Title: A developmental perspective on existential distress in patients with advanced cancer

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Abstract: The confrontation with mortality imposed by advanced cancer may trigger existential concerns about the meaning and value of one’s life. In this conceptual talk, I use Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development to interpret these existential threats and individual resiliencies against them, as based upon one’s developmental history. The confrontation with mortality may accelerate individuals into the final life stages, regardless of personal readiness. Individuals who were at earlier stages of development may be less prepared to undergo life review and less able to make sense of their foreshortened lives. The experience of advanced disease may also re-activate all developmental challenges, or stress test one’s level of adaption to each developmental task, as physical deterioration removes functional capacities in a manner reminiscent of a reversal of development. Ultimately, Erikson’s themes of relationality and generativity are discussed as offering protection against death anxiety, because the meaning of life may often reside in feelings of continuity and legacy afforded by our social relatedness.

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