

## COPING WITH THE FEAR OF DEATH

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I am often asked to respond to people who are afraid of death. Near death research indicates that the process of dying is spiritual and even joyful, yet that knowledge is often not helpful to those who fear death. 1) Often the knowledge that the near death experience is in fact the dying experience is an intellectual concept that doesn't find its way to our heart. 2) Often people remain unconvinced that near death research can firmly state that NDEs are "real", or have issues concerning the fear of death that have nothing to do with the actual dying process.

The First Step in Discussing the Fear of Death is to Sort Out Why a Person is Afraid to Die

1. Transition Phases in Life: There are well defined times in human development when we can expect to have a fear of dying. They occur at transition times in development. Common times to have a significant fear of death include: a) age 4-6 b) age 10-12 c) age 17-24 d) age 35-55 (at some well defined point during those years). Oddly enough, research documents that the older we get after age 55-60, the less fear of dying we have. The elderly have the lowest fear of death as measured by various death anxiety scales (of adults).

It is generally thought that the reason for a "fear" of death at these periods of time is that we are actually mourning the loss of a previous developmental stage. "I don't want to grow up" in other words, or a fear of the unknown. Ages 17-24 are often marked with vivid dreams of the fear of death, and aggressive risk taking behavior in response to a fear of death, as they are about to enter into the great unknown of adulthood. Ages 4-6 are often a time of significant fear of death, as the child at that period in time becomes self aware and aware of concepts such as time, and loss.

2. Anxiety: People who have a high level of general anxiety often have a severe fear of death. For example, people who have suffered severe trauma or abuse often have a lot of anxiety surrounding such issues, and such anxiety can present as a fear of death. Often, severe childhood abuse and trauma, especially in woman, will not present itself until ages 35-55! Pauline recently had a horrible dream of a meteorite from space hitting our home and "cratering it". She has a lot of unresolved severe childhood trauma. When things are going very well for us, and we are very happy, suddenly she will become very concerned about her health, or the total destruction of our home and family. This is to be expected, as Pauline has had times in her life when she felt completely safe and loved, only to suddenly suffer horrific trauma.

3. Crisis of Faith: We have a deep need to believe in a god or religious myths to explain the Universe to us. Please recognize that simply because we have a need to believe in a god, that

doesn't mean a real god doesn't exist. We create myths and stories about our lives that help us to make sense of an otherwise incomprehensible Universe. For example, even being a Republican, or Liberal Democrat comes with a predetermined set of beliefs and values that help us to find meaning and a place within the Universe. Even belonging to a bowling league can do it.

When our beliefs and values are seriously challenged, and we question everything we know to be true, that process can present itself as a fear of death. For example, in the mid 1800s, Western society was startled to learn that the Bible was actually a collection of many authors and time periods, something people hadn't really thought of before that. This led to a severe crisis of faith for many, and with it, a severe fear of death. However, even more mundane crises of faith can lead to a fear of death, for example, learning that everyone on your bowling team secretly hates you and wishes that you would quit (not that that ever happened to me, as I am a "natural" at bowling), can lead to a fear of death.

4. Suffering or fearing Significant Losses: People who have lost a spouse or child can have severe fears of death, as their universe is also destroyed and life no longer has meaning. Of course it can lead to depression and even suicide, but in those persons who are not prone to depression, it can lead to anxiety and fear about death.

Just thinking about being separated from those we love can lead to a fear of death. I personally have no fear of actually dying, but I am afraid to be separated from my wife Pauline, or my baby Melody. I have been in life threatening situations, and even had a life threatening illness that I had only a small chance of recovering from. It was the oddest experience, as I had absolutely no fear of dying. I would only think "now I will see what the children are talking about", yet I was paralyzed with fear of being separated from Pauline and Baby Melody.

5. Loss of Health, Income, Prestige: This often effects men in their 40s to 60s. We can't jump as high as we could when we were 20, or run as fast. Often our jobs or professions suddenly collapse, people are laid off, companies fail, or we suffer serious diseases. All of this can present as a fear of death, as we want a second chance at being a teenager again, a second chance to start all over again.

6. Actual fear of death and the Unknown: Many people simply don't want to die, and are afraid that there is nothing after death. Life can be a difficult struggle just to survive, and then we die. Other people, often brilliant geniuses or those who have accomplished a lot also fear the loss of who they are, and the end to it all.

7. Fear of the Pain of Death or a long slow death: Many people accept death itself, but fear that the dying process will be painful or humiliating or lonely. So many people in our society die alone, isolated from those that they love. Peter Fenwick recently completed an excellent study documenting that re-uniting with estranged loved ones is an important priority for the dying.

Near death research only impacts a few of these categories. If, for example, someone has a severe fear of death associated with a childhood trauma, or are suffering from grief, watching

all the inspiring videos on my website and hearing that when we die, we are surrounded by love will not bring any sort of long term resolution.

My advice is to spend some time with someone you love, and try to figure out why you are afraid to die. Then take appropriate action in terms of treatment for anxiety, dealing with childhood depression or whatever the specific situation calls for.

The one common element seen in almost all persons who suffer from a fear of death is that whatever the cause, it involves spiritual issues. Spiritual issues are best addressed when we can temporarily suspend judgment and analysis. This is very hard to do, when we are suffering from a severe fear of death! There are specific and fairly easy techniques that I have found to be very helpful in learning to suspend judgment and analysis, and in turn promoting healing spiritual insights. I will write about them in my next essay on death.

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