

## Everyone Dies—So Why Not Talk about It?

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July 1, 2022

Every human being has something in common with other living things. We all die someday. All living things die. What prepares individuals for understanding this reality of life? Why do many individuals avoid talking about death? The causes of death can be due to natural/unnatural, intentional, or unintentional circumstances. Death streams across social media and the news daily. For example, media often covers opioid use, COVID-19 infections, terrorist attacks, violence, homicides, suicides, school shootings, earthquakes, and other natural disasters that can have fatal outcomes. However, many feel uncomfortable talking about death. What makes talking about death so difficult? This article is not intended to challenge religious beliefs, faith, or core values. The purpose of this article is to discuss fear and denial of death, perceptions of death, how to start the conversation about death, and the death positive movement.

Keywords

[death, death positive movement, terror management theory](#)

## Fear and Denying Death

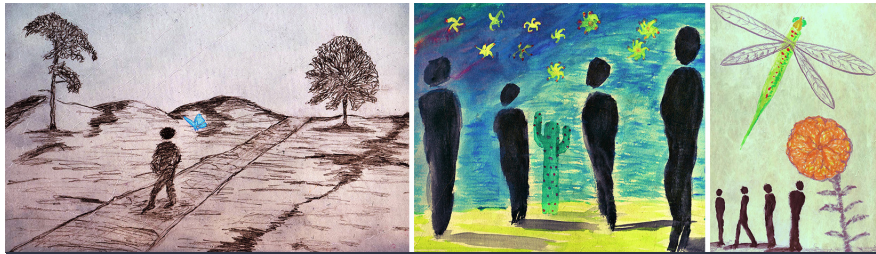
Many choose to live in a death-denying culture. Denying death is an effort to limit some people's discomfort and fear (Kopp, 1980). Consider why there are so many euphemisms (Hopkins, 2008) for the words dead and death (Szczesniak, 2019).

Becker (1997) suggests that people who deny death could also avoid people who are grieving, fail to acknowledge a dying person's needs, give false reassurances to people who are dying, and avoid comforting people who are dying. The reality of death is that it will happen to everyone. Death is an inevitable part of life; therefore, developing coping skills is necessary. What can we do as a society to help people feel more comfortable talking about death? Why does the topic scare so many people?

Fear of death can be a reason people do not engage in discussing the topic. However, familiarity with death could bring a little less fear of the inevitable (Erickson, 2019). Kübler-Ross (1986) stated that "It is the denial of death that is partially responsible for people living empty, purposeless lives; for when you live as if you'll live forever, it becomes too easy to postpone the things you know that you must do. You live your life in preparation for tomorrow or in remembrance of yesterday, and meanwhile, each today is lost" (p. 164). Additionally, Kübler-Ross (1969) wondered if perhaps there would be less destructiveness around us in the world if all of us made an all-out effort to think of our own death, dealt with our anxieties surrounding the concept of death, and assisted others to familiarize themselves with this thought. Knowing that nothing lasts forever may provide motivation to make the best out of every day instead of taking life for granted.

Others suggest that the denial of death is a more recent phenomenon due to the increased reliance on technology and medicine. Talking about death ought to be normal and not be considered a taboo subject. Experts believe we can control some of our fears about death by learning more about it and designing death education curricula. Fear of death usually stems from the unknown and unfamiliar (Moon, 2010). Some do not fear death but indicate they fear leaving someone or experiencing the pain that comes with talking about someone close to them who has recently died. Others indicate they do not talk about death because it makes us think of our own mortality (Gawande, 2014).

The fear of death has been linked to religious practices. Bassett and Bussard (2021) examined the relationship between religiosity, mortality, and the fear of death. The results of their study suggested that religion can be a source of comfort or prompt a sense of anxiety about death. The participants who demonstrated the most anxiety about death believed they were not living up to religious standards or believed in a wrathful and judging deity that was always monitoring moral behavior and would punish immorality in this life and the next. Conversely, those who had confidence in an afterlife and viewed religion as a source of comfort had little to no death anxiety (Bassett & Bussard, 2021).



The desert speaks to pondering and the wonder of or lack of conversation. It depicts a journey—death becomes a difficult conversation, and the image shows a conversation can sometimes create a barren space (much like my father wrote about as he was near death). The dragonfly signifies death in some cultures, and the marigold is a theme that is often repeated in Day of the Dead images. Image courtesy Stephen Ausherman.

## Perceptions of Death

Talking about death can be complex due to social beliefs, cultural norms, spiritual beliefs, emotions, and cognition. Having conversations about death or dying early in life could make a person more comfortable supporting others who may have had people close to them die. Depending on the age of the individual, the way that death is viewed can be complex. Children look at death differently depending on their age (Kronaizl, 2019). Very young children do not think abstractly; therefore, they may not understand the finality of death (Doering, 2010). There are many reasons why children and young people may misunderstand death. They may need adults to help them express their thoughts and feelings, fears, and questions (Tucker, 1998). Trusted adults can learn how to navigate these types of conversations to best assist children and young adults with understanding the finality of death if they take the time to learn more about their own fears about discussing the subject.

Children's movies depict death more frequently than movies made for adults (Fleur, 2014). For example, one study found that in ten full-length Disney Classic animated films, there were twenty-three death scenes (Cox et al., 2005). Watching films or reading stories in which the characters die may serve as a way to begin conversations about death with children. Assisting children to engage in dialogue

helps them develop a more beneficial relationship with death through which their reverence for life does not deny or exclude death (Osvath, 2021). In fact, children are often more capable of discussing death because their defense mechanisms are fewer and less sophisticated than adults (Mahon et al., 1999). A classic example of an honest exchange about death occurred on the “Farewell to Mr. Hooper” episode of Sesame Street in 1986 when Mr. Hooper died (Eichel, 2014). This episode was revolutionary because of its frank discussion of a complicated subject (Eichel, 2014). Engaging children in a conversation about death provides an opportunity for adults to begin a supportive, healthy exchange and offer greater understanding when the need to explain the death of someone does arise.

Not just young children are exposed to death through media. Older children regularly see death through media as well. Consider the vampire stories, celebrity deaths, zombies, and violent death endings in movies and music lyrics. This type of media exposure provides a backdrop to death. According to Coombs (2014), everyday material objects are vehicles to explore, accept, fear, reject, and/or laugh at stories relative to death in the media. Coombs (2014) concludes that young people have a willingness, enthusiasm, and ability to engage in the topic of death, as well as having portrayals of the presence of death in their everyday lives. Unfortunately, it seems their voices are sometimes silenced by those who feel they should not talk or even think about death.

## **Starting the Conversation**

One way to explore the topic of death is to celebrate it through customs and traditions. Some people may not typically want to talk about death but do feel comfortable explaining death when celebrating certain faith-based observances or traditional Western holidays (e.g., Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Easter, Day of the Dead, Juneteenth, Veterans Day). One reason these conversations may occur more easily is that death is less personal, and the rituals related to these holidays are a more widely accepted method of acknowledging death.

To examine how to begin conversations about death other than through customs and traditions, Wildfeure et al. (2015) explored how people discussed death by looking at various forms of media such as short films and online postings about the experiences of young people talking to dying patients. Students in the study demonstrated more public display and discussion of intimate and private details of

dying persons. The researchers suggest that a new paradigm shift toward openly discussing and talking about death should occur. One way of openly discussing death in an interactive way is to use social media (Wildfeuer et al., 2015). The internet has also opened opportunities to access and explore other death-related topics and themes that otherwise would not have been possible prior to the digital age.

Another way to begin a conversation about death is to explore ideas people have about what happens after someone has died. Beliefs in some form of an afterlife have existed in human cultures for centuries. There are many beliefs about death based on religion, culture, or personal experiences (Filippo, 2006; Krystyna, 2022). Life-after-death beliefs can play a role in reducing mortality concerns and death-thought avoidance (Echebarría Echabe & Perez, 2017). Terror management theory (TMT) postulates that individuals believe in symbolic and literal immortality to cope with anxiety resulting from the human awareness of their own death (Dunn et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2021). Questioning thoughts and feelings about immortality can open opportunities to study different perspectives about death. Topics to explore could include research about the afterlife (Newton, 2000, 2009), past-life experiences (Shroder, 1999; Tucker, 2015), reincarnation (Semkiw, n.d.a, n.d.b), and paranormal tourism (Puhle & Parker, 2021), as well as examining the narratives of individuals who experienced near-death experiences (Moshakis, 2021; Craffert, 2019). Many of these phenomena about what happens after death have been debated by philosophers, theologians, and laypeople for years. The most reasonable reason to talk about death beliefs or what happens after life would be to look for answers that would give individuals a sense of peace and strength to live this life with meaning and purpose (Kübler-Ross, 1986).

## **Death Positive Movement**

One does not have to be a morbid person to be interested in talking about death. Americans have pathologized death while other countries have death education and death preparation training conducted through educational institutions from elementary school to the university level (Moss, 2000). An individual's attitude about death is correlated with their social, cultural, and economic environment, their degree of social participation, their personal values, and their degree of cognitive and emotional maturity (Kim et al., 2016). Death awareness and death positive movements are listed in Table 1.

	Description	Website
Death Cafe	The objective is to gain increased awareness of death with the view of helping people make the most of their (finite) lives.	<a href="https://deathcafe.com/">https://deathcafe.com/</a>
Death Salon	Events posted that “brings together intellectuals and independent thinkers engaged in the exploration of our shared mortality by sharing knowledge and art. Conversations include topics on death and its anthropological, historical, and artistic contributions.”	<a href="https://deathsalon.org/">https://deathsalon.org/</a>
Death Talk	“This list of death positive websites and blogs is far from extensive, but it includes some of the organizations, individuals and blogs who are actively trying to change our relationship to death and dying. Some are death professionals, some want to normalize grief, some want to empower you to make informed end-of-life decisions, and some are just plain interesting.”	<a href="https://www.talkdeath.com/death-positive-websites-blogs-you-should-know/">https://www.talkdeath.com/death-positive-websites-blogs-you-should-know/</a>
Order of the Good Death	Order of the Good Death offers educational content, guides and resources, information on how to protect your rights before and after death, in-person and virtual events, grants for death positive practitioners, and a home for all who say, “if speaking rationally and openly about my inevitable mortality is morbid, then morbid I shall be.”	<a href="https://www.orderofthegood-death.com/">https://www.orderofthegood-death.com/</a>
Talk Death	“TalkDeath’s mission is to encourage positive and constructive conversations around death and dying. From green burials and home funerals, to history, memento mori art, funeral law, and grief resources, TalkDeath.com is the hub for a changing death-conscious public. It also aims to bridge the gap between death professionals and the general public, helping you make informed end-of-life decisions.”	<a href="http://www.talkdeath.com">http://www.talkdeath.com</a>
The Conversation Project	“The Conversation Project® is a public engagement initiative with a goal that is both simple and transformative: to help everyone talk about their wishes for care through the end of life, so those wishes can be understood and respected.”	<a href="https://theconversationproject.org/">https://theconversationproject.org/</a>

Table 1: Death awareness and the death positive movement.

## Conclusion



Besides birth, death is the only other experience every human being will share. So why not start the conversation? Hebb (2018), the founder of DeathOverDinner.org, created a set of prompts that have led hundreds of thousands of people to start the conversation and face the inevitable. Examples of the types of question prompts he writes about are: What is the most significant end-of-life experience which you have been a part of? (p. 80). What do you want your legacy to be? (p. 179). What would you want people to say about you at your funeral? (p. 211). In the end, conversations about death expand our understanding of ourselves and our compassion to connect us with each other (Hebb, 2018). Additionally, mortality awareness and talking about death can also make people deliberately introspective about their life goals and reconsider goals that might be more inherently supportive and meaningful (Vail et al., 2012). “Through understanding that in the end we all share the same destiny—that just as surely as we are alive, so we will die—we may come also to understand that life also must be one, aware, and appreciative of our differences and yet accepting that in our humanness, we are all alike” (Kübler-Ross, 1986, p. 3).

## Books, Videos, and Lectures

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