

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DEATH

"Becoming aware of our own mortality can be a liberating experience."

We all have to face it at some point; an event of such enormity that it can make everything else in our lives seem insignificant: death, the end of our existence, our departure from this world.

We live in a culture that denies death. We're taught that death is something we should shy away from, and try to forget about. If we start contemplating our own mortality – so this traditional wisdom goes – we'll become anxious and depressed. And there's no doubt that this is often the case.

In psychology, Terror Management Theory suggests that a large part of all human behaviour is generated by unconscious fear of death. This fear generates a fundamental anxiety and unease, which we try to offset with behaviour such as status-seeking or strongly defending the values of our culture. We feel threatened by death and so seek security and significance to defend ourselves against it. Studies have shown, for example, that when people are made more aware of their own mortality, they tend to become more nationalistic and tribal and more materialistic.

However, this is by no means always the case. In fact, there is also a great deal of evidence showing that becoming aware of death can have a powerful positive effect, and bring about a radical shift in attitude and perspective.

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL EFFECTS:

The people I interviewed described a new ability to live in the present. Facing death had taught them that the future and the past are unimportant, and that life only ever takes place in the present moment. They had developed a much more appreciative attitude, a sense of gratitude for aspects of their life they had taken for granted before. They were grateful for their friends and family, grateful just to be alive, grateful to be able to perceive and experience the world around them. The world had also become a more real place to them – things that they had never paid attention to before became strikingly vivid and beautiful.

Worries and anxieties which had oppressed them before – for example, worries about being liked by other people, about not being successful in their career, or about past events which had made them feel embarrassed – no longer seemed important. There was a shift away from an ego-centered, materialistic attitude to a less selfish altruistic one. There was a sense of letting go – of releasing themselves from fear, from ambitions, from attachment to material goods or concepts of status.