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Death & Dying

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Death & Dying

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Overview & Rationale: In this module, students will consider how to discuss the difficult topic of death and dying with children. Using clips from Sesame Street and other children's media, students will consider children's cognitive capacity related to their ability to understand the concept of death. They will also learn about the role of parents in using children's media as a teaching tool.

*****NOTE*****

Death & dying can be a challenging topic for students. I usually give them warning the week before that we'll be talking about death in the following class, and encourage them to utilize (within reason) whatever self-care strategies they need to tackle this topic objectively and safely. I also make it very clear that sharing personal experiences is welcome, but completely optional. This is also a great place to plug your university's counseling services center or other such resources.

Potential classes: Lifespan development, Child/adolescent development, Loss & grief, Social work, Counseling

Topical Readings:

Longbottom, S., & Slaughter, V. (2018). Sources of children's knowledge about death and dying. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 373(1754), 20170267.

Tenzek, K. E., & Nickels, B. M. (2019). End-of-life in Disney and Pixar films: an opportunity for engaging in difficult conversation. *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*, 80(1), 49-68.

[Death around the world](#)

Video clips:

- [NBC news clip](#) on creating a death plan (4:08)
- [Farewell Mr. Hooper](#) (5:57)
- [Death of a Goldfish](#) (5:36)
- [Bambi](#) (1:18)
- [Lion King](#) (3:27)
- [When families grieve](#) (28:02 but can jump around and don't need to show the whole thing)
- [Dia de los Muertos](#) (3:05)

Supplemental Activities/Lessons

While these assignments were designed for an in-person course, most could be easily adapted. Many would work in multiple formats: large group discussion, small group discussion (or think-pair-share), online discussion forum, or as a short writing assignment.

1. Thinking about death:

Begin by discussing how we talk about death as a society/culture. Ask students to think about individual differences in how we understand death (e.g., living in a first-world country vs. a third-world country, COVID, etc.).

Have students watch this [NBC news](#) clip and consider the pros & cons of getting comfortable talking about death. If you feel comfortable doing so, you can gently challenge students to explore their own death anxieties and where they came from.

Have students consider why we try to protect children from talking about death. Where did this tendency come from? Is it helpful? This is a nice transition into the next topic.

2. Talking to children about death/children's understanding of death

Have students watch the following clips from *Sesame Street*, *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*, and Disney movies, then engage in discussion about how death is “marketed” to children through media. While children’s media is a great medium for helping bring up tough subjects like death, adults play a role too. Have students consider what role parents/adults should play in viewing or co-viewing children’s media about death. They could develop a list of questions or discussion topics for the adults to raise with the children, or write a script for parents to use in conjunction with one or more of the clips below.

- [Farewell Mr. Hooper](#) (5:57)
- [Death of a Goldfish](#) (5:36)
- [Bambi](#) (1:18)
- [Lion King](#) (3:27)

Have students develop a Sesame Street episode aimed at explaining death in the age of Covid. Using *Farewell Mr. Hooper* as a model, they should consider how they might “update” the episode to help children understand/cope with the heightened stories we are hearing about death in today’s media.

Have students watch the first 4 minutes of [When Families Grieve](#), which shows Elmo’s father explaining his Uncle Jack’s death. In pairs/small groups, have students think about Elmo’s understanding of the subconcepts of death (nonfunctionality, finality, universality, applicability, and causation). Which subconcepts(s) are Elmo struggling with? Give examples! Why?

3. Grieving

Discuss Kubler-Ross's theory of grief. Watch the rest of the clip about [When Families Grieve](#) and have students identify the different stages of grief shown by different characters. Then have students list the different coping strategies mentioned in the video (e.g., talking to a friend).

Unlike many other stage theories, the Kubler-Ross theory isn't linear. Discuss how children may move back and forth through the stages of grief, and how their age (e.g., cognitive development) and understanding of death concepts may aid in how they move through the grieving process. How can using models (like Elmo) help them to relate and process their grief?

4. Religion & Culture in Understanding Death

Have students consider the importance of religion and culture in death. Ask students to share some customs from their family/culture regarding death (I usually give the example of sitting Shiva in Judaism). Then watch this clip about [Dia de los Muertos](#).

Break students up into small groups and have each group watch one of these videos about death in different cultures. Then as a large group, have them briefly explain what they learned, and discuss how it might look through the eyes of a child. Each group could then design a *Sesame Street* episode to teach children about death in the culture they learned about.

- [Toraja tribe of Indonesia](#)
- [Dancing with the dead](#)
- [New Orleans jazz processions](#)
- [Jewish funerals](#)
- [Dia de los Muertos \(Day of the Dead\)](#)
- [Fancy coffins in Ghana](#)
- [Tibetan sky funerals](#)
- [Religious & cultural beliefs](#)
- [dzien Wszystkich Świętych \(All Saint's Day\)](#)