

Health Promotion Practitioner

Practical solutions for health enhancement programming

Last Lecture Invites Reflection on Life's Mission

A popular title on college campuses today is variations on a Last Lecture series, where top professors are invited to explore what matters most in their lives and give hypothetical final talks. At the University of Alabama, the simple directive is: *If this were your last time to address a group of students, what would you say to them?*

Randy Pausch at Carnegie Mellon gave more than a hypothetical lecture, as the popular professor had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and told he had only a few months to live. You can access a video of the lecture, full transcript, and media coverage at www.cs.cmu.edu/~pausch/.

Pausch didn't start living like he was dying as a result of his diagnosis. It seems he always has. "I don't know how to not have fun... I'm dying and I'm having fun." If anyone has an excuse to be angry, bitter, or sad, this talented professor and father of 3 young children certainly does. Yet none of that comes through in his talk. Just the opposite... you get the sense that Pausch has not only come to terms with his fate, but decided he'll live his life as he always has — with energy, enthusiasm, and love for his work and his family.

It's About More Than ROI

It's a life lesson for all of us, and for those of us who promote health, it's even more profound. Because

while we're busy assessing, and testing, and coaching, and teaching, and incentivizing, and measuring, we're *living*... and so are the people we're trying to help. Living goes beyond the metrics. It's happiness, hope, caring, and sharing with those you love. It's about fulfilling your potential as a person in every facet of your life.

Yes, health enhancement and disease prevention are important — you've made it your career — because healthy choices allow people the opportunity to live a fulfilling life. But in our pursuit of success as health promoters it's equally important not only to acknowledge the bigger picture of living, but to encourage reflection and introspection by those we serve.

While we may not be invited to present a last lecture, the experience — thinking deeply about what matters most to us — can result in a simple reaffirmation we're living the life we want, or a life-altering experience that gets us on the path to our true mission in life. One way to start is by writing your own obituary the way you'd like it to read when you're gone.

Set aside a day before year-end for this exercise, including a review of the results, and share the technique with your clients.

Continued

I Wish I Had...

Begin by writing a list with the heading “I wish I had...” as an overview of all you wish you’d done if you were to die today, not some distant point in the future. Often it includes spending more time on what’s most precious to you, telling those close to you how you feel about them, or righting a wrong.

Then make several lists reflecting your life at the time of your death in the future:

- Who survives you, what you meant to them, and how they will remember you
- What you accomplished— academic, athletic, career, family, community — whatever you can remember as well as imagine
- What you enjoyed and brought you happiness — people, places, hobbies, pets
- What you’re proudest of.

Compare the *I wish I had* list to the lists reflecting your life in the future. If there’s no overlap, it means your regrets are minor and you’ve lived the life you want to this point. But if the same items appear in both lists

(most people have some overlap), it means your actions to this point don’t align with what you want your life’s mission to be, and you need to make some changes.

Now write your obituary. Start with your name, day, date, and age at your death as well as how you died (don’t dwell on this; it’s probably not going to be up to you). Combine the “I wish I had...” list with the lists reflecting your life in the future and rank the items, with the most important at the top. Use the list as an outline for the core of your obituary, answering the question: What do I want people to know about my life?

When you’re done, go back through your obituary and circle the items you haven’t done. Then sit down with your spouse or best friend to discuss what needs to change in your life, starting today, for you to achieve your life’s mission.

Mark your calendar to revisit your obituary once a year on the anniversary of the date you chose as the day you’ll die. Acknowledge your milestones in the previous year and renew your commitment to continue moving toward your life’s mission. 📅



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