

What does euthanasia mean?

Families sometimes confuse euthanasia, assisted suicide and allowing to die. They often believe anything that shortens life is euthanasia. However, there are clear differences.

Euthanasia is deliberate killing in order to put an end to a person's suffering, with or without the person's consent.

In **assisted suicide**, people take their own lives with the help of someone else. For example, a doctor assists by providing pills, an intravenous drip, or other means that they use to kill themselves.

Allowing a person to die of natural causes is not euthanasia. Neither are the following medical practices:

- respecting a patient's refusal of treatment or request to stop treatment
- giving drugs to ease suffering in a terminal illness, even if the secondary effect is to shorten life.

When someone you love is dying

EUTHANASIA

What of the fear of becoming a burden?

In our society we place a strong emphasis on being independent of others. Many of us fear we will become a burden to those we love. While a terminal illness can place heavy demands on family and friends, the community has a responsibility to help those who are suffering and dying. The type of care and compassion we show to the weak and vulnerable reflects the kind of society we really are.

What about the right to choose?

Some people believe that personal freedom includes the right to have someone help them to die. This belief is often used to argue for legalized euthanasia and assisted suicide. Such an argument ignores the fact that these practices threaten human freedom. Because life is a gift from God, we are free to live as fully as possible but we are not free to decide when or how we die.

We live in communities and the choices we make have an impact on others. Euthanasia and assisted suicide involve other people and affect other people's lives. These practices weaken respect for human life. They threaten the security and trust that are essential for living together in community.

When someone you love is dying

Would acceptance of euthanasia lead to abuses?

In a society that accepts euthanasia, would those who are most vulnerable the chronically ill, the mentally ill and those with physical or mental disabilities - live with the fear that someone else might decide their lives are not important? Who can trust a caregiver who holds the power to kill?

Should anyone have the right to decide whose life is a burden and whose life has quality, or to judge that someone's life should be ended?

The experience of the Dutch people provides some important information. Studies reveal that in the Netherlands mercy killing and assisted suicide are tolerated but, despite guidelines to prevent abuses, patients are killed every year without their consent. In such a climate, many of the elderly are reluctant to go to doctors, fearing they could become the victims of mercy killing.

When someone you love is dying

How do we deal with the suffering?

Many fear that dying means suffering through a long period of extreme pain and loneliness. Those who are dying need assurances:

- that their pain can be controlled
- that they can still have moments of joy and peace
- that they will have the time and opportunity for a gradual letting go and for final good-byes
- that their emotional, spiritual and psychological needs will be met with genuine care and compassion
- that they may approach death with the dignity they desire and not be burdened with technology.

Palliative care seeks to respond to all of these concerns. It is active, compassionate care offered by health care professionals and volunteers. Palliative care shows that pain and other symptoms of advanced disease can be relieved.

When someone you love is dying

The killing of another person, even with that person's consent, is a very public matter. To accept killing as a private matter of individual choice is to diminish respect for human life, dull our consciences and dehumanize society.

Archbishop Marcel Gervais
President – Canadian Conference
of Catholic Bishops — January, 1993

A deep respect for the sanctity of life should cause us to consider how we can help others live with dignity and affirm the importance of their lives, rather than assist in hastening their deaths.

Brian C. Stiller
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When someone you love is dying

Your mother is dying. The thought of losing her saddens you but you want her to have a good death.

You want the doctors and nurses to help her and to help you and your family. You don't want her to die in pain.

The doctor tells you, "There is nothing more that we can do to make her better." Is it OK to say, "Stop the treatments, make her comfortable and let her die?"

What an agonizing decision to have to make. Would this be euthanasia?