

Death Fear

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Editorial

Death fear is a relatively general term that is often used interchangeably with the concept of death anxiety, with some distinct differences. The term death fear reflects a contemplative process by which the individuals assess and reassess their perspectives on dying and death. Some elements of death fear include fear of the unknown, fear of pain, having “unfinished business” and fear of non-existence. This type of contemplating and rationale process reflects the view that individuals facing death experience a significant level of angst related to the end of life in a very rationale and experiential manner.

In contrast, individuals facing the end of life may also experience death anxiety, which is a much less tangible process by which individual demonstrate both psychological and physiological manifestations of anxiety that are in direct alignment with angst related to the end of life. In relation to existential theorists and views on psychopathology, Freud’s belief that individual process a significant amount of angst-related experiences subconsciously fits with the definition of death anxiety. While many people may express acceptance of or awareness of paradigmatic views on death, the afterlife and even spiritual believes, fear of death is universal, even when it is not consciously verbalized. Death anxiety occurs when a person cannot match their beliefs or views on death with the actual process of dying.

The existential view on death fear relates to the views of Frankl, May, and Roger regarding the importance of self-actualization. Death fear and death anxiety that last for prolonged periods of time often stem from a fear of the lack of self-actualization or the belief that a person has not achieved a level of meaning in his/her life. Erikson maintained the importance of identifying the progression of the psyche

in stages that allow for an assessment of the nature of achievement over the lifespan. For many, self-actualization extends from the belief that the individual has progressed through the stages of development, the end product of which was a life that appeared of value to self and/or others.

Though life interrupted early by death is often seen as a negative element because the individual was unable to progress through the life cycle, aging is the process by which individuals navigate the life process, the end product of which is death. Though this is a very blunt perspective on the reality of life, many of the existential theorists, from Heidegger and Sartre to Rogers, believed that it was important to acknowledge the very concrete nature of death as a part of the progression of life. Self-actualization, then, extends from the belief that life was worth living and that at the end, meaning could be derived from that life. The concept of self-actualization extends from a Socratic principle that the “unexamined life is not worth living.” Feifel and Nagel maintained that this kind of perspective is essential to understanding why some individuals develop death fear and death anxiety, while others do not. One very clear explanation may extend from the Rogerian view of self-actualization and the belief that death acceptance comes upon the completion of life, rather than the cessation of life.

Klug and Boss maintained that there were two central components to any process that supports death acceptance or the positive view of death as completion, rather than the termination, of a life process. These two elements are the ability to confront (identify and rationally view) death, and to integrate an understanding of the meaning of death in relation to emotional, psychological, and psychosocial functioning.