

# When Death Darkens the Door: Grieving in Contemporary Times

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# Objectives

- Provide a brief overview of current attitudes towards dying and death from a historical perspective
- Explore ways of supporting grieving adults and children
- Share overview of presenter's favourite grief-related resources

# Western Attitudes Towards Death

- 1. Tame Death** (400 AD- 1800)
- 2. Death of Self** (1000 – 1200)
- 3. Remote and Imminent Death**  
(1500 – 1700)
- 4. Death of the Other** (1750-1900)
- 5. Invisible Death** (1900's)

Ariés, 1974

# The Power of Ritual

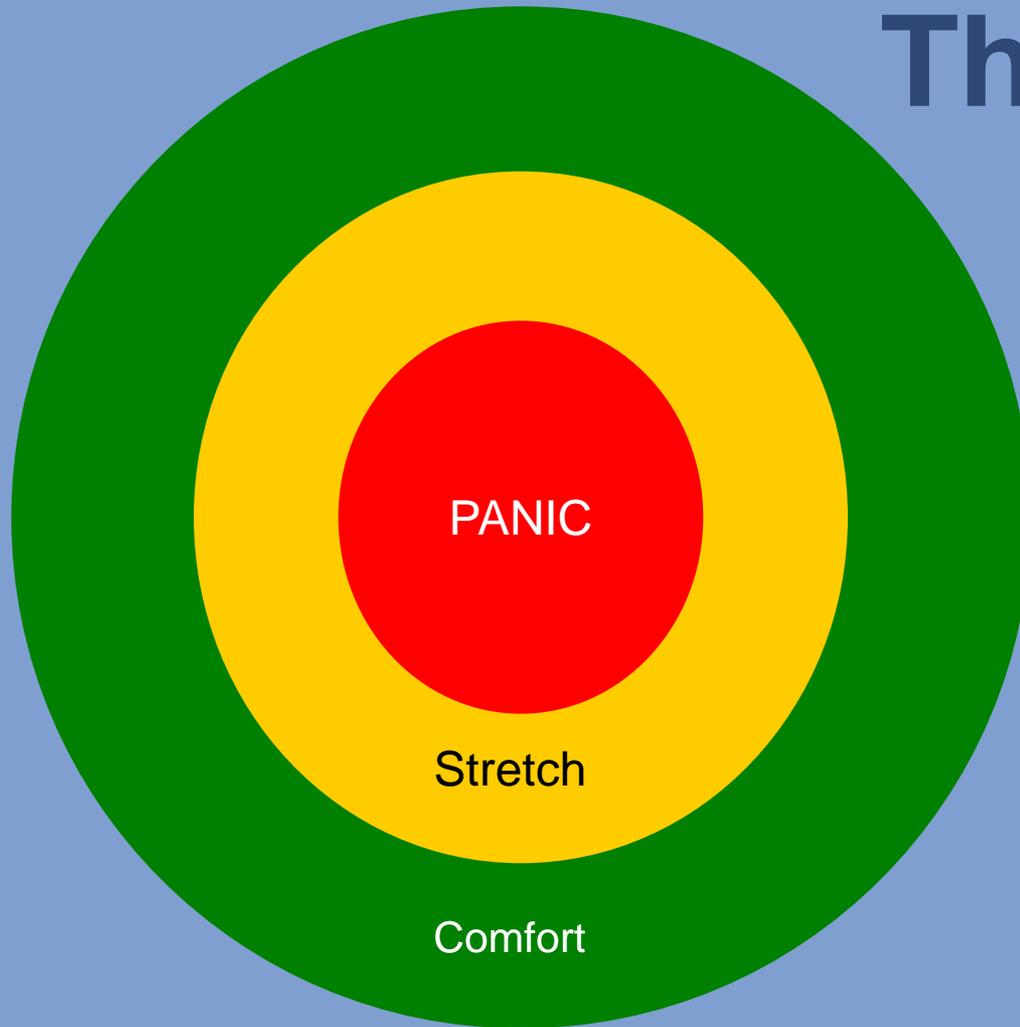
- Rituals provide guidance and order when life is disrupted by crisis
- Usually involve two components: social participation and external actions which symbolize interior realities



# The Power of Ritual

- *The human need for ritual appears to be universal, and in probably no instance is this need greater than in the case of death (Kearl, 1989)*
- *Western society hasn't only lost sight of the importance of rituals for the dying, but of those for the bereaved as well. The bereaved among us are considered far more socially acceptable when their grieving is kept private (Kastenbaum).*

# The Zone



# Communication Principles

## What to Do

- Get comfortable with your discomfort
- LISTEN
- Be Present
- Allow expression of feelings (theirs and yours)
- A simple touch/gesture goes along way
- Be okay not having the answer
- Offer practical help
- Offer the family time to be alone

# Communication Principles

## What to Say

- “I was sad to hear...”
- “Is there anything I can do?”
- Use the word “died”
- “Is there anyone you need us to call?”
- “I don’t know what to say...”

# Communication Principles

## What NOT to Say

- “I know how you feel” / “I know how hard this is”
- “I’m sorry”
- “You are going to be okay”
- “Time heals all wounds” / “This grief will pass”
- “He’s in a better place” / “At least she’s not suffering”

*nor any other cliché!!*

# Communication Principles

## What NOT to do

- Fall into the “fix-it” trap
- Use euphemisms - “passed away” “gone” “lost”
- Praise for being “strong”
- Avoid family in halls etc.
- Be a story topper

# What the Research Says

- Professionals are often inhibited by their anxieties about saying or doing the wrong thing and causing lasting emotional damage (C. MacPherson, 2005)
- “It is becoming clear that children’s levels of anxiety are related to whether they are told about the illness and to the quality of the communication with their parents.” (Kroll et. al., 1998)

# The 3 C's of What Children Want to Know

- Did I CAUSE it?
- Can I CATCH it?
- Who is going to take CARE of me?



# Preparing Kids for a Death

- Be conscious of the power of language
- Reinforce that the dying isn't due to lack of effort
- Ask if child/youth wants to know what to expect of dying process
  - sleepy
  - lack of energy
  - restless, confusion
  - stop eating/drinking
  - cool extremities
  - respiratory congestion
  - predeath awareness



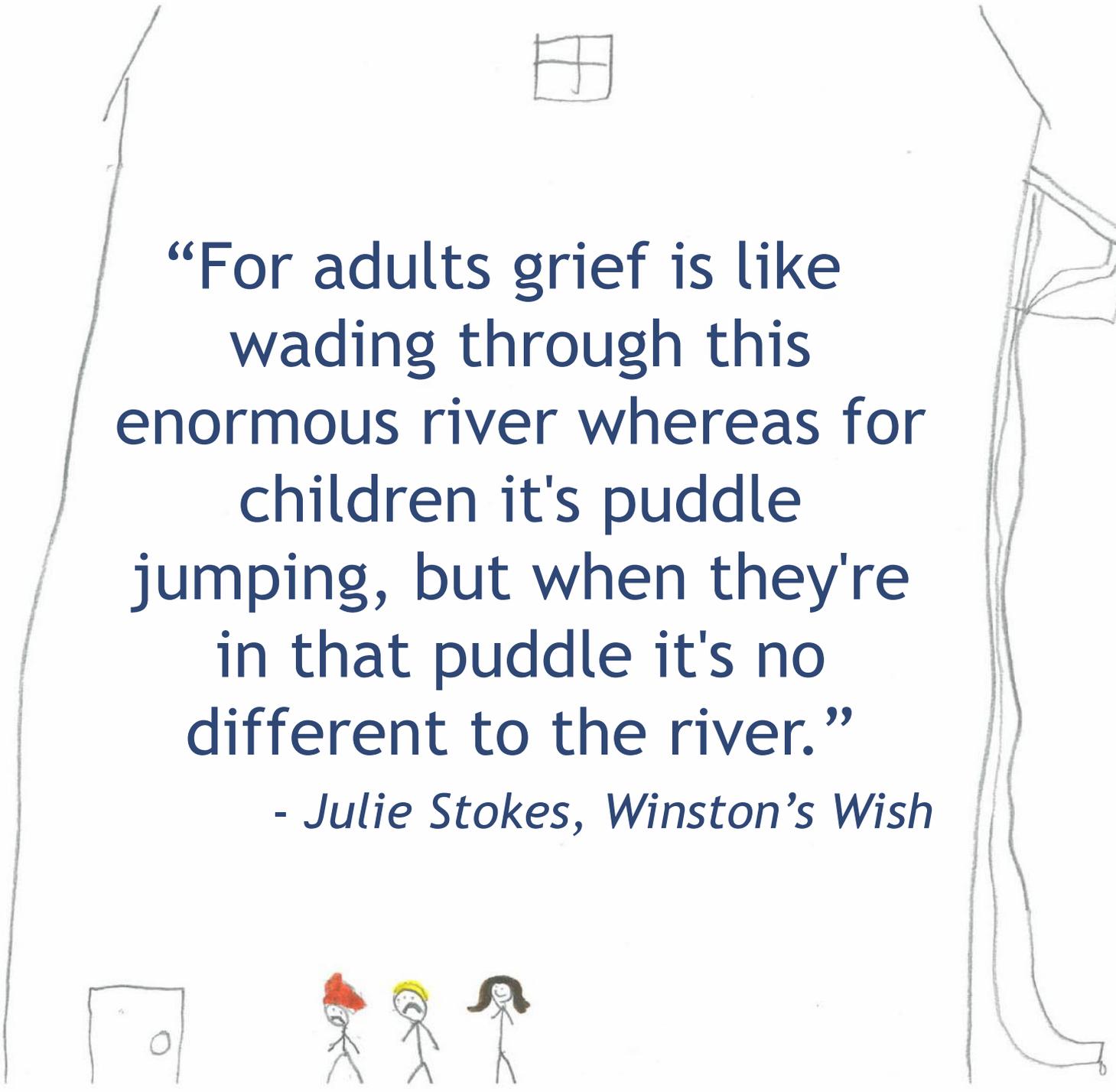
# Preparing Kids for a Death

- Wonder together (“mystery”)
- Body knows how to die
- Even though the person is dying...
  - They still care about the child
  - Death does not end the relationship

# Ways for Children to “be” with Someone who is Dying

- Decorate room
- Choose music
- Read
- Decorate blankets, pillow case
- Mouth care/moisturize
- Watch movie/t.v.
- Do homework in room
- Nail polish
- Make hug



A simple line drawing of a house. At the top center is a square window with a cross inside. On the right side, there is a rectangular shape representing a door or a window with a curtain. At the bottom left, there is a simple rectangular door with a small circle representing a handle. In the bottom center, there are three stick figures: one with a red head, one with a yellow head, and one with dark hair.

“For adults grief is like wading through this enormous river whereas for children it's puddle jumping, but when they're in that puddle it's no different to the river.”

- *Julie Stokes, Winston's Wish*

# Camp Erin

- Weekend bereavement camp for 6-17 year-olds from Southern Ontario (next camp May 31 - June 2)
- No cost to families
- Info available at [www.tlcpc.org](http://www.tlcpc.org)



# Web Resources

Association for Death Education and Counselling: [www.adec.org](http://www.adec.org)

Lighthouse Program for Grieving Children (Oakville):  
[www.grievingchildrenlighthouse.org](http://www.grievingchildrenlighthouse.org)

Canadian Virtual Hospice: [www.virtualhospice.ca](http://www.virtualhospice.ca)

Dougy Centre (US centre for grieving children): [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)

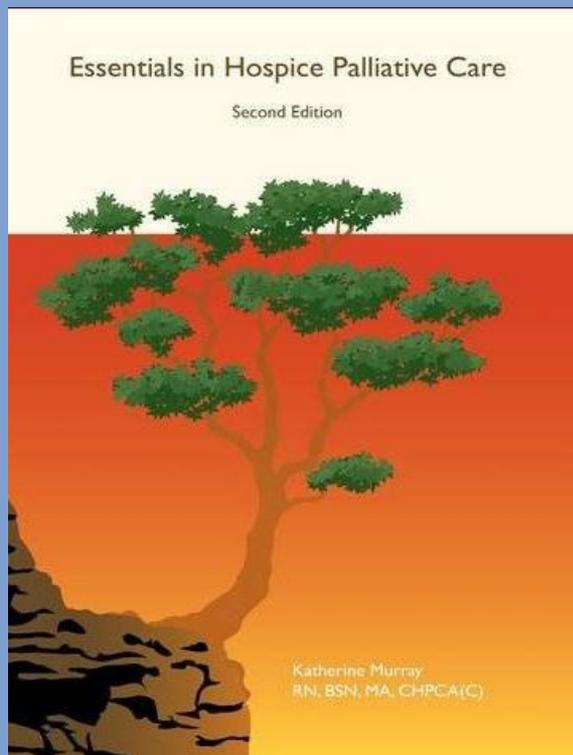
Kids Help Phone (1-800-668-6868): [www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)

Soul2Soul (grief website for teens): [www.soul2soul.ca](http://www.soul2soul.ca)

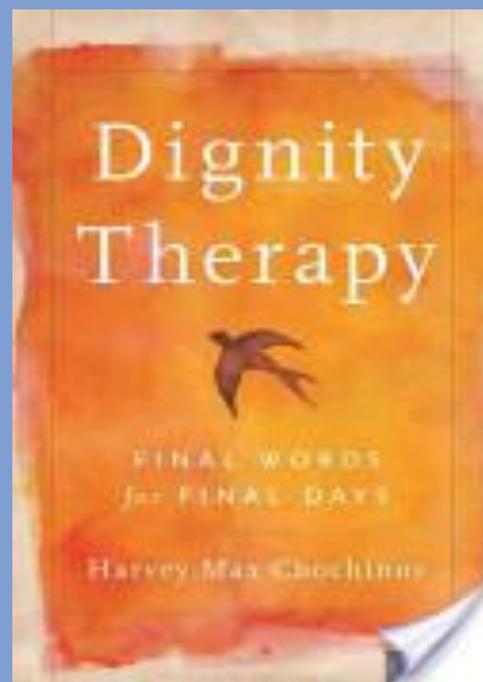
Upaya Zen Centre: [www.upaya.org](http://www.upaya.org)

Winston's Wish (UK centre for grieving children): [www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

# Literary Resources for Health Care Providers



Murray, K. (2009). *Essentials in Hospice Palliative Care*.



Chochinov, H. M. (2012). *Dignity Therapy: Final Words for Final Days*

# Literary Resources for Adults

Baird, J. (2009). *The Heart Does Break: Canadian Writers on Grief and Mourning*.

Eaton Russell, C. (2007). *Living Dying: A Guide for Adults Supporting Grieving Children and Teenagers*.

Halifax, J. (2008). *Being with Dying: Cultivating Compassion and Fearlessness in the Presence of Death*.

Hamilton, Joan. (2001). *When a Parent is Sick. Helping Parents Explain Serious Illness to Children*.

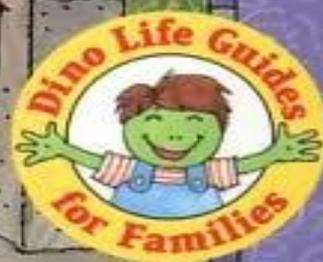
Silverman, P. R. (1999). *Never Too Young to Know: Death in Children's Lives*.

Stokes, J. (2001). *As Big as it Gets: Supporting Children when a Parent is Seriously Ill (Winston's Wish)*

"Strong and comforting." —*Booklist*

# WHEN DINOSAURS DIE

A Guide to Understanding Death



Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown

# Literary Resources for Children

Brown, L. K. (1996). *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death*.

Goldman, L. (2005). *Children Also Grieve: Talking about Death and Healing*.

Mellonie, B. (1983). *Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*.

Paterson, K. (1977). *Bridge to Terabithia*.

Schweibert, P., & DeKlyen, C. (1999). *Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss*.

*If we dislike the modern pornography of death, then we must give back to death - natural death - its parade and publicity, readmit grief and mourning. If we make death unmentionable in polite society - 'not before the children' - we almost ensure the continuation of the 'horror comic'. No censorship has ever really been effective.*

*Gorer, J. Death, Grief and Mourning*