

Criteria for a Good Death

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This brief paper advances the concept of a “good death,” outlines ten specific criteria for a good death, and proposes a simple golden rule for optimal dying.

By almost universal common consent, death has a bad reputation. Words like awful and catastrophic are practically synonymous with death. Good and death seem oxymoronic, incompatible, mutually exclusive. Given all this, what then can it mean to speak of a good death? Are some deaths better than others? Can one plan to improve on one’s death? My answer to these questions is yes, and that is what this brief paper is about.

In a previous article about a related topic (Shneidman, 1998), I discussed how *suicide*—the meaning and connotations of the word—had palpably changed over the last 230 years. The entries on suicide traced in fifteen different editions of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* indicate that suicide has mutated from being a sin and a crime (involving the punishment of the corpse and the survivors) to being a mental health issue meriting the therapeutic and sympathetic response of others. Death is the over-arching topic of suicide and is more culturally gyroscopic, slower to change, yet subject to shifts in the cultural zeitgeist. If one begins, somewhat arbitrarily, in the Middle Ages with another related topic—courtly love, specifically courtship (DeRougemont, 1940)—one sees that there

were elaborate rules for courtly love and for courtly deportment in general. The goal was to be able to do admittedly difficult tasks with seeming effortless and without complaint (Castiglione, 1528/1959); in other words, with grace.

The challenge for this paper is to propose some criteria for a good death—a sort of report card of death, a fantasied optimal dying scenario—and to provide a chance to debate what a good death ought to be.

There is no single best kind of death. A good death is one that is appropriate for that person. It is a death in which the hand of the way of dying slips easily into the glove of the act itself. It is in character, on camera, ego-syntonic. It, the death, fits the person. It is a death that one might choose if it were realistically possible for one to choose one’s own death. Weisman (1972) has called this an appropriate death.

A decimal of criteria of a good death can be listed. The ten items include (see also Table 1):

1. *Natural*. There are four modes of death—natural, accident, suicide, and homicide (NASH). Any survivor would prefer a loved one’s death to be natural. No suicide is a good death.
2. *Mature*. After age 70. Near the pinnacle of mental functioning but old enough to have experienced and savored life.

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TABLE 1
Ten Criteria for a Good Death

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| NATURAL A natural death, rather than accident, suicide, or homicide | ACCEPTED Willing the obligatory; gracefully accepting the inevitable |
| MATURE After age 70; elderly yet lucid and experienced | CIVILIZED Attended by loved ones; with flowers, pictures, and music for the dying scene |
| EXPECTED Neither sudden nor unexpected; some decent warning | GENERATIVE To have passed the wisdom of the tribe to younger generations |
| HONORABLE Emphasis on the honorifics; a positive obituary | RUEFUL To experience the contemplative emotions of sadness and regret without collapse |
| PREPARED A living trust; prearranged funeral; some unfinished tasks to be done | PEACEABLE With amicability and love; freedom from physical pain |

3. *Expected.* Neither sudden nor unexpected. Survivors-to-be do not like to be surprised. A good death should have about a weeks lead time.
4. *Honorable.* Filled with honorifics but not dwelling on past failures. Death begins an ongoing obituary, a memory in the minds of the survivors. The Latin phrase is: *De mortuis nil nisi bonum* (Of the dead [speak] nothing but good).
5. *Prepared.* A living trust, prepaid funeral arrangements. That the decedent had given thought and made arrangements for the necessary legalities surrounding death.
6. *Accepted.* "Willing the obligatory," that is, accepting the immutables of chance and nature and fate; not raging into the night; acceding to nature's unnegotiable demands.
7. *Civilized.* To have some of your loved ones physically present. That the dying scene be enlivened by fresh flowers, beautiful pictures, and cherished music.
8. *Generative.* To pass down the wisdom of the tribe to younger generations; to write; to have shared memories and histories; to act like a beneficent sage.

9. *Rueful.* To cherish the emotional state which is a bittersweet admixture of sadness, yearning, nostalgia, regret, appreciation, and thoughtfulness. To avoid depression, surrender, or collapse; to die with some projects left to be done; by example, to teach the paradigm that no life is completely complete.
10. *Peaceable.* That the dying scene be filled with amicability and love, that physical pain be controlled as much as competent medical care can provide. Each death an ennobling icon of the human race.

I end with a sweeping question: Is it possible to formulate a Golden Rule for a good death, a maxim that has the survivors in mind? I would offer, as a beginning, the following Golden Rule for the dying scene: Do unto others *as little as possible*. By which I mean that the dying person consciously try to arrange that his or her death—given the inescapable sadness of the loss-to-be—be as little pain as humanly possible to the survivors. Along with this Golden Rule for dying there is the copperplated injunction: Die in a manner so that the reviews of your death speak to your better self (as a courtier distinguished by grace) rather than as a plebian

marked by coarseness and complaint. Have your dying be a courtly death, among the best things that you ever did. It is your last

chance to get your neuroses under partial control.

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