
Analyzing the Show Orange is the New Black

Death and Dying in TV Shows

Death is all around us. It is as natural as living and occurs in different ways. We base the way we handle death on the situation. Using examples from the TV shows *Orange is the New Black* and *Scrubs*, I will discuss our society's understanding of death and dying by comparing death in hospitals versus prisons. These shows' portrayals are fairly accurate, since they are still fiction, I will also reference similarities to articles from Dickinson and Leming's *Dying, Death, and Bereavement* to support my examples.

Hospitals see death, arguably, greater than anywhere else. *Scrubs* explores this reality and how employees mentally deal with dying. In the world of doctors and nurses, taking care of the sick and dying is an everyday task. Although it can be an overwhelming job, it teaches the inevitability of death as a part of life. Funeral directors also carry their experiences with death (Wilde 128), so doctors are not the only ones to frequently deal with death. In this show, J.D. experiences death within his first days of his job as a resident. His patient refuses dialysis, stating that she is at the end of her life, and saving her life at this point is futile. That same day, the patients of Turk and Elliot, J.D.'s friends, die as well. Unlike J.D., they had tried to save their patients who ended up dying anyway. This teaches the three doctors a valuable lesson that day; they must learn to view death on a daily basis. They learn that they can delay death, but they cannot stop it.

Anyone in medical sciences must deal with health-related issues, which regularly involve the possibility of death. And with that comes the responsibility over patients' lives. When that is

a job expectation, it is reasonable for doctors to feel remorse when a patient dies on their time. Dr. Cox feels guilty over the death of a patient he had treated for some time. He temporarily handed his patient to J.D. because he was busy, and the patient died within that time. He blames himself and struggles to forgive himself for it. Similarly, in "The Promise of Presence," Dr. Rousseau also feels he has failed a life (82). This is, indeed, a problem in the medical field. Trying to save everyone is an impossible goal, but doctors attempt this goal with each dying patient. Death is unavoidable, and mistakes happen, even among professionals. Taking the blame is natural when the job is to care of the patient. While this is a reality, it should not deter doctors from trying to save future patients.

Compassion is necessary in the medical field. Genuinely caring for the patients is essential to

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the job. The only question is to what extent doctors should take their compassion. One of J.D.'s patients will die during the night and has no family to be there with him. J.D. overlooks it at first, since he had made plans with Turk that night. However, J.D. and Turk then decide to stay overnight with him instead and discuss life and death all night. The two doctors realize that death terrifies them despite seeing it every day. The patient is also terrified, but becomes comfortable knowing he will die. He may have been able to accept it on his own, although it was favorable for him to spend his last hours with company. Even though doctors are helpful, patients spend too much time alone in their rooms, especially at the end of their lives. Turk and J.D. are considerate enough to stay with the patient, making his last moments bearable. Turk and J.D. went beyond what their job required at that moment. They were friends to the patient when he needed them the most.

Unlike hospitals, prisons do not handle death as well. *Orange Is the New Black* reveals to us how deaths and near-deaths taking place in the prison are handled. Death is not an every day experience in prisons. The correctional officers are not equipped to deal with deaths on a daily basis. Tricia, an inmate, overdoses on a bag of OxyContin, which she was supposed to sell other inmates. Correctional officer Mendez finds her in a janitor's closet and uses rope to disguise her death as a suicide. He had been the one to smuggle the drugs into the prison, so he wanted to avoid the blame falling back on him. While this is an extreme situation, it shows a prison guard's disregard for a dead inmate. Whether the disregard is intentional or not, it is important to realize that correctional officers' jobs do not involve dealing with death. Suicide is never pleasant to deal with. It is definitely not a good death, since it is not a natural death (Shneidman 15). Unfortunately, it still happens and there is never an ideal way to handle it.

In a prison, the job of the correctional officers is to guarantee inmates' safety. Unlike doctors, their job does not usually center around deaths. Because of this, they may react differently when they are presented with death. For example, when faced with a suicidal attempt, correctional officers may send patients to the psych ward to avoid dealing with it. Brook, an inmate struggling with depression, tries to overdose on Benadryl. Her fellow inmates find her body and save her life instead of reporting it to the officers. If the officers found out, they would refer Brook to the psych ward, which is assumed to be a horrifying experience. In life-threatening situations, the officers tend to value the safety of others above the individuals. Perhaps there is a bias in how the inmates view the correctional officers as inherently evil, but their reasons for helping their friend instead of approaching someone with higher authority are legitimate. This shows that a hospital might have handled a suicide attempt with more sensitivity, since doctors are better prepared to handle that particular situation.

Compassion is also something to consider. Correctional officers can be respectable people, but they tend to lack compassion when they face death. Rosa, a terminally ill patient, spends the end of her life in prison. Though she is dying, she is treated the same as other inmates, besides

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leaving the prison weekly to receive chemotherapy. When she receives the news that her cancer has worsened, the prison guard refuses to leave the room, even after the doctor insists to

to speak with her alone. He might have been following the rules of his job. However, it would have been more respectful for him to leave when she received that information. Prisoners are a vulnerable population of people, whose deaths are handled in less fortunate ways. This example of helplessness compares to the experiences homeless people face at the end of their lives. To explain, a survey by Song et al. found that participants wish for more compassion (73) and understanding (74) from doctors. Rosa wished for the same things at the end of her life; however, none of it is guaranteed, since she is in prison.

Death is dealt across the world in countless ways. The way people handle dying depends on the situation, such as whether it takes place in a prison or a hospital. I compared this by using examples from *Scrubs* and *Orange is the New Black*, which are generalizations based on the contexts in the shows. I also referenced examples from Dickinson and Leming's *Dying, Death, and Bereavement* to support the fictional examples. Overall, hospitals handle death and dying with more compassion than other systems. While hospitals may have disadvantages, such as not being able to provide for everyone, their strengths lie in the saving of lives.

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