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A theoretical exploration of death anxiety

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Abstract

Death anxiety is examined from several frameworks in an attempt to understand it better. The frameworks are grounded in existential, Freudian, cognitive-behavioural, Becker's sociological perspective and Terror management theory. These perspectives are chosen not only because they address death anxiety, but they also provide an important range of perspectives. This theoretical exploration provides an investigation into similar strands throughout all perspectives of death anxiety and highlights any marked differences.

Key words: Death anxiety, Theoretical review, cognitive-behavioural, terror management

Daniel Defoe (1726) humorously suggested that the two certain things in life are death and taxes. Death is a fundamental part of existence and yet our experience of it remains somewhat difficult to conceptualise. Life and death are the predominant forces in determining behaviour for the survival of organisms. The paramount idea of evolutionary theory, “fight or flight”, is the essential survival mechanism for human beings because this stress response helps determine the seriousness of a threat. Humans have hard-wired fears rooted in the amygdale such as fear of heights, dark places, loud noises and certain animals (LeDoux, 1998). However humans also have a fear of death itself which requires deeper analysis, most likely rooted in the prefrontal cortex (Greenberg, Koole & Pyszczynski, 2004); humans have the unique attribute of self awareness. Self-preservation beyond just day-to-day survival is an absurd concept without awareness. When dangers are identified, our awareness recognizes that we are the ones who are in danger. This result of conscious awareness links dangerous threats to the risk of losing one’s life, furthering the likelihood of survival. This self-awareness of one’s own danger transcends beyond everyday survival. That is, we are also aware of our own mortality, which at the same time creates a consistent source of anxiety for us. Research shows that even mundane exposure to death prompts is sufficient to trigger death anxiety (Greenberg, et al., 2004). Such death anxiety sets the basis for this exploration. Death anxiety is at risk of being an overlooked research area; theoretical standpoints might provide the basis to explore the clinical implications related to the concept of death anxiety. Finding strands across theories can help establish a foundational framework from which to view death anxiety.

Existential perspective

Death has been the topic of speculation for both artists and scientists alike throughout human history. Awareness and subsequent anxiety surrounding death has been of particular interest to both existential philosophical and psychological investigators. Existential philosophy is concerned mostly with our state of being as humans (Heidegger, 2008). Therefore, an important concern for existentialists is to reflect on how humans perceive a state of non-being. Existentialism would suggest that human beings must face their own mortality if they wish to live fully. One such existential philosopher, Martin Heidegger, addresses the existential need in his book *Being and Time* (1962). Heidegger (2008) insists that one can only have an authentic existence when temporality is confronted. This unique

human awareness is an understanding that the very nature of being is finite and temporal. As Heidegger (2008) said: “As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die” (p.289).

Heidegger asserts that this awareness of death allows for a more meaningful existence. He insists that those who would deny and avoid death due to fear and insecurity live inauthentically. He refers to this type of inauthentic existence as *they-self*, which is a being influenced by the crowd rather than its potential (Craig, 2009; Heidegger, 2008). There are difficulties that exist with authenticity, namely the paradox of being authentic while equally being in the world (Craig, 2009). In contrast to authenticity, Heidegger speaks of indifference towards death as a tranquilisation that helps to avoid facing the inevitability of death (Heidegger, 2008). Heidegger refuses this as an authentic existence, and instead endorses courage to face death, thus allowing freedom from the anxiety death can produce. In some sense, Heidegger would embrace death anxiety as a normal part of meaningful existence. While death is the threat on non-existence, it is that realisation that provides grounding for meaningful existence. One who does not find meaning in this dynamic is under threat from being defined by that fear of death. In this vein, facing death allows people to be alive. Death anxiety is part of normal existence when it is an impetus for individuals to live fully. However, denying death may only serve to cause underlying death anxiety to persist, and encourage people to live in inauthentic ways. Heidegger’s philosophy provides a framework for understanding death anxiety as an opportunity for meaningful authentic existence (Gelven, 1970; Tomer & Eliason, 1996).

A foundational philosopher in existential thought is Søren Kierkegaard, who describes the self-awareness of existence as an opportunity for both joy and fear. Awareness of life and death can then serve as motivation to pursue potentialities and create an uplifting sense of joy; yet, additionally, it can fill an individual with a concurrent realisation that all things must come to an end (Kierkegaard, 2009).

The duality to life and death presents an existential crisis in that people are driven to fulfil their potentialities when facing up to the awareness that their existence is finite, i.e. their own death. Being able to fulfil one’s potentialities creates a great sense of joy, while continuous awareness of one’s mortality creates terror and, indeed, death anxiety. Death anxiety then would be touching upon awareness of mortality alongside one’s struggle not to pass up the opportunity to embrace life fully, i.e. live a life by fulfilling one’s potentialities.

Thus, avoiding the potential dread and terror of life and death anxiety is to rob oneself of the advantages of a joyful life. Kierkegaard's ideas lead to the conclusion that if one is unwilling to embrace both the joy of life along with the terror of death, that life is not being lived authentically. Much like Heidegger, Kierkegaard calls people to a life of authentic existence. What emerges, then, is a picture of death anxiety as an opportunity for that kind of authenticity, but also an opportunity for inauthenticity.

The existential philosophical concept of death anxiety has created a theoretical framework for existential psychologists. For example, Yalom (2009) suggests that death anxiety is a fundamental cause to psychopathology. Drawing from existential philosophy, Yalom proposes a direct link to an awareness of death, and its subsequent fear, to the development of mental health difficulties. Indeed, existentialist Sartre (1956) concludes that death limits one's ability to self-actualise; however one who understands their meaning in life will be less anxious about death (Sartre, 1956). Yalom admonishes psychologists to understand this link between death and mental health difficulties, as it provides a framework for developing clinical interventions. Keeping this link in mind clinically, in order to reduce the damage of death anxiety, people must confront death directly. Irving Yalom writes:

“Self-awareness is a supreme gift, a treasure as precious as life. This is what makes us human. But it comes with a costly price: the wound of mortality. Our existence is forever shadowed by the knowledge that we will grow, blossom, and, inevitably, diminish and die”. (Yalom, 2009, p. 2)

This “wound of mortality” must then create a conscious state of fear about one's own demise. Yalom (2009) proposes that death anxiety develops across the lifespan, even at an early age. For example, when confronted with death, parents may try to shield their children from the reality of death and protect them from death anxiety using euphemistic language such as “grandpa is sleeping now”.

The developmental onset of death anxiety still remains questionable. Bowlby (2005) states that human infants see their physiological and psychological needs as a matter of life or death. Parental intervention is necessary to meet the infant's needs and avoid death; consequently, the infant is prone to anxiety regarding dependence on parental care. According to Bowlby (2005), this anxiety surrounding life and death survival based on

parental action provides the motivation for attachment. This is the basis from which death anxiety is derived as theorised by Yalom.

If death anxiety is a necessary step in the developmental process, Yalom (2009) fears that adolescents may engage in risk-taking behaviours to deal with an underlying death anxiety that has not been properly dealt with. The problem is compounded by the well-intentioned efforts of their parents to help them avoid the topic of death (Yalom, 2009). This avoidance of death which develops in childhood continues through adolescence and into adulthood, creating a life-long pattern of avoiding death anxiety. Yalom (2009) hypothesises that in adulthood, death anxiety often manifests in relational struggles and maladaptive behaviours. One could speculate that an individual who faces life threatening events, and then is unable to face the issue of death, may experience significant psychological and social problems. This idea is corroborated by research such as Port, Engdahl, Frazier and Eberly (2004) which found that death acceptance was significantly related to PTSD symptomology more so than negative life events. In other words, as Yalom says, facing death is more important than the external factors in a person's life. If this is true, many of the mental health issues that clinicians observe, while there is no apparent link to death anxiety, actually stem from a deep-rooted life-long pattern of avoiding death, rather than confronting it directly. Yalom creates a framework for understanding psychopathology which has death anxiety at the centre of well-being. How people face death anxiety is the avenue towards mental health or mental difficulties. This perspective of death anxiety as an opportunity for meaningful existence, as believed by Heidegger, Kierkegaard and Yalom, is the essential lynch pin in the existentialists' view.

Existentialism asserts that death anxiety exists and, in the perspective of Yalom, that death anxiety is related to overall mental health (Adams, 2010). However, it also touches upon the ability for a person to shift between two levels of awareness. Firstly, there is a subconscious level of awareness to which an individual feels the angst of death anxiety, yet chooses to avoid it. The second is a conscious level providing the opportunity to directly face death anxiety, allowing the potential of becoming authentic and avoiding mental health difficulties. Death anxiety's existence, its relation to mental health functioning, and an ability to oscillate between two levels of awareness, are fundamental in creating a working and testable model.

Freudian perspective on death anxiety

Yalom's model of psychopathology as a result of death anxiety begs the question whether fears about one's mortality are truly a fundamental dilemma within the human condition. This existentialist perspective of death anxiety as a source of pathology is not shared by all. From a psychoanalytic orientation, death anxiety is not a causal factor of psychopathology, but a symptom of it. Sigmund Freud (2009) does not take the same perspective on death anxiety; in his view, the unconscious is not concerned with death because it is not something that has been subjectively experienced:

“Our own death is indeed quite unimaginable, and whenever we make the attempt to imagine it we really survive as spectators. At bottom nobody believes in his own death, or to put the same thing in a different way, in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality” (pp. 304–305).

In addition, the ultimate source of psychopathology in Freudian theory is unconscious conflict. Therefore, death anxiety must not be a fundamental etiological force as it is not a primary concern of the unconscious. Instead, Freud (2009) saw death anxiety as a defence mechanism implemented to deal with unconscious conflicts. Freud (2009) did agree that patients do manifest a fear of death, which he labelled thanatophobia. However, although this death anxiety is observed and reported by patients, the actual fear of death is merely a coping mechanism for some other unconscious concern (Howarth, 2001).

Ergo, from Freud's perspective, death anxiety is not a precursor to psychopathology, but a symptom of unconscious conflict. Clinically speaking, death anxiety is a symptom in which an underlying conflict is created. For example, a patient reports a fear of dying and requests treatment for said problem. Yet after further psychoanalysis, it is revealed that this death anxiety is not really about death at all. Instead, this patient is actually struggling with the pain of losing a spouse in a divorce. The “death” is actually the end of a relationship and, in this example, a fear of death is a defence mechanism for a fear of abandonment (Howarth, 2001). Therefore, from the Freudian perspective, consciously experiencing death anxiety is much more manageable for the patient than delving into the unconscious source of distress: a failed marriage. Freud provides a working model of death anxiety that is quite damning to Yalom's reliance on death anxiety as an etiological framework for psychiatric co-morbidity.

Freud's view is that death anxiety is not the cause, but merely a symptom, of psychopathology. However it is important to note that this model is hard to falsify.

This symptom versus cause dilemma is theoretically difficult to resolve either way, but these viewpoints are reflective of the theoretical orientations of the psychoanalytic and existential perspectives. An existentialist could counter that, in the above case, the marriage failed because the person was not willing to live authentically. By definition, living authentically means facing death anxiety to better embrace life and meaning. Therefore, in some sense, the divorce is a symptom of death anxiety. At this point, there is no clear theoretical justification for either perspective; however, this exploration will explore some studies that have attempted to identify the role of death anxiety, regardless of the direction.

As with existentialism, Freudian theory acknowledges that death anxiety exists albeit linked to an unconscious conflict. Therefore, whether it is conscious or not, death anxiety is related to psychological difficulties. This affirms the second important aspect of death anxiety as being linked to mental health status. Thirdly, it recognises the ability for a person to shift between two levels of awareness. In fact, early research into death anxiety was done primarily through projective measure attempting to capture this unconscious experience (Feifel & Branscomb, 1973; Feifel & Nagy, 1981). A patient thus oscillates in their awareness of death anxiety. So, along with existentialism, the Freudian perspective also supports death anxiety's existence, relation to mental health and ability to fluctuate between two levels of awareness.

Death anxiety from a cognitive-behavioural approach

To add to the existentialist and psychoanalytic viewpoints, it is important to include the cognitive-behavioural perspective on death anxiety. This view is fundamentally based on the idea that death anxiety is wholly integrated with beliefs about oneself. For example, personal construct theory states that regarding death anxiety, the extent to which death is able to be understood and lie outside existing belief structures ultimately influences the level of death anxiety (Robinson & Wood, 1984). Some within the cognitive-behavioural framework have examined death anxiety as within the category of, or in close proximity to, health anxiety (Furer & Walker, 2008). It is a problematic response to issues of health and well-being. Death anxiety is understood as a normal experience, similar to any other type of anxiety (Furer & Walker, 2008). However, death anxiety becomes maladaptive when it

interferes with normal functioning. The cognitive perspective would then focus on effective coping with death; managing the emotions of fear about death and dying (Furer & Walker, 2008). For example, avoidance of death-related activities, such as funerals and hospitals, as well as avoiding planning for the future, could potentially become a complicated and intrusive force in one's life. If avoidance of situations related to one's fear of death become significant and disabling, death anxiety now becomes an issue of psychopathology (Furer & Walker, 2008). The cognitive fear of death is present in many health-related issues, akin to other aspects of anxiety (Furer & Walker, 2008). The cognitive perspective sees death anxiety within a broader spectrum of health anxiety and, in fact, can be treated clinically as such. For example, Furer and Walker (2008) suggest clinical treatment that includes exposure to death themes, reduction of safety behaviours, cognitive reappraisal, life goal focus and relapse prevention as methods of effectively coping with death. This model of death anxiety as a form of health anxiety becomes more manageable without having the major existential crisis. In other words, death anxiety is a factor of health-related issues, not a preeminent condition of human nature.

Does this theory diminish the foundational existential nature of death anxiety as the source of mental health problems? One could argue that death anxiety simply becomes an aspect of health anxiety. Conversely, one could debate that health anxiety is really an aspect of worrying about issues of mortality. If death anxiety is common in individuals with hypochondriasis, fear of death and dying may be the central reason as to why people experience concerns related to health problems (Furer & Walker, 2008). The cognitive behavioural perspective adds insight into the relationship of death anxiety to anxiety as a whole. For example, worry about mortality becomes an integral aspect of the broader diagnoses of generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) and panic disorder. Furer, Walker, Chartier and Stein (1997) found patients with panic disorder reported significantly higher anxiety about death than did patients with a diagnosis of social anxiety disorder. Starcevic, Fallon, Uhlenhuth and Pathak (1994) found that patients with GAD had concerns for both their own death and/or the death of a family member. Clients suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a whole tend to have high concern for safety and health. Studies have shown a positive relationship between posttraumatic stress and death anxiety (Chung et al., 2002; Martz, 2004). From a cognitive perspective, underlying many anxiety disorders is a basic sense of worry; this worry can thus manifest itself in death anxiety. This idea is

somewhat similar to the Freudian idea that death anxiety is related to unconscious anxiety. However, instead of seeing death anxiety as a defence mechanism, it is uniquely defined within a broader spectrum of anxiety themes.

The cognitive perspective has clinical implications in the treatment of death anxiety. There is very little research on the controlled treatment of death anxiety per se; however, attempts have been made in the treatment of health anxieties. For example Hiebert, Furer, McPhail and Walker (2005) examined cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) with a clinical population of patients with hypochondriasis. Death concerns were addressed via exposure to situations in an attempt to increase acceptance of the reality of death (Hiebert, Furer, McPhail, & Walker, 2005). The final analysis of the CBT interventions showed a significant decrease in death anxiety and hypochondriacal symptoms for the CBT group condition (Heibert et al., 2005; Furer & Walker, 2008). If death anxiety has become maladaptive, it could be seen as an important clinical issue to address. Furer and Walker (2008) describe avoidance as one of the biggest problems with death anxiety. Therefore, controlled exposure to death-related situations may provide a useful treatment option. This type of approach within CBT is reflective of the cognitive perspective that death anxiety is ultimately a form of health anxiety, or perhaps more generally, an aspect of overall anxiety, and thus should be treatable in the same way as other anxiety issues.

Models of death anxiety as defined by existential, Freudian, and cognitive-behavioural theories, all agree that death anxiety does, in fact, exist. The cognitive-behavioural perspective likens death anxiety to health anxiety, however, identifies the idea as a real phenomenon. In addition, this perspective supports the relationship between death anxiety and mental health in that death anxiety can become maladaptive and in need of clinical management. The cognitive-behavioural approach also describes the necessity of moving between levels of awareness to address this anxiety. In treatment, individuals are encouraged to be aware and in control of their own death anxiety; a view that one can oscillate in their awareness of death anxiety.

Sociological perspective

Ernest Becker (1997) describes the fundamental problem of death anxiety from an existential viewpoint, but with an application to sociological issues, in his book *The Denial of Death*. Becker reaffirms the existential perspective of death by acknowledging death anxiety

as a real phenomenon. He explores possible applications of death anxiety by providing a sociological framework for how a human actively denies death. Becker asserts death anxiety is an enduring sense of concern for human beings in everyday life, and attempts to connect a variety of fears (e.g. terrorism, illness) to an underlying fear of death (Becker, 1997). Becker would counter the psychoanalytic perspective and identify death anxiety as a precursor to psychological and sociological dysfunction, rather than a symptom. In his words:

“To live a whole lifetime with the fate of death haunting one’s dreams and even the most sun filled days-that’s something else...I believe that those who speculate that a full apprehension of man’s condition would drive him insane are right”. (Becker, 1997, p. 27)

Becker theorises that people transform their underlying death anxiety into smaller more manageable fears. In addition, people use daily rituals and behaviours in an attempt to control and deny death (Becker, 1997). Yet these fragile attempts ultimately do not control death anxiety; especially when people are reminded of their own mortality as a result of tragedy and overt events. It is virtually impossible to avoid death completely; therefore, these reminders are present and frequent. If the need to deny death is crucial and yet there are reminders of death in everyday life, how, then, can people cope with the potentially ever-present death anxiety?

From a sociological perspective, Becker suggests that human beings need larger and more powerful systems that help maintain a consistent denial of death. He states that society and its institutions serve to strengthen an individual’s own defence against death anxiety (Becker, 1997). An anthropological investigation into belief systems and ritualistic practices identifies tools that help members of a society deny their own mortality. Keeping with the existentialist proposition, these larger frameworks function to reduce death anxiety in its individual members. Society’s ritualistic behaviours provide an outlet for death anxiety that would alternatively cause significant impairment for the individual. One such example is religion; a system of ritualistic activities that reinforce the idea that death is not final. Whether it is the Christian belief in heaven or the Hindu idea of reincarnation, many religious systems exist to tell their followers that they will live on in some way. Is this, then, a delusion that helps people with their death anxiety? Further examination of many cultural frameworks

would demonstrate a marriage of societal and individual attempts to deny death and allow humans to live in a delusion that death is not real.

Becker expands upon the following mechanisms that allow people to maintain sanity in the face of death: the religious, the romantic and the creative (Becker, 1997). As mentioned earlier, religion is a human device that invents a deity who will not only protect people, but will free them from death itself. In the face of great suffering, humanity has created God or gods as a personification of being saved from death (Becker, 1997). Becker also suggested that religious mechanisms for denying death are not as prevalent as they once were historically due to an increasingly secular society. Secondly, Becker presents the romantic solution as a mechanism for coping with death anxiety. Romantic expressions in literature, music and cinema promote “love” as an enduring feature that is eternal and, much like religion has the power to save. Becker (1997) talks of love becoming the central solution to all of humanity’s problems because it is a useful defence mechanism. Finally, Becker proposes the creative solution as a means to eternity. Whether it is a piece of art or literature, or perhaps an invention, a product that reflects the creator’s persona can last longer than the individual. Therefore, the creation itself allows a sense of immortality (Becker, 1997). In this digital age, the ability to leave a presence behind is even more prevalent. On-line resources, such as Facebook, now have profile pages for people that have died. Their Facebook accounts are memorialised to allow the now-deceased user to carry on indefinitely (Kelly, 2009). Despite the unique social commentary, this concept that creation allows one to live beyond the grave is Becker’s (1997) final mechanism for denying death. Becker has identified these three ways in which humanity tries to deny its own mortality, however, these are merely illusions of immortality.

In terms of mental health, Becker suggests that those who struggle with mental health issues have fewer defences against death anxiety than the typically functioning population (Becker, 1997). Higher functioning individuals usually do not suffer the same maladies, due to a better ability to keep their fear of death from overwhelming them. This may indicate that deluding one’s self from facing one’s own death may actually serve a functional purpose. On the surface, societal tools for managing death may provide a protective factor. Becker affirms this, and yet asks whether we would be better served by acknowledging death and dealing with it in a more direct manner. Becker’s ideas about death anxiety have inspired the

development of psychological theories, and research has been carried out to test the role of death anxiety in cognition and behaviour.

Although originally seen as contrary to Freud's ideas on death anxiety, Firestone and Catlett (2009) expand Becker's assertion within a psychoanalytic perspective, stating that denying the inevitability of death results in neuroticism. In line with classic Freudian defence mechanisms, death anxiety is a form of denial and can be overcome (Firestone & Catlett, 2009). Therefore death anxiety, as in any other dysfunction, is a defence mechanism that can be overcome within the context of therapy. It is important to note then that death anxiety can be defined as a dysfunction that must be overcome, not a state of existential being that one must accept. This psychoanalytic focus on death anxiety as a defence against overall anxiety is contrary to the existentialists' perspective. Existentialism, such as Kierkegaard's, suggests that angst is not the same as Freud's view of anxiety because it is an apprehension of the unknown (Kierkegaard, 2009). This existential angst precedes choice or perhaps, in the case of Freudian terminology, defence. Regardless, whether exploring a Freudian concept or existential concept of death anxiety, one must conclude that a relationship between death anxiety and well-being exists.

Returning to a sociological framework, Becker identifies the existence of death anxiety, and also demonstrates its relationship to mental health functioning. Becker suggests that death anxiety fully reflected could cause mental health difficulties. However, in Becker's perspective, denying death anxiety, and thus ignoring, may also prove detrimental. This again suggests that an individual has the ability to oscillate in his/her awareness of death anxiety. Therefore, Becker's sociological standpoint also confirms the three basic aspects (existence, relationship to mental health, and levels of awareness) of death anxiety.

Terror Management Theory

A significant contribution to the psychology of death anxiety, based in part on Becker's ideas, is Terror Management Theory (TMT). Becker and TMT share the belief that "positive illusions" help to minimize death anxiety (Taylor & Wood, 1984; Collins, Skokan & Aspinwall, 1989; Greenberg, et al., 2004). TMT assumes that self-awareness of one's own mortality can be a source of existential anxiety. Based on Becker's (1997) ideas, worldview and beliefs can act as a buffer to death anxiety. Two perspectives have emerged from TMT research: the mortality salience hypothesis and the anxiety-buffer hypothesis (Greenberg,

Pyszczynski, Rosenblatt, Veeder, & Kirkland, 1990). The mortality salience hypothesis states that cultural worldviews provide a buffer from death anxiety, and that death prompts will increase the need of individuals to strengthen their own worldview. The anxiety-buffer hypothesis argues that self-esteem is the primary buffer which serves to protect humans from death anxiety and to deny mortality (Schimel, Hayes, Williams & Jahrig, 2007)

Focusing on the mortality salience hypothesis, research has examined death anxiety and its subsequent effect on the human condition in the form of nationalism. Ochsman and Mathy (1994) found that following an exposure to death thought, German participants sat closer to a German confederate and further away from a Turkish confederate. This line of research within TMT appears to show an interesting connection between death anxiety and nationalism, or perhaps more specifically, a within-group bias as a means to survival. In other words, when faced with reminders of mortality, human beings will favour and draw closer to their own kind; whether this is a coping skill or an explanatory cause of local and global conflict is yet to be fully determined. However, this study showing the relationship between culture and fear of death provide a compelling argument as to the personal and sociological effects of death awareness.

It is noteworthy to point out that there is a reciprocal process in that when one's nationalism is criticised, death anxiety increases. This would imply that any challenge to worldview would increase the access to thoughts of death. Schimel et al. (2007) conducted research testing death thought accessibility and showed threatening nationalist perspectives increased thoughts of death (Schimel, et al., 2007). This study also showed that death thought accessibility could remain low if these threats to nationalist perspectives were dismissible. Yet when the worldview was challenged with more compelling evidence, there were higher levels of death thought accessibility (Schimel, et al. 2007). Therefore, when people's cognitive frameworks are challenged with conflicting evidence, the result is great access to thoughts of death.

Turning to the anxiety-buffer hypothesis, self-esteem serves as a buffer against death anxiety and denying mortality. In this view, self-esteem is fundamentally a sense of contribution to something bigger than oneself. Robertson, Jay and Welch (1997) suggest that by contributing to something larger and infinite, it allows the individual to feel immortal and thus reduces death anxiety. Self-esteem is then directly related to the individual's sense of investment into something beyond a finite life. Robertson, et al. (1997) suggested people may

choose to see this contribution as living in the memory of their families or even biological continuity through genetics. Alternatively, they may gain this self-esteem through their own creative work and material contributions to society, such as literature or art. This is similar to Becker's concept of creation as a way of denying death; however, the focus is on the self-esteem derived from creation that serves as the actual mechanism for denying death.

TMT is deeply rooted in the existentialist's framework because of the importance it places on existentially motivated processes in human behaviour. If TMT theory is to be summarised, it suggests death anxiety is a distal causal factor for a variety of socially significant motives, in particular those that centre on meaning e.g. religion and politics (Greenberg, et al., 2004). It provides a framework that posits the juxtaposition of instinctive self-preservation with the cognitive capacity to be aware of one's own death; this awareness creates death anxiety which can be overwhelming and paralyzing when it is insufficiently managed by cultural beliefs and a rigid sense of symbolic value (Greenberg, et al., 2004). TMT warns that when the death anxiety buffers are enacted to provide some sense of immortality, they can become problematic socially (Greenberg et al., 2004).

TMT also identifies the existence of death anxiety and does, in fact, show a relationship to mental health difficulties (Greenberg et al., 2004; Tomer, Eliason, & Wong, 2008; Weems, Costa, Dehon & Berman, 2004). TMT addresses general existential anxiety, which is then correlated with both anxiety and depression (Weems et al., 2004). In addition, TMT indicates differing levels of awareness, in their terminology salience of mortality, indicating that death anxiety is subject to different states of awareness (Weems et al., 2004). TMT, therefore, also recognises the three basic factors of death anxiety identified by all of the prior theories, including identification of the existence of death anxiety, its relation to mental health impairment and identification of different levels of awareness.

Conclusion

The need for self-preservation creates a necessary avoidance of death. Yet the human capacity for self-awareness creates a sense of anxiety surrounding death. Death anxiety seen from an existential perspective is an opportunity for authentic growth, while also potentially causing mental health difficulties. The Freudian perspective indeed confirms a relationship between death anxiety and mental health functioning, albeit symptomatic of unconscious conflict. Cognitive-behavioural thought would concur that death anxiety is related to the

greater umbrella of health anxiety, and its ability to become maladaptive. Becker supports the premise that death anxiety can become destructive both personally and sociologically when it is denied. TMT also shares these concerns and examines the ways in which death anxiety is managed when brought to awareness. Despite the different perspectives on death anxiety, what is clear is that the aforementioned theories all agree that it can be a component in mental health and well-being. The wider implications of this exploration are that both practitioners and future researchers need to acknowledge death anxiety is prominent across theories. Future research should work on establishing a clearer operational definition of death anxiety that can be tested and examined further. Death anxiety could be linked to conditions such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder or other mental health issues along the anxiety spectrum. Only by having a clear and measurable concept of death anxiety can we further explore its effect on mental health and well-being.

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