



# Thanatophobia: The Fear of Death

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## Introduction

Are you afraid of dying? Are you concerned with what happens to your body after you die? Do you believe that death is final or that there is an afterlife? The fear of death can often be spiritually or religiously based. Most of us probably don't think about these things often, but for many people, the fear of death is a real problem and sometimes, even an obsession. Fear and anxiety about death can be both persistent and interfere with normal daily functioning. This fear can also lead to physical and emotional difficulties.

## Thanatophobia

The word thanatophobia comes from the Greek God of Death Thanatos, and is the fear of either the dying process or death itself. It can be a fairly complex phobia. Many people, if not all, are afraid to die. Some fear the state of being dead while others fear the process of being ill, declining, being cared for by others, and ultimately dying. Some people are completely obsessed with death and dying, and this can interfere with one's quality of life and be seen as concerning to others.

We have undoubtedly seen other people die, have been to funerals and heard about death every day in the media. So, how can we fear something we have never experienced ourselves... our own death? This may be a way for us to try and deal with unresolved issues and conflicts that we experienced earlier in our lives. Perhaps we fear what we ultimately cannot come to terms with or express emotionally.

One reason we may think about death more often is simply the aging process. The closer we come to death the more we may attempt

to suppress it. A friend of mine just morbidly expressed recently at his birthday, "Another birthday... another year closer to death". I hope you don't feel the same way he does! More interestingly than his preoccupation is "Terror Management Theory". According to this theory, we as humans instinctively deny and reject death in order to regulate our deeply held anxiety about it. That makes sense.

## Types of Common Fears

So, exactly what are people afraid of concerning death and dying? First, and probably foremost, fear of the unknown concerns many people. What happens after we die? Where do we go, if anywhere? Who will we see? Will it be hot or mild and breezy (LOL!)? Some fear the loss of control we experience during the act of dying. It usually is, after all, outside our control and most of us are not comfortable with that. Others fear the pain that may accompany the dying process. As a hospice professional, I certainly don't want anyone to experience unbearable pain and therefore it is our job to manage pain as much as clinically possible. More philosophically speaking, what some people fear most about death is meaninglessness and purposelessness in their lives. What did they do with their lives? Was living worth it? Was life good or not so good?

## Other Types of Fears:

- **Illness – What will illnesses and disorders do to us?**
- **Loss of Dignity – being in compromising positions while dying**
- **Concerns about Relatives – leaving loved ones behind**
- **Fear of Other People's Reactions – Will we cause them pain and suffering?**
- **Isolation – dying alone**
- **Fear of Entombment, Being Buried or Cremated**

## Ways to Overcome Fear of Death and Dying

Each of us will deal with death and dying in our own way. We all have different coping mechanisms and skills that will help in navigating us through this process. Some people may have few mechanisms and skills and therefore have a tougher time. What really matters most, according to everything I've read or researched, is taking control of your life right

now and living your life to its fullest. Not only will you feel more in control now and live a better quality of life, but when the end comes, you can reflect back on your life, like Frank Sinatra sings, "I did it my way"! Staying active and engaged in people and life right now is more important than something we may have little to no control over at the end of our lives.

Another way to shake this fear is to better define who you are and create meaning and purpose in your life. Who are you, not only to yourself, but in the eyes of others? What or whom brings you meaning and purpose? Your career, family or other interests? Living a life full of meaning is a gift. Living with purpose is powerful. Just thinking about these makes me fear death less.

Other ways to overcome the fear of death and dying is to psychologically and emotionally accept that death is a part of life. It is natural and inevitable. It can also be very healing to find your source of faith and engage in it fully and without hesitation. Explore spirituality even more deeply than before.

## You can also:

- **Plan for your death**
- **Seek professional help if the fear is too overwhelming**
- **Talk about it and make it real**
- **Embrace that nothing lasts forever**
- **Believe we are all "travelers"**
- **Read and study more about death and dying**
- **Create something you can leave behind – your legacy**
- **Focus less on death and more on love and life**

## Final Words

For some people, the fear of death and dying is merely a fleeting thought, which neither preoccupies their thoughts nor creates intense worry and fright. For others, thanatophobia is a real and present problem that brings dread, anxiety and distress, sometimes to the point of physical and psychological impairment. We all fear something. Fear is a natural human instinct, like stress, and is necessary for us to live. Despite this, no one should live their lives fearing death. Anything that is learned can be unlearned, with professional help. So, focus not on death and dying, but on living well.

*Live. Love. Laugh. Daily!*