



Portland Institute  
For Loss and Transition

## Principle of Practice

# Develop your Death Competence

All over the world since the Coronavirus pandemic exploded, we are experiencing a new and unexpected contact with disease, death and the entire dimension of our mortality and finiteness. This involves us at all levels, as citizens, members of the community and of our family and as professionals in the field of psychological help. Those who work with people who face grief, as happens for those who work in the context of the end of life (for example in hospice) or work at the clinical level with bereaved, have usually acquired their skills by enriching their basic training through learning techniques to prevent Prolonged or Complicated Grief and to work in psychotherapy with bereaved people who are stuck in chronic mourning to help them make sense of the loss they are suffering. Often, however, the theme of *Death Competence* remains in the background, or is not specifically addressed, and this calls for a broader and deeper personal development.

Death Competence was initially defined as a set of a specific Cognitive and Emotional Competencies to work with grief (Gamino & Ritter, 2009). I felt that these two competencies must be completed and integrated by a third – *Existential Competence* – defined as “The capacity to accept our own and the others’ mortality in a specific and idiosyncratic horizon of meaning” (De Luca, Iatesta, Tineri, 2017). It is important that practitioners who work in the aforementioned areas can self-monitor through a *checklist* and draw from its open ended questions cues for reflection in order to attend to all three dimensions to develop a solid Death Competence.

Drawing on the following partial checklist of questions can facilitate self-exploration of the areas to be developed:

- How much do you think you are able to manage what the prospect of your death evokes in you?
- In working with clients who are dying or are bereaved can you empathize with them and regulate the emotions elicited in you by their experience of loss?
- Are you comfortable in working with clients who have a representation of death different from yours (e.g. death as passage or as annihilation?)?

Reflecting on the different areas of your Death Competence, either on your own or in the context of a group of colleagues or within your work team, can facilitate your *search for meaning* in a narrative context and foster mutual support.

*Reference:* De Luca, M.L., Iatesta, F., Tineri, M (2017). La Death Competence. *Psicologia, Psicoterapia e Salute*, V.14 (3), 35-55.

*Author:* Maria Luisa De Luca, PhD, Psychotherapist, is a Professor of Psychopathology and Emergency Mental Health at Pontifical Salesian University in Rome, Italy, and is the founder of the ‘Grief and Growth’ Institute and author of several studies in the field of grief and bereavement. See <http://www.luttoecrescita.it/> for more details.

✉ [deluca@unisal.it](mailto:deluca@unisal.it)