

Patricia L. Ewalt and Lola Perkins

The Real Experience of Death Among Adolescents: An Empirical Study

A survey of high school students indicates that adolescents have more experience with death and mourning than has been assumed. School guidance and mental health personnel need to encourage students to discuss and understand their proximity to death, the effects it has on one's feelings, and how best to deal with loss.

Patricia L. Ewalt is Associate Dean, University of Kansas, School of Social Welfare, Lawrence, Kansas. Lola Perkins teaches English at J. C. Harmon High School, Kansas City, Kansas.

STATEMENTS ABOUND IN THE literature that assert that young people are isolated, to an undesirable degree, from the process of death and dying.¹ This is thought to occur both because people live longer and are more likely to die in institutions. In addition to this presumed lack of knowledge, it has been suggested that adolescents' preoccupation with fantasies of death are, perhaps, a result of fears of retribution for individuation or loss of components of childhood identity.² Both lack of knowledge and prevalence of fantasies about death have been suggested as rationales for guided opportunities for adolescents to discuss death and dying.

The degree of young people's isolation from the reality of death may, however, have been greatly exaggerated. A recent survey of high school juniors and seniors indicated that many more students than might have been suspected had had real experiences with death

and that their concerns about death emanated not merely from their fantasies, but from death of close relatives and friends or from the near loss of their own lives.³ Implications for classroom teachers, guidance personnel, mental health workers, and others who work with youth can be quite different if it is understood that a large proportion of adolescents are actively dealing with real loss through death rather than with fantasy.

Rationale for the Study

The present study was undertaken in order to learn the extent to which juniors and seniors in two high schools had had real experiences with death and dying. A prior study, based on 148 questionnaires completed as a required part of classroom routine in an English elective course called "Death in Literature," revealed that 93 percent of students had seen a dead person; 84 percent had lost someone they "really cared about" through death; 27 percent had been present when someone died; and at least one parent of 10 percent of the students had died.⁴ The

1. See, for example, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1968); Robert Jay Lifton and Eric Olson, *Living and Dying* (New York: Bantam, 1975); and Ray Reisler, "The Issue of Death Education," *The School Counselor* 24 (May 1977).

2. Peter Blos, *On Adolescence: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (New York: Free Press, 1962).

3. Lola Perkins, Bill D. Todd, and Patricia L. Ewalt, "High School English Courses as Potential Contributors to Adolescent Mental Health." Panel presentation at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the American Association of Psychiatric Services for Children, Atlanta, Georgia, 11 November 1978.

4. Ibid.

latter figure is twice the national estimate of loss of a parent before adulthood.⁵ Overall, the findings seem to suggest that the assumptions made in professional literature and by the press about the limited experience young people have with death lack foundation.

Certainly, the seemingly high proportion of students who had experienced death could have been accounted for by the special nature of the elective course in which the survey had been administered. Perhaps this class attracted persons with an unusual degree of such experience. It was also possible that demographic characteristics of students taking the course had some bearing because the school in which these classes were held serves persons of primarily working-class backgrounds and the classes themselves are largely intended for the non college-bound student.

The Questionnaire

Arrangements were made to administer a six-item questionnaire to all juniors and seniors in School A, the school in which the earlier survey had occurred, and also in School B, a primarily middle-class school in the same district. The inclusion of School B would indicate whether the findings might be generalizable to students other than those of the working-class, non college-bound category. The six items on the questionnaire were as follows:

1. Has anyone you really cared about ever died?
2. Have you ever seen a dead person?
3. Have you ever been present when a person died?
4. Has either of your parents died?
5. Have any of the following died: a grandparent, aunt, uncle, brother, or sister?
6. Has any close friend your own age died?

Because the original questionnaire had been administered in an English class and all students were enrolled in an English class of some kind, the cooperation of English teachers was sought. The questionnaires were administered at each school to all students who were present within a two-day period during September 1978.

5. Sarah B. Stein, *About Dying* (New York: Walker, 1974).

The Settings and the Samples

Both schools are a part of the Kansas City, Kansas, public school system. School A serves primarily working-class neighborhoods of modest single-family homes where, in 1974, the median family income was \$9,000. The population of the School A district is 66 percent white and 34 percent minorities. School B serves a primarily middle-class suburban neighborhood, where, in 1974, median family income was \$12,000. The population is 73 percent white, and 27 percent minorities. Sixty-six percent of the students at School B had plans to pursue higher education, as opposed to 45 percent of the students at School A.

Overall, there was a response rate of 76 percent in both schools. The base for this calculation, however, includes absentees, an unknown number not in the classroom when the questionnaire was administered, and a class of thirty juniors to whom the questionnaire was accidentally not given. Although it was explained that completing the questionnaire was voluntary, few (only 8 percent of those at School A) declined to participate.

Findings

A comparison of findings for School A (primarily working class) and School B (primarily middle class) indicated that there were no significant differences between these two schools on the dimensions studied. Indeed, the findings were remarkably similar. Nearly 90 percent of students at both schools (1,303) reported that they had seen a dead person and had lost a grandparent, aunt, uncle, sibling, or someone else they cared about through death. Approximately 20 percent of students at both schools (283) reported that they had actually been present when a person died. Approximately 40 percent (591) had experienced the death of a close friend of their own age. Two findings within the group are worth noting: At School A, 15 percent of the seniors (36) said a parent had died; at School B, 47 percent of the seniors (216) reported the death of a close friend their own age.

Experiences with death have been more frequent for seniors than juniors on all dimensions, but the differences are small except for the item involving death of a close friend of

the student's own age. Of the seniors, 44 percent (311) had lost such a friend compared with 35 percent (280) of the juniors. It is possible that this is a difference between the two grade cohorts over time. It is also possible, however, that it is a difference that has actually occurred between junior and senior years, representing very recent losses either of a schoolmate known to many, or of peers not known by fellow class members. By the time of reaching the senior year, 11 percent (twice national estimates) had lost at least one parent through death. At least 90 percent had lost a near relative and seen a dead person and 21 percent had witnessed a death.

Discussion

Insofar as these data can be generalized to other high school populations, it appears that experience with death among adolescents is by no means negligible. Loss of at least one parent and of a close friend of the person's own age are substantially higher than might have been suspected. Presence at the death of a person also seems to occur more frequently than is often suggested by literature.

Despite the fact that high schools serving students primarily from two different social classes were studied, more investigation is required to establish the generality of the findings. For example, even though the study has the advantage of racially and culturally mixed samples, differences within the groups in this respect were not explored. Nor were schools serving primarily the lowest or highest social stratum investigated; for example, it might be assumed that persons in lower stratum would have more experience with death (as a cause or as an effect of poverty) and people in the higher stratum, less.

With respect to having seen a dead person, a cultural characteristic may pertain. Among both black and white residents of the area, a very high proportion are Protestants who attend church services. For these adolescents funeral attendance is considered important, and closed caskets are rare.

Implications for Practice

Among those adolescents studied, death is by no means a stranger. Despite the several

caveats stated with respect to making generalizations, it seems safe to suppose that at least for the vast majority of teenagers, from both the working and middle classes, death may be encountered much more frequently than is imagined. The implications for school and mental health personnel, for all who work with youth, and for young people themselves, are substantial.

School Personnel

The benefits of classes on reactions to death and dying in the schools are often suggested on the basis that they will demystify death, the unknown.⁶ Such classes may indeed be desirable, not because death is unknown, but because it is ubiquitous. Yet, as the study of "Death in Literature" classes,⁷ revealed, a course that seeks to inform young people about death can often be woefully off-target:

- "When my great grandparents died, I kind of expected it because they were old. But when my uncle died it was a shock—he was in a boat and he drowned."

- "When I was in the fourth grade, my best friend was murdered."

- "I was with my brother at the lake when he drowned."

- "I myself have come close to death. I just felt really scared. A man was threatening my life and there was no one around to help. I knew that he could just kill me and nobody would know."

As learned from the students' statements regarding enrollment in the course, what they sought most from the classes was an opportunity to share thoughts and fears about death with their peers as well as to gain others' ideas through a study of literature and exposure to guest speakers:

- "When I was operated on at the age of ten, people told me I was on the line of death. I've been scared since then."

- "I'm scared of thinking about dying so I figured maybe if I learned a little more about it, it would make me feel more at ease."

- "Does everyone have fear of death?"

6. Reisler, "Death Education," pp. 331-32.

7. Perkins, Todd, and Ewalt, "High School English Courses."

• "I would really just like to discuss maybe how everyone feels on the subject compared with how I feel about it."

• "One of the things I wanted to know about and learn to cope with is the idea of death. I often think about my immediate family and how I would be able to take them dying and I don't think I would be able to cope."

Thus, students sought input from others to deal with actual or anticipated experiences with death. The theme of seeking mastery is apparent. Congruent with adolescent developmental tasks, it was evident that the students wished to expand their private worlds through comparison with others and thence to develop their own means of managing fears surrounding death.

Aside from courses dealing specifically with death, it may be well for teachers and guidance personnel to be aware that proximity to death may either be a current experience or a painful memory for many students. Teachers have observed, through writings or other artistic creations, that death is a preoccupation with students.⁸ Such a preoccupation may be more than an emanation of the adolescent phase; it may be a clue to the adolescent's having incurred a real loss. Thus, educators should be alert to the implications for their students, including the need for discussions of feelings about death in art or literature classes that portray this event and in science classes where death is discussed or death of an animal actually occurs.

Because guidance personnel and school social workers are frequently aware of deaths among students' family members or among the student peer group, it would be desirable for these school staff members to be specifically prepared to provide crisis intervention for bereaved students whenever necessary (including family members if possible)⁹ and to make this service known to all classroom staff.

Mental Health Personnel

It has often been stated that death as a preoccupation among adolescents stems from a sense of discontinuity between the child that

8. Reisler, "Death Education," p. 332.

was and the adult that may be. In the precarious state between the knowns of childhood, however favorable or unfavorable they may have been, and the unknowns of adulthood, the person may feel that the very continuance of self is in question. Such fears may be all the more acute among persons who have sensed in their parents a lack of acceptance of increasing maturation.

Although these observations may be accurate, it is also possible that their fears may be exacerbated by a real confrontation with death. A real experience with death during adolescence is likely to cause fears of one's continuity whether or not such fears are already present.¹⁰

Vivid examples of the impact of death experiences during adolescence were provided by the earlier study:

• "My best friend's mother died of cancer this past year and we were very close. Then my grandfather died in a most unusual way and it has never left my mind. I get afraid sometimes when I think of my Grandpa and my friend's mom. I get a weird feeling over me."

• "My uncle died during the last semester. We were very close and it made me realize that death is unpredictable and could come anytime."

If, indeed, confrontation with death is as prevalent for adolescents as this study seems to indicate, there are two implications for mental health personnel. First, any adolescent who is seen for whatever reason may have as an aspect of his or her problem a frightening loss. Although this can certainly not be assumed, it seems desirable to be alert to the possibility. Second, it should never be assumed that worries about death are only intrapsychic. Although death of a family member may well be identified in taking a history, the death of a peer or a significant non-family member may not be mentioned spontaneously and, therefore, overlooked. Feelings of fear, hopelessness, uncertainty

9. William H. Jones, "Death-Related Grief Counseling: The School Counselor's Responsibility," *The School Counselor* 24 (May 1977): 317-20.

10. *Ibid.*; and Robert Kastenbaum and Ruth Aisenberg, *The Psychology of Death* (New York: Springer, 1972).

about the future, or other affects, may signal that a real experience with death has occurred. Young people themselves may be unaware of the impact a death has had on them or, though aware, not realize the importance of discussing it.

Implications for Young People

If adults have widely assumed and promulgated the idea that experience with death is infrequent among youth, it is possible that young people who do have such an experience believe that theirs is a uniquely painful fate. Such a feeling may be especially painful for those who have lost a parent.

It is possible that young people have known better than adults that the death experience is common among them. If not, it would be well for all helping persons to provide adolescents with more accurate information and to facilitate an exchange of experiences and ideas on how best to cope with their feelings surrounding death. It might be particularly useful for students to realize, for example, that in any school of 1,000 students, according to the present data, about 100 would have lost a parent through death. If students are given an opportunity to share ideas and experiences about death, an important contribution to their sense of well-being will have been made.