

Coping with the Fear of Death

What is death anxiety?

Death anxiety refers to feelings of fear that can intensify from increased awareness of the fact that each human life will end. It is common to feel a certain level of apprehension when thinking about death, but for some individuals the fear of death becomes overwhelming and all-encompassing. This handout provides an introduction to the topic of death anxiety and some strategies for coping with this difficult, yet universal human experience.

What do we fear?

The aspects of death that are frightening vary from person to person, but they generally relate to either the state or process of death. Some people are haunted by the uncertainty of what happens after death. Others express a fear of non-existence, where they specifically fear their consciousness permanently ending when they die. Some individuals are more fearful of the process of dying itself, worrying whether they will experience pain and suffering during the days and hours leading up to death. Some may also feel anxious about how family and friends will cope during and after their death.

When might death anxiety arise?

Although some clinicians and philosophers suggest that a certain level of death anxiety is always present, some life events may increase awareness of your own mortality and the fragility of life. Anxiety about death is common during or after: receiving a significant medical diagnosis, reaching a milestone birthday, enduring or witnessing a life-threatening event, experiencing the death of a loved one or a pet, or experiencing other key life events, such as the birth of a child, graduation from university, or retirement. These types of monumental events highlight the passage of time and the ever-changing nature of life, which can bring about feelings of fear or anxiety when thoughts of a finite life arise. Major world events, such as a terrorist attack, a pandemic, or natural disasters (e.g., floods, wildfires, hurricanes) can also increase fear of dying.

Tips for coping with death anxiety:

1. **Acknowledge the reality of death.** Generally, it is not helpful to cope with death anxiety by pushing away all thoughts and reminders related to death and dying. Consider occasionally approaching the idea rather than completely avoiding it. For example, some people may avoid going to the doctor (for fear of getting bad news), attending a funeral, or writing a personal directive. Such avoidance tends to be ineffective, since it is impossible to ignore your own mortality entirely. Although avoidance often decreases anxiety in the short term, this approach tends to increase it in the long term, making people even more preoccupied and fearful of what they try to avoid. When reminders of death come up (e.g., seeing a funeral scene in a movie), the best response is to allow yourself to remain in the situation and experience whatever thoughts and emotions naturally occur. Your emotions will not last forever, and you will begin to trust that you can handle these thoughts and feelings without rushing to escape them.
2. **Consider taking an inventory of your personal experiences with death.** At what age did you learn about death? At what age did you experience the loss of someone close to you or a pet? How did you react then, and what emotions do you experience now? Reflecting on your views of death can provide meaning, which helps you to make sense of what can seem to be a jumble of painful thoughts and memories. The emotions that come up may be uncomfortable, but you will be able to tolerate them.
3. **Reflect on the value of now.** Awareness of the reality of death can be a reminder of the preciousness of the present moment. Knowledge of a finite life can be terrifying, but some suggest that our existence would feel less meaningful if life on earth had no ending. There are reports of people experiencing dramatic and lasting changes catalyzed by a confrontation with impending death. While working with patients facing death from cancer, psychiatrist Irvin Yalom found that many seemed to experience some positive aspects of their limited lifetimes.

Yalom writes, “Many of them, rather than succumb to numbing despair, were positively and dramatically transformed. They rearranged their life priorities. They assumed the power to choose not to do the things that they really did not wish to do. They communicated more deeply with those they loved, and appreciated more keenly the elemental facts of life—the changing seasons, the beauty of nature, the last Christmas or New Year. Many reported a diminishment of their fears of other people, a greater willingness to take risks, and less concern about rejection.”

We do not have to be terminally ill to experience these types of benefits. By asking yourself what regrets you would have if your life ended tomorrow, you might have an immediate sense of your priorities for your life, both in the short and long term.

4. **Reflect on and enhance your contributions to the world.** People are often comforted by the thought of leaving something behind that endures beyond their lives. Consider an “immortality project,” where you create something that will outlast you. This creation could be making a sculpture, composing a piece of music, writing on a topic that is meaningful to you, teaching another person a new skill, sharing your wisdom with those younger than you, or choosing something else that feels important to leave as a legacy. These actions are a way of creating a life of meaning, and there is evidence that people who have experienced full and satisfying lives have lower levels of death anxiety, perhaps since they are more likely to feel that they achieved their purpose on this earth.
5. **Consult with the experts.** Some of the greatest minds of the world have wrestled with the very terror you may be experiencing. You could find comfort in reading the work of philosophers who provide guidance on how to live a life of meaning. There are also true stories containing wisdom on living and dying with meaning. *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi, *Tuesdays With Morrie* by Mitch Albom, and *Hannah’s Gift* by Maria Housden all share the stories of individuals who lived full and impactful lives before they died. There are, of course, many other such works that might be helpful to read.

Tips for coping with death anxiety: *continued...*

- Spiritual beliefs are a source of peace and strength for many.** If you ascribe to a particular faith background, it can be helpful to connect with a spiritual leader or mentor and to explain your fears. It can be reassuring to learn that you are not alone in your concerns, and you will benefit from the wisdom that your faith leader shares with you. You may also try seeking out prayers, verses and other sacred writings pertaining to the end of life. Those who believe in life after death may be comforted by learning more about what happens during and after death from the viewpoint of their particular faith.
- Try a mindfulness approach.** The impermanence of all things is an idea represented in a number of prominent religions and philosophies, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Greek philosophy. It was Heraclitus who wrote, “*No man ever steps into the same river twice, for it is not the same river, and he is not the same man.*” Although the idea of impermanence might initially create some anxiety, it can also bring about a feeling of peace when we accept the idea that our suffering, fear, and uncertainty will not last forever. When we reflect on this idea using a mindfulness framework, we combine our knowledge of impermanence with a focus on the here and now, through our senses in the immediate setting (i.e., things we see, passing sounds, thoughts, physical sensations, and the rhythm of our own breathing). You can find many relevant mindfulness videos, readings, and audio recordings online.

A final thought.

Consider the words of Dr. Irvin Yalom, who writes that “*Anxiety will always accompany our confrontation with death...it is the price we pay for self-awareness. Staring into the face of death with guidance, not only quells terror but renders life more poignant, more precious, more vital. Such an approach to death leads to instructions about life.*”

“*Death destroys a man, but the idea of death saves him.*” — E. M. Forster

References

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