

## **CAPA NSW Professional Development Event: 6/5/14**

### ***Mortality and meaning – integrating death into life***

Presenter: Dr Alison Strasser, Centre for Existential Practice

*PDE review written by Juliana Triml, CAPA NSW PDE Coordinator*

On 6 May 2014 Dr Alison Strasser provided CAPA members with an opportunity to reflect on our own mortality and meanings, so that we can better understand and connect with clients who bring these issues into the therapy room. The idea of this topic came to me after reading Irwin Yalom's book *Staring at the Sun*.

As we were working in groups on the night, some of the therapists admitted that the thought of mortality was remote. I personally believe that this is not unusual for younger counsellors as contemplation of mortality comes to us as we get older or when we encounter a life threatening situation. I would confess that now in my mature years I can feel more empathetic with clients who talk about the issue of mortality than I did some 15 years ago.

While we were discussing in groups our own understanding and meanings, most likely, some issues became clearer. For example, some of us could separate death per se from a fear of dying with pain, being incapacitated physically and mentally, or loss of opportunities that life offers. For example, Alison suggested that some dying persons express regrets and wish that they had lived a life true to their-self, hadn't worked so hard, had the courage to express feelings, had kept in touch with friends and family, etc. Most of these regrets are relational to self or others.

Heidegger posits that most people aim to create certainty by their actions to avoid uncertainty; everything has an end and owning our own anxiety is our key to authenticity. Hence, anxiety is our teacher that invites us to explore what it is to be unique and authentic. Yalom's existentials explore meaning/meaninglessness of both life and death, including loss of health, loss of love or friendships, loss of autonomy or identity. Some of these losses can be seen as a "type of death" that brings on a grieving process.

It was suggested that defences against death anxiety may include one's specialness, workaholic attitudes, narcissism, aggression and control, humour or calling on the Ultimate Rescuer, such as God, therapist, doctor, etc. However, philosophical or spiritual ideologies give us our own meaning of life and death.

So how do we work with our clients, as most questions related to clients rather than therapist's position although this workshop was intended as a "self-care" for the therapist? Therefore, having travelled the journey of reflections and/or lived experiences allows us to experience our empathy to be more genuine. Further, we need to realize that mortality is a reality that unites us all. And, ultimately, the role of the therapist is to be with the clients and work within their belief system.

Finally, I believe that, it is imperative for us therapists to be knowledgeable about various spiritual/religious belief systems on death and life after death, so that we can assist with our clients' journey rather than imposing our own beliefs that would make us feel more comfortable.

Reference: Yalom, I. 2008, *Staring at the Sun*. Wiley, UK.