A photograph of a swing set against a sunset background. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The swing set is in the center, with its chains and seat visible. On the left side, a hand is visible, reaching towards the swing. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

# ON DEATH AND DYING

## *The Role of the Counsellor*

BY TARA FIELD, RCC

**Are you considering becoming a palliative counsellor?**

Tara Field has worked with thousands of individuals and families facing the most life-altering and confusing challenges of their lives, including terminal illness, sudden death, and Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD). Here she provides an overview of this highly specialized area of the counselling field.



**Counselling the dying is unlike other forms of therapy** as its purpose is to support clients through a natural part of life rather than a mental, social, spiritual, or financial issue. At the same time, these issues can be, and often are, also present with the dying.

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**D**eath is an event that nobody can avoid, but conversation around death is often avoided. When facing death becomes unavoidable — for example, for people in palliative care — holding space for the dying offers them an opportunity to explore, express, and resolve thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a way they ordinarily cannot.

Counsellors who wish to support the dying and their support networks require a unique set of skills, experience, and knowledge, as well as strong self-awareness and empathy. Beyond the ability to create trust, safety, and connection with clients, palliative counsellors must also possess the ability to journey into the darkness with their clients without living there themselves. Sometimes it means hearing the details of illness and failed treatment. Other times, it is riding the roller coaster of hopes and disappointments with clients.

The best of times involve witnessing clients as they transition emotionally from the hope of a cure to the hope for a comfortable life before a peaceful death. More challenging times involve supporting clients who are never able to find peace at the end of their lives. Everyone journeys through their dying time in their own way, and the role of the counsellor is to support their clients' goals without being attached to outcomes or influencing their paths.

#### **SOME REALITIES**

Counselling the dying is unique in specific ways, and there are certain realities to consider. One reality is the limited time for therapeutic work to take place: often, this time frame is unknown and unpredictable. Not only is a more imminent death a reality, the ability for the dying to cognitively, energetically, and physically participate in counselling is limited. Symptoms and medications can alter capacity, so counselling may need to be brief and focused. When time is of the

essence, having a high level of comfort with the reality of death can help a counsellor establish rapport earlier in the relationship.

Another reality is that counsellors often need to meet clients where they are — emotionally and physically. They may be expected to conduct sessions in hospital wards, private homes, residential facilities, clinics, hospices, or even in public places. Some counsellors only work with individual palliative clients, while others also work with families, caregivers, and/or communities. Some work privately, while others work as integral members of multi-disciplinary teams.

Palliative counsellors are often asked to counsel the dying until and including the moment of death. This may pose a challenge for counsellors who are uncomfortable with the reality of death in general. Moreover, a counsellor who is uncomfortable with assisted suicide and euthanasia will face challenges if a client chooses Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD). For those reasons,

training and supervision are important. A large part of palliative care education involves discovering, exploring, and resolving our own histories, philosophies, and emotions around death (see training page 13).

### WHAT ELSE TO BE PREPARED FOR

Counselling the dying is unlike other forms of therapy as its purpose is to support clients through a natural part of life rather than a mental, social, spiritual, or financial issue. At the same time, these issues can be, and often are, also present with the dying. A counsellor's ability to prioritize a client's concurrent issues within the framework of palliative care is important. The opportunity to tackle end-of-life concerns may be impeded by more pressing challenges and limitations.

Those who are dying experience anticipatory grief — encountering emotional, physical, cognitive, and spiritual reactions to the consecutive losses they undergo throughout illness. These reactions can be intense and include anger, denial, fear, and despair. A solid understanding and familiarity with the grief process is crucial for palliative counsellors. Humanistic, existential, and behavioural therapeutic approaches — including mindfulness-based stress reduction, family systems, and relaxation techniques — are commonly used when counselling the dying.

Palliative care moves away from primarily focusing on the physical care of the dying and toward physical, psychological, and spiritual care of the dying and their support network. The counsellor's role is to support the dying to complete practical and emotional unfinished business, explore their thoughts and feelings, say their goodbyes to friends and family, and find comfort in their final days. Counsellors

## GRIEF RESOURCES

BY CORAL PAYNE, RCC

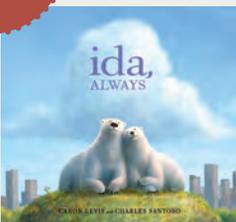
**BC Bereavement Helpline:** A non-profit, free, confidential service that connects the public to grief support information and services including: support groups, events, resources, newsletters, and volunteer opportunities. [www.bcbereavementhelpline.com](http://www.bcbereavementhelpline.com)

**Canuck Place – Children's Hospice:** Good source for information and referrals, as well as assistance for families caring for children with life-threatening illnesses. [www.canuckplace.org/resources/for-families](http://www.canuckplace.org/resources/for-families)

**The Compassionate Friends of Canada:** International, non-profit, self-help organization, offering friendship, understanding, grief education, and hope to families who have experienced the death of a child at any age from any cause. Free B.C. Chapter meetings. [www.tfccanada.net](http://www.tfccanada.net)



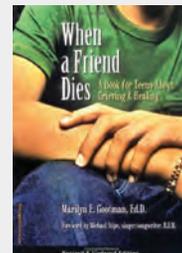
FROM **ODIN BOOKS** IN VANCOUVER  
[www.odinbooks.com](http://www.odinbooks.com)



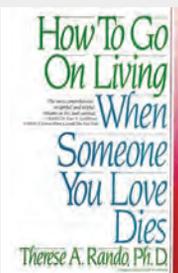
**ida, Always** — Story book for children  
By Caron Levis, illustrated by Charles Santoso (Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2016)



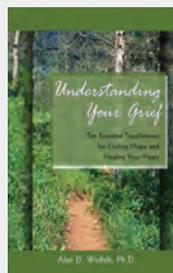
**The Heart and The Bottle** — Loss and healing for children or people of any age  
By Oliver Jeffers (Harper Collins Children's Books, 2010)



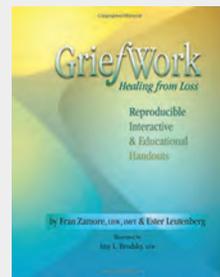
**When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving and Healing**  
By Marilyn Gootman (Free Spirit Publishing, 2005)



**How to Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies** — Adult grief  
By Therese A. Rando (Bantam, 1991)



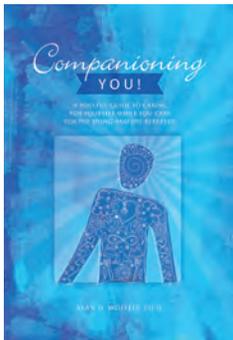
**Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart** — Adult grief  
By Alan D. Wolfelt (Companion Press, 2004)



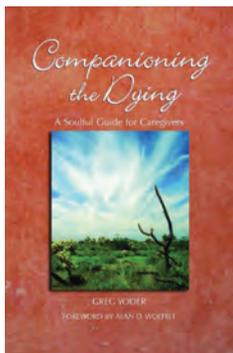
**Grief Work: Healing from Loss** — Interactive, educational handouts for counsellors  
By Fran Zamore (Whole Person Associates, 2008)



## RECOMMENDED READING



*Companioning You! A Soulful Guide to Caring for Yourself While You Care for the Dying and the Bereaved* (2012)  
by Dr. Alan Wolfelt  
(Companion Press)



*Companioning the Dying: A Soulful Guide for Caregivers* (2012)  
by Greg Yoder  
(Companion Press)

## PALLIATIVE RESOURCES

*What Dying People Want*  
by David Kuhl  
(Anchor Canada, 2003)

*Final Gifts*  
by Maggie Callanan  
(Bantam Book, 1997)

*Dying: A Memoir*  
by Cory Taylor  
(HarperPrism, 2016)

British Columbia  
Hospice Palliative Care  
Association website:  
[bchpca.org](http://bchpca.org)



may also facilitate family meetings involving sensitive topics, potentially fragile relationships, and many unknown variables. Some members may not be ready to hear certain terms, such as hospice, or face certain realities. Others may want to control the uncontrollable or have answers to the unanswerable. Counsellors must have the capacity to navigate these meetings with professionalism, empathy, and confidence.

Working with multiple family members has the potential to pose a number of boundary issues. Counsellors must be cognizant of these issues and be extremely diligent to avoid them. Alternatively, a counsellor may only be supporting one client in a family — either the individual who is dying or another individual involved with the dying person in some capacity. Whether working with an individual or a family, it is imperative that the counsellor is clear about exactly who the client/s is/are. Confidentiality

must always be considered and privacy laws must always be upheld. For example, medical information must never be shared, directly or indirectly, with those who are not legally entitled to it.

Knowledge of family systems and cultural diversity is essential for palliative counsellors. Supporting family members and friends can often become the focus of our work, especially as the patient gets closer to dying. The earlier we can become involved in a family, the more consistent support we can offer. Facilitating difficult conversations between family members requires empathy, compassion, and flexibility while maintaining a non-directive yet goal-oriented method of communication. Not a simple task when so many unknown variables can affect the navigation. Each person brings to the experience his or her own unique personality, history, goals, and expectations. Each culture brings its own rituals, philosophy, and traditions.

## The counsellor's role is to support the dying to complete practical and emotional unfinished business, explore their thoughts and feelings, say their goodbyes to friends and family, and find comfort in their final days.

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After a death, palliative counsellors may be involved in the ongoing bereavement aftercare of family and friends. This can be beneficial for survivors by offering continuity and comfort for them; having a familiar presence for support can provide family members with a sense of stability when they feel most vulnerable.

It is also important for counsellors to know when continuing with bereavement support may not be prudent. Strong self-awareness can guide counsellors to know when they have biases, compassion fatigue, conflicts of interest, or specific knowledge that could potentially affect their ability to provide unconditional positive regard to family members or friends.

### SELF-CARE AND SUPERVISION

Providing support for the dying and the significant people in their lives is an honour and can be incredibly rewarding and life affirming, leading to compassion satisfaction. At the same time, regular exposure to others' emotional, physical, and spiritual pain can cause vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout. Working around

death can and will trigger personal challenges for counsellors. This is normal and expected, but it can often catch new palliative counsellors off guard. Regular and frequent self-assessment is crucial to avoid influencing the therapeutic relationship with personal reactions and biases. As with all helping professions, self-care is non-negotiable. Regular participation in hobbies, mindfulness practice, exercise, journaling, therapy, travel, social engagement, and other self-nurturing activities help rejuvenate us and restore our joy for our work.

Participation in ritual facilitates the mourning process, and many counsellors create their own rituals around working with the dying. Death awareness is unavoidable when regularly confronted with death and dying; therefore, rituals honouring clients who have died and rituals that affirm life can improve counsellors' outlook on their work. A deliberate mental and physical transition between work and home



### PALLIATIVE COUNSELLING TRAINING

Training for counselling the dying can come in many forms. Hospice societies, such as **Victoria Hospice** ([victoriahospice.org/courses/psychosocial-care-dying-and-bereaved-course](http://victoriahospice.org/courses/psychosocial-care-dying-and-bereaved-course)) and organizations, such as **Life and Death Matters** ([lifeanddeathmatters.ca](http://lifeanddeathmatters.ca)), offer specialized training.

can be transformed into a ritual. For example, something as simple as taking off or putting on identification can transition a counsellor's mind and body away or toward work.

Ongoing professional supervision is necessary when considering the emotional well-being of palliative counsellors. Debriefing especially complicated cases and releasing emotional residue can prolong their career longevity, maintain the quality of their work, and prevent their experiences from overflowing into their personal lives. Furthermore, when facing their own personal grief and loss, supervision can support them to determine when and if they can return to work.

### A CALLING

Interest in counselling the dying typically happens by chance. It is not usually a specialization new graduate students consider, unless personally or professionally exposed to prior palliative experiences. Interest may be sparked during a course or practicum placement. Usually, the interest begins through working around or with the dying in health care centres or private practices. Many palliative counsellors describe their initial interest as a calling. While it is not a specialization for everyone, those who are called to do the work cannot imagine a more fulfilling career. ■

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*Tara Field, RCC, has a private counselling practice in White Rock specializing in end-of-life, grief and loss, life transitions, and relationship challenges. She also offers consultation services to companies and organizations. Tara recently spent five years on Fraser Health Authority's Hospice Palliative Care Consult Team in White Rock/South Surrey. [www.tarafeld.com](http://www.tarafeld.com)*