Death Cafes: A Tool for Teaching about End of Life in Both Academic and Community Settings (FR469-E)

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Objectives

- Increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives.
- Create a safe and informal forum for health professions learners (medical and nursing students, residents, fellows) and community members to discuss EOL issues openly and authentically.
- Build a foundation for subsequent training in relationship-centered EOL care, contemplative care, and cross-cultural approaches to dying and death.

Background: Since 2011 over 1,000 Death Cafes have been held around the world. A Death Cafe is a casual group discussion of dying and death, typically hosted in someone's home. Participants, usually strangers, gather to eat cake, drink tea, and discuss death. The Death Cafe model was developed by Jon Underwood and Sue Barsky Reid (Great Britain), based on the ideas of sociologist Bernard Crettaz (Switzerland). We hosted the first Death Cafe in San Francisco as part of the UCSF 80-hour interprofessional course “Integrative Approaches to End-of-Life Care.” Over the past 2 years, UCSF and Zen Hospice Project have hosted regular Death Cafes in both academic and community settings as part of our end-of-life (EOL) educational partnership.

Methods: Each Death Cafe consists of a 2-hour meeting with 15-25 participants (typically talking in small groups of four to six people). One or two facilitators loosely structure the session through prepared discussion prompts or short exercises designed to encourage conversation.

Results: In written evaluations (responses to open-ended prompts regarding the nature and impact of the Death Cafe experience), participants note that discussing difficult or taboo subjects in a safe, informal context has helped to transform their attitudes toward death. People report being surprised at the ease with which they are able to discuss end-of-life issues in these settings; they emphasize that sharing personal concerns in a group of strangers is not only comforting, but also serves to normalize the death-related topics.

Discussion: Because Death Cafes provide a secure and casual context in which to explore one of the most challenging and fear-inducing topics, the discussions can be used strategically as points of entry for much-needed societal reappraisal of how we approach—and how we want to approach—the end of life.

Conclusion: We have found Death Cafes to be an extremely effective educational tool. We will share practical guidelines and suggestions for the use of Death Cafes in both academic and community settings.