

Faith Based Perspectives on Medical Aid in Dying

What Is Medical Aid in Dying?

Medical aid in dying is a safe and trusted medical practice in which a terminally ill, mentally capable adult with a prognosis of six months or less to live may request from their doctor a prescription for medication that they can choose to self-ingest to bring about a peaceful death.

Support for Medical Aid in Dying Is Strong Across All Faiths

The American public consistently supports medical aid in dying by large majorities (68%-74%)¹ as shown in both independent national and state surveys. Three U.S. state polls also confirm that a majority of individuals who identify with a faith support medical aid in dying as an end-of-life option.² In addition, a 2016 survey of 7,500 physicians from more than 25 specialties demonstrated a significant increase in support for medical aid in dying from 2010. Today well over half (57%) of the physicians surveyed endorse the idea of medical aid in dying, agreeing that "Physician assisted death should be allowed for terminally ill patients."³

Medical Aid in Dying Is a Personal Decision

Every religion has its own values, tenets and rituals around death. A person's individual beliefs are an important factor in their understanding of and approach to dying. While some faiths counsel their adherents that advancing the time of death to avoid suffering is immoral, others just as strongly counsel the dying and their families to leave this life in the manner most meaningful to them. Choosing medical aid in dying is only one end-of-life care option. Those who are strongly opposed need not choose it. For those who face unbearable suffering, this option can give them

U.S. polls show that a majority of individuals who identify with a faith support medical aid in dying as an end-of-life option. Prominent faith leaders have publicly stated support for medical aid in dying noting that the practice ensures patient autonomy and relieves suffering.

both courage and hope, allowing them to live fully as long as possible and to pass peacefully when death is imminent. This is a personal decision that only the individual can make.

Is a Faith Leader Forced to Participate in Medical Aid in Dying?

No. Faith leaders have no specified role in medical aid in dying laws; it is a medical practice involving a dying person and their healthcare providers. The person who chooses medical aid in dying often asks for spiritual and emotional support from their faith community or faith leader, but no one — not a healthcare provider or a faith leader — is ever forced to participate.

How Can Someone Support Medical Aid in Dying if Their Religion Says It's Wrong?

It is called medical aid in dying because anyone who uses it is already actively dying from an incurable condition. But even if you believe that shortening a difficult dying process at the very end is equivalent to ending one's own life, remember that faith is a personal issue as well as a community expression. We all have our own personal beliefs, so it is valid for someone to feel that accessing medical aid in dying is right

or wrong for them. One individual's personal beliefs or faith should not limit another's right to choose which end-of-life medical option is best for them and their families, however.

Medically and legally speaking, it is inaccurate to equate medical aid in dying with suicide or assisted suicide. Medical aid in dying laws emphasize that: "Actions taken in accordance with [the Act] shall not, for any purpose, constitute suicide, assisted suicide, mercy killing or homicide, under the law." The terminally ill person who chooses medical aid in dying is not choosing to die; they want to live, but the disease is taking their life.

Isn't Suffering Sometimes a Good Thing?

Beliefs around suffering depend on the individual and the faith tradition. Our understanding of suffering and its purpose in our lives will likely vary from the people around us, so we need to allow people to make their own decisions about how to deal with difficulty at the end of life. One individual's beliefs shouldn't dictate how those who don't share them live their lives.

Prominent Faith Leaders and Organizations Support Medical Aid in Dying.

Leaders from a number of faith communities and organizations have voiced their support of the full range of end-of-life care options. Among these are:

American Baptist Church:

American Baptist Church has adopted the policy "to advocate within the medical community for increased emphasis on the caring goals of medicine which preserve the dignity and minimize the suffering of the individual and respect personal choice for end of life care."⁴

United Methodist church:

At their 2015 Cal-Pac Annual Conference, the United Methodist Church approved a resolution stating, in part: "We also affirm that one of the greatest gifts God has given us as humans is the freedom to seek

to live in dignity according to one's own beliefs and faith. For many terminally ill persons faced with inevitable and unavoidable death, the growing death with dignity movement now provides such freedom."⁵

Resolution: "Therefore, we call upon local congregations to support existing and newly organized efforts to educate their members and the common society at large about end-of-life decisions including all aspects of the death with dignity movement."⁶

The Unitarian Universalist Association:

In 1988, the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly passed a resolution supporting the right of "terminally ill patients to select the time of their own deaths."⁷

Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

"Dying is part of life ... And since dying is part of life, talking about it shouldn't be taboo. People should die a decent death. For me that means having had the conversations with those I have crossed in life and being at peace. It means being able to say goodbye to loved ones — if possible, at home."⁸

Rabbi Donald R. Berlin, Temple Oheb Shalom, Baltimore, MD:

"Grant me a choice! Allow a physician to prescribe a drug to aid me which I would administer personally in potentially dying peacefully and whole. Only God knows whether I would actually make that choice, but choice will be the final blessing of my individuality I will ever have."⁹

Rev. Dr. Ignacio Castuera, United Methodist minister and Board Member for Compassion & Choices, Pomona, CA:

"I was raised Catholic and was taught early on that only God has the right to take our lives. At no point, that I recall, did the AIDS patients, the woman with brain cancer or my father ask if God would approve of their decision to end their pain and experience a peaceful death. They never questioned God's mercy. Aid in dying is a basic human right. It is not what the church says, nor what our culture or family says. It is a personal decision between a dying patient and his or

her God. I believe that God understands the longing for the choice of patients whose death appears imminent and medical treatment offers no hope for a cure."¹⁰

California governor and former Jesuit seminary student Jerry Brown:

Brown's message upon signing the California End of Life Option Act read, "I do not know what I would do if I were dying in prolonged and excruciating pain. I am certain, however, that it would be a comfort to consider the options afforded by this bill. And I wouldn't deny that right to others."¹¹

Rev. Graylan Scott Hagler, senior minister at Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ, Washington, D.C.:

"If we live in grace and dignity and respect, then we should die in grace. God did not intend for us to suffer."¹²

Rev. Cedric A. Harmon, An ordained pastor affiliated with the National Baptist and Missionary Baptist Churches as well as Executive Director, Many Voices, Washington, D.C.:

"As a faith leader, I know families and friends want a peaceful passing for their loved ones instead of being haunted by images of deterioration and pain. I would support a parishioner who may choose this option when they are facing a terminal illness with the prognosis of it ending in terrible suffering. A colleague in ministry has said it very well: 'When dying persons have alternatives — a final measure of control — they feel a sense of comfort and peace that allows them to truly live during their last days. This is the greatest gift we can grant our dying friends and loved ones.'¹³

Rabbi Elias Lieberman, Falmouth Jewish Congregation, Falmouth, MA:

"[M]ine is a faith tradition that deems precious the gift of life we are granted. But mine is also a tradition that rejects the notion that there is anything inherently redemptive about suffering. ... I believe firmly that every individual should be afforded the right to end life when suffering renders living intolerable. I believe that life must be infused with meaning and purpose, and

when it is no longer possible for us to attain either, because of the suffering induced by illness, a compassionate alternative must be available to us ..."¹⁴

Rev. Dr. Paul Smith, Pastor Emeritus, First Presbyterian Church, Brooklyn Heights, NY:

"We must offer a humane and self-empowering option for terminally ill adults to end their suffering — we must authorize medical aid in dying ... As for me, I am comfortable in my belief that death is not the worst thing that can happen to me. Wherever God is, that's where I want to be. I am prepared to give my consent to death when my time comes, and when it does, I want another option in the end. And I will be with God."¹⁵

Rev. Wendy Von Courter, Unitarian Universalist Church of Marblehead, MA:

"My father died eight years ago. He had multiple sclerosis. He also had a stash of pills. 'The worst thing, the very worst thing, is the pain.' It could be hideous. He told me about his pills. He never used them. But it meant something to know if the pain became too great, he could leave. Today, as a religious leader I urge you to hear that loving one another should not require suffering through our final days, weeks and months of living. As a daughter, I offer my father's voice through mine. Please hear him, and picture your own father, sibling, child, knowing they will be parting soon. Picture the grimace, hard as it may be. Note our natural feeling of wishing they would stay. Because it is so natural for us to fight loss. But then picture the powerful gift we as a society could offer, by making aid in dying a choice."¹⁶

Rev. Verdell Wright, Lincoln Congressional Temple, Washington, D.C.:

We constantly engage in medical procedures that prolong and enhance life, with little to no assurance that these actions are divinely sanctioned. These actions are undertaken with the hope that somehow the will of God is being honored. It is my opinion, as a scholar and practitioner of the Christian faith, that this consideration extends to end-of-life choices."¹⁷

Where Can I Find More Support Concerning End-of-Life Issues and Faith?

Compassion & Choices has online faith-community resources available at CompassionAndChoices.org. Compassion & Choices is starting a new initiative called Faith Communities for End of Life Options which shares information and empowers faith leaders — whatever their beliefs may be — to best serve parishioners as they face end-of-life issues. For more information to to join Faith Communities for Choices visit CompassionAndChoices.org/communities/faith-communities-for-choices.

Resources

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3. Medscape Ethics Report 2016: Life, Death, and Pain, December 23, 2016. Available from: <http://www.medscape.com/features/slideshow/ethics2016-part2#page=2>
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5. Statement from Bishop Minerva G. Carcaño, 31st Annual Session, California Pacific Conference: <http://www.calpacumc.org/bishop-carcano/on-the-eve-of-all-saints-day/>
6. 31st Annual Session, California Pacific Conference, Resolution 15-20, End of Life Options, pages 227-228: <http://www.calpacumc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/CP-AC-2015-PR-Legislation-Compressed.pdf>
7. Unitarian Universalist Association, 1988 General Resolution; The Right to Die with Dignity: <http://www.uua.org/statements/right-die-dignity>
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9. Rabbi Donald R. Berline Testimony on Maryland aid in dying legislation: <https://www.compassionandchoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Rabbi-Donald-R-Berlin-testimony-on-Maryland-aid-in-dying-legislation.pdf>
10. Rev. Dr. Ignacio Castuera, "A Decision Between God and a Dying Patient," La Opinion, October, 1, 2014
11. California Governor Jerry Brown on signing message to the California State Assembly on AB x2 15, October 5, 2016: https://www.gov.ca.gov/docs/ABX2_15_Signing_Message.pdf
12. Compassion & Choices' Interfaith Rally held at the State House plaza in Annapolis, Maryland; <https://www.compassionandchoices.org/faith-rally/>
13. Rev. Cedric Harmon Testimony on DC Death with Dignity Law, July 10, 2015: <https://www.compassionandchoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Rev.-Cedric-A.-Harmon-testimony-on-Washington-DC-Death-with-Dignity-legislation.pdf>
14. Rabbi Elias Lieberman Testimony on Massachusetts aid in dying legislation: <https://www.compassionandchoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Rabbi-Elias-Lieberman-Testimony-2015.pdf>
15. Opinion: In Support of End of Life Options, Brooklyn Daily Eagle, June 12, 2015: <http://www.brooklyneagle.com/articles/2015/6/12/opinion-support-end-life-options>
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