

Personal Death Awareness

One of the most helpful ways to understand personal death awareness is to take a moment and recall the number of times today you've thought about your own — not someone else's death or limited span of life. Maybe you thought about your age and evaluated your own progress toward certain life goals. Or perhaps you briefly experienced a fear of dying. If such a thought didn't occur to you at all, then you're probably in the low range today. If these ideas crossed your mind, one, two, or three times, then you've moved up to the moderate range. If you seriously pondered your own death or mortality four or more times, or find it a preoccupation, then you're likely in the high range.

Your PDA is a fluctuating phenomenon, moving up and down daily. Some days, you may act and think as though you're going to live forever. The purpose of this is to ask you to raise your personal death awareness so that you can begin to perceive an entire range of choices about your life and death that you might not have been aware of before.

Opening Exercises

To test the level of your PDA try this simple exercise. On a piece of paper, that also includes the date, draw a line that you think best represents your life span. The line can be any shape or length that you think is most appropriate.

Some people choose to draw a line from one end of the paper to the other; in effect a line without boundaries which ends only because the edge of the page forces the pencil to stop.

Now draw another line of any length, this time a straight one with a beginning and an end. Consider this line to be your total life span. Place a slash mark at any point along the line where you think you are today in your life's chronology.

Continuing on the same sheet of paper complete the following sentences: I expect to live until the age _____. I am presently age _____.

When you compare your present age with the age at which you expect to die, how much of your life do you find you've already lived? A third, a half?, a quarter? Now look back on the line with the slash mark. How does it compare with these estimates?

How did it feel to estimate a definite life span? Some people worry that they may jinx themselves by doing this. Old superstitions arise. Does this concern you? Did you feel any other discomfort? Take a minute and jot down your responses to these questions. (When you do this, write out the entire sentence. Using only the fragment at the end will make it difficult to reread later. Also, it makes sense to identify which section, the **Boldface** type, the answer comes from. Finally use as much space as is needed.)

I was uncomfortable in estimating my remaining life span because I was comfortable in estimating my remaining life span because The death I would most prefer for myself would be _____. The death I would least prefer for myself would be _____. The reasons for my choices are _____.

You probably found it easy to pick the types of death you would not want for yourself. But did you have difficulty picking a death you would want?

You have a style of life that you call your own. What would be your style of death? Take a few moments and compose your obituary on this other sheet of paper.

Obituary

_____ died today at the age of _____. A native of _____ (birthplace), she/he died (how you might die). She/he is remembered for (how will people remember you?). She/he is survived by (who in your family will live longer than you?). Details of the funeral and burial are as follows _____.

What was it like for you to compose your own obituary? Did you feel anxious or upset? Did any of the questions make you think about things you had refused or neglected to think about before? Did you increase your estimate of your life span?

How are you feeling now? List the emotions; anxious, calm, tense, sick, angry, happy, amused, frightened, embarrassed, confused, bored, interested, other?

Think of three people you know well with whom you might share these feelings. Write down their names and how they might respond to your feelings. Would they be very helpful, somewhat helpful, not helpful?

First choice: _____, second choice: _____, third choice: _____.

If you thought any of the three would be unhelpful why do you think they would react negatively?

A Picture of Death

"The Grim Reaper", "Jordan's Bank", the "journeys end", that "dreamless sleep", "the way of all flesh", "going home", and "dust" are a few images which have been used to describe the end of life, that last unknown which has a different image in each of our imaginations. The picture that you harbor in your mind may be frightening or comforting, but perhaps you've never thought about death in graphic terms. It's likely that many of our conscious fears and anxieties are rooted in shadowy images of death, an ominous anticipation of the unknown that lurks on the edge of your unconscious. To get clearer ideas of your concept of death, take your pencil and draw death as you imagine it. Don't spend time thinking about it. Just begin drawing and see what emerges.

To get even a clearer sense of your current concept of death, complete the following sentence by writing the first response that comes to mind. When I think of death, I think of _____.

As we continue to look at fear, use the words agree, not sure or disagree to identify in the following statements.

- I would avoid death at all costs.
- The total isolation of death frightens me.
- I am disturbed by the physical degeneration involved in a slow death.
- I would not mind dying young.
- Dying might be an interesting experience.
- I view death as a release from earthly suffering.
- The pain in dying frightens me.

- I am disturbed by the shortness of life.
- The feeling that I might be missing out on something after I die does not bother me.
- If I had a fatal illness, I would like to be told.
- The idea of never thinking or experiencing again after I die does not bother me.
- I am not disturbed by death being the end of life as I know it.
- The intellectual degeneration of old age disturbs me.
- I am disturbed that my abilities could be limited while I lay dying.

Free To Recycle Yourself

What will happen to your body after you die? Even after learning about the obvious benefits of organ donation, many people are still resistant to the idea. If you are also, try getting in touch with the source of your reluctance by looking at the resistances listed below. List the ones which apply to you. Or add any other.

- I'm afraid I might not be dead when they remove an organ.
- I'm chicken about doing unusual things. Organ donation is a fad.
- It's a sick perverted idea.
- They wouldn't use my parts anyway.
- My kind doesn't do those things.
- If I do anything with my body, I'll freeze it for possible later use.
- I'm embarrassed and uncomfortable about having my dead body out or examined by doctors or medical students.
- I want to be buried intact.
- Removal of my organs might spoil my appearance.
- It's too much trouble to arrange for organ donation before I die.
- I really don't care about medical research or helping people who need transplants.
- God wouldn't approve.
- I need all my parts for the after life.

Free to Give to Others

Take an inventory and see which responses best describe the present state of your finances and financial attitudes:

1. Do you have a will?
2. I have \$ _____ insurance on my life.
3. If I died today, my insurance would provide my family with _____.
4. I don't carry insurance because _____.

Free to Live Until Death

How do you feel about passing a right to life bill? How do/did you feel about the initiative on the California ballot in November 1992?

Personal Death History

1. The first death that I experienced was the death of ____.
2. I was ____ years old.

3. At that time I felt ____.
4. I was most curious about ____.
5. The things that frightened me the most were ____.
6. The feelings that I have now as I think of death are ____.
7. The most intriguing thing about the funeral was ____.
8. I was most scared at the funeral by ____.
9. The first personal acquaintance of my own age who died was ____.
10. I remember thinking ____.
11. I lost my first parent when I was ____ years old.
12. The death of this parent was especially significant because ____.
13. The most recent death I experienced was when ____ died ____ (years/months/days) ago.
14. The most traumatic death I ever experienced was ____.
15. At age ____ I personally came closest to death when ____.

Breaking Free from Fear

No sane, healthy person really wants to die. The last appointment is one that almost everyone, no matter how religious, elderly, or bored with life, would like to postpone. The reason that we're reluctant to confront the end of our existence is not simply that we enjoy life so much. For many of us, it's the fear of death and the process of dying that makes us avoid the subject.

You may have drawn happy pictures of death and described it as a warm, welcoming parent in the preceding pages. Exploring the end of life may also have introduced you to ways of dealing with difficult emotional situations. But in this last analysis, if you look down deep inside yourself, you're still afraid of what death and dying may involved for you personally.

Some fears may center on the event of death itself, but many people seem more concerned about the events that lead inexorably to death. People fear the dying process as much as death itself. Perhaps this is true of you. Think about it for a minute. Which do you fear more? - I fear death more than dying - I fear dying more than death - I fear neither - I fear them both - I dislike thinking about either.

If you are in touch with your fears associated with dying as a process, what are they? The thing which most frightens me about dying is: the pain - the progressive deterioration and disability - losing control over personal decisions - being left alone - overwhelming emotional feelings - not knowing what is happening - being buried before I'm dead - getting inadequate medical care - other?

Controlling the End

How important would it be to you to retain control over your personal decisions if you found you were dying? If you're afraid you may lose control over your last days of life, think for a moment how you can plan now to maintain some independence even though you may be confined to a bed. If you let your loved ones know **NOW** that you want to retain certain powers of decision making over your life, you may succeed in keeping some control. Try answering these questions:

When I learn my death is approaching, I would like to have a say about ____.

To ensure that I maintain control over this/these area(s) of my life, I could notify _____ about my wishes and enlist her/his support on my behalf. Other ways I can lay the groundwork now for keeping some control over personal decisions are _____.

At this point of your life, consider what level of physical disability you might be willing to live with for an extension of life.

To extend my life, I might be willing to give up the use of: one arm - both arms - one leg - both legs - my arms and legs - a vital organ such as a heart which would have to be replaced with a transplant - my eyes - my genital organs - my entire body (complete paralysis).

My greatest fear in dying is _____. My second greatest fear is _____.

Free to Choose Where

So that you will be in a better position to make an intelligent choice, take time to now explore some of the possible places where you could spend your last days. To get some perspective of what it's like to die in different locations, think of the places where some of your friends and relatives have died. (List as many as you need.)

Name _____ Hospital _____ Home _____ Nursing Home _____ Other _____

Free to End Life

Stop for a moment and think one of the following statements which best describes you:

- I have never had a suicidal thought - I have occasionally had suicidal thoughts - I constantly have suicidal thoughts - I have self-destructive thoughts and have threatened suicide by communicating these thoughts to others - I have had such thoughts and have actually made a suicide attempt

Look at the following possible reasons for suicide. Which ones might apply to you? Are there others not included?

- If I had a terminal illness and was going to die anyway - If I became permanently paralyzed, unable to move any part of my body.
- If I got persistently bored with life - If I could no longer support myself - If I had severe pain which could not be relieved
- If I lost a person who is closest to me in life - If I disgraced my family and myself - If I was about to go insane - If I really wanted to hurt someone badly by inducing guilt feelings in him/her through my death - Other reasons

Free to Celebrate

At this point take a few moments and consider what might be an appropriate service to celebrate your life after you are gone. I realize that this is not a very easy task, but doing it can put you in touch with some important thoughts and feelings.

I would like my service to take place: in my church, synagogue, temple, mosque - at home - at a funeral chapel - outdoors - at the graveside only - other.

Wherever you decide to have the service, the service should reflect you - your uniqueness. Since it will be a time of remembering and recollections, what would you most like people to remember about you? Reflect on this and make some notes.

What I want people to remember about me:

What has the most meaning in my life? _____ My interest in: _____
My accomplishments: _____

Now consider some procedural issues. Somebody will have to convene the service. Who would you like to do this? - my clergyperson - my funeral director - a psychologist - a friend - a family member - other.

Because of the intensity of emotion that may grip family members after your death, it may be hard for them to publicly participate in your service. Your friends may be in a better position to contribute in your final celebration.

Here are the name of the friends I would like to participate in my services: 1. _____, 2. _____, 3. _____, 4. _____, 5. _____

Think of some specific function for each person. The ways in which they might participate are: 1. _____, 2. _____, 3. _____, 4. _____, 5. _____

The Service Itself

Now think for a moment about the service itself -- what would you like it to include: _____.

Some specific things I'd like to have included in my service are:

Music: _____, Poetry: _____, Scripture: _____, Other Readings: _____.
Other features (such as interpretive dance, art forms, etc.): _____.

Religious or philosophical convictions I want expressed in the service: _____. Things I definitely **DO NOT** want at my service: _____.

In considering readings and creative presentations for your service, you are choosing material which reflects those things which are important to you. The manner of expressing these beliefs and convictions is limited only by your imagination and sense of taste. Your convictions may include your beliefs as to the meaning of life and death, where you came from and where you are going. Some people focus on beliefs which sustain them and enable to function when life gets very rough. If you believe that your life has a plan and purpose, share this with those who will be joining in the celebration of your life.

You might want to write a draft of your final message. My final message I would like read is: _____. (Take as much space as you need.)

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