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# Perspectives on the Fears of Death & Dying

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**PERSPECTIVES ON THE FEARS**  
**OF**  
**DEATH & DYING**



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## **Introduction**

This E-Book will examine some perspectives on fear, the fears of death, and constructs used to overcome or deal with the fears of death. By examining the literature on fear in general, a framework can be developed to understand how individuals become fearful. In the section, "Fears of Death," what people fear about death and why they fear it will be discussed.

## **The Nature of Fear**

Schuster (1986) defines fear as "a way of alerting one that danger is present and that something needs to be done to protect oneself" (p. 225). Fear is a human emotion that can affect how individuals live their lives and face death. It is difficult to describe fear in precise, scientific terms due to its subjective nature. Some theorists postulate that fear is a learned emotion; some, that it is an interpretation of a physiological response. Others believe that fear is an innate response for self-preservation. A person's past encounters with threatening, fearful, or anxious situations determine what she or he may perceive as a fearful or anxious event. Despite the source of the emotion of fear, in order to reduce or be free of fear, individuals should learn how to deal with their fears.

There are three main components to fear, which do not always correspond with each other. These components of fear are described as "the subjective experience of apprehension, associated psychophysiological changes, and attempts to avoid or escape from fearful situations" (Rachman, 1990, p. 3). These three components of fear can affect how individuals perceive and respond to fearful situations, how physical and psychological states change when one is

frightened, and how people may attempt to avoid or escape from a threatening situation. When discussing fear, one should be aware of which components of fear are being described. This will provide a clearer understanding of the individual's fear.

Psychological research by researchers such as Wolpe and Bandura has shown that fear can be acquired through a conditioning process or by vicarious observations of fearful situations. Conditioning theorists postulate that fear is a learned response. It occurs when there are "signals (conditioned stimuli) that are premonitory of (i.e., have in the past been followed by) situations of injury or pain (unconditional stimuli)" (Mowrer, 1939, p. 554). Fear can also be reduced by using conditioning techniques. Positive conditioning, such as, systematic desensitization techniques, can be used to reduce or extinguish some fears.

Vicariously acquired fears are believed to be developed by observing fear in others. For example, if a child observes a significant adult being afraid of death, she or he may develop the same fear. Bandura observed that not only could attitudes and behaviors be developed by observing and copying other's responses, but that by copying other people's appropriate behavior, fearful attitudes and behaviors could be changed. There are some theories that fear can be learned through the absorption of threatening information. For example, the sharing of information that could be interpreted as threatening can create a sense of fear in some individuals, such as the rise in some peoples' fears of flying following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. However, information that could be considered non-threatening to the individuals can also be used to help them deal with fear. For example, information about the pain of some terminal illnesses can lead to a fear of the process of dying. However, providing information about the benefits of palliative medical care can help reduce this fear.

People respond differently to threatening situations. Individuals respond to a threat based

on how the threat is perceived and their learned response to the threat. According to Becker (1973), "[One's] fears are fashioned out of the ways in which [one] . . . perceives the world" (p. 18). What one person might consider threatening or fearful may not be considered the same by another person. How one has learned to deal with fear will affect her or his response.

### **Dealing with Fear**

People use various methods to reduce or extinguish their fears. Defense mechanisms such as denial and illusion are cognitive defenses used by many to deal with unacceptable psychological situations. According to Freudian theories, an illusion is the creation of an acceptable concept that avoids the recognition of the unacceptable situation. The defenses of illusion and denial are two common methods used by many people to deal with death.

The personal construct theory of George Kelly provides an analysis of how fears can develop and be resolved. According to the personal construct theory, individuals develop certain belief constructs to anticipate and deal with events that may occur in their lives. These constructs help individuals interpret and respond to life's experiences. When an individual's personal construct does not support the expected interpretation or response, the individual will feel threatened and may become fearful. The resolution of this fear can be accomplished by modifying existing personal constructs to encompass the newly acquired experiences, such as the observation or knowledge of the value of palliative care, which may reduce a person's fear of death and dying.

## **Fears of Death & Dying**

Many people fear death and/or dying. These fears can be summarized as fearing the pain and loneliness of dying, the fear of non-existence, and the fear of the unknown after death. The most common fear, in Western society, is that the process of dying will be painful, prolonged, and will reduce the quality of life. Many also fear dying alone. Another fear is that of not existing and no longer participating in life. Many people cannot conceive life without their involvement. Humans also fear death because they view death as an annihilation of their person, a radical personal transformation, a threat to the meaningfulness of life, and a threat to the completion of life projects. Third, not knowing what happens after death has been linked both to eternal questions of mortality and immortality and to the fear of the unknown by many human beings.

Although advances in medical science and pharmacology have helped reduce the pain associated with some illnesses and injuries, they also often compromise the individual's ability to communicate and be involved with others. The prolongation of life and the physical and financial expenses associated with medical care can cause an individual to become dependent on others for support, with an accompanying loss of self-esteem. Further, because of the use of modern medical technology, many people are confined to hospital settings for their final days, away from their known surroundings. This confinement often leads to social isolation that can exacerbate someone's fear of dying alone.

Most humans have difficulty conceptualizing their nonphysical existence. The prospect of nonbeing can be fearful to many people. They cannot conceive of life without their participation. Many humans also fear death due to its destruction of the living person's

existence.

The finality of death may cause fear if an individual thinks that her or his life has not had meaning, or that she or he has not completed a particular life task. When death is imminent, she or he may feel that she or he has not accomplished enough to reflect a purpose and value for having lived. Many people also view death as an obstacle to the completion of life projects, such as parenting young children or completing a career goal. Not being able to complete a life goal could be considered a sign of failure and add to their fear of death.

The transformation from life to death also can be frightening due to the unknown nature of what happens after death. Shneidman (1973) writes,

To contemplate death-that meeting-point of life and nonlife. That absence of a self, that absence of a future, that experience that is not experienceable-is it any wonder that this epistemological never-never land makes death seem forbidding and forbidden. (p. 62)

Religious beliefs and practices can be beneficial to help some individuals deal with their fears of the unknown related to death. Religious beliefs and rituals can sometimes help reduce this fear of the unknown. According to Duff (1995), “group celebrations of religious rituals lift people and give them “a sense of continuity beyond the grave”” (p. D-7).

Fears of death can be affected by how someone perceives how others react to death. Fears of death also can be affected by acquiring new knowledge, such as knowledge concerning the advances in medical science that make dying less painful. For some people, the fear of death causes anxiety and physical discomfort. Others accept the inevitability of death and are comfortable with their mortality. Those who fear death often attempt to avoid, deny, or create illusions to make the realities of death palatable.

## **Conclusion**

Fear is a human emotion to a perceived threat to one's sense of well-being. To approach death unprepared can cause fear. To accept death one must be prepared. Philosophical, religious, and psychological reasoning can prepare one for death. For one to become comfortable with one's own mortality and not fear their own death or the death of others, they should engage in modifying her or his personal constructs regarding death and learn to accept death as a normal part of our human existence.

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