

The Four Tasks of Living and Dying

1. Understanding and Transforming Suffering

Dying includes both necessary and unnecessary suffering.
Our interpretations of why we suffer often make things worse.
Remember what you needed when you went through periods of suffering.
Reflect on the benefit past experiences of suffering brought to your life.

Spiritual Practices for transforming suffering:

Meditation

Three Noble Principles

Compassion practices: Loving Kindness, Self-tonglen and Tonglen,
"Seeing the other as Another You and Exchanging Places"

Dedication

2. Healing Relationships, making a connection, and letting go

The dying person and family members often yearn to make a deep, meaningful connection in the time they have left, but don't know how to begin.

Potential Responses:

Communicate with new goal: to genuinely connect with each other.
Clear up unfinished business and heal the relationship.
Be open to learning and speaking about dying and be there for the
dying person through the process.
Be willing to express and give your love fully before the person dies,
so you can let go easier.

3. Spiritual Preparation for Death

Spiritually, death is a tremendous opportunity - "the crossroads of eternity."

*"At the moment of death, two things count: Whatever you have done,
and the state of your mind in that moment." --Sogyal Rinpoche*

Spiritual support

For those with a spiritual tradition:

Identify a spiritual practice which brings inspiration during the dying process

For those who believe in God but have no religious practice:

Invocation, the power of heartfelt prayer and devotion

Buddhist practices for death:

Profound Meditation: Resting in the nature of mind
Essential Phowa
Compassion and Dedication

Jewish tradition:

Hope comes from your good actions during life -- that is, what you have contributed to family and community
Face death squarely; prepare family to survive after you're gone
Meet with others and atone for past harms
At death, Shema prayer is said, and candle is lit
Relatives will continue prayers (sitting Shiva) for 7 days

Spiritual care for those not affiliated with a religious tradition:

Discover what is their own 'flame of hope'
Help the dying person to not die empty-handed: focus on their accomplishments
Explore the meaning in the life they lived
Find meaning in dying: help them identify "one noble act" they want to do (see below)
Create a 'sacred environment' for his or her mind by quietly offering your spiritual practice.

4. Finding Meaning in Life

The dying may review their life, and wonder, *What was the point? What difference did my life make?*

Potential Responses:

Let the dying know how they have contributed to your life.
Express to the dying person what you are gaining from being with them during their illness and dying process.
Ask them their life story and help them acknowledge accomplishments.
Allow them to admit regrets, clear up unfinished business, reconcile.
Dedicate their suffering and death to bring benefit to others who are suffering (or to atone for past regrets).
Decide now to live meaningfully.

3 commitments for a meaningful life:

1. Become aware and accepting of your natural experience.
2. Be willing to engage in authentic dialogue with others.
3. Decide on a positive direction of growth.

Everyone yearns to do "one noble act" before they die, something that brings a sense of fulfillment in life and a meaning to their dying. Examples of "noble acts" include:

- Prepare practically so your loved ones have less difficulties after your death
- Donate an organ, or a retina
- Ask forgiveness or extend forgiveness
- Dedicate your suffering and death to benefit others
- Express your gratitude and love to others
- Make offerings - to atone for past harm, to express appreciation, or to assist charitable organizations in their work
- Change a negative or selfish pattern
- Write or tape messages of courage, wisdom and love for loved ones