

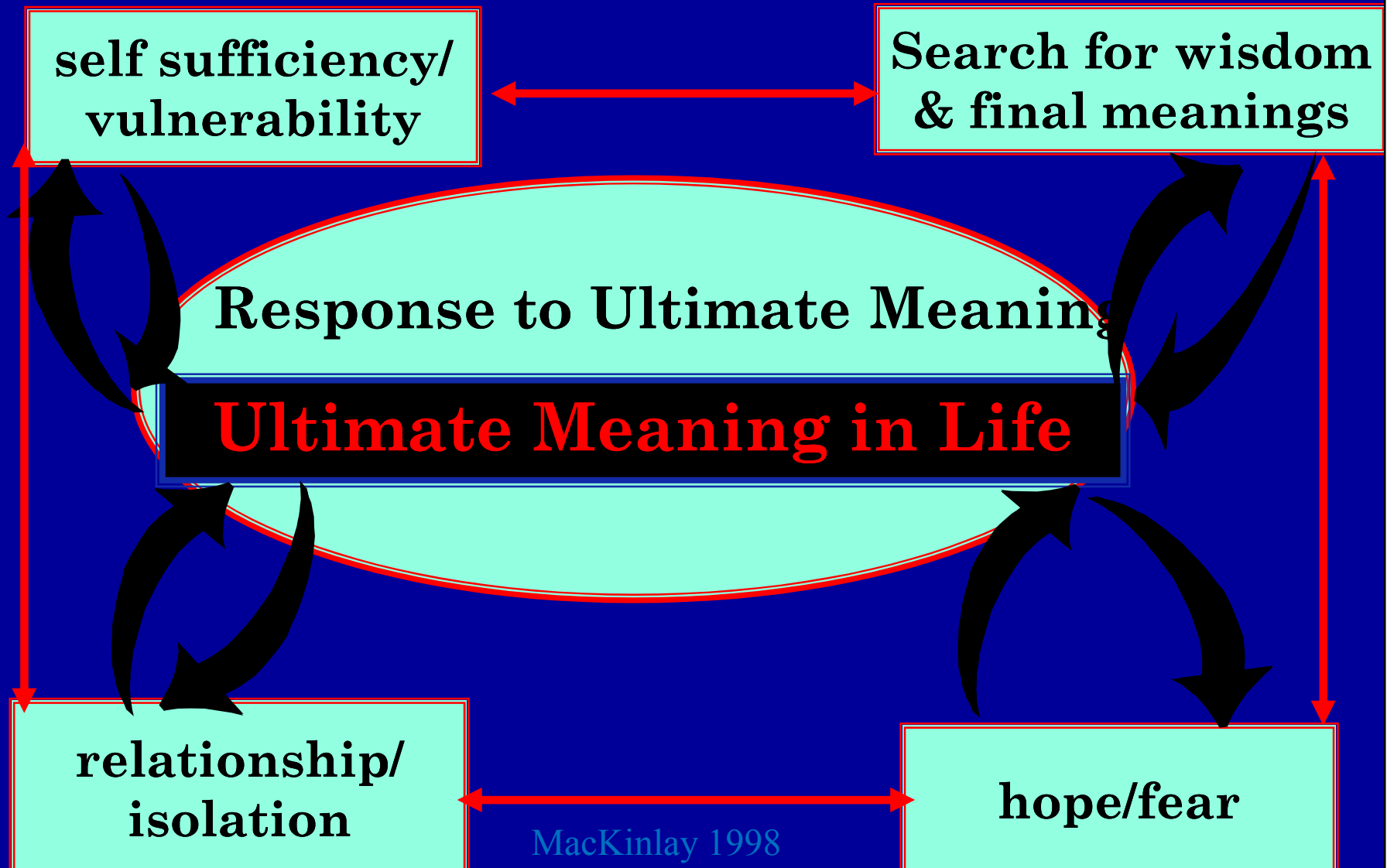
**Why doesn't God take me?  
A spiritual perspective on dying  
workshop**

**Fourth international conference:  
Ageing and Spirituality**

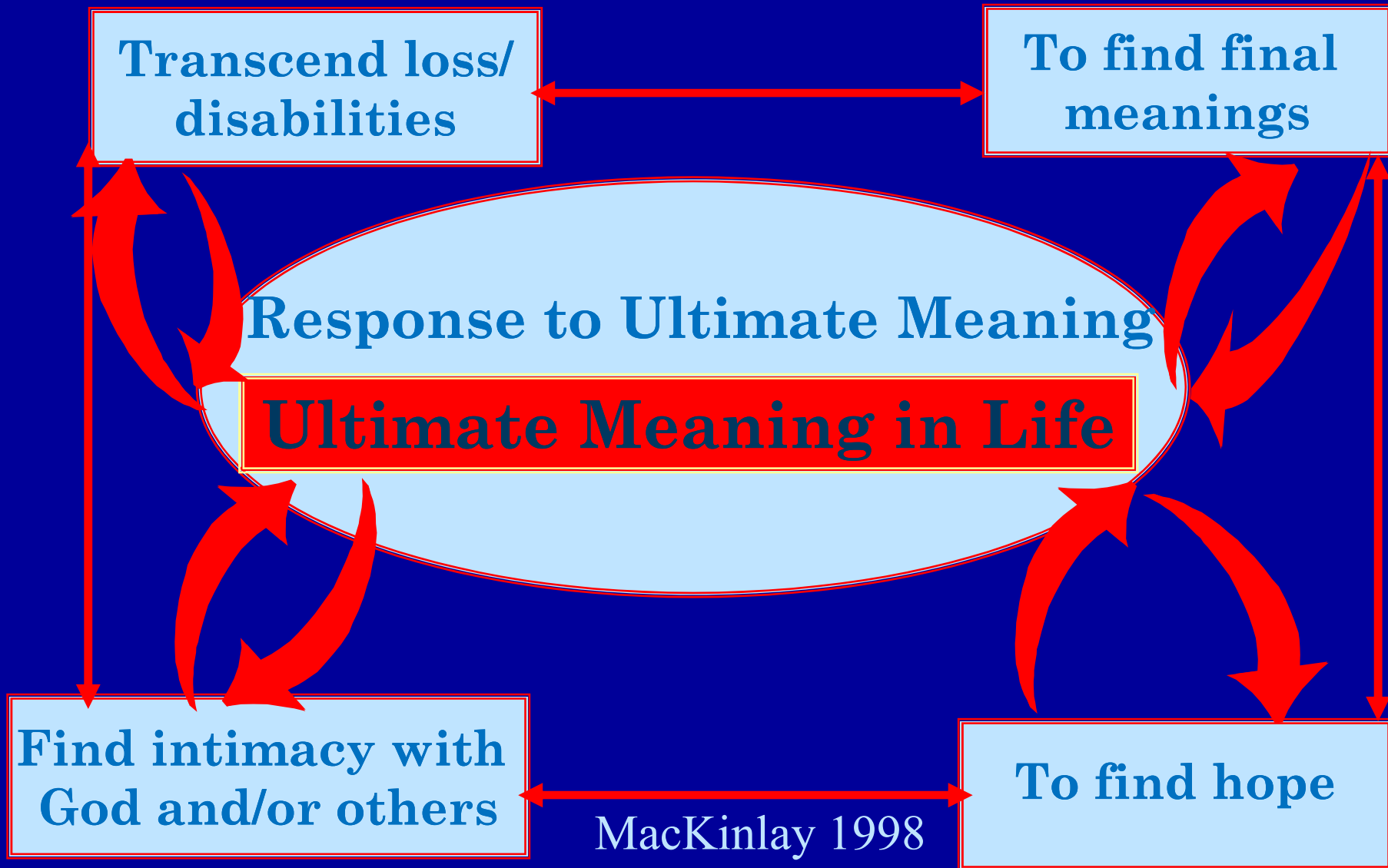
**Auckland 2009**

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# Spirituality in Ageing: Themes



# Spiritual Tasks & Process of Ageing: A continuing process



# Dying well: Life's final career

Death - like ageing, became defined as a disease and medicalised during the twentieth century

Death often now only experienced in later life, or through violence TV or real life.

Have we lost the way to die?

*FEAR OF THE PROCESS OF DYING*

# The search for meaning.

**From birth to death:**

*change is a constant feature of being alive, at some level we continue to ask: Why? What does this mean?*

***The search for meaning lies at the centre of what it means to be human***

**The search for meaning is essentially a spiritual search.**

**Meaning is something that can only be found by the individual (Frankl, 1984). Although others can help and support, it is the individual experiencing the challenge of impending death who must come to their own sense of meaning.**

# DON'T TALK ABOUT DYING

How do I feel about dying?

How do I feel about my own death?

Is it too far away to think about?

Do I deny it?

Do I project a sense that topics of dying and death are off the agenda?

# Fear of dying alone

- ❖ **100% of independent living older people expressed fears of future vulnerability. (MacKinlay 2001)**
- ❖ **45% of participants in the residential group study expressed fears related to the process of dying and/or losing control of their situation. (MacKinlay unpublished study)**

**The final career, the individual journey into death is unknown still today. Each of us has to make that journey, unless we meet with sudden death.**

# Meaning in life and in dying

**“What I ask from my death, is that at the last minute I will be able to look back over my life and know, without any doubt, the entire story I have been living ... Then I will know, despite pain, disappointment, and limitation, that this life of mine has been a good and meaningful work”**

Deena Metzger: *Writing for Your Life*, 1993



☉ Who am I?

☉ Why am I here? What is my purpose in life?

☉ What do I hope for?

**What would I want to have  
done / experienced before I  
die, to complete my life?**

# **Nourishment of the Soul:** *being, giving and receiving*

**Providing care is not just caring for the physical needs**

**Care is not wholistic unless it contains the spiritual dimension**

**Spiritual care is not an optional extra.**

**Yet**

**\*Who can people find to listen to them?**

**\*With whom can they work out their life meaning?**

# Blessing in the midst of vulnerability

## **Transcendence:**

moving from doing to being

Pastoral care role is to affirm each individual as loved by God

## **Honouring the personhood of each individual:**

- \* sacred space
- \* being with the person
- \* listening to their story
- \* spiritual reminiscence
- \* appropriate liturgy
- \* sacraments

## **Needs for wholeness:**

confession, forgiveness and reconciliation

# Providing pastoral care: focus within aged care settings

**Pastoral care should be:**

- ❖ *intentional*
- ❖ *a real part of the team approach to care*

**Function of pastoral care:**

- ❖ **Assessment of individual needs**
- ❖ **Work within the institutional framework**
- ❖ **Advocacy for the frail and vulnerable**
- ❖ **For the aged person and for family, for staff**

# Spirituality and Religion

## **Relationship:**

Intimacy with  
others  
and/or God

## **Environment:**

Nature  
Sea, mountains,  
gardens

**SPIRITUALITY-**  
**Ultimate Meaning**  
*Mediated through*

## **Religion:**

Worship  
Prayer  
Reading of Scripture  
Meditation

## **The arts:**

Music  
Art, Drama  
Dance

# Dying and being with friends

- ▣ The need for intimacy in the process of dying.

Intimacy is “the ability to let myself be known by another and to be comfortable in that revelation” Carroll & Dyckman (1986, p.123)

# Doing spiritual care in palliative care

- ▣ Often 'doing' is 'being'
- ▣ Spirituality in palliative care and dying is about accompanying someone on the last significant journey of their lives.
- ▣ It's about intimacy, it's about sharing
- ▣ It's about listening, even when the person may not seem to be able to speak. The listening is done with all your senses, not just ears.



# Dying and ethical issues

## Ethical issues of dying

- To treat or not to treat?
- When is a person on a dying trajectory?  
In other words, is there a time when death is inevitable and treatment may increase suffering and prolong death?
- Can it be futile to intervene to prevent death?
- What does good palliative care include?
  - Holistic care- care of body, mind, social, emotional and spiritual care.

# Issues of pain in palliative care

Fear of dying: will I have to suffer unbearable pain?

- Physical pain
- Existential pain

Jewish concepts of pain make an important distinction in the understanding of pain and suffering. (Kestenbaum 2001 p5) :

‘Suffering is a response to pain; it results from the emotional and spiritual meaning that the pain has in one’s life. Medicine treats pain; caregiving responds to suffering’

# Dying, identity and story

- ▣ We are story (Kenyon, Clark & de Vries 2001 Narrative Gerontology)
- ▣ Identity is bound up in our story
- ▣ Spiritual reminiscence is valuable in assisting people to come to final life meanings

# The studies

- ▣ Aged 62-96 years
- ▣ First group: 20 frail elderly nursing home residents, cognitively competent
  - In-depth interviews
- ▣ Second group: 113 elderly residential aged care people with dementia (Ave MMSE at entry 18.12 and 16.09 at exit)
  - In-depth interviews followed by weekly small group sessions of spiritual reminiscence for 24 weeks.
- ▣ Analysis of qualitative data by NVivo7

# Grief in frail older cognitively competent people

## *Main themes*

- ▣ Grief is part of life (Attitudes to grief)
- ▣ Grief and coping – a faith perspective
- ▣ Grief is hard to talk about (Attitudes to grief)
- ▣ Grief for untimely deaths - Death of parent/s in childhood, death of child
  
- ▣ *On death & dying:*
- ▣ Fear of dying
- ▣ “Why doesn’t God take me?”

## Grief in frail older cognitively competent people

- Grief is part of life (Attitudes to grief)  
“Apart from losing my mother and sister and my hubby, I don't think I've had much grief.”
- Grief and coping – a faith perspective
- Grief is hard to talk about (Attitudes to grief)
- Grief of parents who had lost a child through death

# Grief in frail older cognitively competent people

*On death & dying:*

- Fear of dying

“Life’s one big fear for me”

“grief as part of life” and “fear of dying”  
not found in the same participants

# “Why doesn't God take me?”

I'm not looking forward to getting well,  
I'm striving to get well, I do everything they tell  
me, but I'm looking forward to be taken.

Firstly it's my faith that keeps me going and  
secondly it's the help I'm getting here with  
physio and the help with the nurses and thirdly,  
I wonder why God doesn't take me when I pray  
every night that he will



# Grief in older people with dementia

## Confusion of relationships

Asked where they found meaning in life, most said they found meaning through family.

Relationship, or *connectedness*, which seems to express this better for those with dementia, is almost synonymous with meaning

# Grief in older people with dementia

**Grief** - Is part of life (most participants)

- Loss of relationships
- Grief and faith
- Grief for lost opportunities (only one person)
- Loss over leaving parents in country while young

## A sense of peace and acceptance?

- ▣ Are these people at a stage of peace and acceptance?

Or –

do they just not know what is going on having lost cognitive competencies?

Could this be a time of emotional and spiritual connection into the process of dying.

# conclusion

- ▣ Differences between frail elderly but cognitively competent group and those with dementia. *Fear an important factor in facing process of dying.*
  - Fear of dying important among cognitively competent older group
  - Almost no expressed fear of dying among those with dementia
  - Grief as part of life – more agreement on this with those with dementia
  - Coping and faith present in both groups

# conclusion

Is there the possibility of resilience and health in older people who are facing death and dying?

Fear of death and reluctance to speak of death and dying hinder better support of those who are dying.

New programs of palliative care in ageing are being implemented, spiritual and pastoral care being developed.

*([www.nhmrc.gov.au/PUBLICATIONS/synopses/\\_files/pc29.pdf](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/PUBLICATIONS/synopses/_files/pc29.pdf))*

Spiritual care in dementia needs to be available as a part of holistic care for these people

Spiritual growth remains a possibility while life continues