

Stress and final journeys

Advice Line

by Dr. Betty Phillips



This article is the latest in my series on stress management. In October we have an opportunity to hear a world-class speaker and attend an international conference in our area. Maggie Callanan, author of *Final Journeys*, will be the keynote speaker at the conference of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) held at the Millennium Hotel in Durham on October 3 and 4. Maggie is a hospice nurse and author of the groundbreaking book *Final Gifts* about understanding the needs of dying loved ones.

How is this related to stress management? Well, we certainly experience stress when we realize our beloved family members will sometime make their final journey. And we experience distress when we realize that we will face this journey ourselves. Now you're thinking, Oh I'd rather read about something more fun... (like war and politics...?). Before you turn away, think how much better you'll feel when you come to terms with death and afterlife. Stress can turn to relief and even peace, love and comfort.

When I first realized I would have to deal with the terminal illnesses of my parents, I turned to the Internet to search for information about dying. I was frustrated and sorely disappointed when I found little of practical value. When my mother was admitted to home hospice my sister and I anxiously pulled the nurse aside to question her as to what happens when someone dies. Isn't it amazing that two Harvard-trained Ph.D. professionals didn't have the faintest idea about how to handle this incredibly important part of the life cycle! Now this information is readily available within the pages of Maggie Callanan's books. She has treated more than 2,000 terminally ill patients over more than 20 years and share this information in an empathetic, compassionate and eminently readable manner. The book begins with the introduction, "I Don't Know How to

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Do This" and contains 40 chapters illustrating aspects of the final journey. You'll also find humor in the book when you least expect it, as in Chapter 2, "Don't Tell Mom She's Dying. It'll Kill Her!"

I'll mention a few of the highlights in the book. Maggie writes, "A terminal diagnosis is not the end of the story. As one door closes, another can be opened." Her advice is that the family and dying person can live as fully as possible every day remaining. Another chapter, "The Right to Be Comfortable" explains palliative care, describing all the options for pain control. Another chapter, "It's Hard Enough to Die Once" describes reasons for do-not-resuscitate orders. If the DNR order is not signed and readily available, cardiopulmonary resuscitation must be used. Maggie explains, "many people with terminal illnesses today have to experience dying a second or even a third time... It is a death without comfort, peace or dignity." Her step-by-step explanation of admin-

istering CPR to terminal patients is information you will rarely find anywhere. Most people wish to die in their sleep. Maggie explains that, in fact, about 95 percent of people do die in their sleep. With hospice help a dying person is able to drift into a peaceful and relatively brief coma.

So what about this IANDS organization? More information is available on their website, www.IANDS.org. It is an organization formed by near-death experiencers and professionals studying the field. Check out the fascinating story of an orthopedic surgeon who survived a near-death lightning strike and later found himself with newly acquired skills in classical piano and musical composition which he said came to him from "a divine place."

We all have a primal anxiety about death and afterlife. I found immediate use for near-death information assisting my father in his transition to the afterlife. A good and kind person, he nevertheless worried that he might go to hell as had been threatened when he was a mischievous child. During his final months he loved to hear me read story after story of positive near-death experiences. At the end as he drifted off, he told me of seeing beautiful lights, colors and flowers and my mother's spirit holding out her arms to him. While helping my father I found that anxiety about my own death had vanished, replaced by a curiosity.

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