

Robert W. Firestone (clinical psychologist, author, theorist and artist), whose articles have to some extent informed this post today (the links are at the bottom of this passage), also refers to research findings to support his own observations and ideas. He writes that ‘although largely unconscious, the awareness of our finite existence, the fact that we all must die, has a profound impact on our thoughts, feelings, and behavior. The fear and emotional anguish associated with anticipating the end of life are so painful that we must protect ourselves. People find it difficult to tolerate facing their mortality directly; therefore, they repress the full realization of death and dying, and develop various defenses to keep the suppressed material at bay’. So even though we may often not recognise our anxiety over our mortality simply because we avoid talking or thinking about it, it still informs our life since it still operates below our conscious awareness. Terror Management Theory (TMT) researchers have found that people change their behaviors and increase their reliance on specific defense mechanisms when their death salience is aroused in experiment settings. He notes that in one experiment, after subjects were subliminally presented with the word “death,” they more strongly endorsed the worldview of their own ethnic group or nation while, at the same time, they denigrated members of other groups whose worldviews differed from their own. (Solomon, et al, 2015)..... If the single word “death” introduced subliminally in an experimental setting can produce significant changes in subjects’ attitudes and actions, one can only imagine the powerful effect of countless events in the real world that remind people of their mortality’.

If we are not mindful and present, being reminded of our mortality by things, such as, an illness, a loss of any sorts, a threat or accident, death of a loved one, the death of a pet, the media, or a story can all lead to less than optimal defense mechanisms against death anxiety, which can mutate into less empathic attitudes, rigidity, cynicism, adherence to beliefs that favor our ingroup over outgroups, exclusion and demonization of others, believing that others unlike us are waste products and expandable, prejudice and racist attitudes, aggressiveness, hostility, persecution and even war over our perceived or manufactured differences. Often these destructive attitudes and behaviours also stem from traumatic childhood experiences and conditioning to conform and be obedient. Group identification may offer a sense of immunity from our ultimate vulnerability, that of eventually dying, but our belonging to groups with rigid ideologies and through perceiving our ingroup as special and superior can not only lead to our having a temporary sense of safety and belonging, but also to prejudice and aggression. Institutionalized defensive adaptations and socially constructed defenses are not deeply effective because our discomfort with the uncertainty and mystery of life and death will always permeate our consciousness. Firestone writes that ‘allegiance to and identification with the in-group and simultaneous devaluation of others (“outsiders,” “immigrants,” those who do not belong), feeds narcissistic, omnipotent feelings and can imbue one with a sense of invulnerability in relation to death’and ‘totalitarian nations epitomize the destructive effect of collective defenses and exaggerated group identification. Although they may offer a sense of unity, there is always a substantial loss of personal freedom and independence and an increase in human rights violations’.

Repression and denial can also lead to depression, avoidance of risk taking and showing up as one's full self, and conformity, which provides an illusion of safety and belonging because standing out may feel threatening. Nonconformity requires courage because there is always fear of suffering marginalization, harassment, losses and violations of our rights. when we decide to step out of our conditioning and go against a certain status quo. Firestone writes '.....prejudice and acts of retaliation are directed toward people with views that oppose the general consensus or status quo. The uniqueness and free expression of the nonconformist threaten the conventional person because they raise his or her existential anxiety. Results from over 500 empirical studies based on Terror Management Theory (TMT) validate this point. "One of our earliest and most widely replicated findings is that reminders of death increase nationalism and other forms of group identification, making people more accepting of those who are similar to themselves and more hostile toward those who are different" Pyszczynski (2004), (p. 837)'.

Denial can also present as arrogance, a false sense of invincibility and entitlement. Firestone discusses how denial of the finite nature of our physical existence can, for instance, manifest as what refers to as vanity. He defines *vanity* as 'an exaggerated positive view of the self that an individual uses to compensate for feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. It represents remnants of the child's imagined invincibility, omnipotence, and invulnerability that live on in the psyche. It acts as a survival mechanism at times of stress or when people become painfully conscious of the fallibility of their physical nature and the impermanence of life. It expresses itself in the universal belief that death happens to someone else, never to oneself. The sense of specialness makes the person feel immune to the fate that awaits "ordinary" human beings'. We may also numb our fears through believing that excessive power and control or manipulation of other people and the excessive accumulation of wealth can function as buffers against our sense of powerlessness in the face of our immortality. We can also resort to addictive behaviours and substance abuse to numb ourselves not only to our personal aches, but also to our collective and more universal experiences and fears.

Interestingly, positive experience and happiness, as well as, moving towards independence and autonomy can also trigger separation and mortality fear. Firestone writes that 'living an independent life, achieving personal freedom, and differentiating from parental and societal mores can contribute to a fear of standing out and being different and to the anticipation of being ostracized from the "tribe" or group, which, in evolutionary history, equated with certain death (Case & Williams, 2004). In investigating how conformity to the standards of society and adoption of its cultural worldview is affected by death salience, Terror Management (TMT) researchers (McCoy, et al 2000) proposed that, "Independence from social consensus [and] creation of a truly individualized worldview. . . are difficult to achieve" (p. 58) because they precipitate unconscious death fears.

The fact remains that our mortality is an inevitable part of being human on this planet. Maybe relief from and reduction of suffering may not lie in our denying this reality, but instead, as with all pain and difficult emotions and sensations, by staying present, embracing and feeling into the discomfort whenever it shows up, tapping or mediating on it, being curious of how and when it manifests in our life and what processes may have intensified it. Through sitting with and embracing, some clarity and relief always

takes place. Allowing any experience to become conscious can allow for dissipation, relief, increased clarity and sublimation. So our collective angst can be transformed into works of art and other accomplishments or in finding meaning in connection with loved ones, in tears of gratitude, worthy causes and humanitarian acts; instead of aggression and segregation. Through sitting with our existential discomforts we may uncover our life purpose and meaning, which is an inherent part of our human nature, according to Viktor Frankl, the founder of Logotherapy. Feeling and expression of emotions can be liberating, and the open discussion of something as universal as our fear of death can bring home to us our collective vulnerability and common humanity. Fear is restriction and love is expansion. Any time we release any amount of fear our body breathes and our heart opens some more and from a more expansive place it is always a little easier to discern and make less fear based choices.

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<https://www.psychalive.org/death-anxiety/>

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