

I Don't Want to Die Like That!

Choosing to Stop Eating and Drinking Instead

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Jonna Goulding, MD, Palliative Care Physician, CVMC

Cindy Bruzzese, MPA, MSB, HEC-C
Executive Director and Clinical Ethicist, Vermont Ethics Network
Clinical Ethicist, UVMCC

Patsy Fortney, CC
Palliative Care Chaplain, CVMC

Objectives

1

Discuss options with patients who are interested in hastening death but are not eligible for or not interested in Medical Aid in Dying (MAID)

2

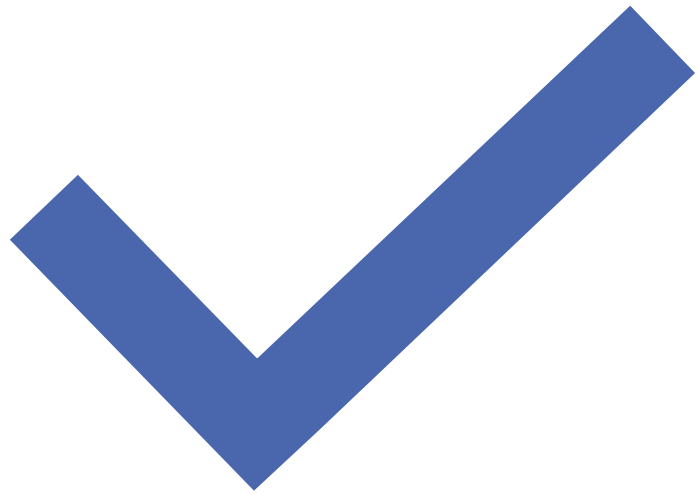
Distinguish voluntarily stopping eating and drinking (VSED) from stopping eating and drinking by advance directive (SED by AD).

3

Feel more confident about supporting patients and their families who want more information about, or are seeking to utilize, VSED.

4

Appreciate the ethical, legal, emotional, and spiritual considerations surrounding VSED.



Disclosures

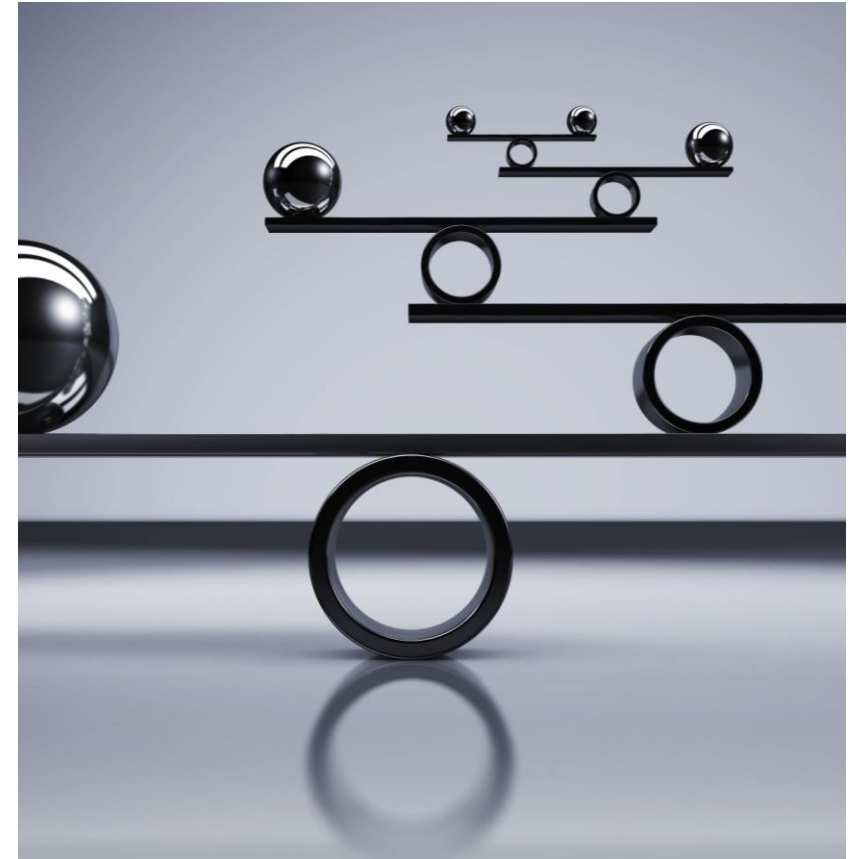
There are no disclosures or conflicts of interest to report.

Definitions

- **VSED:** When a decisional patient voluntarily chooses to hasten their death by completely stopping all intake of food and fluids.
- **SED by AD:** A process to allow a person to leave instructions now about a time in the future when they lack capacity and reach a predetermined level of deterioration or discomfort, to have food and fluids withheld as a means of hastening death.

Legal and Ethical Considerations

- Not illegal in any state; reasonable alternative to MAID, available to patients who are not dependent of LSMT
- Ethically permissible manner of hastening death - logical extension of the right to refuse
- Capacity needed for ongoing consent and voluntariness
- Not wholly uncontroversial
 - Lacks a clear procedural framework
 - Akin to suicide – how should clinicians respond to inquiries
 - Food and drink are “basic human care” so some consider this different than artificially administered nutrition and hydration
 - Concerns about vulnerable populations, subtle coercion and/or starvation through medical neglect.
- What would NOT respecting this choice look like – practically?
- Hospice & palliative care involvement is ethically appropriate, if not obligatory



What Happens Physiologically When Not Eating & Drinking

- No nutritional intake leads to ketosis, which releases endorphins
- No fluid intake leads to dehydration, which can result in drowsiness
- VSED can lead to a peaceful death. Be ready for symptoms of dry mouth, possible agitation.

Cases: Inquiries about VSED

Case 1: Don has mild dementia and lives in an assisted living facility. He came to Vermont to be near family but misses his home in Ohio. He is very frustrated with his circumstances and wants to talk about possible “off ramps.”

Case 2: Bruce lives alone and was independent and active prior to a terrible injury sustained in a fall. Joint replacement was followed by two revisions further complicated by multiple infections. He is now on chronic antibiotics. He reports an unacceptable quality of life because he cannot care for his dog and home or go canoeing and camping. He declines amputation, even though it could help with QOL in a different setting. Is VSED an option?

Case 3: Brenda has mild dementia and a supportive husband. They are very close with her PCP, who is helping them identify options since Brenda doesn't want her death prolonged. She is looking to use VSED before she loses capacity.

Assessment and Planning

Values & Voluntariness

- Determine capacity
- Document reason
- Fill out AD and COLST

Sharing Information

- VSED stages
- 24-hour caregivers
- Hospice

Practical Considerations

- Alcohol
- Bowel cleanse
- Calorie reduction

Navigating Potential Challenges

- Distractions
- Reminders
- Support for family/caregivers



Outcome & Take-Away: Assisted Living Case

Outcome: After hearing about what was involved in VSED, Don learned that he would not be able to do it in the assisted living facility where he lived.

Take-away: A clinician who provides a clear picture of what VSED entails can help patients make informed decisions and possibly suggest other forms of support.

Emotional/Existential/Spiritual Issues

Isolation

Cognitive dissonance

Meaning and
values

Belief (morality,
spirituality, religion)

Stages of VSED



Early Stage

2 days – 1 week

- Alert and oriented
- Hunger
- Dry Mouth

Middle Stage

2 days – 1 week

Signs and Symptoms

- Weak
- Sleeping more
- Possibly confused or delirious

Late Stage

2 days – 1 week

- Loss of consciousness
- Organ failure
- Near death

Stages of VSED

Early Stage

2 days – 1 week

- Distraction
- Sensory stimulation
- Mental stimulation

Middle Stage

2 days – 1 week

- Massage/bodywork
- Medication (including benzodiazepines)
- Hospice

Late Stage

2 days – 1 week

- Hospice
- End-of-life care

Interventions



Outcome & Take-Away: Quality of Life

Outcome: Bruce was introduced to a physical therapist who was very helpful in improving his quality of life. He also started receiving home caregiving from a compassionate caregiver. He is not interested in VSED at this time.

Take-away: For Bruce, exploring his options at length may have clarified what he needed and help him to explore ways he might modify his life going forward.

After VSED

- **Death certificate:** Report that death occurred naturally. The immediate cause of death is dehydration, with a primary serious illness or injury causing the person to pursue VSED listed as a contributing comorbidity.
- **Bereavement:** Address the bereavement of family, caregivers, and clinical staff. The use of hospice and community resources is recommended.



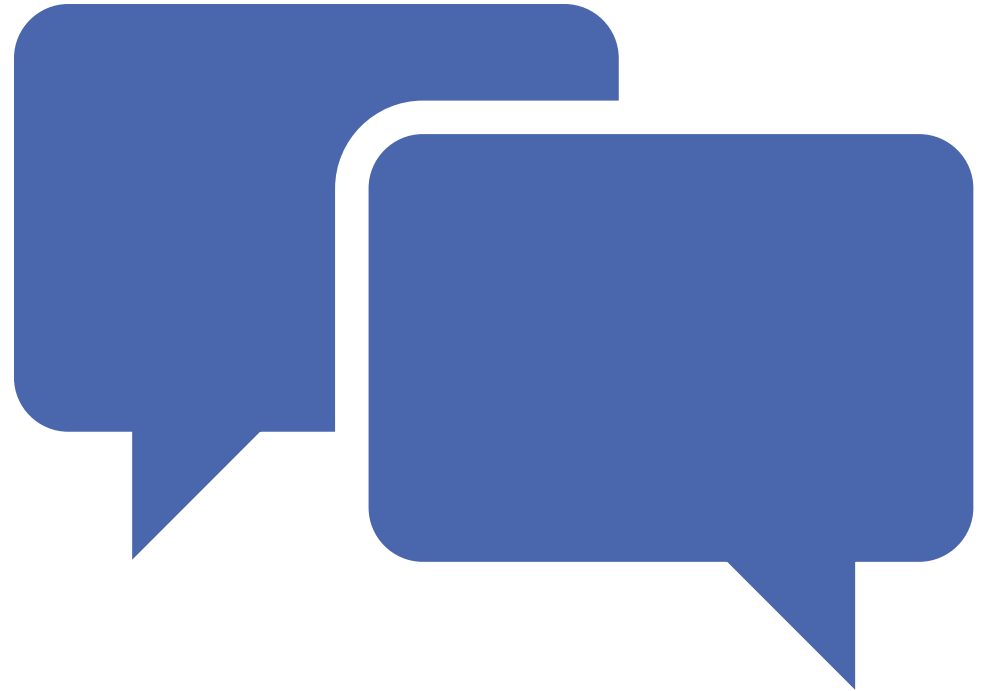
Outcome & Take-Away: Early Dementia

Outcome: With the help of her family, Brenda died peacefully at home by VSED.

Take-away: The support of her PCP and her family made it possible for Brenda to die peacefully before she became more incapacitated.



Discussion



Resources

Clinical, Ethical & Legal Guidelines

- Wechkin, H, MacCauley, R, Menzel, P, Reagan, P, Simmers, N, Quill, T. *Clinical Guidelines for Voluntarily Stopping Eating and Drinking (VSED)*. Journal of Pain and Symptom Management. 2023;66(5).
- Day, JM, Woodley, L, Ivancic, M. *Navigating Voluntarily Stopping Eating and Drinking in Hospice Settings: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. Journal of Hospice and Palliative Nursing. Feb 2025;27(1).
- Quill, TE, Menzel, PT, Pope, TM, Schwarz, JK. *Voluntarily Stopping Eating and Drinking: A compassionate, widely available option for hastening death*. Oxford University Press (2021).

What Patients and Families Are Reading

- Christie, K. *The VSED Handbook*. Seattle, WA: Second Growth Books; 2022.
- Schacter, P. *Choosing to Die: A Personal Story. Elective Death by Voluntarily Stopping Eating and Drinking (VSED) in the Face of Degenerative Disease*. 2017.