From Death Anxiety to Death Acceptance

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Abstract

How we cope with death anxiety can affect every aspect of our lives – either positively or negatively. Unless we come to accept death, all our defenses and coping efforts will prove inadequate in solving the problem of death. Meaning management can greatly facilitate death acceptance. Finally, I will discuss how the dying can teach us how to live and die in a meaningful and fulfilling way.
I. Introduction

- Death has a thousand faces, but dying has a millions ways.
- Death is ubiquitous and universal
- Death attitudes affect how we live
- Dying is hard work
- We live in a death-denying culture
DEATH

What kind of image comes to your mind?
Palmer’s (1993) cross-cultural interview on Death and Dying:

- Zen Buddhist Monk accepted death as the shedding of his old skin
- Most of the other people have developed various ways of denial and avoidance
- Death is terrifying because it is omnipotent, omnipresent, brutally impartial and most importantly, it is mysterious

“The death entities we create have an effect on the way we live our lives “(p. 19)
What is your preferred way of dying?
• Research has shown that many people fear dying more than death itself
• According to Government statistics, there are about 6000 common ways of dying:
  – Heart failure
  – Stroke
  – Cancer
  – Accident
  – Lightning
  – Natural disasters
  – Infectious diseases, etc.
• Dying *can* be a positive and rewarding experience
• It can also be a time of personal freedom and growth
• Dying well begins with Death Acceptance
Dying is hard work

• Dying is more than a physical process
• “It is a process that includes one’s whole being – physical, psychological, and spiritual” (Kuhn xvii)
• One needs to resolve psychological and spiritual issues
Death Denial

Q: Why is it that so few people have found death acceptance? Why are people so afraid of death?

A: In Western societies, we live in a death-denying culture
Extreme Measures of Death Denial

The Life Extension Movement

- The calorie minimizers
- The supplementatarians
- The cryonicists
Death fear and existential anxiety

- Death happens to all organisms
- Human beings alone are burdened with the cognitive capacity to be aware of their own inevitable mortality and fear what may come afterwards
- Human beings’ capacity to reflect on the meaning of life and death creates additional existential anxiety
- “The existential fear of death, the fear of not existing, is the hardest to conquer” (Goodman, 1981)
II. The Bases of Death Anxiety

1. The Finality of Death
2. The uncertainty of what follows
3. Annihilation anxiety or fear of non-existence
4. The ultimate loss
5. Fear of the pain and loneliness in dying
6. Fear of failing to complete life work
III. Coping with Death Anxiety

- Elizabeth Kuber-Ross’s (1969) five stages of coping -
- People do exhibit denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance

- **Denial** – Death avoidance and extreme sports
- **Anger** – Aggression, violence and terrorism
- **Bargaining** – Doing good deeds or worshipping gods
- **Depression** – Disengagement and isolation
- **Acceptance** – Engagement in life
• Wong, Reker & Gesser’s (1994) three types of death acceptance:
  1. Neutral
  2. Approach
  3. Escape
Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon’s (2002) Terror management theory

- Resort to anger and violence
- Manage or deny subconscious terror
- Cognitive construction of immortality
various kinds of symbolic immortality:
• Biological
• Religious/spiritual
• Creative
• Natural
• Institutional
Positive death acceptance

“Death Acceptance is the only antidote to Death Anxiety.”

- Acceptance one’s life as worthwhile
- Readiness to let go things of this world
- Recognition of the spiritual connection with a transcendental reality
- Hope in sharing spiritual life with loved ones for all eternity
Facilitating Death Acceptance

Pathways to death acceptance

• Life review (Wong, 1995)
• Self-acceptance (Wong, 1998)
• Religious/spiritual beliefs (Wong, 1998)
• Embracing one’s own life
• Death education

To contemplate our death is to contemplate our life that leads to death
The life-death connection

• “To solve the problem of death, one must first solve the problem of life, living life” (Dennis Yoshikawa)

• “To be prepared for death is to be prepared for living; to die well is to live well” (Konosuke Matsushita)
A Meaning Management Model

V. Living and dying well through meaning management

• Human beings are born with the innate need for meaning
• Finding meaning and purpose can make a big difference
• The psychology of meaning management helps deepen our spirituality and existential understanding
• Meaning management helps construct an effective psychological and spiritual model
• Meaning management motivates us to embrace life
• Meaning management involves transformation of values and beliefs
Questions and consequences

• Have you lived the life you have always wanted to live?

• Have you lived a life that is worth living?

• How you answer these questions affects how well you will live and die.

• There is an urgent need to change your priority when there is still time left.
VI. Conclusions

• Our death attitudes affect not only our own lives but also our society
• We can choose to face death with fear or with hope
• We need to decide what matters most in life and death
• What is worth dying for reveals our ultimate concerns
• Death is our best teacher
“Enhancing one’s sense of self, one’s relationships with others, and one’s understanding of the transcendent, the spiritual, the supernatural” (Kuhl, 2002)