

Death Anxiety

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Just as humans are sentient creatures, aware of their beingness in this world, they are also cognizant of their eventual and inevitable death. With this knowledge comes the natural dread and anxiety associated with being aware that on any given day one will cease to exist. Indeed, one of the fundamental existential conflicts, or causes for existential angst, is the tension caused when an individual is aware of their inevitable death while also yearning for their continued life. Just as anxiety is a natural emotion, so too, is the anxiety surrounding death and its associated existential conflict.

In this context, death anxiety involves the angst experienced when considering one's own eventual death, or the deaths of individuals close to us, and not the emotions experienced when faced with direct threats to one's life. Thus, a person suffering from a terminal illness or an adult child worrying about their parents' health may struggle with death anxiety, but a person whose life is in clear and immediate danger (e.g., being involved in a car crash) does not fall within this scope.

Despite understanding from an intellectual perspective that death is unavoidable, humans shape their lives in patterns which perpetuate the denial of death through attempts to prolong their lives. Then in turn, individuals expend energy towards achieving various forms of immortality in attempts to ameliorate the anxiety associated with this existential given of death. Looking around our everyday environments, one can see such attempts to deny or delay death such as advertisements for beauty products which counteract the appearance of aging or even monuments erected to ensure that various individuals are not forgotten.

Robert Jay Lifton suggested five different ways in which this symbolic immortality can be achieved: 1) biological mode- living on through one's children and hereditary line, 2) theological mode- living on through higher levels or planes of existence, 3) creative mode- living on through one's artistic expressions, 4) eternal nature mode- living on by becoming one with the forces of nature, and 5) experiential transcendent mode- living on by transcending into a state where there are no concepts of time or death, and one exists within a "continuous present". By achieving immortality in one of these ways, an individual is able to cheat death by ensuring that their name carries on, and thus, their fears and anxieties regarding their eventual death are reduced, even if by just a scant amount.

We can see that how one approaches the concept of death defines how one chooses to live one's life. Individuals may live in fear of death and the possibility of it being around any corner, thus cutting off opportunities to experience life and truly be present from day to day. These individuals may even avoid becoming close with, or loving, others as they wish to avoid the pain of eventual separation caused by death. Yet others may realize that life is short and fleeting and as such, should be lived to the fullest. For these individuals, the threat of eventual death allows one to understand what truly matters in life and how to live authentically and genuinely.

Similarly, multiple theories exist regarding one's death anxiety and how one consequently reacts to this dread. Terror management theory suggests that as an individual's death anxiety increases, so too does their need to find structure and make meaning out of their lives. On the other hand, posttraumatic growth theory suggests that death anxiety can lead to an individual seeking out positive changes within their personal lives (e.g., improved relationships with loved ones, working towards personal goals, greater appreciation for life). No matter how

an individual may attempt to conceptualize and come to terms with death, the more that they are able to sit with their death anxiety and experiences, the less defensive they may be regarding their own lives, thus leading to a healthier and more authentic life.

Further Reading

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