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Living Fully Until Death is an upbeat and idealized portrayal of death and dying. The video features three people with terminal illnesses: Morrie Schwartz, a Brandeis University professor diagnosed with Lou Gerig's disease (ALS), Shirley Waring, a leukemia patient and the mother of four adults, and William Meyer, diagnosed with lung cancer.

The video points out that most people know the cause of their death at least two years before they die. Implicit is the theme that people should use this time to find meaning through dying. Thus, Living Fully chronicles how three people struggle to find meaning and personal growth through dying.

At first glance, this is a sugar-coated portrayal of death. Little is shown about the psychological, social, and physical devastation of death. There are few tears, but many smiles and wise words. The dying remain connected to the world and their loved ones. Each appears to be affluent and well educated. This is not the story of the average person. However, underneath this sugared glaze are the controversial topics of suicide and assisted suicide. For example, one man gives an account of how he helped his father die by applying information given in the bestseller Final Exit (Humphry, 1991). This segment might be a useful stepping stone for a class discussion on euthanasia and assisted suicide.

Although the people portrayed in the video are far from typical, more typical people might find inspiration through Morrie, Shirley, and William's stories — people can gain meaning from dying and continue to grow until the very end. However, viewers need to understand that the process of dying is often a devastating experience for both the dying and loved ones, and that certain diseases (e.g., Alzheimer's disease) would deny such a graceful death.

Therefore, this video should be clearly presented as an idealized account of dying. It might work well as an introduction to death and dying to ease people into a topic feared by many. However, for most audiences, this video should not stand alone. Other material needs to be presented to give a more realistic view of the dying process.

Possible discussion topics following this video would include: (a) how the nature of the disease might affect dying; (b) the role of spirituality in the dying process; (c) assisted suicide; (d) the effects of age and developmental norms on dying (is it easier to die when you are old?); and (e) why it is easier for some people to come to grips with dying than others?

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Reference


To Choose No Harm is a sensitive yet powerful documentary which explores the ethical dilemmas that healthcare professionals encounter when caring for dying patients. This video explores a range of end-of-life issues and the difficulties encountered by healthcare teams when conflicts exist between the wishes of their patients and the patients' families, and/or conflicts between the wishes of the patients and the beliefs and clinical judgments of the healthcare workers. This is an especially timely topic, considering the current media debate over "assisted suicide," the right to die, and death with dignity.

The video looks at two terminally ill patients and the respective healthcare teams who are caring for these individuals. Each case presentation is followed by a panel discussion. The panel is made up of a hospital ethicist, nurse manager, physician, medical resident, and a hospital administrator, three of whom are members of the hospital's ethics committee. The panel discussions reflect on the challenging ethical problems related to patient autonomy, patient safety and welfare, family conflict, and patient or family denial. Questions are raised and discussed regarding patient autonomy, shared decision making, and the ever-present topics of cost effectiveness and whether treatment and hospitalization are necessary and appropriate.

The first case presented is a young man who is terminally ill with AIDS and is showing symptoms of AIDS-related dementia. He lives alone. There is a local hospice facility which would appear to be the reasonable solution to this young man's dilemma; however, the patient does not want to give up his independent living, and he wants the team to explore additional treatment options for him so he can "get better" and stay at home, thus preserving his autonomy. The team acknowledges the young man's need for autonomy, yet his living alone is not safe and would not be a viable option.

The second case is an elderly woman with terminal cancer who has chosen to decline cardiopulmonary resuscitation should it be necessary, and who desires to die at home rather than in a hospital or other facility. In her presence, her husband agrees that he will abide by her wishes, but in private, he has told the healthcare team that he is emotionally incapable of caring for her at home and honoring her wishes regarding cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and he asks that the team keep this "secret" from her. The woman remains in the hospital, but eventually her insurance company refuses to pay for continuing hospitalization and the patient faces nursing home placement, which she does not want. Whereas dying at home appears to be the logical solution both financially and in meeting the wishes of the dying woman, because of the husband's emotional state, this is not an option.

To Choose No Harm is a well planned and well executed documentary. The videocassette itself is a technically excellent product. The photography is of high quality and the