

Through the Fire – A Dying Exercise

Written by Joan Stempel, MSN

This is a powerful exercise in helping you to understand the letting go process that those who are terminally ill must face. As you experience the process, just notice how you feel, and how you respond to those feelings, without self judgment. How might this awareness impact how you work with patients and families who are facing this is real life, without the choices you are being given here?

Before you begin this exercise, take 16 small slips of paper.
Write one item on each slip of paper. The items to include are:
Your 4 favorite people (currently living)
Your 4 favorite foods
Your 4 favorite places
Your 4 favorite activities

THE EXERCISE

You have not been feeling well, tired, irritable with increasingly severe stomach pain. You keep telling yourself it is just stress. The pain is becoming more constant and more severe so you make an appointment to see your doctor. *Give up one card*

After listening to your symptoms and doing an examination, the doctor tells you he wants to send you for some further tests. You feel yourself becoming anxious. You look at his face and ask, “Is it anything serious?” He says, “We’ll know more after the tests.” He gives you a prescription for some pain medication and tells you to let him know if that doesn’t do the trick. *Give up one card*

You have a CAT scan and go to the doctor for the results. He tells you they have found a tumor and orders a biopsy. A week later, you again meet and the doctor tells you that you have cancer of the pancreas. You ask, “Is there anything that can be done?” and are told you are being referred to an oncologist, a cancer specialist. *Give up one card*

Two days later, you see the oncologist. You are told that chemotherapy can be tried, but it is usually not successful with this type of cancer. You ask, “How long?” and are told 6 months to 1 year. *Give up one card*

You feel stunned, you can’t believe this is happening to you! You feel there must be some mistake...it’s not fair...you find yourself alternating between wanting to ignore the cancer and pretend nothing has changed, and wanting to rage and scream and shout. *Give up one card*

After much thought and discussion, you decide not to try chemotherapy. You wonder if you are making the right decision, are you cutting off a chance to be cured or to have more time? You don’t sleep well at night, you are anxious, fearful, wondering what will be next. At least the medication is stopping the pain. *Give up one card*

You decide to contact some of your family and old friends and invite them to come and spend some time with you. You begin calling and writing them and explaining what is happening to

you. It's hard to hear the shock and pain in their voices when they are told. Several begin to cry. *Give up one card.*

You've had a couple of good days, you could almost forget you were sick. A visit from a long time friend really picked up your spirits. You sat and talked for hours. It felt so good to laugh. *Give up one card*

You went to see the doctor today. He confirmed the tumor is growing and suggests that now might be a good time to call hospice. Hospice...don't they take people who are about to die? You think, "Am I really that close? Somehow I thought I had more time." You tell your doctor you'll think about it and let him know. *Give up one card.*

You sit with your family and friends and watch the sunset tonight and talk. You wonder how many sunsets do I have left? You feel a deep sense of sadness fill you as you picture saying good-bye to each and everyone. You being reviewing your life. The people you are close to. You look at your relationships, and realize there are people you need to forgive and others you need to ask their forgiveness for times you could have been more...given more...done more....*Give up one card.*

You have no appetite today and just pick at your food. You catch sight of yourself in the mirror and are shocked. Who is that skinny person? It doesn't look like you. You feel the physical you is just fading away. You wonder how much longer will I be able to take care of myself? You do not like the idea that you may need to have others take care of you. Your family calls hospice. *Your partner will randomly take one of your remaining cards.*

You can no longer get out of bed. You are sleeping a lot of the time and your dreams are becoming very vivid. You awaken to see someone you love very much sitting by your bed, quietly crying. You whisper "I love you" to them and feel them squeeze your hand. You wish you could comfort the person and know you're too weak to try. You feel frustrated and helpless and with that thought you drift back to sleep. *Give up one card.*

You have a hospital bed now and it is in the living room so you can look out the window. You watch a hummingbird come to a feeder and marvel at its beautiful colors. *Give up one card.*

You are gently awakened and told it is time for a bath. Those taking care of you look so tired...you wish they didn't have to work so hard. You know it can't be much longer...at least you hope not....*give up one card.*

You feel a deep sense of peace, a sense of moving out beyond your body. You have been seeing and talking to friends and family member who are dead. The fear that you once had is gone. It's hard to tell when you are sleeping and when you are awake. Sometimes you hear people talking in the distance, but you are too weak to respond. *Give up one card.*

You sense it is time for you to just let go. A peacefulness comes over you and those who have come to help you are there lending you strength. You are surrounded by love and light and you just gently ease out of this life and are gone. *Give up your final card.*

Refer to the lecture download for sample processing questions