cultures think about death and how they organise a funeral.

When someone dies on a Belgian farm in Catholic Flanders, a large straw cross is placed in front of the house, with a consecrated palm branch on each arm of the cross, and the so-called Hosanna cross and a lantern are placed in front of the house where the deceased died. The coffin with the deceased is placed in a "Wyte wagon" pulled by two horses to take the deceased to the church and cemetery. The two horses are watered with holy water beforehand. At every Catholic funeral, memorial cards are shared on the day of mourning: Each person present at the church comes to the front of the church and gives a final greeting.

An Islamic funeral has many rituals that are strictly observed. The body is buried as quickly as possible, preferably within 24 hours. The funeral prayer is performed in the mosque. Outside the mosque, three rows are formed in the direction of Mecca. The men are in the front row, the children in the middle row and the women in the back row. After the prayer, the coffin is carried to the cemetery by bearers. They take turns regularly, as many men want to help as a good deed of honour. Normally, no women are present at the funeral. They are only allowed to visit the grave the next day.

A Jewish funeral is sombre and sad. Flowers are not allowed. Instead, small stones are symbolically placed on the grave. After the sober funeral service, the coffin is placed in the grave and those present stand around it. The family members all throw three shovels of earth onto the coffin. Then it is the turn of the others present. For Orthodox Jews, only the men do this. The consolation only takes place after the deceased has been buried. The idea behind this is that one should first take care of the deceased before caring for the living.

Buddhists see life as an exercise in doing good deeds; for them, death is not the end, but the beginning of the transition to a new life. They believe in reincarnation. But other aspects of Buddhism also play an important role at funerals. In the bathing ceremony, for example, relatives pour water over the head of the deceased. The body is then placed in a coffin surrounded by incense, wreaths and candles. Before the deceased is cremated, Buddhist texts are recited to release the good energy from the body of the deceased.

In these different cultures, music and songs in various forms are also an important part of the funeral, and flowers also often play an important role.

In Germany!

Saying goodbye to life;

- Dying at home or in a hospice - today
- Thanks to care insurance, relatives can now often accompany their dying loved ones on their final journey at home. Mobile hospice workers can also guide helpful rituals and point out dying processes so that relatives can better understand them.
- Dying in a hospice is also a possible option.
- Appropriate palliative measures such as medication for pain and nausea can be very helpful here.
- The familiar dying processes can also be well categorised and accepted here.

Farewell after dying;

In the dying room:

- Open the window so that the soul can "get out"
- Light a candle - in memory of the deceased

Possibly:

Bless the deceased;

- The deceased is laid out in a coffin in their flat/house for up to three days (72 hours).

He is washed beforehand and dressed in his "favourite clothes".

Candles are lit around the open coffin and photos and favourite objects of the deceased are placed. Relatives, neighbours and friends can "say goodbye" during this time. Some relatives hold a "wake" during this time. In Christian tradition, the pastor/priest performs a "blessing" (prayers are said, songs are sung, a blessing is given to all). Funeral service;- Most cemeteries have meeting rooms (chapel, mourning hall, etc.) where funeral services can be held. Rooms can often also be made available by the funeral director.

Songs/music can be sung/played to commemorate the deceased. A speech / eulogy can also be given. In both churches (Catholic / Protestant) there are specific procedures for this.

- The funeral service can take place with a coffin or urn. After the funeral service; - The coffin or urn can be buried directly afterwards. This ritual can be organised individually: For example, relatives can carry the coffin/urn. Farewell can also be said directly at the coffin in the funeral parlour - if the coffin is then taken to the crematorium. The urn will then be buried later in the family circle.
- The coffin or urn can then be buried directly. This ritual can be carried out individually: For example, relatives can carry the coffin/urn. It is also possible to say farewell directly at the coffin in the funeral parlour - if the coffin is then taken to the crematorium. The urn will then be buried later in the family circle.
- After the funeral, there is the ritual of the "funeral feast". All those attending the funeral service come together for a coffee or meal. Here, the deceased is remembered and a step back into life is taken for the relatives and friends.
- Grave - urn - place in a cemetery / cemetery forest;
- The grave is an important place of mourning and therefore also of rituals.
- It can be an "earth grave", an urn grave or an anonymous grave (urn in a specific "field" in the cemetery).
- Relatives, neighbours or friends can visit the grave site, lay flowers, commemorate or pray.
- The grave is an individual place to say goodbye - for most mourners it is a "place of mourning". Here I can be alone - mourn - remember the deceased or remember that I have said goodbye with many other "intimates" - and that the deceased is really "under the earth" - or also "received by the heavenly Father".
- Here I can be alone - mourn - remember the deceased or remember that I have said goodbye with many other "intimates" - and that the deceased is really "under the earth" - or also "received by the heavenly Father".

Closing words

Everything in life has a meaning, including death. Grief and saying goodbye, dealing with finiteness are painful and unavoidable processes that we experience in our lives.

In such moments, comforting words and sensitive images help to give us hope and strength to live.

... An approach to death education...

Enlightenment about death is the aim of this culturally specific handout - filled with knowledge, personal experiences and traditions - and a healing gift to recognise the meaning in our lives and to live accordingly.

Surely everyone has thought more than once about what will happen next. Some dread the arrival of that moment, others look forward to it, and some simply live, never remembering that life will end sooner or later. But, it must be said that all our thoughts about death have a great influence on our life, on its course, on our goals and desires and actions.

Of course, each person determines their own attitude towards death. And it is probably hardest for those who think that death is the end of everything. For those who believe in death as a transition between different worlds (states), it is not so painful.

But, as Goethe said:

"Until you have realised the perpetual law of death and rebirth, you are but an indefinite sojourner on this earth.

"Every end is a radiant beginning"

When we discard the body, we will be free from pain, fear and all sorrow, like a colourful, beautiful butterfly, we may return home to God. Death is quite simply stepping out of the physical body in the same way that a butterfly steps out of its cocoon.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross