



Dying Well - what does that mean?

We'd all like to 'die well', but what does that actually mean?

It's one of those BIG questions that are not answered simply! What we understand by a 'good death' is influenced by our values, beliefs, culture, faith, life experiences, social supports, and the physical symptoms of our condition. We do know that a good death is more likely when we have open and honest conversations about dying with the people we most care about. For Christians this may include candid conversations with God, and about God. This can get uncomfortable for people involved in pastoral care if they are unprepared. Death is an important topic for people to consider well before they face it if they want their dying process to be as 'good' as possible.

Christian responses to a 'difficult' death

A peaceful death is not an absolute certainty for any person, Christian or not. Neither is a difficult death a sign that the person's faith is weak and failing. Tragic and premature death is never easy to term 'good'! Dying can be slow, long, challenging and anything but 'good'!

At these times we really need people to walk alongside us who can provide God's comfort and hope at a time when we can feel very alone. Yet over many years of nursing and pastoral care I have seen Christians avoid discussing dying, sidestep being around the dying person, and move away at the time the person most needs comforting presence and gentle understanding. I've heard well-meaning Christians defend, apologise and make excuses for God's perceived silence or absence. I have heard people apportion blame, just as Job's friends did (read Job 4-8 and you will know what I mean) and in so doing they have dismissed the despair and anger the person and their family were experiencing.

As Christians we often have a head knowledge that death cannot separate us from God, but that is small comfort when the process of dying can make you feel as if God is far away and disengaged, or even worse – has abandoned you. Jesus knew that feeling (read Matthew 27:46). There is a place for lament to surface the challenging emotions that the person feels. Reading, singing or hearing music from the Psalms of lament (for examples see Psalm 6, 22, 42, 69, 77) can facilitate the expression of such difficult emotions and help the person move through the experience. The way Christians respond to the dying person greatly impacts the possibility of experiencing a 'good' death.

So what do we know about a 'good' death?

A good death gives the person choices, privacy and dignity (Smith 2000). It provides a clear understanding of what can be expected, providing access to information and experts who can assist in decision making. People want control over their options – especially regarding pain management,



symptom control, the environment in which they will die, and the people who they want to connect with before they die. They want support that addresses their physical, personal, social and spiritual needs (Smith 2000).

Preparing for the journey

If we consider life to be a journey then death can be viewed as the end point, but for those who believe in Jesus Christ, death brings the transition to life eternal with their Saviour - Jesus. Death is not to be feared, however, the process of dying is something about which many of us remain concerned. We commonly prepare for any journey we take in order to have the smoothest and best possible experience. Not everything is in our control, but the more we understand about our destination and our mode of travel, the more likely it is that we will have a good experience.

Similarly, dying well is more likely to occur when we prepare for the dying phase of our life's journey. It does not mean we are giving up on choosing life, nor does it mean we have lost hope. Rather, it is a way of acknowledging the facts and preparing the way in a compassionate and empathic manner.

For some ideas on how to support others to die well see:

- [7 ways you can help a person to die well](#)
- [7 things I learned from the Dying Well Conference](#)

References

Swerissen, H. & Duckett, S. (2014). Dying Well. *Grattan Institute Report No. 2014-10*, Grattan Institute <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/815-dying-well.pdf>

Smith, R. (2000). A good death : An important aim for health services and for us all. *British Medical Journal*, 320(7228), 129–130 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1128725/>

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