

The Last Tasks of Dying

Finding Closure and Peace at the End of Life

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When most people consider the tasks that a dying person must accomplish they think of wills, trusts, medical arrangements, and funeral planning. In reality, there is much more important work to be done to achieve closure in relationships and a peaceful death.

The most important thing in life is our relationships with those we love. The five tasks of dying seek to complete and reconcile these relationships.

In his book *The Four Things That Matter Most*, Dr. Ira Byock teaches us four vital things that a dying person must do before saying goodbye to loved ones. While these tasks shouldn't only pertain to dying people—we should all remember to complete tasks 1–4 often—they are an important part of the work of the dying.

Ask For Forgiveness

We've all done things in our lives that have hurt those we love, either intentionally or unintentionally. We all carry wounds with us that family and friends have inflicted on us and we've all been the inflicter of wounds on those we love. The most important healing at the end of life isn't physical healing, but rather the healing of those emotional wounds.

Dr. Byock compares the healing of emotional wounds to physical wounds. For a physical wound to heal, all dirt and infected tissues have to be washed away; for an emotional wound to heal, all the toxic material between two people needs to be washed away.

The best way to cleanse your relationships of their toxic pasts is to seek forgiveness.

Asking for forgiveness isn't easy, especially if we feel that we were misunderstood or justified in our actions. But regardless of how you feel about your rift, asking for forgiveness can be a freeing experience and can prepare your relationship for the rest of the work that needs to be done.

Offer Forgiveness

This is another difficult task for many of us to complete. Offering forgiveness to someone who we feel hasn't earned it is extremely hard. But it's important to know that forgiving someone we love isn't excusing that person's behaviour. Forgiveness is ultimately a gift we give ourselves; when we forgive, our spirit is set free of anger and resentment.

In addition to forgiving others, it's equally as important to forgive ourselves. You have undoubtedly done things you're not proud of. All of us have done things that we regret, we've made serious mistakes, and we all harbor shameful secrets. We are imperfect humans! But we are often harder on ourselves than others. Even if a friend or family member has granted you forgiveness, you might still find it difficult to forgive yourself. But forgiving yourself is the ultimate act of self-kindness, allowing you to find self-acceptance and love.

Offer Heartfelt Thanks

We all have an innate need to express gratitude and feel appreciated. Many of us mistakenly believe that we don't actually have to say the words "thank you" out loud. We assume our loved ones know how thankful we are for all they have done for us. The truth is, often our loved ones really *don't* know how much we appreciate them.

Offering gratitude for the acts of kindness others have extended to you is quick and easy. It takes little time and effort to say "thank you," yet it can have a tremendous impact on completing important relationships. You can find something to be thankful for in every relationship in your life. In *The Four Things That Matter Most*, Dr. Byock gives the example of Avi and his father Simon. Simon had been horribly cruel to Avi growing up. Despite this, Avi was able to forgive his father and even thank Simon for giving him life. Just the act of Simon giving life to Avi was enough to be thankful for.

Surely you can find something to be thankful for in each relationship in your life. Now is the time to tell them "Thank You!"

Offer Sentiments of Love

Uh oh. Now we're getting mushy and sentimental. Before you skip over this task thinking it's too "touchy-feely," stop for a moment and think of those relationships that matter to you most. Can you recognize feelings of love for each of these people? Although it may differ from person to person, love for others is the most natural and important of human emotions. But saying the words "I love you" can be incredibly difficult for many people to say.

If you are in touch with your emotions and find it easy to express your feelings by saying "I love you," then just go ahead and do it. If you, like many people, find saying those three little words more terrifying than jumping out of an airplane without a parachute, there are other ways you can express sentiments of love.

Some people might be more comfortable expressing love in a written letter or card. Others find less obvious, but equally meaningful ways of expressing love. In *The Four Things That Matter Most* a story is told about Gunter who's father was dying. Gunter didn't feel comfortable expressing his love for his father; it just wasn't done in their German Lutheran home. Gunter later recognized his father's request for Gunter to shave him as a way to invite physical touch and affection. Gunter began grooming his father every day and picking up more and more of his

physical care as his father declined. The simple act of caregiving with loving touch was a profound way for Gunter and his father to express their love.

In what ways can you get creative in expressing your love?

Say Goodbye

Goodbye is a powerful necessity for many dying people. Those of us who work with the dying can tell stories of dying patients who held on longer than should have been possible in order to say goodbye to loved ones. Amazing stories of this phenomena can be found in the book *Final Gifts* by Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley. Stories of people who have lingered in between life and death, waiting to say goodbye, are reminders that we shouldn't wait until the last minute to take steps 1–4.

We've all heard touching stories of people who go to incredible lengths to say meaningful goodbyes—the mother who bought and wrapped presents for her daughter to open on every birthday and her wedding day; the child who wrote his parents a book of poems; the father who made a video diary for his children chronicling his life and professing his love for them. All goodbyes don't need to be this elaborate. Once you've made it through the first four tasks, all that's left to do is recognize the precious impermanence of life and enjoy the presence of those you love.

Saying goodbye is painful but it doesn't have to be tragic. If you've completed your most important relationships by doing tasks 1–4, saying goodbye can be a bitter-sweet way to remind those you love how fleeting life is. It can be a wonderful way to remember to live life to the fullest and focus on the things that matter most—the relationships with those we love.

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