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# The Psychotherapist Meets Death: Perspectives on Clinical Education in the Area of Death and Dying

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The Psychotherapist Meets  
Death: Perspectives on  
Psychological Literature and  
Clinical Education in the Area  
of Death and Dying

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# Interest in Topic

- Teacher: Teach course on Death and Dying for past 20 years
- Private Practice: Personal Story
- In 2010 wrote and presented paper for conference In Hong Kong on Death: Philosophy, Therapy, Medicine titled: "The Clinician Meets Death: Psychological Perspectives on Being with the Dying"



# How rare is this death thing anyway?

“I read this book as a therapist wanting to stimulate my own thinking around death in the consulting room since it is rarely out of it.”

Simone Lee writes in his published review of Barnett's book (2010)  
*When death enters the therapeutic space: Existential perspectives in psychotherapy and counseling*

# Exploratory Research Question

- How much activity is there in broad area of clinical psychology associated with death and dying in psychotherapy?
- Activity defined as:
  - Publications in psychinfo
  - Graduate schools offering courses in death and dying

# Background

- Many books and articles written on how therapist's can work with the terminally ill and dying
- Explosion of publications post work of Elizabeth Kubler Ross (1969)
- Abundant publications when the focus is the patient

# Death in Psychotherapy: Focus on The PATIENT - Publication Areas

| Area of focus   | # of Publications in Psyinfo |
|---|------------------------------|
| Working with terminally ill patients  | 169++                        |
| Psychotherapy with the grieving/bereaved patient                                  | 1100++                       |
| Working with suicidal patients  | 2460++                       |
| Patients reactions to psychotherapist's death (sudden, terminal illness, suicide) | 23                           |

# Death in Psychotherapy: FOCUS on the PSYCHOTHERAPIST

| Area of focus  | # of Publications in Psyinfo |
|--|------------------------------|
| Psychotherapist personal exp. with death (own loss & bereavement) and practice | 13                           |
| Impact of suicide of patient on the therapist                                  | 40                           |
| The dying or ill therapist while practicing                                    | 7                            |
| The psychotherapist's reaction to death of terminally ill patient              | 8                            |
| The psychotherapist's reaction to sudden or unexpected death of patient        | 4                            |



# Graduate Clinical Education

- Looked at 45 Graduate Clinical programs in US and England
- First 30 were drawn from rankings in US News and World Reports
- Remaining 15 were random California professional institutions and 5 schools in England

# Findings... (shocking)

- Only 2 public institutions offered a specific course on Death and Dying
- 1 professional school
  - UCLA
  - U of A
  - Adler School of Prof. Psy, Chicago
- However, many courses on aging, life span development where some discussion of Death and Dying may occur

# What is explanation?

- Students will already have content
- Students will receive content in supervision
- Intuitive, no one needs content
- Denial of death in profession/life (Becker, 1973)
- More focused on psychopathology than normal life experiences
- Psychotherapists do not like to write (different than researchers)
- Minimization of impact of death on psychotherapist
- Less inward focus (than outward on patient)
- Associated with other issues in literature (e.g. counter-transference, burn-out)
- Associated with other topics in education: suicide, aging, developmental
- Psychotherapist's will seek own consultation/supervision

# References

- Sign up if you want emailed list of literature by topic under: Death in Psychotherapy: FOCUS on the PSYCHOTHERAPIST