

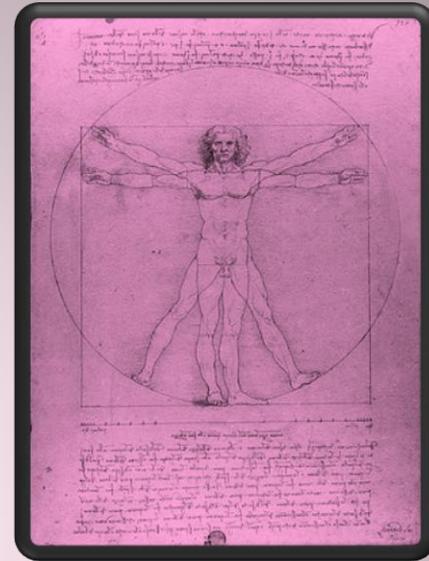
# The Value of Existential Pain

An opportunity to focus on what is  
really important.

Fred Grewe, MAPS, BCC

# Objectives for this Workshop

1. Gain an increased knowledge on the basis and symptoms of end-of-life existential suffering
2. Learn specific verbal and non-verbal skills to enhance difficult end-of-life conversations
3. Learn non-pharmaceutical therapies to ameliorate end-of-life existential suffering



# Signs of Existential Pain

Why me?

Why now?

What did I do to deserve this?

Why won't God take me?

There must be some purpose for  
me?

Is there hope?

Can I be forgiven?

What happens when I die?

How long will this last?

How will I be remembered?

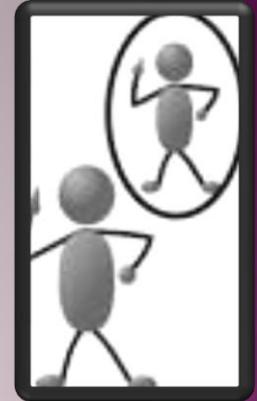


# The Value of Existential Pain

- ⦿ Pain is a great change agent
- ⦿ Pain teaches us we are alone
- ⦿ First step in 12 Steps
- ⦿ A call to wake up
- ⦿ Existential pain can shatter our false illusions of self importance
- ⦿ Existential pain can provide an opportunity to focus on the truly important
- ⦿ It is also normal at life's end!



# Upon Further Reflection



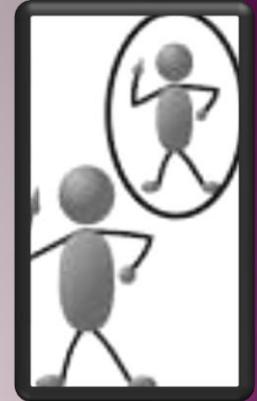
The English word *reflect* has two primary meanings - to see ourselves as in a mirror, and also to look inward in a contemplative way. <sup>[1]</sup> In my own search for meaning, I've found the two to be intimately connected.

<sup>[1]</sup> Robert Solomon, "Lecture 16: Heidegger on the World and the Self," *No Excuses: Existentialism and the Meaning of Life*, (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, CD, 2000).

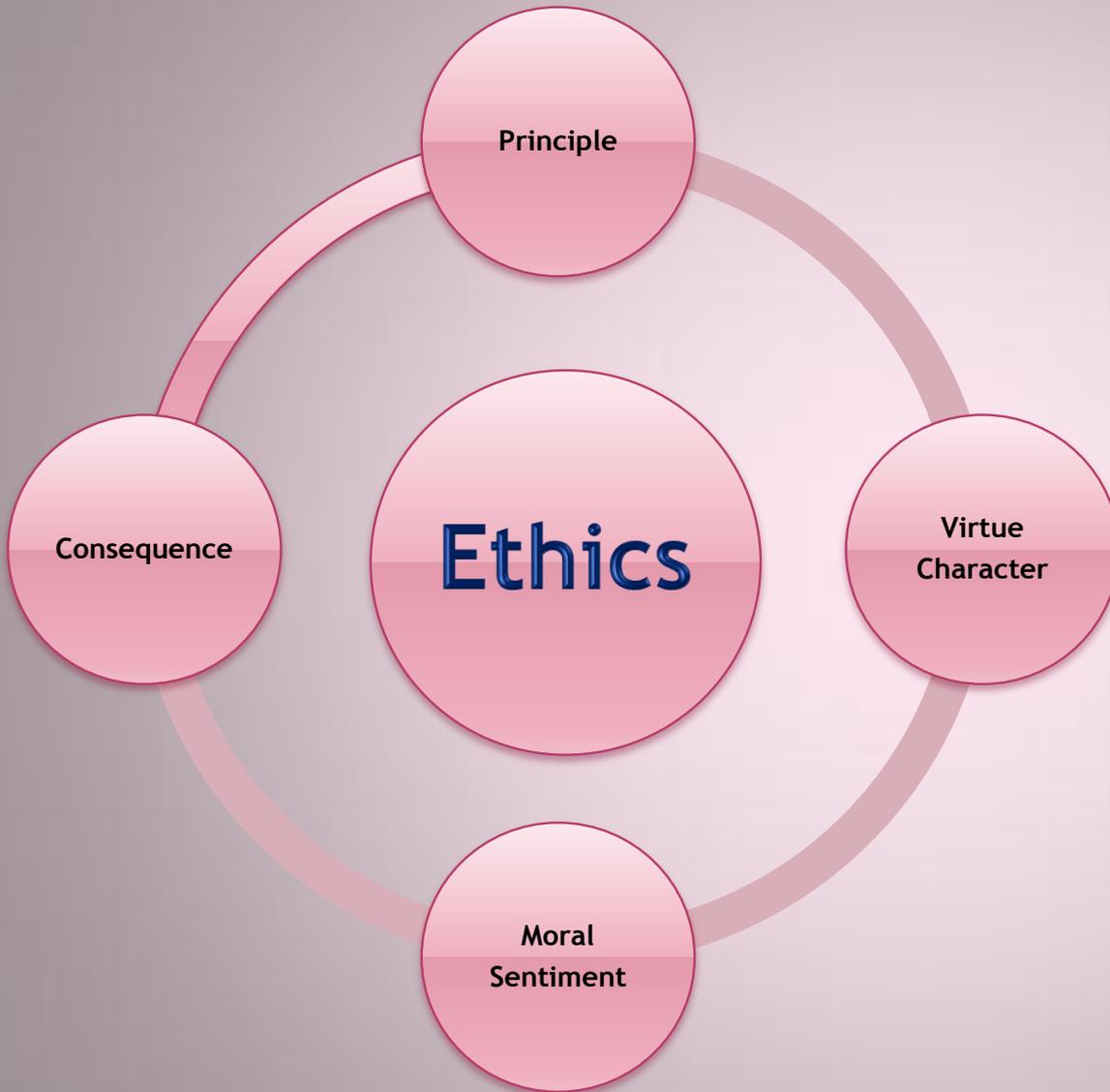
# Upon Further Reflection

Philosophers (particularly the existentialist ones like Heidegger and Sartre) believe it's impossible to know ourselves apart from being in relationship. The existentialists teach it is by getting feedback from others about who we are (*mirror reflection*) that we can then truly look inward to contemplate our being (*contemplative reflection*). "By linking ourselves (who can't be very objective) with others (who can be more so), we gain access to ourselves."<sup>[2]</sup> Therefore, the only way I can truly come to know myself and create any sense of meaning is by being in relationship with others.

<sup>[2]</sup> David Biro, *The Language of Pain : Finding Words, Compassion, and Relief*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 153.



# 4 Ways People Approach Ethics



Brian O'Toole  
*Health Progress, 1998*

# Having the End of Life Conversation



- ◉ Don't just do something - sit there!
- ◉ Communication is more than 85% non-verbal
- ◉ Silence is often therapeutic
- ◉ Appropriate touch
- ◉ Allow yourself to be human and *feel* emotion
- ◉ Follow the Patient's lead
- ◉ Honor the Patient's story

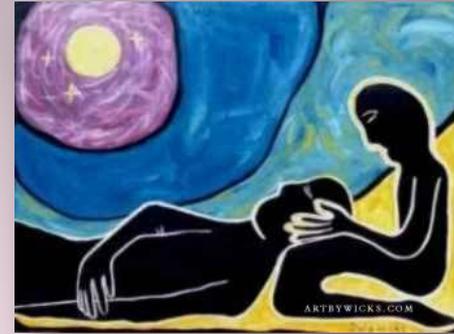
# Having the End of Life Conversation



In the long run it is the persistent nurturing role of the therapist who has dealt with his or her own death complex sufficiently that helps the patient overcome the anxiety and fear of his impending death.

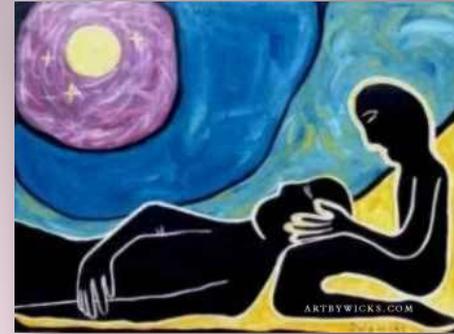
- *Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross*

# Ideas to Soothe Existential Pain



- ◉ Try to specifically reflect back to Patients where their life had meaning
- ◉ And how they have brought meaning to you - what they have taught you
- ◉ Treat the dying person as normal
- ◉ Reframe vulnerability as an invitation to *intimacy*
- ◉ Suggest they bless their loved ones
- ◉ Give the gifts of affirmation and acceptance

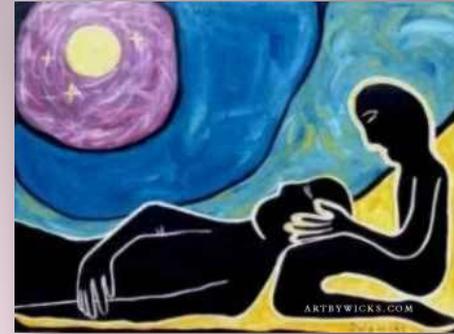
# Ideas to Soothe Existential Pain



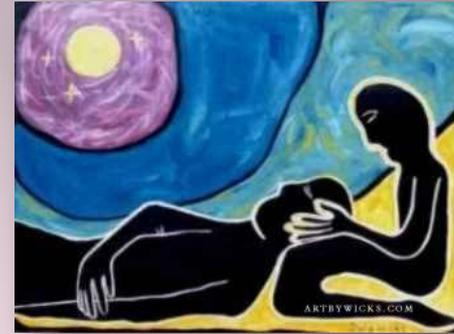
I've learned that people will forget  
what you said, people will forget  
what you did, but people will never  
forget how you made them feel.

- Maya Angelou

# Ideas to Soothe Existential Pain



And remember, there is no cure for existential pain at the end of life. There is only temporary relief - but that is enough.



# Henri Nouwen

Compassion is hard because it requires the inner disposition to go with others to the place where they are weak, vulnerable, lonely, and broken. But this is not our spontaneous response to suffering. What we desire most is to do away with suffering by fleeing from it or finding a quick cure for it ... Our ability to enter into solidarity with those who suffer [is our greatest gift].



**May you have the  
commitment to know  
what has hurt you, to  
allow it to come close  
to you, and in the  
end to become one  
with you.**

- Gaelic Blessing

# Contact

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