

Death Anxiety

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Anxieties are states of uneasiness, dread, and fear which often stem from concerns about future uncertainties. Along with the mental manifestations of danger and foreboding, bodily changes occur such as increased heart rate, breathing, sweating, trembling, and fatigue (Uretsky, 2002). The experience is invariably the same regardless of the source. The average person is aware of at least a few anxieties, such as separation anxiety, social anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, however most do not take time to consider death anxiety to be a concern for many people, especially themselves (Becker, 1973). Whether there is truly a difference between what is considered to be death anxiety and other general anxieties, there has not been much attention paid to those distinctions. Most academic studies have relied on self-report questionnaires where respondents responded by agreeing or disagreeing with direct questions such as “I fear dying a painful death” (Kastenbaum, 2007). Although vague in terms of depth of detail on the subject, these basic studies have aided in directing more in-depth thanatological studies on death anxiety.

Janet Belsky (1999) defined “death anxiety” as “the thoughts, fears, and emotions about that final event of living that we experience under more normal conditions of life” (Belsky, 1999, p. 368). Belsky posits that as people live their lives, they are continuously suffering varying degrees of anxiety about death. Psychologists have accepted that there are wide degrees of factors that could influence what might affect the degrees to which people experience feelings of death anxiety. The majority of studies conducted have used healthy adults with attention given to their level of anxiety, gender, age, and other demographic variables (Kastenbaum, 2007). There have been other studies that focused on the effects of death anxiety in seniors (Goebel & Boeck, 1987) as well as in children and adolescents (Koocher, O’Malley, Foster, & Gogan, 1976).

The majority of adults in the United States report having moderate to low levels of anxiety about death. This is often interpreted that people readily hide their anxieties from those in their social and professional groups, including themselves (Hayslip, 2003). Studies that support this interpretation have found that participants had detectable physiological indications of stress, even when they reported experiencing no death-related anxiety at all (Kastenbaum, 2007). This seems to support Belsky’s (1999) position on that people carry death anxiety with them at all times. Herman Feifel and B. Allen Branscomb (1973) also came to the same conclusion, stating that “everybody, in one way or another, is afraid of death” (Feifel & Branscomb, 1973). Some individuals have greater self-control when it comes to death-related anxiety, disallowing it from disrupting their day-to-day lives. No one however has the ability to completely quell underlying feelings of threat (Kastenbaum, 2003).

There are reported differences between genders. In the United States, women usually report higher levels of death anxiety than men (Kastenbaum, 2003). Interpreting this, one can assume either that women have greater anxiousness towards death, whereas men are the opposite, simply having less anxiety about death.

Chances are there are no differences in the level of anxiety that men and women have, rather cultural display rules allow women to express their anxiousness more freely. It is also worth noting that women empathize with dying and grieving persons more often and women are a leading contributor to the international hospice movement (Kastenbaum, 2007). Historically, the male is supposed to exude power and control, and anything less would be a sign of weakness. Therefore confronting the classic male with their mortality would only lead to anger, denial, and an attempt to reign whatever situation is causing this confrontation with mortality back under control.

Age has been found to be a factor in levels of death anxiety in people. Adolescents generally have a sense of immortality, but at the same time experience a degree of vulnerability, although they usually transform high death-related anxiety into risky death-defying activities (Kastenbaum, 2003). Middle-aged parents often carry a moderate level of anxiety for themselves with concern for whether or not their loved ones would be financially and emotionally prepared for their death. Elderly people in general have the least amount of death-related anxiety stemming from feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment through their life or from their willingness to let go of a life that is no longer worth living (Goebel & Boeck, 1987).

Erik Erikson (1950) proposed a psychosocial theory that stated that people progressed through a series of crises as they age, and that later in life a stage of "ego integrity" is attained (Erikson, 1950). By this stage, a person would find meaning and acceptance in the lives they have lived. Erikson proposed that people engage in a life review when they attain late adulthood. During their review, if they find meaning or purpose in their life, they have integrity (Hockenbury & Hockenbury, 2007). On the other hand, if during a review a person sees many missed opportunities, they do not attain ego integrity. By this theory, older adults who reach this stage of ego integrity should have lower death anxiety, by that they have lived a meaningful life.

Quinn and Reznikoff (1985) explored the relationship between death anxiety and sense of purposefulness in life and perceptions of time. What they found was those who felt they had a lowered sense of purposefulness to their lives had both a higher risk of death anxiety and sensitivity to the future. As people age, they seemingly have a decrease in awareness of the future and what their contributions to the future might be. This in turn, allows death-related anxiety to lower to healthier levels in older adults (Quinn & Reznikoff, 1985). Using Abraham Maslow's theory of Self-Actualization, people who fail to self-actualize, or reach their potential as a person would have higher death anxiety than someone who reached the self-actualization stage and has that sense of accomplishment (R. E. Opp, PSY 101 lecture, December 01, 2008).

Across the spectrum, from younger to older individuals, the level of religiosity a person has can have a profound impact on the level of death anxiety a person experiences throughout their life (Kastenbaum, 2003). Over the years, the teachings of Christianity have highlighted messages of both Damnation and Salvation. Fire and Brimstone sermons were not uncommon, calling for everyone to denounce their sins or else face the rest of eternity in hell. Followers of Christianity undoubtedly gained a measure of unease regarding their own deaths for fear they were not devout enough. As well, death-related anxiety may also plague a religious follower more when it comes to the death of a friend, family member or loved one if the religious person feels the other person was not religious enough or had potential sins that may prevent them from reaching the afterlife (or heaven). At the same time, religion has aided many in lowering their death-related anxiety through teachings of

salvation and the promise of a glorious heaven. The notion that humans are stuck upon this earth and must suffer its highs and lows, only to be embraced by a welcoming afterlife lends death an air of acceptability. In this case, it is a destination to look forward to; helping individuals who follow that train of thought to have lower death-related anxiety (Alvarado, Templer, Bresler, & Thomas-Dobson, 1995). Historical studies suggest that benefits stemming from religious practice only occur when the individual has high intrinsic religious motivation, and a genuine religious conviction, rather than just practicing religion alone or going through the motions (Duff & Hong, 1995).

Religious convictions aside, many people often torment themselves with regrets and doubts about the lives they have lived. Similar to Quinn and Reznikoff's views that a person would have lower death anxiety with a greater feeling of completion and purposefulness in their lives, Adrian Tomer (1996) proposed the Regret theory. The recommendation for overcoming these regrets in order to continue living a satisfied existence is for a person to stop and reconsider their memories and expectations in order to reprioritize various things their life, such as family and friends over self-regrets, and discover how to live more fully in the present moment (Tomer & Eliason, 1996).

Another theory attempting to describe how we are able to live with death anxiety is Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski's Terror Management Theory (TMT). The core proposition to TMT is that self-esteem and a positive worldview serve as effective barriers to death-related anxiety (Kastenbaum, 2007). We often call upon our sense of self-worth and belief that the society in which we live is sound and that we live in a friendly universe whenever we find ourselves in danger. Different things can attribute to our sense of self-worth and our thoughts on the resilience of society, in turn shaping how we manage the threat of terror-induced anxiety. With weak consideration of self-worth, a person may very well be plagued by anxiety, however if this person took on a positive view of the world around them and of themselves, they may realize a decrease in death-related feelings of anxiety (Tomer, 2003).

Death anxiety does not affect everyone consciously, however all people should be considered to have some concern for self-preservation at their rim of consciousness, causing at minimum low levels of death anxiety (R. E. Opp, PSY 101 lecture, December 01, 2008). For those who do actively experience its' symptoms are scarcely the same from person to person. Long before reaching old age, each person has a personal history of thinking about death (Hockenbury & Hockenbury, 2007). Death anxiety can affect both the young and the old; though more often than not those who are middle aged to young adults often experience it with greater frequency and/or strength. Women are more apt to express their anxieties while males hold back discussion of their mortality in order to display their expected societal standing of strength. Religiosity can also affect the level of anxiety followers and non-followers experience. Many psychologists and researchers will agree though that if a person can review their own lives and find a sense of accomplishment and worth, they will undoubtedly experience less anxiety about death than people who are unable to find accomplishment in their lives.

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