

Editor-in-Chief's Introduction to the
Handbook of Thanatology: Foundational Knowledge

Thanatology at its core centers on the whole person. Holistic knowledge and holistic practice intertwine in our interdisciplinary efforts. If ever there was an arena requiring that the research-practice gap be bridged, surely it occurs where thanatologists engage with persons dealing with human mortality. Mastering the complex, multidisciplinary arena that is thanatology is a task, however, beyond human capability.

As in all arenas of scholarship and practice, thanatology too has become more vast than any one individual can be expected reasonably to master. Given the recognition that no one can master all the material, a temptation is to abdicate any responsibility to know what is foundational to thanatology and only know a slice of what interests us. Our intent with this handbook – and the intent of developing the CT Exam itself -- is to challenge the notion that we can abdicate mastering foundational knowledge in thanatology.

The handbook emerged as ADEC members serving on the Credentialing Council, in the Body of Knowledge Committee, and in the Test Committee reflected on efforts to put into operation a reliable and valid exam measuring knowledge considered foundational to a beginner in thanatology. The structure of this handbook comes directly from the inspired efforts of the Body of Knowledge Committee, chaired by Carol Wogrin, in a two day meeting in the Winter of 2005 during which categories considered fundamental to thanatology were identified. These categories are

- Dying,
- End-of-Life Decision Making,

- Loss, Grief, and Mourning,
- Assessment and Intervention,
- Traumatic Death, and
- Death Education.

In addition to these six fundamental categories of knowledge, several indicators applicable across categories were identified. These categories are

- Culture and Socialization,
- Religion and Spirituality,
- Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,
- Life Span Issues,
- The Family and Larger Systems,
- Ethical and Legal Issues,
- Professional Issues, and
- Resources and Research.

The Body of Knowledge provided operational definitions for the six categories and the various indicators.

Dying: the physical, psychosocial, and spiritual experience of facing death, living with terminal illness, the dying process, and caring for the terminally ill

End of Life Decision Making: the aspects of life threatening illness/terminal illness that involve choices and decisions about actions to be taken, for individuals, families, and professional caregivers

Loss, Grief, and Mourning: the physical, behavioral, cognitive, and social experience of and reactions to loss, the grief process, and practices surrounding grief and commemoration.

Assessment and Intervention: includes information gathered, decisions that are made, and actions that are taken by professional caregivers to determine and/or provide for the needs of the dying, their loved ones, and the bereaved.

Traumatic Death: sudden, violent, inflicted, and/or intentional death, shocking encounters with death

Death Education: Formal and informal methods for acquiring and disseminating knowledge about dying, death and bereavement.

Indicators

Cultural/Socialization: the influence of cultural/ethnic and social parameters on the experience of death and loss

Religious/Spiritual: the relationship between religious and spiritual belief systems and the reaction to and coping with death.

Professional Issues: factors that affect professionals' training, abilities and responsibilities in providing care

Historical: the historical context and historical changes that played a role in the death experience, and the theoretical paradigms in the field of Thanatology up to 1980's

Contemporary: theoretical perspectives in death and dying and the factors that have influenced the perspectives from the 1980's to the present

Life Span: the consideration of death and dying and developmental perspectives from infancy to old age

Larger Systems: the social organizations beyond the individual and family that effect the experience of dying, death and grief

Family and Individual: Social, cognitive, and physical encounters and interpretations of dying, death, and loss from the standpoint of the person, and the group of people with a relational bond and long term commitment who define themselves as “family”

Resources: Involves materials, organizations and groups of individuals who facilitate knowledge acquisition. Ideas and materials are based upon the findings of empirical research and theoretical synthesis that add to the knowledge base.

Ethical/Legal: Aspects of dying, death and/or loss that pertain generally to determination of right from wrong, and specifically to the principles of medical ethics. Legal issues refer to the articulated laws of a society as they pertain to thanatology.

The six categories and twelve indicators form the Body of Knowledge (BOK)

Matrix reproduced below. The BOK Matrix is copyrighted by the Association for Death

Education and Counseling. The examples in the various cells of the BOK Matrix are

illustrative of topics considered probable when categories and indicators intersect. For instance, in the cell with the category Traumatic Death and the indicator Religion and Spirituality, you will see the illustrative examples of “meaning reconstruction” and “rituals.” The topics in the BOK Matrix presented below are not considered exhaustive.

As early as July of 2003 the Test Committee floated a proposal that ADEC commission its own book on the material considered foundational knowledge in thanatology. The first two proposals for such a book were dismissed for various reasons, among them the fear that such a book could not be produced and the fear that ADEC would lose its financial shirt in backing such an endeavor. In 2005 after further endorsement for a book from the Test Committee and from the Body of Knowledge Committee, and with the BOK Matrix now in play, the decision was made to go ahead with the book. The ADEC Board appointed an Editor-in-Chief, and he in turn sought three persons to serve as Associate Editors: Carol Wogrin, Gordon Thornton, and David Meagher. Different plans for the book were tried out. One that got an extremely lukewarm reception from persons contacted to be authors was to have six chapters; each chapter would focus on one of the BOK categories and include coverage of all the indicators identified in the BOK matrix. Respondents said the task lacked any appeal and would be akin to being given a recipe or check list; authors wanted room to be intelligently creative.

A new structure for the book got strong endorsement: to write separate chapters using a category-by-indicators focus. Thus, there would be a chapter on Culture, Socialization, and Dying; one on Religion, Spirituality, and Dying; and so forth through all the categories and indicators within the BOK Matrix. After some reflection, the

editors decided two indicators (Professional Issues; Resources and Research) deserved one long chapter each that would cut across BOK categories (in contrast to the other chapters that focus on a BOK category by a specific indicator).

Nominations were sought for whom to contact to write chapters. Persons readily accepted the offer. Then we set in motion a process to get all manuscripts reviewed by the editors, to discuss and synthesize the reviewers' comments, to provide authors feedback of the editors' comments, and to seek revisions.

What you have in your hands is the product of those efforts. We think it a worthy first endeavor, and we realize that our vast field continues to grow. We expect in a few years knowledgeable persons will commission a revised edition of the *Handbook of Thanatology: The Essential Body of Knowledge for the Study of Death, Dying, and Bereavement*.

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