

# **Caring for Dying: the art of being present**

## **STUDY GUIDE**

**[www.secretsoflifeanddeath.com](http://www.secretsoflifeanddeath.com)**

At the beginning of *Caring for Dying: the art of being present* the filmmaker describes her difficulties with caring for her dying parents and the discrepancy between her ideal and what she was actually able to do. Her concerns are echoed in the stories of the three people she interviews. She learns from them that there is no ideal template for caregiving, no right behavior or correct strategy, just a lot of different ways of doing the best you can. Trying to stay aware and present with a healthy dose of forgiveness seems the best recipe for success. The film and the discussion it stimulates are an opportunity to develop awareness and learn from the experiences of others.

### **Advantages of Group Viewing and Discussion.**

Sharing our stories about caregiving can be informative and healing. Describing our experiences, thought and feeling to others can help bring them into focus and clarity. We can discover what concerns we have, what we are still holding on to and what we wish to change. We can also learn how others have handled similar situations, what worked, what did not, and find reassurance and affirmation in the discovery of common emotions, reactions and behavior.

### **Possible Group Contexts.**

Family and/or friends; church or community groups, retirement communities and senior centers, support groups for life-threatening illnesses, hospice and bereavement groups, academic classes on: aging, life passages, death, end-of-life; hospice nursing, palliative medicine.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND THEIR USE**

**The instructions and questions listed below are offered as suggestions. Each group should feel free to experiment and find what works best for its own process.**

1. After viewing the film wait a few minutes in silence to gather your thoughts and observe your reaction.
2. Write down (optional but encouraged) or mentally review your experience while watching the film
3. Share with the whole group
4. If the group is larger than ten people, divide into pairs or threesomes to share. Set a time limit of about ten to fifteen minutes. Let one person from each pair or threesome briefly summarize to the larger group, what was said and learned.
5. Open the group to general discussion or use some of the questions and exercises listed below.

## **Questions to Discuss**

### **Caregiving Experience**

- What thoughts, feelings or memories do you have after watching the film?
- What are your experiences with caregiving either as caregiver or recipient (not only for the dying)?
- How do you feel about your experience?
- What worked, what didn't, what did you learn?
- What advice would you give to someone about to be a caregiver for the first time?

### **Home Care v. Professional Facility**

- If you had to take on the responsibility of caring for someone in your family for six months to a year, how would such a commitment affect your daily life? What changes or adjustments would you have to make with your work and your family, to you home?
- The issue of homecare vs. nursing home was touched upon in the film. What factors might effect your decision to put a loved-one in a professional facility?

### **Caregiving Community**

- Brainstorm ways friends and family members might support a primary caregiver?
- Conflicts can arise among family members involved in caregiving such as: distribution of labor, sharing of expenses, decision-making, and access to the person dying. Thinking of your own family, do you anticipate (or have you already experienced) any conflicts around caregiving?
- Can you think of some positive ways these potential or real conflicts might be addressed in a positive and mutually respectful way?

[EXERCISE: Pick an actual or potential family conflicts from those that have been shared and have the group brainstorm strategies to resolve them.]

[EXERCISE: Pick an actual or potential family conflicts from those that have been shared and have members of the group role-play the conflict and attempt to resolve them. Have the role players discuss what happened from their viewpoint. Have the observers share what they observed.]

### **Discussing Death**

- Have you ever talked to your parents, or partner about death? How did it go?
- When is a good time to bring up the subject?
- What do you think are the most essential topics to discuss?
- Both Christine and Marcia had discussions with their loved ones about death. How might you bring up the subject of death to someone with a life-threatening illness? When is a good time, when might be a bad time to discuss death?

[EXERCISE: Divide into pairs and role-play care-giver and dying person and have a discussion about death. Decide who in the pair will bring it up. Then switch roles. Insights? How did the discussion feel? How did it feel when you switched roles? What subjects seem most important to discuss? Did that depend who you role-played?]

### **Assisting Death**

- Christine talked to her parent about using the extra morphine to die together. How do you feel about that proposal?
- What are your thoughts about assisted suicide for someone with a terminal diagnosis? Can you imagine some situations in which that might be appropriate, humane?
- As Christine says in the film there are many medical interventions that can prolong life, e.g., life support equipment, feeding tubes, antibiotics, calling 911. What are your feelings about any of these interventions if you or someone you loved had a terminal diagnosis? What if that loved-on was unconscious or in a coma? Under what sort of circumstances would you make the decision to stop medical intervention?

[Remember that what you think in the abstract might be very different from what you would actually do in the situation.]