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From Fear of Death to Management of Life:— Inspirations from the Life and Death Education

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**Why Do We Need Life Education?**

Just as the saying goes, “there is a designated time for one’s birth and death”. We cannot avoid one from meeting death nor to predict it. Since life is ever-changing, rather than sitting duck waiting one’s doom, why we do not treasure every moment of life with a positive attitude, and face the relationship and meaning of both life and death head on? From this point of view, life education makes all the difference.

Life education aims at equipping people with a full knowledge of life course and its essence, and it covers a broad context, including: adapting to different life stages, experiencing the goodness of life while cherishing what you currently possess, and preparing early for death to reduce its impact on family and friends, etc. Such an exploratory syllabus will urge its students to “manage life” as soon as possible, that regrets can be avoided, and hence live wonderfully the rest of one’s life.

**How Can We Discuss Death Easily?**

It is always easier said than done, especially when the educating object is elders with relatively conventional minds. However, a successful new programme named simply “Life and Death Education”, organised by our Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies, Lingnan University (APIAS), could perhaps provide referential experience.

Sponsored by the Board of Management of the Chinese Permanent Cemeteries, this project of “Life and Death Education” was held from October 2013 to October 2014. It included several a “Questionnaire Survey for the Elderly with Disabilities”, “Life and Death Education Ambassador Training Programme”, “Educational Activities Set for Elderly People”, “Training Manual for Helping Disabled Elderly Person”, and a sharing session cum public seminar. This scheme targeted elderly persons with disabilities, poor physical or mental cognitive function. Through organising seminars in residential care homes for persons with disabilities, we aimed at enhancing the elderly’s and their carers’ awareness towards the preparation for the last stage of life, as well as preparing a training manual to encourage the masses to optimistically help the disabled elderly live happily the rest of their lives via the introduction of concepts and practices of life education in communities.
“Life and Death Education Ambassador Training Programme” and “Educational Activities Set for Elderly People” are the two signature initiatives. Adopting the “Train-the-Trainer Approach”, actions of classroom learning, role-playing, and group discussions had transformed a group of enthusiastic students from Lingnan University and some seniors from the Elder Academy into “Life Education Ambassadors”, who subsequently convey profound life and death knowledge to the audience through simple activities like “Life-Review Manuals” production, interactive theater, and other small games.

Is It Effective to Have a Serious Conversation of Death in the Form of Relaxing Activities?

While the foregoing activities did not seem complex in design, but the effect was significant. Participants reported that they had a better understanding of elderly life through this project. For example, the ambassadors have learned the basic contents and concepts of life and death education through learning and sharing, which are helpful to their reflecting on the meaning of life, how to cherish it, and to care about people around them. Moreover, more than 80 percent of the participants who have joined the “Educational Activities Set for Elderly People” told us that they have now increased understanding in life planning, life review manual and advance directives.

In addition to knowledge transfer, the programme could improve communication skills and foster transgenerational harmony. Both the students and elderly ambassadors agreed that what they have learned from the activities is helpful for exchanges of life and death knowledge amongst generations, which help facilitate the creation of a more harmonious transgenerational relationship. Furthermore, the elderly and the youngsters formed friendship that they will be benefited mutually through mutual support to each.

More importantly, the programme stressed on taking care of the spiritual needs of the elderly. Some elderly ambassadors shared that they were grateful towards the volunteers for their willingness to listen to their stories attentively and their assistance in translating them into life review manuals.

Dr. CAO Ting, Project Officer of APIAS and person-in-charge of this programme, also believes that promoting life education as friends through activities, could not only popularise the concepts of advance directives, death preparation and life management amongst the elderly, but also help them appreciate their past accomplishments and experiences, reinforce their self-esteem, and hold a positive and optimistic attitude towards life.

Suddenly Talking about Death, Would the Elderly be Scared?

Perhaps you will assume that the elderly might not like to talk about death, but in fact, they hold an open mind towards it, that over 60% of elderly people with disabilities are willing to discuss and even to plan for their posthumous arrangements.

The reason of fear is that people are unfamiliar with “death” and hence do not know how to cope with it. Referring to the experience from “Life and Death Education Ambassador Training Programme”, we should deliver life and death education through lively and interesting ways, so that seniors can on one hand build a positive mind towards late, and on the other hand through proper life planning eliminate their concerns and thus enjoy a carefree finale.