



A Handbook For Mortals: Guidance for People Facing Serious Illness

Joan Harrold

Joanne Lynn

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If a foreword by former first lady Rosalynn Carter is not enough to make one take this handbook seriously, then the subject matter will. “Am I dead yet?” one seriously ill patient is quoted to have asked his nurse. When told no, he next wondered, “How will I know?”

Such is the tone in *A Handbook for Mortals*, a guide for anyone who knows someone or is themselves facing a serious illness, written by Drs. Joanne Lynn, Joan Harrold and others at the Center to Improve the Care of the Dying in Washington, D.C.

In tackling this tough and touchy subject, the doctors manage to avoid the sugary sweetness of false hope while offering down-to-earth, encouraging advice of how to deal with a life-threatening illness. Addressed to those in the most immediate need, the book offers easy-to-digest coverage of pertinent topics which include dealing with the diagnosis, family issues and support, decision making, getting help, pain management, some review of specific illnesses (AIDS, Cancers, Heart disease, Alzheimer’s), coping with a child who’s sick, the issues and legalities of physician-assisted suicide and so on.

Without telling anyone what they have to do, the authors provide paths based on their own and actual patients’ experiences to follow, should one wish. Particularly nice are shadowboxes filled with practical tips like Chapter One’s “Words To Try: for families talking with a sick person,” which offers eight “When you think you want to say, try this instead,” suggestions. Scattered photos of real people, poems, words and real-life experiences further warm the text. Additional resources of names, addresses and phone numbers of pertinent organizations round out the end.

If death has become more real through a serious illness—whether for oneself or another—here is nicely-written guiding light through the tunnel of fear, confusion and grief that such a diagnosis brings.

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