

The 10 lessons of life

ELISABETH KUBLER-ROSS and DAVID KESSLER work with the dying, and those who have survived life threatening illness. They say such people often discover a profound appreciation of life that has eluded them before. Here, they share 10 valuable lessons they've discovered from those in their care. ABRIDGED BY MARY HAMPSHIRE.

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The lesson of happiness

One thing we've learnt from people who are dying is they've stopped looking for happiness out there. They no longer wait for tomorrow - they find richness in today. We think of happiness as a reaction to an event. But it is a state of mind. Having a face lift or winning the lottery is temporarily elating, but the thrill wears off and we are as happy or unhappy as before. Unfortunately, we've been trained to feel happiness is not only unnatural but undeserved. That is why we often find ourselves thinking the worst about someone or a situation. We must not give in to feelings of victimisation. Life has loss, recovery, sunshine and rain. It's not personally against us. When we feel good about ourselves, we have more to give. Happy people are the least self absorbed. Ask yourself which behaviours bring you happiness and practice being kind to others. This way we can experience moments of happiness, and this builds into minutes and then whole days.

The lesson of fear

So much is possible when fear no longer holds us captive. It is a protector which can alert us to harm in dangerous situations, but it's also easy to experience fear where there is no danger. Then it just paralyses us. To transcend fear we have to practice. If you're scared to speak to people at social functions, remember they will probably feel the same. If you tackle your secret passions you will not face regrets of a life half lived. A young client of mine who had cancer for six of his nine years had accepted the reality of his death and was discharged home. His biggest dream was to ride around the block. He asked his father to take down the bicycle which had been in the garage unused for three years, and off he rode. Two weeks later, he died. With little time and energy left, this brave boy had lived out his final dreams. We all have dreams. But sadly, we are also filled with reasons why we shouldn't try to fulfil them. Life will be over sooner than we think. If we've bikes to ride, now is the time.

The lesson of relationships

We demand a lot from our romantic relationships. But problems will arise if you believe a romantic relationship will fix you and your life. It can't. We have to be responsible for making ourselves happy. Instant completeness does not come from others. If you were an unhappy single person, you'll most likely be an unhappy spouse. But this is an opportunity to look at the lessons you have to learn. This does not mean staying with an abusive partner. Don't allow people to be reckless with your heart. However, before tossing a partner aside consider if the problem lies in them, in the relationship or in you. Ask yourself if

the love you're giving and receiving is based on what you received as a child. What kind of love do you want to give and receive and are you in the kind of relationship you really want?

The lesson of love

Love is the only lasting experience of life, and the only thing we can really give. But it is fraught with expectations and conditions. Too often, we feel short changed. Ironically, we can give and receive love only when we release the conditions we place on one another. If you love someone in spite of their faults, you will see their heart melt. Stop criticising them. Being able to love is also only truly possible when we appreciate ourselves. That comes from doing things we enjoy. What activities do you do that make you feel better about yourself? Start trying to introduce them into your life.

The lesson of patience

In this modern world, people are used to getting results - right now. They want answers faster than they can be delivered. People no longer know what waiting means. So many of us do not know how to accept a situation as it is. We feel we have to change it, make it better and try to control it. Sometimes we have to have faith and give in to a situation, knowing that we have the time, means and courage to wait.

The lesson of power

Our real, personal, power is not determined by our social position in life or a hefty bank account. It comes from living each day with integrity and grace. Personal power comes from knowing who we are and our place in the world. It means being honest and reasserting our boundaries, saying 'no' to people when necessary. We give our power away when we become too concerned with other people's opinions. To recapture it, remember this is your life. Don't be dependent on others' opinions. Form your own about yourself. We also become more powerful when we let go of trying to control others. You don't have the power to make someone else happy: you can only make yourself happy. Personal power stops us from feeling like victims. It enables us to forgive ourselves for our mistakes and feel grateful for what we have. One of my clients, Leslie, was walking on the pavement with her five-year-old daughter when they were almost hit by a car. The driver swerved and stopped inches from them. Leslie said the incident has fuelled a gratitude for what she has, and given her life more meaning.

The lesson of forgiveness

We all deserve to give ourselves and others a fresh start. That chance is the magic of forgiveness. There are many blocks to forgiveness. Chief among them is the feeling we are condoning the behaviour that hurt us. But this is not true. Forgiveness does not mean allowing people to take advantage of us. It's about letting the hurt go, because holding onto a grudge forces us to live in unhappiness. The desire for revenge is another block. But getting even only gives us a temporary feeling of relief. We don't have to be permanently wounded by anyone or anything. There is great power and freedom in that. Forgiving means acknowledging people are human, and make mistakes. It means feeling our anger, and then trying to let it go.

The lesson of guilt

The psychology of guilt is rooted in self judgement, the sense that we have done something wrong. Much of it is rooted in what we were taught as children especially if we were trained to tend to others' needs rather than our own. This breeds an inability to say 'no'. Those prone to guilt can feel bad when they put themselves first. The way to healing guilt is through forgiveness. A client, Ellen, was filled with guilt and shame for having become a mother at 15. Her family put her child up for adoption. At the age of 55, Ellen was in poor health and decided she wanted to forgive herself for what happened before she died. Even though it was too late to find her daughter she wrote her a letter explaining what had happened. She told her daughter that she was wanted and that, if there is such a thing as an afterlife, she would watch over her in spirit. Ellen's letter was found by her family after her death. Her story was reported on a local radio station and her daughter came forward.

The lesson of authenticity

Deep inside all of us, there is someone we were meant to be. But too often, we define ourselves by our circumstances. We only feel great if things are going well. If life goes badly, we feel worthless or look to other things or people to define us and prop up our self esteem such as our loved ones, money, status or the 'perfect' job. We take on certain roles because they are lucrative. Yet, once we achieve them, we feel empty. We discover our true identities by finding out what we want - and do not want - to do. This means we have to acknowledge what we enjoy, right down to our job and the clothes we wear and not allow ourselves to do something because someone else thinks it's our role. We also have to work through the darker side of our personalities. For example, there might be a part of you that acts like a victim or a bully or a martyr. Once you recognise those aspects you can start to choose not to act out that role. Once in a while, give in to an urge you would normally suppress or try doing something new. You may learn more about who you are. Start with the simple things. It might be realising you really enjoy resting and reading a good book rather than rushing around seeing the sights.

Extracted from: 'Life Lessons: How Our Mortality Can Teach Us About Life and Living,' by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler (Simon & Schuster, 2001, £10)