

# For whom the bell tolls: The fear of death and the ways to become less afraid of it

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim:** This paper aims to examine the fear of death and psychotherapeutic techniques to face and confront this fear.

**Materials and Methods:** The authors used interpretive research paradigm, integrative anthropological approach, and hermeneutic approach.

The data collection was carried out using PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar databases. Research papers were identified according to search terms: "fear of death", "death anxiety", "death", "mental health", "psychological wellbeing", "culture", "human existence", "philosophy", "existentialism", "cognitive behavioral therapy", "existential psychotherapy", "logotherapy", "acceptance and commitment therapy", "mindfulness", "meaning in life".

**Conclusions:** According to S. Kierkegaard, a fear, including the fear of death, is the prerogative of a human being, because human beings, unlike animals, have a spirit. It is closely connected with the pinnacle of temporary tension, the moment when we have to act in order to shape or reshape our destiny and our Self. J.-P. Sartre considered anxiety and fear to be integral parts of our being in the world. Being abandoned in the world, an individual does not have a certain future, so he/she is forced to choose his/her own life and Self. None of us can escape the fear of death; each of us, sooner or later, has to face it. But if we cannot avoid something, we must accept it. People have known this simple truth since ancient times.

**KEY WORDS:** death, fear of death, death anxiety, mental health, psychological wellbeing, culture, human existence, philosophy, existentialism, cognitive behavioral therapy, existential psychotherapy, logotherapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, mindfulness, meaning in life

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## INTRODUCTION

Death is one of the poles of the fundamental binary opposition "life – death". This opposition is universal and serves as the principle of semantic division of the world into two parts. Within the framework of this binarity, individuals organize and comprehend their experiences, their place in the world seeing "life" as a desirable goal and "death" as something that must be avoided at all costs. Since it is almost impossible to realize and describe one's own death (in this context, the investigations of R.A. Moody, T. Leary, R. Metzner, and R. Alpert are of great interest), it was awareness of the death of the "Other" that determined sociogenesis and cultural genesis.

From ancient times to the present day, the death of an individual, his/her attitude to death, the meaning or meaninglessness of life has always been a relevant, pressing and controversial topic for any human being

and humanity as a whole. This incomprehensible and frightening phenomenon seemed mysterious, hidden behind the veil of Isis, the lifting of which revealed the way to the worlds beyond our earthly realm: from the state similar to a dream or transition to another world to the developed concepts of heaven and hell, reincarnation or even the physical immortality of the Taoists. Human culture has used all its wealth to "resist" death. Ideas about death are crucial for worldviews inherent in any given sociocultural community, individual self-awareness, human values, and "maps of meanings". Cultural orientations in relation to death are closely related to the self-awareness of the individual, his/her identity. People tend to perceive death based on the values of their cultures. Changes in the perception of death express shifts in our self-understanding. In fact, the transformation of the image of death in the public consciousness sheds light on the reshaping of human subjectivity.

The institutionalization of death plays an important role in the process of socialization and formation of cultural identity in all societies. In traditional societies, the phenomenon of death shaped culture, religion, and morality. Nowadays, a society (especially the Western society) is trying to “eliminate” death from social and cultural life. Death is no longer a sealed secret. It has come into conflict with scientific rationality and the progress of science and technology. It no longer evokes sacred horror and awe; on the contrary, it should be hidden and transformed. As a result, there is a need for more aesthetic funeral rites. The process of dying should not disturb the harmony of human society. The death of an individual has become the responsibility of hospices, hospitals, and funeral homes. However, the fear of death is constantly present in human souls.

According to YouGov Death Study, 41% of Britons are afraid of their own death that has affected their enjoyment of life [1]. A 2019 survey on respondents' fear of death shows that 11% of respondents in the United States were very afraid of death [2]. According to a survey conducted in Singapore in 2019, 32% of respondents were afraid of death [3]. However, the answers to the surveys and the perception of death in an existential situation can be strikingly different.

Covid-19 pandemic added fuel to the flame becoming an anxiety-provoking global event. Death toll statistics have reminded people of the fragility of their own existence. Tragic situations occurring with relatives, friends, neighbors and even strangers were projected onto themselves causing fear and anxiety for their own lives and the lives of their loved ones. Conducting a systematic review in order to estimate the pooled score of death anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic, I. Patra et al. revealed that “the standard score of death anxiety in the COVID-19 pandemic was 50% ... The findings related to the continent showed that the standard score of death anxiety was 51% in Asia and 42% in Europe and America. In addition, the death anxiety score in studies related to 2020 and 2021 was 51% and 62%, respectively. The results of subgroup analysis revealed that the highest score of death anxiety was related to patients with COVID-19 (59.4%), other patients (58.9%), and the elderly (56.4%). The lowest score of death anxiety was related to the general population (42.9%) and health care workers (48.2%)” [4]. Z. Chalhoub et al. defined death anxiety as the “most significant predictor of fear related to the COVID-19 pandemic” [5]. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that the changes are the only constant in life [6]. Changes involve situations of uncertainty, which in most cases are difficult to tolerate, because human beings “seek to understand, predict and control – it helps us learn and it keeps us safe. Uncer-

tainty can feel dangerous because we cannot predict with complete confidence what will happen” [7].

M. Bulut's research suggests that intolerance of uncertainty is a critical variable in the relationship between anxiety provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic and the fear of death [8]. Uncertainty seems dangerous, frightening, preventing us from planning the future, being confident or having a system of expectations that is justified. Death for people is also a huge abyss of uncertainty, since no one has returned from the other world and shared their experiences about the stages of transition to another reality or complete disappearance.

Though human beings, unlike other species, know about their own finiteness, the COVID-19 pandemic increased the awareness of the inevitability of death, aggravated the fear of death, and affected mental health. W. James stated that the awareness of our inevitable death is the “worm at the core” of human existence: “The fact that we CAN die, that we CAN be ill at all, is what perplexes us; the fact that we now for a moment live and are well is irrelevant to that perplexity. We need a life not correlated with death, a health not liable to illness, a kind of good that will not perish, a good in fact that flies beyond the Goods of nature.

It all depends on how sensitive the soul may become to discords... a little cooling down of animal excitability and instinct, a little loss of animal toughness, a little irritable weakness and descent of the pain-threshold, will bring the worm at the core of all our usual springs of delight into full view, and turn us into melancholy metaphysicians. The pride of life and glory of the world will shrivel. It is after all but the standing quarrel of hot youth and hoary old. Old age has the last word: the purely naturalistic look at life, however enthusiastically it may begin, is sure to end in sadness” [9]. This “worm at the core” may dramatically undermine human experience of happiness; cause mental health disorders; lead to a loss of meaning in life which will end anyway. L. Iverach, R.G. Menzies and R.E. Menzies argue that death anxiety is a transdiagnostic construct that underlies the “development and maintenance of numerous psychological conditions” [10]. The fear of death is related to illness anxiety, somatoform disorders, panic disorder, common specific phobias, obsessive compulsive disorder, agoraphobia, post-traumatic stress disorder, depressive disorders. Death anxiety is related to social anxiety disorder and eating disorders [11]. Hence, dealing with only one disorder does not address the underlying death-related fears, which ultimately results in the new mental health issues because the core problem remains untouched [11].

## AIM

This paper aims to examine the fear of death and psychotherapeutic techniques to face and confront this fear.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The authors used interpretive research paradigm, integrative anthropological approach, and hermeneutical approach.

The data collection was carried out using PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar databases. Research papers were identified according to search terms: "fear of death", "death anxiety", "death", "mental health", "psychological wellbeing", "culture", "human existence", "philosophy", "existentialism", "cognitive behavioral therapy", "existential psychotherapy", "logotherapy", "acceptance and commitment therapy", "mindfulness", "meaning in life".

It should be noted that the concepts of "fear" and "anxiety" are not identical and may carry different meanings. M. Heidegger explained anxiety as the state in which the threat is nowhere: "Anxiety 'does not know' what that in the face of which it is anxious is" [12]. It is something more extensive and diffuse than the immediate manifestation of fear, which is specific [13]. However, as M. Heidegger emphasizes, there is an essential connection between fear and anxiety. Fear and anxiety are distinct but inseparable. They are immanent to each other and to life itself. These ontological phenomena are modes of human existence. Therefore, in this article we will use the concepts of fear and anxiety interchangeably.

## REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

The fear of death is as old as the world and human life itself. G. Zilboorg states that no one is free of the fear of death which underlies many psychopathological conditions: "behind the sense of insecurity in the face of danger, behind the sense of discouragement and depression, there always lurks the basic fear of death, a fear which undergoes most complex elaborations and manifests itself in many indirect ways" [14]. As C. Wahl put it, "death is itself not only a state, but a complex symbol, the significance of which will vary from one person to another and from one culture to another..." [15]. According to E. Becker, the fear of death haunts the human race like nothing else. This fear is a driving force of any life activity. Given that a human being is at the intersection of the natural and symbolic worlds and it is the symbolic identity that distinguishes him/her from the natural world, each of us is in the state of existential paradox: we are unique beings towering above the world and at the same time the flesh that must inevitably perish. This unbearable situation must be overcome, at least in the symbolic world [16]. E. Becker argued that "man's innate and all-encompassing fear of death drives him to attempt to transcend

death through culturally standardized hero systems and symbols" [17].

Thus, the terror of death governs human life, even if we are not consciously death aware. Awareness of our finite existence awakens thoughts about the meaninglessness of everything around including ourselves. In an attempt to give meaning to this elusive moment, people strive to achieve symbolic immortality, whatever that means. At different times, in different cultural-civilizational communities, this issue was addressed in its own way. Trying to keep death at bay, individuals elaborate social constructs, create own worldviews in which the fear of death becomes more controllable and bearable. Funeral rites, the cult of ancestors, rituals, various forms of religions, ideas ranging from non-being to heaven and hell, architectural monuments, works of art, awards, statuses, projects of the future, immortality projects, human superiority and everything that boosts self-esteem have performed a psychotherapeutic function in the fight against the fear of death. i.e., the human self should become meaningful again: I am, I am significant.

Developing E. Becker's ideas, S. Solomon, J. Greenberg and T. Pyszczynski introduced Terror Management Theory (TMT), according to which "the uniquely human awareness of death gives rise to potentially paralyzing terror that is assuaged by embracing cultural worldviews and meeting or exceeding the standards of value associated with them (i.e., self-esteem) in pursuit of literal and/or symbolic immortality. Convergent empirical support for TMT was originally obtained by studies demonstrating that: momentarily elevated or disproportionately high self-esteem reduces anxiety, autonomic arousal, and defensive cognitive distortions produced by psychological and physical threats; making MS (*mortality salience*) increases defense of the cultural worldview and self-esteem striving; and threats to cherished cultural beliefs or self-esteem increase the accessibility of implicit death thoughts (DTA)" [18].

Trying to insulate themselves from the deep fear of death, people use proximal and distal defenses based on whether their fears are conscious or unconscious. If they are conscious, people combat them through proximal defenses exaggerating their health, denying their vulnerability, or just suppressing thoughts about death. Distal defenses deal with unconscious fears – people strive to see themselves as valuable contributors to the world, develop cultural worldviews, create meanings, purposes, and values that offer literal or symbolic immortality [19]. Although Terror Management Theory as any complex multidimensional theory, has attracted its share of criticism, it is an effective tool

that can help in understanding our existential world, the fear of death and develop strategies to address these issues [20].

The power of death is so strong to resist, and there is still no one “always working” approach to solving this problem. As Shakespeare noted, “death, a necessary end, will come when it will come”, so it seems reasonable to come to terms with death, that is, to accept this truth. G. Gesser, P.T.P Wong and G.T. Reker defined three types of death acceptance:

- Approach-Oriented Death Acceptance – death is viewed as a passageway to a happy afterlife; religious beliefs play a main role in this type of acceptance;

- Escape-Oriented Death Acceptance – death is viewed as an escape from our painful life; health conditions, suffering, loneliness, hopelessness play a main role in this type of acceptance;

- Neutral Acceptance – death is neither welcomed nor feared; this type of acceptance is based on the awareness of the mortality of all living things [21].

Approach-Oriented Death Acceptance ought to be positively related to happiness, optimism and hopefulness, while Escape-Oriented Death Acceptance indicates a low level of wellbeing and hopelessness. As for Neutral Acceptance, it, on the one hand, may motivate individuals to make their lives meaningful, to be “here and now”, on the other hand, perception of ourselves as creatures who come to this world for a moment and are doomed to die may lead to doubt about the meaning of life, which is not conducive to psychological wellbeing [21].

Although all types of death acceptance help reduce the level of death anxiety, R.E. Menzies and R.G. Menzies emphasized that “neutral acceptance appears to produce the lowest levels of death anxiety” [11] and compared it to the Stoic approach. And indeed, when it comes to such deep existential problems, it is philosophy that acts as a guiding star in the ocean of chaos, darkness, and fear. The Stoics taught that some things were in our control and others not. Death, like birth, is beyond our control, thus, we have to accept it. Epictetus wrote: “where I can escape death: discover for me the country, show me the men to whom I must go, whom death does not visit. Discover to me a charm against death. If I have not one, what do you wish me to do? I cannot escape from death” [22].

Neutral Death Acceptance is also represented by Epicureanism – another Hellenistic philosophical school. Being aware that death is a part of human existence and the basic human fear, Epicurus addressed this issue: “Become accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us. For all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation.

And therefore, a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not because it adds to it an infinite span of time, but because it takes away the craving for immortality. For there is nothing terrible in life for the man who has truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living. So that the man speaks but idly who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when it comes, but because it is painful in anticipation. For that which gives no trouble when it comes, is but an empty pain in anticipation. So, death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more” [23].

Can we cultivate death acceptance in our complex, contradictory, ever-hurrying world, in which, on the one hand, the topic of death is most often avoided in interpersonal communication and, on the other hand, death appears everywhere in popular culture and becomes something ordinary? Is it possible to loosen the grip of the suffocating fear of death? Today it is believed that the leading place in correcting the fear of death is occupied by cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). It helps people reinterpret situations allowing them to find ways to deal with their fears more constructively. Cognitive behavioral therapists encourage clients to explore some of the complex reasons behind their fear to help them better understand it and discover their maladaptive unrealistic beliefs about dying and death [11]. Since avoidance is a common way of dealing with the fear of death, CBT focuses a lot on exposure (in vivo or imaginal) allowing clients to face their fears. Entering the frightening situation, clients “learn” to calm themselves gradually approaching their worst fear and learning to accept it. In vivo exposure includes reading obituaries, preparing a will, visiting cemeteries, hospices, funeral homes, etc., i.e., visiting places and engaging in activities directly related to death. Imaginal exposure involves writing a story about different aspects of client’s own death or deaths of their loved ones, about fears concerning death, pain, suffering. If certain unpleasant sensations are signals of fear of death, interoceptive exposure is used [24].

Definitely, CBT effectively copes with certain symptoms by changing conscious thoughts and behavior, but this approach does not consider the personality in its entirety. As F. Faranda put it, CBT and the general shift in the orientation of psychotherapy are associated not so much with the advantages of one approach over another, but with our fear of something inside us [25], with the abyss and darkness of our natural (vs

symbolic) part at which sooner or later we have to look. As R.E. Menzies and R.G. Menzies rightly stated, the “failure to address death fears may in fact be due the death anxiety of clinicians and researchers themselves. How can we begin to work with clients’ concerns about death and dying if we ourselves avoid the subject in our own life?” [11].

Existential psychology and, accordingly, psychotherapy try to cope with this existential abyss. Psychology is deeply rooted in a certain type of philosophy. If scientific psychology adheres to theories and techniques that have been developed and validated through the use of the scientific method and depends on the objective measurement and the replication of results under controlled or known conditions [26] by and large following the path of R. Descartes, then existential psychology is based on the philosophy of existentialism. Focusing on naturalism and empiricism and searching for general laws, scientific psychology to some extent absolutizes and universalizes the reality, in which the individuals have to act according to its laws. Moreover, cartesian “mind – body” dualism has led to the collapse of the holistic phenomenon of a human being and accordingly to the deep contradictions [27]. At the same time, existential psychology interprets a human being as an indivisible whole: there are no separate mental and physical phenomena, and we have to deal with human wholeness and indivisibility approaching his/her core (where this deep and inescapable fear, the fear of death, resides).

Within the framework of existential psychodynamics, the basic conflict of an individual is determined by his/her confrontation with the givens of existence. I.D. Yalom defines these givens of existence as “certain ultimate concerns, certain intrinsic properties that are a part, and an inescapable part, of the human being’s existence in the world” [28]. He identified four ultimate givens: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. Existential conflicts are generated by the individual’s confrontation with any of these life facts. Of these, death is the primary source of anxiety and the primary fount of psychopathology [28]. One of the classic boundary situations, in which a person can really answer the question of “who” he/she is and “why” he/she is, is a confrontation with personal death, which can cause a significant change in a style and character of an individual’s life. Indeed, as I. Yalom emphasized, “death is of such momentous importance that it can, if properly confronted, alter one’s life perspective and promote a truly authentic immersion in life” [28].

A confrontation with own death pulls an individual out of the trap of oblivion, transfers him/her to another mode of existence, in which people take personal re-

sponsibility for their lives. Existential psychotherapists encourage clients to visualize their death; to write their own obituaries or epitaphs; to draw a line on paper, with one representing birth and other – death, and to draw a cross where they believe they currently are; to disidentify from what they are used to consider themselves; to use a guided fantasy technique to increase death awareness; to interact with the dying, etc. [28].

Philosophy plays an important role in existential psychotherapy. For individuals who express concern about their nonexistence after their death, I. Yalom recommended to find comfort in Epicurus’s symmetry argument: “after death I will be in the same state of nonbeing as before birth” [29]. Confrontation with death becomes a source of personal change – an individual realizes that life cannot be postponed; disidentifies with everything insignificant to which he/she holds on within his/her illusion of life; begins to appreciate what he/she has. Despite its apparent depressive overtones, existential psychotherapy helps to overcome existential vacuum; brings people back to life in a broad sense of the word; reveals the world in a new light, the world, in which they can live to the fullest. Choosing to live independently and fully, an individual creates his/her own meanings that are really important to him/her, feels more joy in life, and is more capable of healthy interactions with other people.

It is a great challenge to find (or create) meanings in life. People form their values, goals, attitudes, preferences under the influence of the agents of primary and secondary socialization, i.e., their meanings are conditioned by others and are often not critically analyzed. As A. Maslow put it, people do not listen to themselves but to the voices of their parents, government, authorities, traditions, etc. However, true existence in the face of inevitable death and other givens is possible only if we shape our life and create our own meanings. Then, even in the most difficult situations, we can overcome all hardships. As F. Nietzsche said: “If you have your why for life, you can get by with almost any how” [30]. The meaning of life has become the cornerstone of logotherapy – a therapeutic approach developed by V. Frankl. Believing that it was possible to turn suffering into self-development, V. Frankl helped clients to struggle with existential vacuum and uncover their true meanings. According to V. Frankl, the purpose of logotherapy is to cope with the suffering caused by the philosophical problems posed by life [31]. The task of a logotherapist is to help his/her clients in finding their meanings, since meanings cannot be given. By finding meanings, people are able to rise above their difficulties, fears, and doubts and outgrow their own limits.

Although it seems to us that death deprives life of meanings, V. Frankl stated that “the transitoriness of our existence in no way makes it meaningless. But it does constitute our responsibility; for everything hinges upon our realizing the essentially transitory possibilities. Man constantly makes his choice concerning the mass of present potentialities; which of these will be condemned to nonbeing and which will be actualized? Which choice will be made an actuality once and forever, an immortal “footprint in the sands of time”? At any moment, man must decide, for better or for worse, what will be the monument of his existence” [31]. The studies conducted indicate that logotherapy significantly reduces death anxiety in the elderly; in mothers of children with cancer; in the women with breast cancer; in diabetic patients with depression; in multiple sclerosis patients [32-34]. M. Ameli and F.M. Dattilio suggested enhancing cognitive behavioral therapy with logotherapy providing examples of how logotherapy techniques may be incorporated into a cognitive behavioral framework [35].

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is no less effective in combating the fear of death. ACT is an action-oriented approach to psychotherapy developed by S.C. Hayes. It is focused on values, compassion, living “here and now”, forgiveness, striving for true self and contributes to the acceptance of our hardships, negative thoughts and feelings since they are a part of our life. ACT aims to develop our psychological flexibility through acceptance; cognitive defusion; being mindful in the present moment; expansion of the self; values; and committed actions. It helps to “create a rich and meaningful life, while accepting the pain that inevitably goes with it” [36].

Mindfulness plays an important role in ACT. Mindfulness is a certain mental state and a therapeutic technique that rely on the ability to be focused on the present moment, “here and now”. Mindfulness can be practiced anytime, anywhere and can be applied to any situation. It effectively supports ACT by developing nonjudgmental acceptance of clients’ thoughts and feelings. Research shows that ACT decreases death anxiety in clients with OCD, in patients with multiple sclerosis, in palliative care, in cancer patients, in the elderly [37-39].

Examining the effects of different psychosocial interventions on death anxiety, J. Lu et al. came to the conclusion that rational-emotive hospice care therapy “exhibited superior efficacy as a psychological treatment for reducing the death anxiety of patients” [40]. Rational emotive behavioral therapy was formulated by A. Ellis and was inspired by the Stoic belief that the ideas of things make us happy or unhappy, but not things themselves. In addition, J. Lu et al. attached

special importance to logotherapy (including group therapy), spirituality therapy training, and acceptance and commitment therapy hypothesizing that “combining logotherapy and spirituality therapy training or acceptance and commitment therapy would yield a more favorable effect on DA (*death anxiety*) than employing rational emotive hospice care therapy alone” [40; emphasis added].






## CONCLUSIONS

According to S. Kierkegaard, a fear, including the fear of death, is the prerogative of a human being, because human beings, unlike animals, have a spirit. It is closely connected with the pinnacle of temporary tension, the moment when we have to act in order to shape or reshape our destiny and our Self. J.-P. Sartre considered anxiety and fear to be integral parts of our being in the world. Being abandoned in the world, an individual does not have a certain future, so he/she is forced to choose his/her own life and Self. None of us can escape the fear of death; each of us, sooner or later, has to face it. But if we cannot avoid something, we must accept it. People have known this simple truth since ancient times. Various cultures throughout history have developed their own ways of dealing with the fear of death that found expression in the religious and philosophical teachings of humankind, to which many people still resort today. However, in the contemporary world, in which the exacerbation of existential anxiety has reached monstrous proportions, more and more people terrorized by wars, disasters, impending environmental, sociopolitical and cultural problems abandon traditional ideas and feel cut off from the integral fabric of being.

Modern psychotherapy offers a range of psychotherapeutic techniques that can help confront the fear of death, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, existential psychotherapy, logotherapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, rational-emotive hospice care therapy and some others. These techniques are not always suitable for everyone. One glove does not fit all. Probably, that is why it is very difficult to work within the framework of one protocol in such non-protocol existential situations as the fear of death, loss of meaning of one’s existence, horror in the face of nonexistence. Therefore, it seems appropriate to direct joint efforts towards elaboration and development of effective strategies to confront and overcome the fear of death – strategies that would combine the strengths of various techniques, could be tailored to fit personal needs of a client, and in the spirit of a holistic paradigm would be integrated and implemented by a transdisciplinary team of specialists.

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