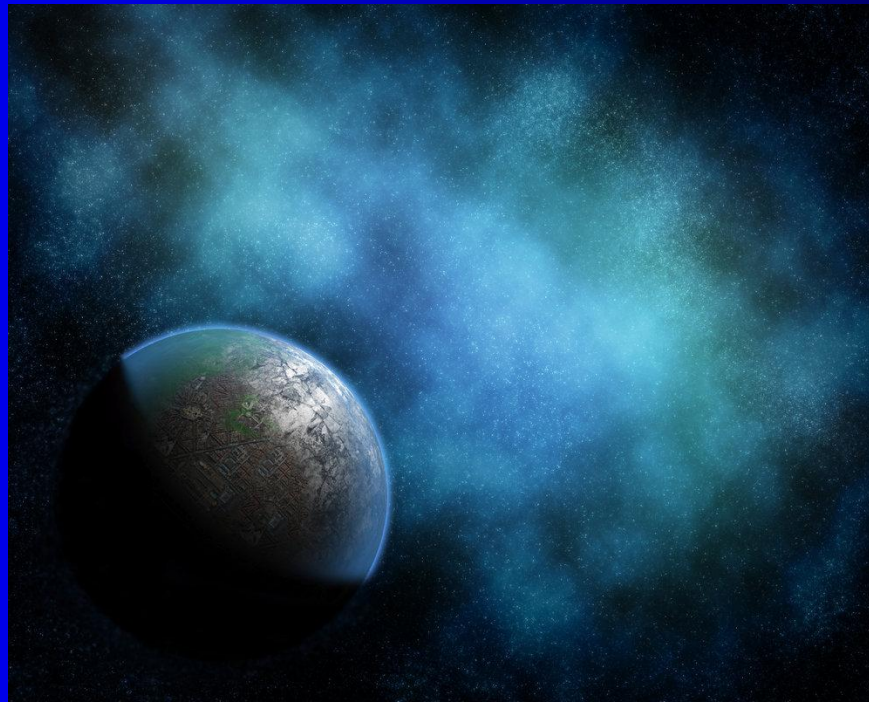


On the Edge of Forever: Paranormal Experiences at Life's End – Strategies for Clinicians

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Goals

- To explore phenomena around death and dying
- To learn ways to assist others who experience such phenomena—and those who do not but wish they did/would
- To consider the ways that that phenomena may influence our grief and loss

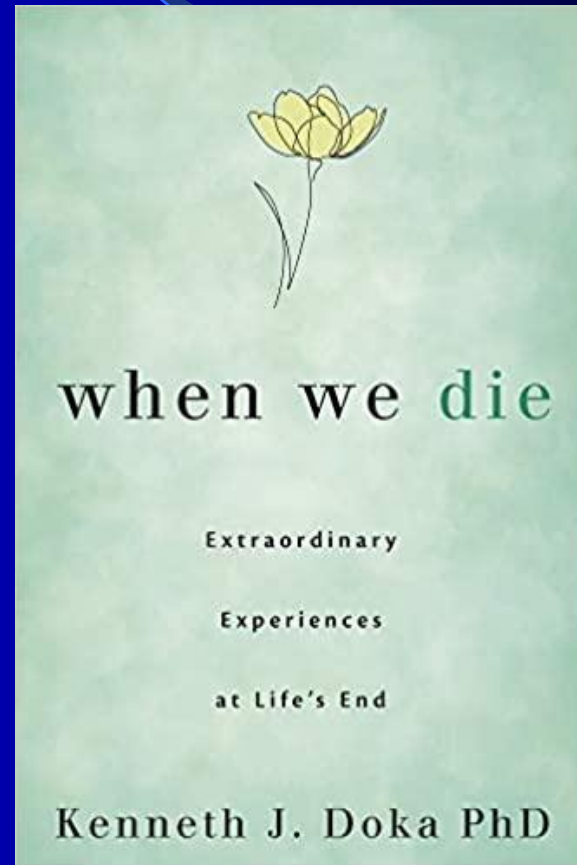
A Personal Statement

- Trained as a sociologist and Lutheran clergyman
- 40 + years in field
- Experienced both professionally and personally experiences
- Do not always fit easily within my spirituality or my scientific framework
- Yet also a nonjudgmental types – thus can tolerate dissonance

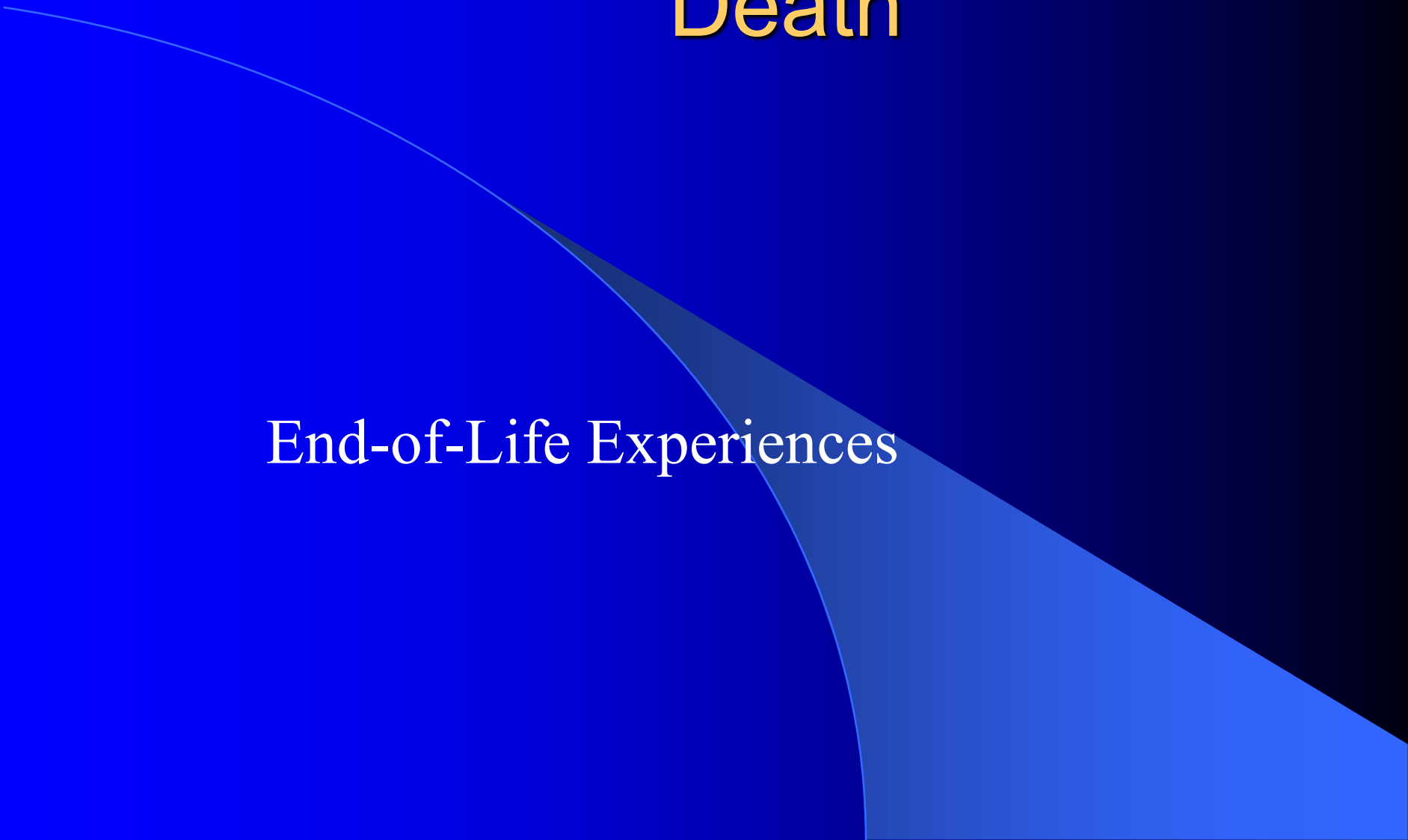


When We Die

- An unexpected Invitation
- Ultimately wrote *When we die: Extraordinary experiences at life's end*
- Goal was to recount unusual experiences that regularly occur and have been documented in both the dying and bereaved
- Here focus is on these experiences in the dying process



Phenomena around Dying and Death

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End-of-Life Experiences

Opening the Conversation



- Individuals may be reluctant to share such experiences for fear of being judged
- *Many times, individuals have shared with me that they have some unusual experiences around dying/bereavement. Have you had any such experiences?*

The Value of Self Disclosure

- Freud—a blank slate
- Three Rules for Self-disclosure
 - Keep it short
 - Make sure it is intentional
 - The “morning after” rule



Phenomena around Dying and Death



- A wide range of phenomena have been reported around the process of death and dying – throughout history and across cultures

Terminal Lucidity

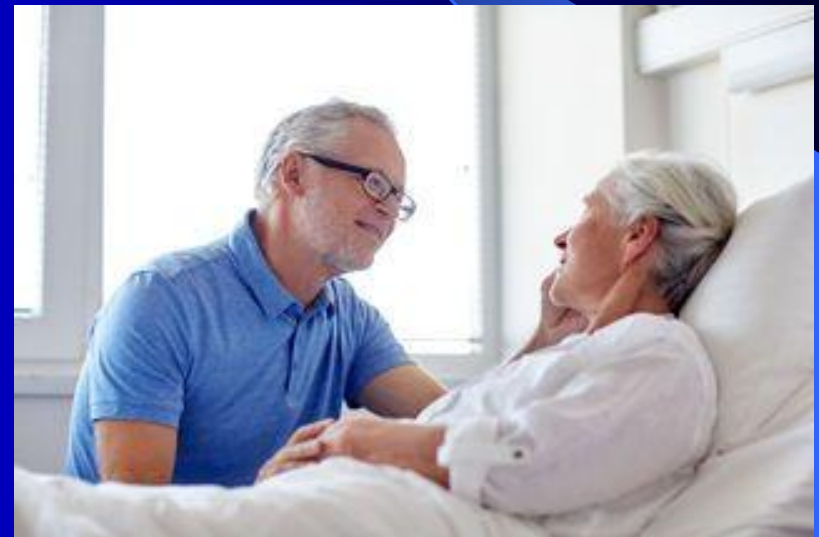


- Nahm & Greyson (2013) documented numerous cases where patients have had a spontaneous remission of symptoms and regained lucidity in the last days or hours of life
- This has even been seen in cases of persons with intellectual disabilities and dementia.
- In the case of Käthe Ehmer, a women with severe intellectual disabilities, who never previously spoke, she sang to herself a coherent song of dying
- Nahm & Greyson suggests that the study of such phenomena may lead to discoveries about brain functioning

Terminal Lucidity

Implications for Families and Health Professionals

- Some families may see this as a sign of recovery—engendering false hopes. Thus the need for death education
- An opportunity to finish business with the person who is dying
- Comatose patients may still hear everything around them—danger of loose lips



Terminal Lucidity

Implications for Families and Health Professionals



- Experiences of terminal lucidity reaffirmed that patients –whatever their status or disability—had lives to be valued
- Dr. Walter Wittneben, Käthe Ehmer's physician would later oppose Hitler's plan to euthanize persons would severe Dementia or disabilities

Near Death Experiences *(NDE's)*

- The phenomena as described by Moody and Ring
- A secular spirituality?
- Kastenbaum – experiences are more diverse, less archetypal, and not as uniformly positive as portrayed
- A negative NDE



Near Death Experiences *(NDE's)*



- Widely reported throughout history and across cultures
- Images are influenced by culture
- A canoe in Polynesia

Near Death Experiences

Positive Effects

- Heightened or restored spirituality
- Great appreciation of life and relationships
- Lower anxiety toward death



“Appreciate every moment
of your life because one day
you’ll wish you had more
TIME.”

Near Death Experiences (NDE's)

- The phenomena as described by Moody and Ring
- A secular spirituality?
- Kastenbaum – experiences are more diverse, less archetypical, and not as uniformly positive as portrayed
- Positive experiences of Near-Death Experiences may reduce death anxiety



NDE's and Suicide



- Not all aspects of NDE's are positive
- Research by King (2025) indicated that pleasant experiences of the NDE can increase suicidal risk
- Though in some cases, experiences of NDE's were perceived as discouraging suicide (for example, promising an afterlife that might be denied in a death by suicide)

Near Death Experiences (NDE's)



- Even negative experiences may have positive effects
- Decisions to make life changes

Near Death Experiences

Professional Implications

- Solicit “unusual” experiences
- Process the experience
- *What did it mean to the client*
- *In what ways, if at all, has the experience affected the client?*
- *Has the clients shared the experiences with others in his/her intimate network?*
- *How did they respond? How has this affected the clients*



Premonitions of Death



- Lincoln's Dream
- The Law of Large Numbers
- Other explanations
– the spiritual self warning the physical self

Premonitions of Death



- Premonitions of death for self or others are not uncommon
- In many cultures premonitions may be associated with dreams, animals, or other natural signs
- These premonitions may or may not be related to current illness
- When they are not, reactions and anxieties need to be assessed less it becomes self-fulfilling
- When they are related to illness and experienced by the patient, they may be seen as *nearing death awareness*

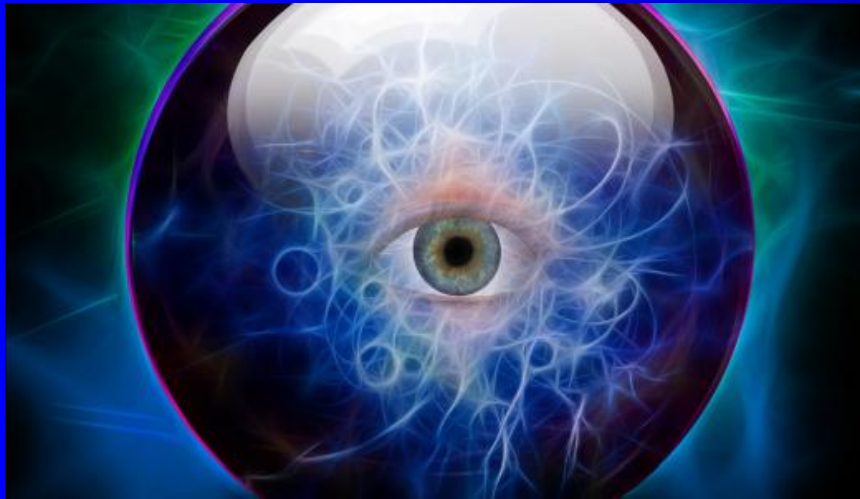
Concidences

Tied in Life, Tied in Death



- Coincidentally – Death
- Adams and Jefferson
- A tale of two brothers – both died a year apart in moped accidents – hit on the same road, same place by the same taxi, with the same passenger

Accounting for Premonitions and Coincidences

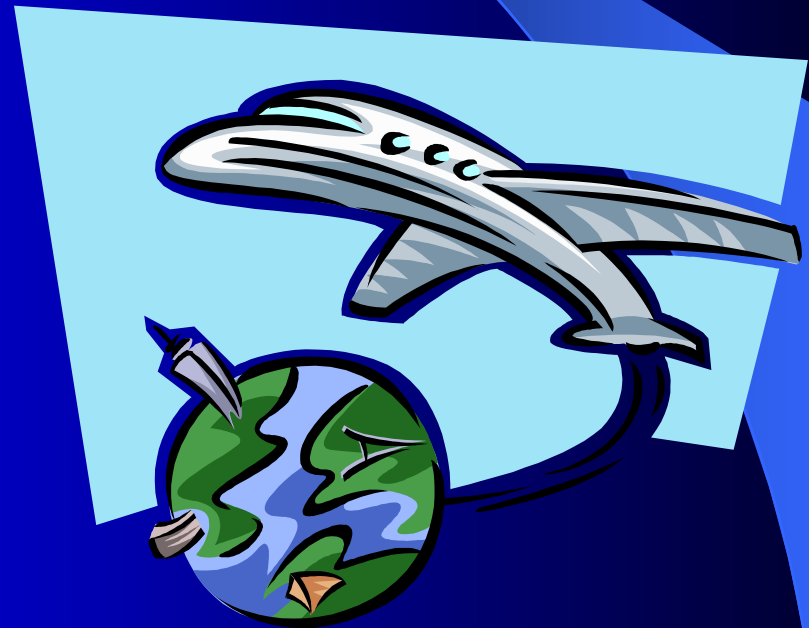


- The Law of Large Numbers—as the present interprets the past
- Jung's synchronicity –
- Events are tied together by meaning
- Other explanations:
 - The spiritual self warning the physical self
 - The brain monitoring physical signs – alerts the conscious. An ant's picnic

Nearing Death Awareness

Patients May Communicate the Immanence of Death

- Speak of travel
 - Speak with dead family members
 - Sense death
- (Callanan & Kelley)



Nearing Death Awareness Implications for Counselors



- Be aware that deathbed phenomena is larger than the archetype images suggested by Callanan & Kelley
- Ask patients about “dreams and visions” and allow patients to interpret
- Interpret phenomena for family
- Follow through if needed

Other Phenomena

Transpersonal ELE's

- Coincidences such as close friends and relatives, physically distant, sense the death
- Pets behave strangely
- Other phenomena such as clocks stopping at the moment of death, strange odors, lights, or mists

Brayne and Fenwick



ELE's Dreams and Visions



- Kerr *et. al.* (2014) found 87% of their sample experienced dreams or visions (awake experiences) – memorable and recalled with clarity
- Dreams and visions included:
 - Deceased family/friends/animals
 - Living family/friends/animals
 - Past meaningful experiences
 - Religious figures
 - Going somewhere

ELE's Dreams and Visions

- 60.3 % found it comforting
 - 18.8% disturbing
 - 20.7 neither
- (Kerr *et. al.* 2014)



Other Phenomena

Final Meaning ELE's



- Allow person to finish business prior to death
- Can include a sudden desire for reconciliation, waiting for a relative's arrival before death, dreams that allow person to come to terms with life events

Brayne and Fenwick

Shared Dying Experiences (SDE)

- Defined as “experiences that occur when an individual feels they have somehow shared in a dying person’s transition from this life to whatever lies beyond (p. 233).”
- Can be:
 - *Sensing* – companion remotely experiences a sense of transition
 - *Witnessing* – vision of the death followed by another phenomena such as light or nonhuman entities (the most common)
 - *Accompanying* – a sense of being with the dying persons till some sort of boundary is reached that cannot be broached by the living
 - *Assisting* – witness has some sense of assisting the transition

(Peters & Kinsella, 2022)



An Aside: Study of the Major Regrets of Dying Persons

- The courage to fulfil my dreams
- I worked too hard
- The courage to express my feelings
- Spend more time with family and friends
- Worked to be happier
- Been nicer to people
- Worked on inner rather than outer beauty



Lessons Learned



- Establish priorities
- “Finish business” daily
- Tend to personal relationships

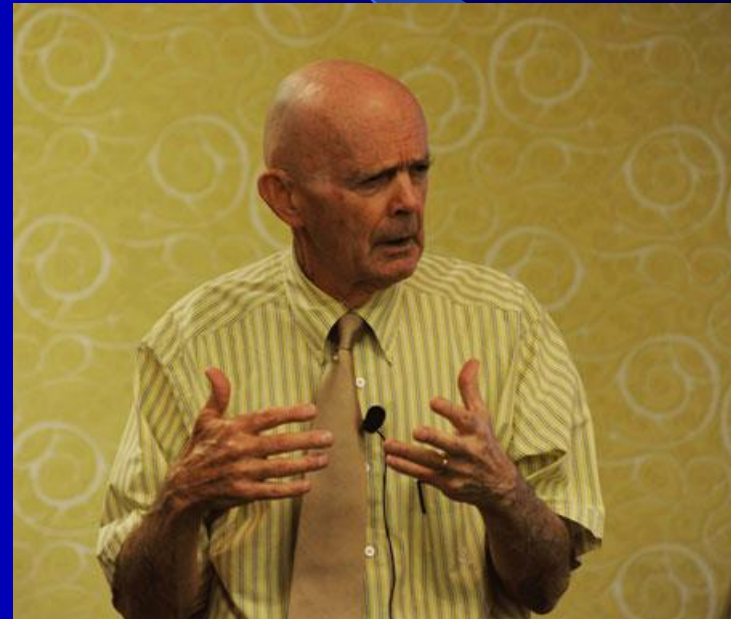
Death-Related Phenomena



- Such experiences have to be respected
- The historical reports, across cultures, suggest that they are neither hallucinations nor dementia
- Moreover they usually appear to persons when they are lucid whereas hallucinations may be more frightening and annoying
- Be open and use good communicative skills in dealing with such phenomena

After Death Experiences

- Note work by LaGrand
- After-Death Communication
- Extraordinary Experiences
- Post-Bereavement Experiences



Extraordinary Experiences



- Sense of presence
 - Sense experiences
 - Symbolic experiences
 - Third-party experiences
 - Dreams
- (LaGrand)

Extraordinary Experiences

Dreams

- Very common

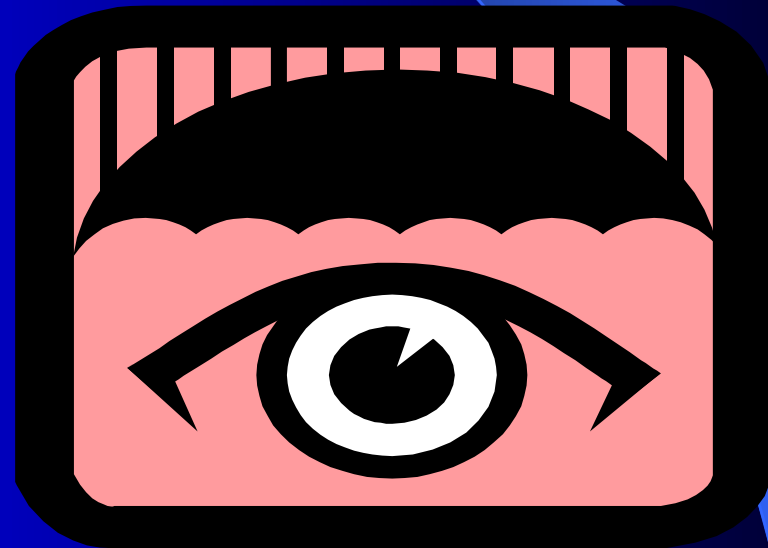
Can be:

- *Basic grief dreams* – often very fragmented and filled with symbolism (for example traveling together, then the deceased gets off leaving the other alone on the plane etc.)
- *Visitation Dreams* – More vivid, easily remembered, and interpretation is clear. Often the deceased is pictured as healthy



Extraordinary Experiences

- A relatively common phenomena
- Linstrom's research found about 60% of bereaved persons experience such experiences
- Cultural variation – higher in vision-positive cultures



Dealing with Extraordinary Experiences *Counseling Implications*

- Solicit and Validate
- Allow the Client to Interpret
- Deal with Negative Experiences
 - Reframe
 - Intervene
- When Clients Feel Bad They Have Not Had Such Experiences
 - Reframe
 - Suggest

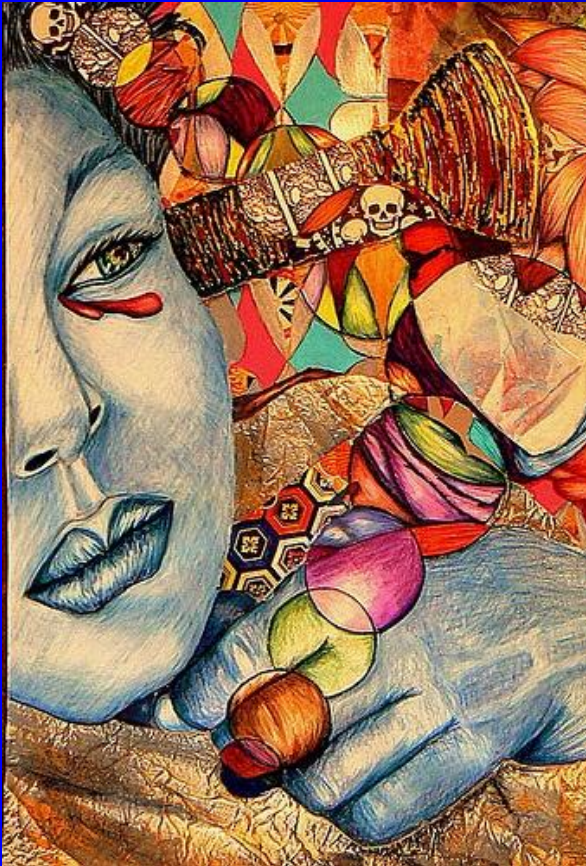
Post-Bereavement Experiences

Complicating Factors

- Challenges posed by the experiences to the individual's world view may need support
- Yet the person may be reluctant to share the experience feeling other's judgment or in fact experience such negative judgments
- Importance of education in validating such experience



Virtual Dreams



- While not everyone has dreams, everyone can create a *virtual dream*
- Ask client to construct a dream based on six elements you assign based on the loss
- For example the death of a spouse might include images of a remote beach, an empty bed, missing ring etc.

(Neimeyer, 2010)

Other Death-Related Phenomena

Reincarnation – Past Lives

- A child's memory of Memory Lake
- The British Frigate
- Stevenson and Gender Identity Disorder – habits, likes, phobias



Other Phenomena



- Ghosts and apparitions
 - OT King Saul and the witch of Endor conjuring a vision of Samuel
 - The weeping woman of Mexica
 - NC – The Brown Mountain lights
- Messages and Mediums
 - A psychic in Kansas City
 - LaGrand

Paranormal Experiences



- How should counselors react when clients seek paranormal contact with the deceased?
- While respecting the client's own spirituality, explore and address the needs underlying the desire for contact
- Recognize and assist client in understanding the risk of exploitation
- Reaffirm the many ways we experience a continuing bond

Grief is not a time bound
process that ends in
detachment

Utilizing *Continuing Bonds* in Therapy

The importance of stressing
continuing bonds in setting goals
for therapy

Amelioration

- Intensity of grief reactions diminishes
- Individuals function as well as they did (sometimes better) prior to the loss
- Yet, grief has a developmental effect

Utilizing *Continuing Bonds* in Therapy (2)

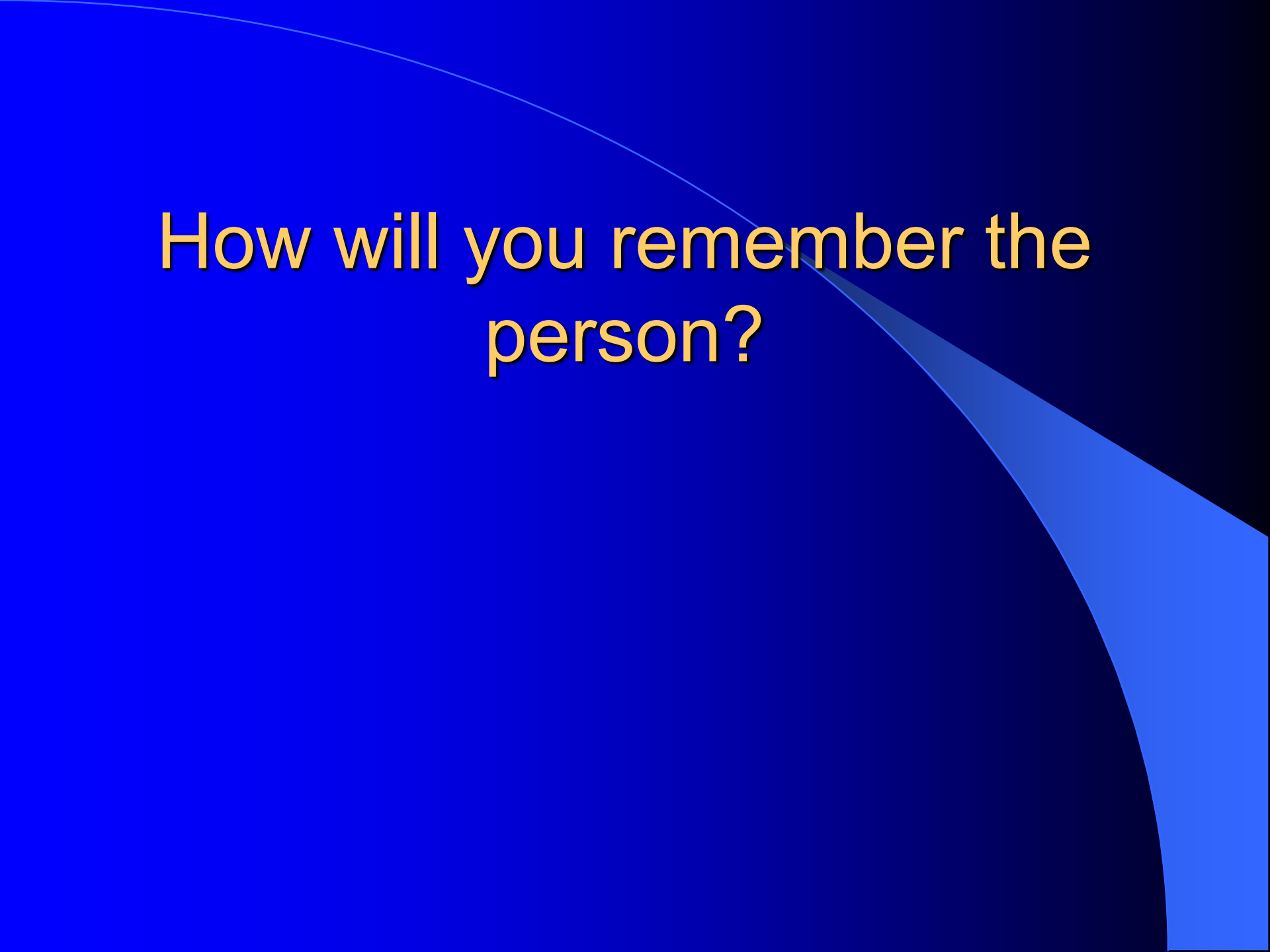
- In termination, make clients aware on the developmental surges likely to experienced as one continues to live with the loss.



Types of Connections

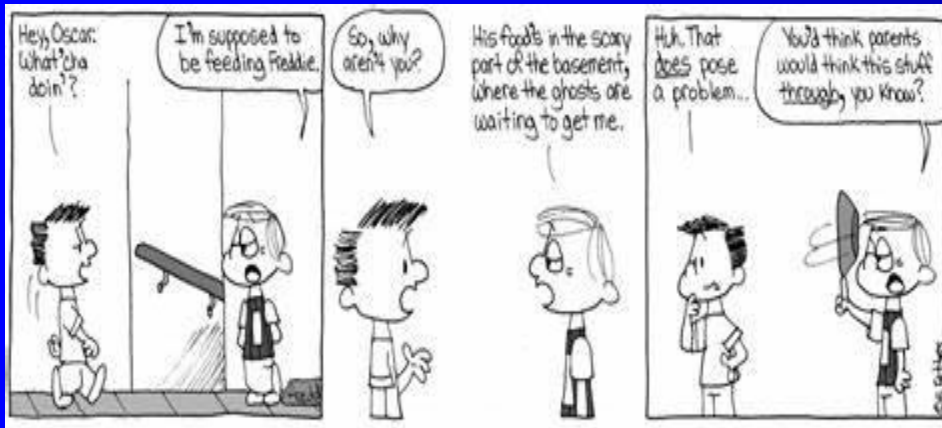
- Memories
- Biography
- Legacies and liabilities
- Spiritual
- Extraordinary Experiences





How will you remember the
person?

Continuing Bonds



- Continuing bonds can also be reinforced by family myths and stories
- *Grandma and the Ghost in the Basement*

Connections and Keepsakes, Mementoes, and Linking Objects

- Linking objects are ways to externally maintain a relationship with the deceased (Volkan)
- Different from keepsakes and mementoes which are simply reminders

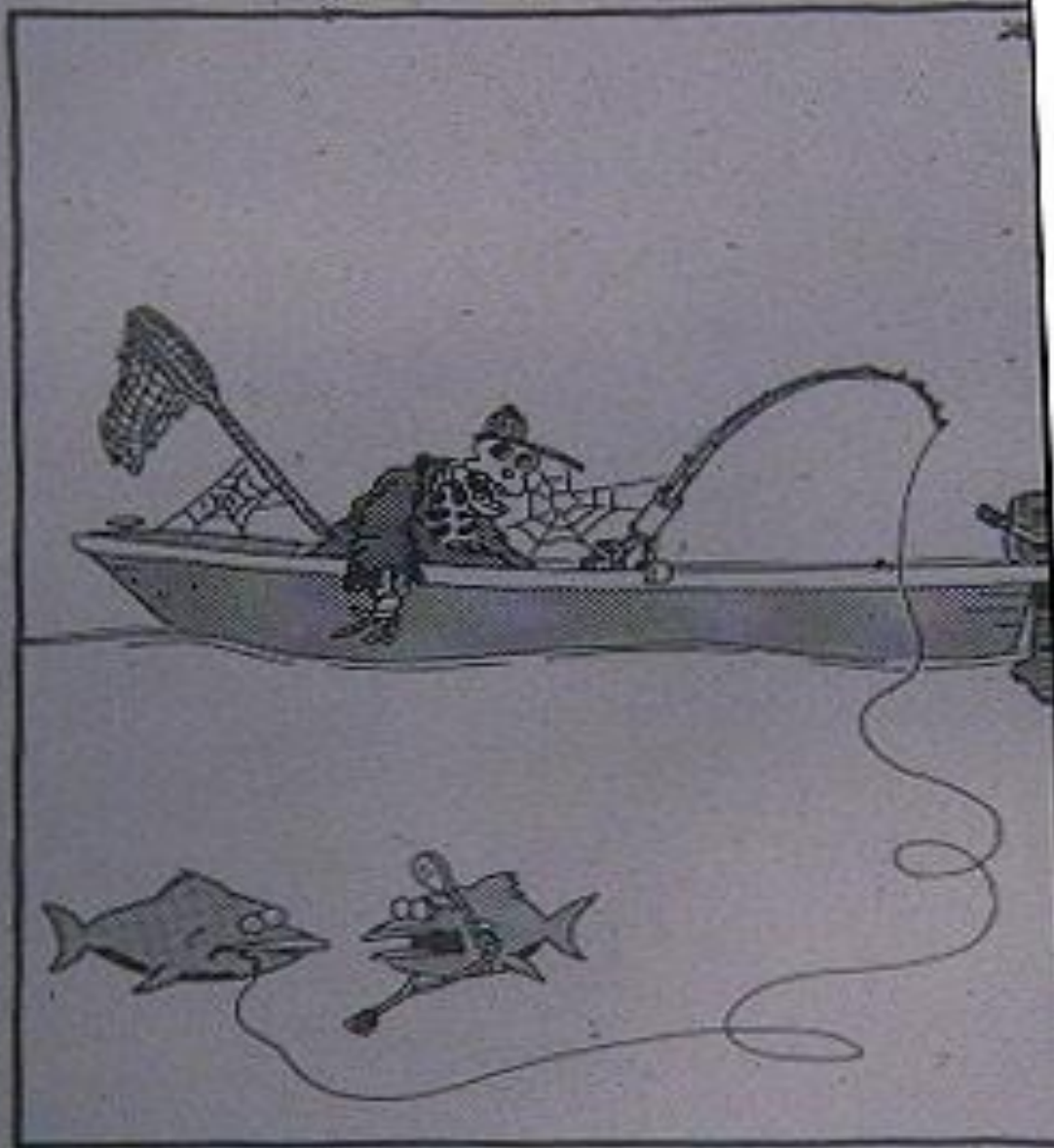


Keepsakes, Mementoes, and Linking Objects



Keepsakes, Mementoes, and Linking Objects

- Personal Possessions of the deceased
- Gifts from the deceased
- Photographs or other representations
- “Last minute objects” – music heard during notifications etc.



"Well, first the bad news —
you're definitely hooked."

Problematic Connections

- The ghost rules
- No acknowledgement of loss
- Impairs growth
- The message of new research is mixed – Fields & Filanosky (2010) found externalized CB behaviors (hallucinations) were associated with complicated grief while internalized CB's offered a secure base and were associated with personal growth



Continuing Bonds



- Continuing Bonds behavior always has to be assessed within a spiritual and cultural framework.
- There is a social context as well. In some societies continuing bond behavior is encouraged. In other societies, social norms discourage it.

Concluding Comments

- Goal – a review of the phenomena associated with dying and death
- Often reaffirms a sense of mystery
- Yet important to reaffirm our experiences as well as to note the bond that continues in this life as well as our spiritual beliefs that may reaffirm an unending connection

