

Editor's note: Due to an error, Betty Phillips Advice column was cut abruptly in mid sentence in both the September print and web edition. Here is the column in its entirety.

Stress and Final Journeys

By Betty Phillips

This article is the latest in my series on stress management for the Chatham County Line. In October we have an opportunity to hear a world-class speaker and attend an international conference in our area. Maggie Callanan, author of the new book "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 October 3 and 4, 2008. Even if you aren't able to attend the conference, you will want to be aware of her new book. Maggie is a hospice nurse, and last year I wrote about her groundbreaking book "Final Gifts" composed to help us understand the needs of our dying loved ones.

But you ask: how is this related to stress management? Well, we certainly experience stress when we realize that our beloved family members will sometime make their final journey to the afterlife. Yes 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, yes, even peace, love and comfort for ourselves as well as others.

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 death and 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 you can have this information readily available within the pages of these two books. Maggie Callanan has treated more than

2000 terminally ill patients over more than 20 years and is able to share this information in an empathetic, compassionate and eminently readable manner. The book begins with the introduction, "I Don't Know How to Do This" which is really true for all of us. The book contains 40 brief chapters each illustrating one aspect of the final journey from beginning to aftercare. The chapters contain real-life stories, practical and straightforward advice and end with a "bottom line" quotation. 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. The bottom line quote from Chapter 1 is "A terminal diagnosis is not the end of the story. As one door closes, another can be opened." Maggie's 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: "The end of life does not have to be about suffering." The book describes all the options for pain control with practical and compassionate treatments which can be administered at home. 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 administering CPR to terminal patients is information you will rarely find anywhere. Most people wish to die in their sleep. Maggie explains how, in fact, about 95 percent of people do actually die in their sleep. With hospice help a dying person is able to drift into a peaceful and relatively brief coma.

I can't begin to tell you about all the valuable information in this book. You'll have to read both of Maggie Callanan's books, and if you're lucky enough, hear her speak in October.

By now you are wondering what is this IANDS organization? More information is available on their website, www.IANDS.org, and you can click on the conference link. IANDS is an organization formed by near-death experiencers and professionals studying the field. You will find interesting information on this website and also in conference

presentations. Check out the fascinating story of a board certified 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."

Why would anyone want to find out about near-death experiences? Why not just enjoy life and let it go at that? We all have a primal anxiety about the topic of death and afterlife. I found immediate use for near-death information assisting my father in his transition to the afterlife. An outstandingly good and kind person, he nevertheless worried that somehow 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 my anxiety about my own death had vanished, replaced by a curiosity which I am following in additional reading and information gathering.

Information about death, dying and afterlife all are now becoming available in books and conferences. Home hospice services are available to provide end-of-life care, and therapists such as myself are becoming experienced in assisting families dealing with these important questions. So follow your curiosity in accessing information about this topic and use support services when needed.