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Origins and Manifestations of Death Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I will be making the claim that death anxiety is a feature of human nature. After making a case for why it can be defined this way, I will present evidence from an evolutionary perspective as well as behavioral manifestations that can be explained by this anxiety. Such manifestations can be described as distraction, denial, and reassurance seeking. Acceptance will then be given due diligence as a special consideration. These ideas are compatible with Terror Management Theory, which has spawned a significant amount of related research in the fields of sociology and psychology. Although a relatively new theory, its related ideas have been discussed to some extent by ancient philosophers onward, and continue to be synthesized into a more cohesive understanding that can be applied to benefit the human condition on both an individual and societal level.

KEYWORDS

Death Anxiety, Human Nature, Memento Mori, Terror Management Theory, Thanatophobia, Coping Mechanisms

PART I: ORIGINS

As far back as we can study, themes of immortality have permeated ancient culture in an effort to manage the despair that accompanies death. Even the earliest piece of literature known to man, the Epic of Gilgamesh, reveals the ominous manner in which death was viewed by early civilization. Gilgamesh's myth is believed to have later given rise to the creation story found in the biblical account of Genesis, which also centers around immortality. This religious narrative portrays a man and woman living in a state of innocence, forbidden to eat fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. They eat from it anyhow and, interestingly, it is the advent of their newfound knowledge that brings about death and its corresponding anxiety. I like to think of these characters as a sort of prototype of the human species akin to our hominid ancestors. Their innocence can be equated with ignorance and underdeveloped capability for rationality. As greater intelligence awoke within them (as did our predecessors), so too did an accompanying despair regarding the finiteness of life.

In this paper, I will be explaining how death anxiety is a characterization of the human condition because of what happens when abstract thought and emotional complexity is coupled with the survival instinct. Notice how Arthur Schopenhauer attributes our fear of death to the nature of our consciousness, "Here there primarily lies before us the undeniable fact that, *according to the natural consciousness* [emphasis added], man not only fears death for his own person more than anything else, but also weeps violently over the death of those that belong to him..." (2016, 648-649). We can look at the aforementioned claim in terms of the following structure: Humans dread things they don't want to have happen. Humans don't want death to happen, therefore, humans dread death. These above premises are supported in the following paragraphs by making connections between semantic processes (which enable abstract thought and complex emotions), and the anticipatory nature of dread that ensues, with the survival instinct being a root drive. This dread is an experience that can be referred to as death anxiety, which terms we will use interchangeably.

Dread signifies that which we know will happen in the future, but that we do not wish to occur. Taking out the emotional component (i.e. the feeling of aversion), we are left with anticipation. Anticipation is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for dread. Death anxiety cannot be experienced unless one

can anticipate the future, which requires the ability to think in the abstract. Our ancient ancestors became equipped with this abstract understanding through semantic processing. They could now reflect on the past and comprehend the future. Semantic processing is the function that assigns meaning to data, both in the present as well as when accessing our memory bank (Binder and Desai 2011), without which, it is just information with no interpretive value. Words for example, would just be arbitrary grunts and babblings. Through semantic processing, assigned sounds become a *symbol* for the object in question. Words are not tangible objects; they are *representations* of things. Furthermore, words are not the only ways in which we find representation or interpretive value. Through abstract thinking processes, our species began to perceive other creatures with whom we identify as symbolizations of our own demise.¹ By witnessing others like us die (whether through tragedy or old age), semantic memory functions allow humans to connect the dots of past occurrences and assign that same inevitable event to ourselves and loved ones in the future to come. And while other animals are equipped with “fight or flight”² responses to evade death in the moment, they generally don’t think about it otherwise. Humans, on the other hand, do think about death otherwise because they are able to ponder the past, present, and future thanks to their more complex, abstract thought. In short, unlike any other animal we observe, human faculties have developed in such a way that we are aware of our own mortality. As Homo Sapiens came to understand the concept of future occurrences as well as cause and effect, they became more aware of mortality, and with it, existential anticipation.

You’re probably wondering *why* being aware of mortality necessitates a feeling of dread just because we can anticipate. We have emotions to thank in conjunction with abstract thought. We’ll get to that component after I address a potential objection. One might point out that all animals avoid death, and *they* aren’t filled with existential dread. It’s true that all living creatures attempt to avoid death, but because other animals lack the ability to understand abstract thought to the degree we do, they can’t comprehend future identity (Duval et al. 2012) or their orientation in a future world, which means they only seem to worry about

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1. See Bassok (1997) to learn more about how semantic processing plays a role in assigning meaning to objects in addition to its role in language.
 2. See Understanding the Stress Response (2011) for more information on the “Fight or Flight” Response.

death in the near moment of danger. Even then, death avoidance is more of an act of instinct, rather than a true understanding of what it means to die. This instinct hasn't been consciously manifest to the degree that it has in humans. *Our* attempts and hopes to avoid death go far beyond instinct. With the ability to understand abstract concepts, hominids started becoming aware of our avoidance of danger and death even when it wasn't directly imminent.

Let's now add the feeling of aversion back in with the intellectual component of anticipation to understand how emotion ties in with dread. The feeling of aversion is the other necessary (but not sufficient) condition that defines the experience. Greater emotional complexity was an added result of Semantic Processing. As covered already, Semantic Processing's conduction of abstract thought makes possible our ability to use language. There is mounting evidence that language plays a key role in the development of human emotion (Lindquist et al. 2015). The more words that become available to us, the more complex are the ideas that can be explored, expressed, and understood. This in turn leads us to create more words as more concepts arise, with an even richer construction of our experience and even our emotions. With the advent of language through abstract thought, an entire world opened up to humans that was previously unavailable. A world of morality, a world of identity. A more intricate sense of love and loss. And with loss, a new perception of death.

Our human ability to understand our mortality as a result of reason, coupled with an increased depth of emotion as semantic processing emerged, naturally produces dismay at the realization we will die. Emotions coexist with our thoughts. They are either pleasant or unpleasant reactions to thoughts depending on what those thoughts represent. When a thought represents a condition that is perceived as beneficial to us, a subjectively pleasant emotion is the resulting effect. On the contrary, a thought representing a state we view as harmful to us results in an unpleasant emotional experience. Of course, this is a simplistic cause and effect account of emotions as thought reactions, but it is important to recognize how emotions can be influenced by our perceptions. Humans have an instinctual desire to live, an added intellectual understanding of life and death, and a natural emotional response to the fact this desire will be thwarted. The conditions of anticipation and the feeling of aversion in regard to death are both in place, inevitably resulting in dread by our definition. So long as it remains true that science has not advanced a way for our psyche to become indestructible, and

that we are cognizant of reality, we will continue to feel the same dreadful anxiety about death permeating our existence.

Being relegated to a life of despair needn't be a completely pessimistic realization though. Awareness of mortality seems to enhance the survival instinct by allowing it to manifest on a conscious level. Being upset about our demise rather than welcoming it with gladness can be useful. Imagine how we might respond to spotting a hungry lion or being held at gunpoint if we weren't at all concerned about our continued existence. To facilitate the survival instinct, it helps to be averse to death. In other words, in order to live, by default we have to try not to die. While increased brain function has made us more aware of death, the feeling of dread may be what motivates us further to do something about it. Is death anxiety itself a continued adaptation to further ensure that we will do all we can to survive? Think of dread as the ultimate adaptation, giving us even more advantage to be proactive in survival. On the other hand (and more likely), our fear of annihilation may just be a spandrel of sorts, a sort of side effect that arose naturally out of our increasing intellect. Still, scientists point out that spandrels which persist in the gene pool are rarely without some useful function in their own right (Gould 1997). Aversion to death seems to facilitate the preservation of our species and DNA.

Just as not having enough fear is maladaptive, so too is excess anxiety. It could be that moderate levels (akin to Aristotle's golden mean³) may actually be beneficial to our survival so long as it doesn't become too extreme. We can think of it in terms of diminishing returns which eventually lead to negative returns. Suppose there is a function of benefit commensurate with expenditure of anxiety. This anxiety may cause us to go above and beyond instinct to protect our lives so that we as a species (and consequently, our DNA⁴) survive. This is undeniably beneficial. At a certain point, there can conceivably be a peak where just the right amount of anxiety yields the most benefit for our survival. If the above scenario isn't plausible to you, at the very least we can agree anxiety is able to be "tolerated" by evolutionary processes so long as it doesn't interfere with the natural selection process.

3. See Kraut (2018) to learn more about Aristotelian Ethics

4. Dawkins (2016) popularized the Gene-centered view of evolution with his 1976 book that revolutionized the study of evolution. It asserts that genes are the basic unit which drive the survival instinct in an organism.

We must contend with the controversy about what human nature consists of. There are those who deny that what I have described above is representative of the human condition on the grounds that it is not universally observed. I propose that if something (be it trait, feature, behavior, etc.) is a tendency within a species, that something can be acknowledged as a part of its nature. The lack of apparent anxiety in every single individual shouldn't be a problem. Philosophers have long pointed out that man's rationality is what sets us apart from other species, and that reason is a distinct component of human nature. Not every human is rational or adequately uses reason though, so by that logic we would have to reject that man's rationality is our nature. Suffice it to say that what we mean is that the human species in general has the *capability*⁵ of rational thought. Not every human is rational, but we as a species tend to have the ability for rational thought. Furthermore, not every trait is expressed within a species until environmental factors come into play. Science has empirically supported that behavioral expressions derive from a combination of nature and nurture. It is therefore plausible that all humans are innately predisposed to having death anxiety, which may predictably only show expression in specific environments. This may explain why some people claim that they are not as bothered by their mortality.

A noteworthy mention of environmental factors would include those that lead to feelings of significance (sometimes referred to as self-esteem, self-worth, and even a sense of fulfillment). Abeyta (2014) shows a direct correlation between feelings of significance and death anxiety. The greater the feelings of insignificance, the greater the feelings of trepidation about our extinction. Those who have less death anxiety are observed as having higher feelings of significance. Remarkably, significance only affects the intensity of death anxiety and not the other way around.⁶ The important takeaway is that we are defining human nature as a tendency within our species under the condition of being mortal, and that other environmental conditions may also affect the way in which this tendency is expressed.

5. K. Rand (personal communication, November 6, 2020), researcher and psychology professor, confirmed my examples of ways in which man has tendencies that are not found in every human by adding that man is only capable of reason, which supports my claim that tendencies like rationality and certain fears are sufficient to define human nature.

6. See Solomon et al (2015) for a worthwhile illumination on how feelings of significance affect death anxiety.

There are also two final elephants in the room that will be briefly addressed and those are the issues of suicide and murder. Does the fact that so many people voluntarily take their own life or that of another debunk death anxiety as an underlying malady? No. It is a mistake to automatically assume that one who kills is fearless of death. It is plausible that a person can be afraid to die while also finding the circumstances of life to be unbearable, and ultimately commit suicide. Many examples can be given in which people do things in spite of fear. Skydiving, ripping off a band aid, public speaking, you get the idea. Therefore, killing oneself is not a justifiable reason to dismiss death anxiety. It is also plausible one may kill another while desiring to preserve their own life. This often occurs in relatively large quantities during war, for example.

After considering the above explanations and responses to possible counter arguments, it would not be unreasonable to conclude that humans developed death anxiety as a result of evolved brain function. Regardless of whether or not death anxiety itself is an adaptation that was selected for over time or merely an uncomfortable spandrel, our species had to find a way to deal with this uneasiness lest we be weighed with too much despair, which becomes detrimental to survival outcomes. As it may be, when anxiety levels rise past the peak productivity level, benefits begin to taper off until finally we yield negative returns, rendering excess anxiety a hindrance to survival success. In order for anxiety to not reach beyond the bounds of what can be tolerated, humans have managed to develop coping mechanisms⁷ in order to keep our death anxiety in check. We distract ourselves through entertainment. We engage in self-deception and denial. We seek reassurance through promises of eternal life beyond the grave as presented by religion and even science. In other words, we have developed ways to balance our terror in order to maintain equilibrium. This is why we don't observe a constant, salient state of death anxiety in individuals, especially when assessing on a superficial level. Deeper inspection (and introspection) would reveal dread running in the background if it wasn't already in the foreground.

We each have something in common with Adam and Eve. As children dwelling in a similar state of ignorance, there comes a time in human development when the knowledge of death likewise dawns upon us. In our own lives, we feel the same

7. In *The Worm at the Core*, Solomon et al (2015) describe many ways in which humans unconsciously behave in order to keep fears of death at bay. These authors are known for having a large body of studies that provisionally support their theory known as Terror Management Theory.

sorrow as that of our legendary biblical heroes when enlightened on the matter. It would be highly abnormal for this news to be met with gladness. Such a mental state could even be considered pathological. Even neutrality would be unusual and is likely simply due to the aforementioned coping mechanisms dulling reality. The very essence of our thoughts, emotions and instincts necessarily dictates that when presented with the particulars of our forthcoming annihilation, we react with dismay and dread once fully understood. It would be appropriate to once again quote Schopenhauer with the following, " If now the will, by means of knowledge, beholds death as the end of the phenomenon with which it has identified itself, and to which, therefore, it sees itself limited, its whole nature struggles against it with all its might," (2016, 651) which is why he also wrote, "the greatest fear is the fear of death," (649). Any who claim that they have never encountered such anxiety after having gained a genuine comprehension of what their annihilation means, deserves congratulations for figuring out how to defy all nature and perfectly conquer the will to live.

PART II: MANIFESTATIONS

Memento Mori. It means "remember death" in Latin and is a phrase not meant to be morbid, but to inspire. It is a precept intended to motivate one to cherish every drop of existence that remains available to us in creating a purposeful life. Marcus Aurelius, who would rather have been a philosopher, was a Roman emperor who adopted the Stoic lifestyle that embraces the above ideology. Aurelius wasn't immune to suffering his fair share of tragedy at death's hands. Later reputed to have been of a more sensitive nature and having lost nine of his own children, Aurelius had to have struggled to come to terms with life's transience. In his *Meditations*, he quotes Epictetus as saying, "When a man kisses his child, he should whisper to himself, 'Tomorrow perchance you will die'" (1945, 124). It is clear from Epictetus' direct writings that he meant this as an admonition to not become too attached to that which won't last, perhaps as an attempt to minimize future grief, which might have appealed to Aurelius as he sought ways to cope with death as anyone would. Today, many would interpret Epictetus' advice as a reminder to not take life for granted. Both interpretations provide a suggestion for handling the anxiety regarding our finiteness. The renowned philosopher Seneca (whom Aurelius would have studied) wrote in a letter to his

correspondent, Lucilius, "You are afraid to die. But come now: is this life of yours anything but death?" (Seneca and Barker 1932). It isn't new now and it wasn't new then that fear of death was an obstacle to be reckoned with for every being able to contemplate it.

We've established that the fear of death is a natural tendency for humans. If you are one of those lucky few who denies you experience any degree of death anxiety, you have simply developed a coping mechanism that allows you to manage life without constant worry. These coping mechanisms don't refute the theory; their presence actually further substantiates it. While the following tactics may be performed on a conscious level, many of us implement them for reasons outside of our conscious awareness, at least one of these reasons being death anxiety. These physical manifestations of our attempts to cope with mortality come in three main categories: Distraction, Denial, and Reassurance.

The world as a whole never sleeps. All around us can be found a myriad of Earth's inhabitants engaged in seemingly frivolous activity. We keep ourselves distracted to block out the unpleasant thoughts that plague us when our minds are forced to face our thoughts. It was Blaise Pascal who wrote, "Men, unable to remedy death, sorrow, and ignorance, determine, in order to make themselves happy, not to think on these things. Notwithstanding these miseries, man wishes to be happy....For this he must needs make himself immortal; but unable to effect this, he sets himself to avoid the thought of death" (1901, 38). If left to our own musings long enough, our inner narrative would eventually circle around to haunt us with regrets and secret yearnings that are only frustrated by our finitude. We couldn't escape the salient truth that our very death is what makes our longings so urgently loud in our head. Escape we do in the form of social media, alcohol, TV shows, shopping, YouTube, anything that keeps us from having to face our own thoughts alone. What better way to ignore our despair than to entertain ourselves with lighthearted fluff that makes us laugh and forget?

I know what you're going to say next. You're going to point out that not all entertainment is rainbows and butterflies; horror movies and violence also plaster our screens. Does this not show a large sample of people who defy this theory by their apparent delight in laughing death in the face? On the contrary. Perhaps author Stephen King explains it best when he wrote in his 1981 non-fiction book *Danse Macabre*, "We take refuge in make-believe terrors so the real ones don't overwhelm us, freezing us in place and making it impossible for us to function in

our day-to-day lives. We go into the darkness of a movie theater *hoping* to dream badly, because the world of our normal lives looks ever so much better when the bad dream ends" (2010). King admits to these death anxieties in his book and affirms the macabre is intended to help us escape from reality by displacing our own fears onto artificial characters who live in a fantasy world we've convinced ourselves is unlike our own.

Rather than sit with the greater discomfort of facing our own horrible ending, we easily distract ourselves whether it be watching horror films, reality TV, or Rom Coms. Unfortunately, distraction only lasts as long as the two-minute blurb or two-hour flick can run. We need more than a momentary series of distractions in order for the pain numbing effects to be sustainable. When distraction fails, we have denial.

You may wonder how denying our mortality has any credibility when we are intellectually aware that we will die. People even willingly engage in viewing violence for entertainment purposes, so how can anyone be in denial? What we fail to understand is that even when witnessing death around us, many people tend to have the idea that such an event will never happen to *them*. You would think it would be unmistakably obvious to each of us, but Irvin D. Yalom quotes one of his adult patients who reported her surprise at this revelation, "I suppose the strongest feelings came from realizing it would be ME who will die, not some other entity like Old-Lady-Me or Terminally-Ill-and-Ready-to-Die-Me" (2008, 13). In Leo Tolstoy's short story, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, Ivan almost seems to think he is too special to die:

The example of the syllogism that he had learned in Kiseveter's logic-Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal-had seemed to him all his life correct only as regards Caius, but not at all as regards himself. In that case it was a question of Caius, a man, an abstract man, and it was perfectly true, but he was not Caius, and he was not an abstract man; he had always been a creature quite, quite different from all others; he had been little Vanya with a mamma and papa, and Mitya and Volodya, with playthings and a coachman and a nurse...Had Caius been in love like that? Could Caius preside over the sittings of the court?

And Caius certainly was mortal, and it was right for him to die; but for me, little Vanya, Ivan Ilych, with all my feelings and ideas- for me it's a different matter. And it cannot be that I ought to die. (2004, 121-122).

Death seems to befall other people, but not ourselves. We are too unique and exceptional of persons in comparison with others. How can this be?

It doesn't seem possible to fool ourselves into believing something in direct contradiction with what we know. Enter the world of self-deception. Setting aside for a moment the *motive* for doing this, let's define what it entails. Denial means we have refused to accept information or conclusions presented to us. Take into account the effects of confirmation bias; only accepting evidence that supports our existing or desired narrative, and discounting (rejecting) evidence that is contrary to our belief system. This seems to be a fairly common occurrence but can only be sustained to a certain extent. When there is overwhelming information that renders us unable to easily deny such facts, we have to resort to self-deception in order for denial to maintain its effectiveness. Self-deception concerns lying to oneself, and in order to lie, one has to knowingly misrepresent true information. In order to successfully deceive another, that person has to actually believe the liar. But how do we successfully deceive ourselves when the liar and the believer are of the same brain? How can our mind both know the truth and not know the truth simultaneously?

George Orwell brilliantly demonstrates this in *1984*, a novel about a dystopian society whose party member citizens are forced to believe everything that their corrupt Government feeds them, even when the beliefs are in direct contradiction to what they were forced to believe prior to. Our hero Winston Smith's job is to assist the government with literally rewriting history so there is no evidence of what was purported beforehand. For years you may be at war with Eurasia, only to experience yet again the gaslighting disturbance of finding out from the same authorities that we've never been at war with Eurasia, nor did anyone ever say that. We've been at war with Eastasia. Everyone around Winston seems to accept this as truth despite knowing yesterday that *Eurasia* is the enemy (2000). The reason Orwell's book is so compelling is not because of its fictional component, but because of its reflection of actual phenomena, like that of doublethink: to believe one thing while also maintaining a contradictory belief. One amusing example is when I hear a man claiming he hates when women wear makeup while

complaining when his significant other doesn't wear any. Another example is the woman who wants to be treated as an equal partner by having her husband do the same chores as her (i.e. washing dishes), yet she insists she can't mow the lawn like him. What about the tenet to tolerate free speech so that we may hear other ideas, but won't tolerate speech of ideas we simply don't like? The list goes on in which our levels of hypocrisy amount to an indisputable state of self-deception.

It doesn't take too much convincing at this point to understand why our brains would give us conflicting information about unpleasant realities in the world around us. We see to some degree how we can persuade ourselves to believe something that we know on another level doesn't make sense. I'll indulge a bit further though to drive this home. Most are familiar with the "fight or flight" response. When we engage in flight, we are avoiding the stimulus that poses a threat. When the realization of our mortality dawns on us, we may respond to the threat to our existence by using avoidance strategies. Drawing this together with our ability to deceive ourselves, we can see how denying the reality of our fate can be successful, even while knowing otherwise. I don't think it warrants explaining further *why* someone would want to avoid painful truths.

When denial isn't enough, we can find reassurance in religion,⁸ science, and social constructs. Is it any wonder that religion in some form has been around for longer than recorded human history? One of the most appealing aspects of religion is the comforting doctrine of immortality that is found in most faiths. Virtually every religious philosophy addresses the issue of death, making attempts to provide solace for those asking life's pressing question, "what happens when we die?" Whether an afterlife involves Heaven, resurrection, non-material souls, reincarnation, or any combination of these, religion provides the promise of continued existence so desperately desired. We needn't assume that faith-based beliefs are the only themes that make promises of eternal life. Scientists do exist who are currently involved in work on Substrate Independent Minds, a visionary form of technology that hopes to be able to essentially upload human consciousness onto an inorganic platform that resists biological death. Carbon Copies is one such group that compares our brains to software data that can be

8. Dennett (2006) gives a fascinating lecture on how religion has evolved in the context of the selection process. This can be integrated with some of the earlier commentary in this paper regarding the need for humans to find ways to adapt to their death anxiety, with religion being just one of those ways in which coping mechanisms can be regarded as part of the evolutionary process.

uploaded and accessed even on separate “devices”. If science can figure out how to replicate the processing of our minds and functionally preserve all of the data, they predict we can experience consciousness on a substrate, independent of our physical body, which means we won’t have to perish with our flesh. We’ve also heard of cryogenics. It is not a myth that establishments like Alcor or the Cryonics Institute exist that preserve the deceased in hopes that a more advanced technological future can bring about revival. For those who find the above to be mere pseudoscience and religion too mythical, we can find reassurance of mortality in social constructs. Particularly fame and legacy.

If we know that we can’t literally live forever, we can try to achieve the closest thing to it. It’s fairly common that people dream about making a big break or accomplishing an amazing feat, garnering masses of adoring fans who will remember them long after their earthly advent. Kings have erected great edifices and statues of their likeness to make their presence known in a lasting way. Musicians and writers hope their art will be appreciated throughout generations to come. Other breakthrough prodigies fiercely protect their right to credit for their work not just for financial benefit, but for the sake of perpetual recognition. Sigmund Freud once reportedly fainted at the very thought of his work not being carried on after he passed away.⁹ We know that Aurelius himself must have struggled with this due to the amount of times he reflected in his *Meditations* to avoid relying on fame for comfort. We sense a distinct impression that we would feel at greater peace if we knew we were to be remembered rather than slipping into an eternal obscurity.

Few will accomplish star status though, which leaves us legacy. Living on through the memory of those who live after us. The popular holiday *Día de los Muertos* is celebrated by millions who honor their ancestors by displaying their photos on an offering table called an “*ofrenda*”. *Coco* is a heartwarming film that depicts a character who is terrified that when he is no longer remembered, he will

9. Sigmund Freud is known to have been obsessed with fame and to have struggled with death anxiety. He had taken special interest in Carl Jung as an apprentice, with whom he had hoped would carry on his ideas. The incidents in which Freud fainted pertain to this topic in which he interpreted some comments from Jung as a threat to Freud’s legacy. One particular comment that caused Freud to pass out was Jung’s allusion to Freud’s Oedipal theory, which asserts that sons are jealous of their fathers and want to usurp them. In a letter to Freud, Jung once wrote, “Let me be to you as the son is to the father.” It was a reference to this phrase that Freud took as an encrypted message that Jung meant to supplant him and render Freud’s work irrelevant. See Silverstein, (2014) and Razinsky (2016).

disappear (Unkrich 2017). Many would relate to its pinnacle message in the form of a song entitled, "Remember Me" (Anderson-Lopez and Lopez 2017). Speaking of ancestors (of which one day we will be), descendants also play a role in perpetuating our known existence. Family crests and diaries for example, represented values and ideals that members identified with and passed down through their posterity. Today, photographs are cherished mementos that seek to preserve moments in time that would otherwise be forgotten or never even known about. If we can't be alive forever, perhaps there is peace of mind knowing that someone at least knew who we were. If we can't achieve that through fame, our posterity is more likely to retain a semblance of us in their mind. From religion to scientific pursuits to renowned fame to leaving behind a legacy, these strategies remain an active role in pursuit of rectifying our grievances about annihilation. Whether or not we will ever be able to accept this truth, to thrive with full authenticity despite our knowledge of what's to surely come, depends on whether we are able to rise above our innate tendencies. Which leads us to a final consideration. Acceptance.

Acceptance is a category of its own because of its unique quality. It doesn't come naturally like the aforementioned techniques and is contingent on factors involving a great deal of effort. Acceptance is more elusive than the more common coping mechanisms because it usually comes only after further suffering. Acceptance necessitates having to face death in all its stark reality, being fully awake to all its terrible glory without the crutches of distraction, denial, or reassurance to lull us back to sleep. While many are forced to face it when given the diagnosis of a terminal illness, witnessing violence, or undergoing a major paradigm shift, it is unlikely that anyone would want to voluntarily endure suffering when there are other anxiety reducing strategies that are working well enough. Still, for some people the aforementioned strategies don't work for various reasons. Regardless of whether or not your security blankets were ripped from under you, or you just want to embark on a life of authentic truth, you're probably wondering why you'd have to face facts with such raw exposure in order to reach acceptance.

What I explain next about obsessive compulsive disorder (or OCD for short) and phobias may seem to be off topic here, but you'll understand the relevance soon enough.¹⁰ OCD is characterized by intolerance of uncertainty (Morein-Zamir

10. For a more comprehensive understanding of OCD and exposure therapy, see Phillipson, (n.d.). It is worth keeping in mind the parallels I've drawn between death anxiety and the content within the article while reading.

et al 2020) that manifests in obsessive and/or compulsive behaviors that are meant to reduce the effects of distress in the patient (American Psychiatric Association 2013). They often engage in rituals that are external acts to both distract from and reassure them regarding their source of anxiety. Their rituals are not merely an attempt to avoid the source of the anxiety, but to also avoid the discomforting thoughts themselves. O'Connor and Audet attest that the more one engages in these reassurance seeking behaviors, "the more they are removed from reality and the senses" (2019, 40). The root fear of OCD is often not what it appears to be on the surface. For example, a person who obsessively washes their hands isn't just afraid of germs. They're afraid of what the germs do and what it might mean if they got infected. In fact, their compulsions are reactions to the unceasing ruminations as their imagination runs wild considering all of the possible things that aren't likely to happen, but could. If this sounds unrelatable to you, think back to the old nursery rhyme about stepping on cracks and breaking backs. Most children rationally know that stepping on a crack won't actually lead to a fractured spine, but how many of you felt the need to avoid the crack anyway? You know, just in case... Hence, the handwashing or knocking on wood. Just in case. Or saying a quick prayer or wearing your favorite underwear on game days... Just in case.

Phobias are different from OCD in that sufferers are afraid of a specific known object (Fritscher 2020) and unlike OCD, they do not engage in rituals to ward off thoughts of the fear stimulus and only experience distress when faced with the threat. Spiders, snakes, and heights, for example, are some of the most common phobias known to man (Horn 2015). Although not characterized by obsessive properties, when directly threatened with or given the possibility of exposure, people will go to extreme lengths to avoid the stimulus that evokes fear. It is similar in this way to OCD in that avoidance tactics are used as a temporary compulsion to protect themselves from that which they are averse to. In any case, these two conditions are two sides of the same coin and the method of Exposure Therapy for treatment is generally the same.¹¹ Are you with me still? I promise I'll get to what this has to do with acceptance and why increased discomfort precedes it.

11. See "What's the Difference" (2018). Exposure with Response Prevention (ERP) is a type of Exposure Therapy (ET) that is used specifically to treat OCD. It incorporates the additional measure of prohibiting OCD sufferers from engaging in reassurance seeking behaviors before, during, or after exposure to the fear inducing stimulus. Both phobia and OCD patients engage in exposure therapy and must avoid any behaviors designed to placate the patient's exposure. In

Keeping in mind what we covered in self-deception about the ability to compartmentalize, we can understand why OCD patients recognize their rituals are irrational while still believing their rituals will solve the problem. Sometimes those lucky rituals coincidentally correlate with successful relief, which reinforces our belief that we need them. This is precisely why children will cry when they lose their favorite teddy bear and have to sleep in the dark without it. The only way to no longer depend on the ritual, is to live without it and learn that the ritual itself does nothing (or negligibly little) to prevent harm. Exposure therapy is one of the most (if not the most) highly successful modes of treatment for patients suffering from OCD and phobias (Pittenger et al., 2005, p. 36). This type of therapy exposes patients to their feared stimulus at increasing intervals of intensity. A patient deathly afraid of spiders might begin by looking at photographs of spiders and then over time have to sit across the room with a real spider. With each consecutive session the spider may be brought closer until the patient is made to tolerate actually coming into physical contact and even holding the spider. It is crucial they not be allowed to use any techniques to soothe themselves at this time, or the therapy will not be successful. After becoming habituated to the fear invoking stimulus, they learn to endure it without the ability to seek reassurance by engaging in their ritual or avoidance behavior. That means they have to sit with the discomfort of not being able to wash their hands, or check the door locks five more times or go ballistic when they see a spider lurking in a corner. What first is met with terror becomes tolerance, which becomes indifference, which sometimes even becomes acceptance. Likewise, we'd have to learn to not switch on the TV or recite a dozen Hail Mary's to escape the inevitable. We'd have to learn that while we must take reasonable precautions to not contract deadly germs or prematurely face our death by walking in front of a bus, the rest is out of our control. No amount of lock checking or research about cryogenics will prevent our obliteration. We cannot run away from the funeral casket the way we can from a spider. There is no doubt about it. We will die.

Once we have finally faced facts, we can begin to move towards acceptance. Studies like Dr. Kevin Rand's show that accepting death can lead to a greater sense of fulfillment (2016). When you are hyper aware that a certain moment will be your last, there arises a sense of urgency to live a more enriching life. When we gain acceptance, we stop fighting a losing battle, and when we stop fighting,

this paper we will refer to all types of ERP as ET.

we are freed up to spend that energy on pursuits that matter more to us. Pursuits that have more likelihood for success. Being aware of death means we are more likely to refrain from procrastinating and take steps to create lives that we can be proud of, which enables acceptance. When we feel we've made the best of what we had, it is much easier to accept the end. Think of it like this. Imagine you're just a child back when you only had a few spare dollars from doing menial chores and you managed to get into your favorite ice cream shop right before closing. Satisfied the last of your allowance was well worth the splurge, you walk out with your treat, adorned in all its sugary splendor. And then, to your utter dismay, the delicious dessert you so craved unexpectedly slips from your hand and falls splat on the dirty ground to meet its doom. It's too late to get another one and you've wasted your money. You wouldn't have minded the ice cream being gone nearly as much if you'd at least have gotten a chance to enjoy some of it first!

Life can be viewed similarly. Maybe death can be accepted; but only if we lived fulfilling lives that we had a chance to savor, would we even be somewhat ready to part ways. And in order to live such a life, it helps to feel a sense of urgency to make the most of it. Otherwise, it's business as usual and before we know it, we've run out of time. The question that remains is whether or not distraction, denial, reassurance, and acceptance are actually effective in relieving our anxiety and to what extent. That is a difficult question to answer and would warrant a lengthier discussion that won't be addressed here. What we can deduce is that these strategies likely wouldn't retain such a strong presence in our lives if they weren't fulfilling some compelling need. Sure, society and technology have evolved to make some specifics look different, but the root principles have always been the same. The mortal environment in which we live coupled with our biological make-up leads to the expression of life's greatest terror: our finiteness and disconnection in an absurd universe culminating with our death. Remembering death may motivate us to waste less time. Reflecting on our lives with less regret means we are more likely to be able to accept our end. In keeping with the idea of *memento mori*, we can enjoy our chance to savor life to its fullest while it lasts. Marcus Aurelius leaves us with a profound edict, "...let us pause and ask ourselves if death is a dreadful thing because it deprives us of *this*" (1945, 110). Evaluate what it is you are doing and ask yourself not if it's worth avoiding death for, but if it's worth living for.

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