
CONFERENCE ABSTRACT

The Reflection Room®: promoting discussions on dying and death ... and pandemic-related grief

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Introduction

Thinking about dying and death is something we tend not to do, and those who promote advance care planning for our last days, hours and minutes would like us to do more. We wondered whether providing appropriate places for a form of ritualized, shared storytelling might provide a setting and a time in which people could encounter their own and others' grief and thoughts, feelings and beliefs about dying and death.

Aims Objectives Theory or Methods

We hypothesized that a welcoming physical space where people could encounter short narrative accounts of experiences of dying, death and grief would encourage the expression of thoughts and emotions. The Reflection Room®, conceived as transitional or liminal space, is an immersive experience informed by generative design research and participatory art installations. Design included invitations to enter, nature images, candles, comfortable seating, quiet music and a 'Reflection Wall' for posting stories. The actual use of the Room is iteratively "co-created" through visitors' actions and reactions. Non-participant observation through thematic analysis of stories was conducted to detect what people disclosed and read.

Highlights or Results or Key Findings

Over five years, we installed the Reflection Room® in 57 public and private spaces across Canada and collected over 1,000 reflections (stories). Stories reflected the emotional and conceptual experiences accompanying an encounter with dying and death. The stories also revealed a need or desire to interact with the stories of anonymous others. The stories shared had the quality of an offering to others, rather than straightforward expressions of personal grieving. Themes from the reflections included near and distant memories; continuing relationships past death through dialogue and remembrance; expressions of grief, regret and gratitude; learnings that had emerged through bereavement and grieving; advice to others about living; and observations that unfinished grieving was helped by the opportunity to reflect.

Conclusions

The Reflection Room® used storytelling to prompt expression, and visitors used the Room as they wanted and needed to. The variety and depth of stories shows the Reflection Room® opened appropriate space and time for many visitors--family, friends and caregivers--to publicly share and integrate private conversations and experiences.

Implications for applicability/transferability sustainability and limitations

The research team has been asked to deploy the Reflection Room® to address pandemic-related grief and loss in long-term care homes in central Ontario. This is a new opportunity to investigate whether the Reflection Room® can provide space and time for residents, caregivers and healthcare providers to process their grief.