

# WHAT DOES IT MEAN to fear dying & death?

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You hear it all the time: We humans fear dying and death. "I'm afraid."

"Death scares me."

Or perhaps you heard the famous line by Woody Allen. "I'm not afraid of death. I just don't want to be there when it happens."

In this article we're going to look at this fear from a variety of perspectives.



For the past 40 years I've been teaching a college course called Death and Life. In this course I give students six assignments, one of which is called "Fear of Dying and Death." Students are given 15 statements adapted from a survey by Charlotte Epstein who wrote the book, *Nursing the Dying Patient*, to which they respond yes, no, or maybe.

In addition, for at least half of their responses, students must try to explain their answer. The purpose of this assignment is for students to begin to understand that there are a number of components to this fear. Let's investigate this by looking at these components.

**I've taken the 15 statements and placed them into four categories:**

- Body Fears
- After Death Fears
- Loved Ones Fears
- Life Cut Short Fears.

Let me take you through each one as you consider your own responses.

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## BODY FEARS

- **Control.** When you think about the dying process, do you fear losing control of your body? Most of your life you have control over your body: your intake and elimination of food, how you move your body, and the amount of time you sleep. As your body begins the descent toward death, your ability to control diminishes. How much of a fear would this be for you?
- **Pain.** A related body concern is the fear of the pain of dying. During our life we respond to pain by taking actions to diminish or eliminate the pain. However, for some people, the dying process brings unremitting pain. Is this a fear for you?
- **Helpless.** Losing control of one's body is one thing. Feeling helpless and believing there is little you can do to change the course of your life is a huge challenge for most of us. Would it be for you?
- **Dependent.** For many people, being dependent on others for our care is a significant fear. During our earlier years, we took pride in our independence. Now, we watch as others work to care for our needs. Few of us want to feel like a burden to others. What about you?
- **Long time to die.** Related to the pain of dying and losing control of one's body is the fear of taking a long time to die. To picture yourself lying in a bed, day after day, waiting for the end is not a scene any of us want. How much a concern would this be for you?
- **Sudden death.** The way you imagine how you might die could be a contributing factor to your fear. When you ask people if they could choose whether to die suddenly or with warning, as with a terminal illness, you get mixed results. What is your choice?
- **Violent.** Related to dying suddenly is the fear of dying violently, which is a fear of many. Is it for you?

## AFTER DEATH

- **Nothingness.** When we consider what comes after death, some people state that they know what their new existence will be like, whether it is a religious or spiritual belief. For others, there is a fear that death is a state of nothingness. Is this one of your fears?
- **Feelings.** A similar fear is that death is the end of feelings. No more joy, bliss, pleasure, empathy, amusement, surprise, or satisfaction. Just an existence wherein the emotions of life are left back on earth.
- **Not knowing.** While some people believe that death is more than nothingness, their fear stems from their inability to know what happens after death. To them, it is a mystery that produces a degree of fear. Is this one of your fears?
- **Punishment.** If you believe that your behavior on earth will result in some sort of punishment after death, this fear can produce a great deal of worry and anxiety.
- **Moving on.** Related to the fear of punishment is the fear that one has not live a good enough life to warrant moving on to the next higher plane, whether it be heaven, reincarnation, being with a supreme being or some other rewarded existence.

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## LOVED ONES

- **Abandoning loved ones.** One of the most common fears is abandoning loved ones. Even if one has few of the other fears, the prospect of leaving one's children, spouse, siblings, parents, relatives and/or friends can strike terror in most of us.
- **Pain to loved ones.** In addition to leaving your loved ones, another fear or concern is considering what your death would do to those we leave behind. Few of us wish to dwell on the picture of our loved ones crying at our funeral, which has prompted many to wish that there be no funeral believing that doing so would somehow lessen the pain of grief. Rarely does it. For many of us, it is painful to imagine the extent to which our death would bring about monumental changes in the lives of our loved ones. It is painful for us to think that our death would hurt so many and that the end of our life would plunge our loved ones into weeks months and perhaps years of grief.
- **Losing loved ones.** Death is of course a two-way event. Not only will your loved ones lose you, you will lose all of them. Think of all the important people presently in your life. Imagine them all standing in one large room, Then, imagine going up to each of them and saying, "Goodbye." This is just but one element of death, but a big one for most people.
- **Dying alone.** Would you rather have someone (or many of your loved ones) with you when you die, or would you rather die alone? Few people would choose the latter.

## LIFE CUT SHORT

- **Sins.** One of the reasons people have for not wanting to die is the belief that they still need more time to make up for their sins. They knew that they had sinned in their lives and what they now want was time to be forgiven, to repent, and to make things right.
- **Goals.** We all have goals in our lives. Long before the movie *The Bucket List*, I created the assignment *50 Things I Want to Do Before I Die*. In it, students were to fill in the blanks for the following categories: Things I'd like to say to people, Classes I would like to take, Health goals for my body, Relationship goals, Things I would like to have, Career goals, Risks I'd like to take, Hobbies I would like to begin, Family-related goals, and Personal accomplishments. What goals have you not completed?

So, how did you do? Fear of dying and death is present in the majority of people.

### I have three questions for you:

1. Are there any fears you need to work on?
2. If so, what do you need to do?
3. What are you waiting for?

Death will come soon enough. You do not want to be lying on your deathbed saying, "I should have worked on my fears while I had the time. Now it's too late."