

Why being aware of your mortality can be good for you

September 5 2017, by Mark Mcdermott And Oona Mcewan



It is only nothingness ... for ever and ever. Credit: Dark Moon Pictures

Nobody likes to think about lying on their death bed. From health anxiety to midlife crises, it seems like thoughts about ageing and death can often unleash some level of neurosis. But is that the whole story? We

have examined mortality awareness – the realisation that we are all one day going to die – and found that, although the prospect of death is often scary, it can also have positive effects.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, research on [death awareness](#) so far has focused largely on the negative aspects of realising that we will eventually stop living. Indeed, until now, the dominant psychological theory has been "[terror management theory](#)", which assumes that contemplating our demise invokes fear and anxiety. For example, studies using this framework have found that thinking about death can make us more punitive and prejudiced.

However, throughout the years, literature from various fields has offered other explanations. For example, "positive psychology" proposes concepts such as "[post-traumatic growth](#)" – the idea that people can grow psychologically through traumatic experiences. Thinking about the fact that we will die may be hard, but according to this theory it could also help us to get stronger psychologically.

In our recent study, [published in OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying](#), we asked 356 participants from 18 to 80 years old questions about their experience of mortality. We asked them to indicate the extent to which they agreed with 89 statements which covered a wide variety of possible attitudes to death awareness. These included "I do not let the fear of dying rule my life", "I want to be remembered for doing great things for the world when I am no longer alive" and "I am scared of dying before I am old". In this way, we explored how many aspects of such awareness we could identify.

To see how the results might align with positive or negative features of their experience, we also asked our respondents about how interested they were in their health, how prone to taking risks they were, and how eager they were to conform (such as obeying rules).

Some of the attitudes we identified were negative. These included being fearful, feeling disempowered (realising personal vulnerability in the face of death), and feeling disengaged (refusing to acknowledge death). We found that those people who reported higher levels of disempowerment and disengagement also reported taking more risks and were more reluctant to conform. It may be that people who report taking greater risks do so because they feel that they will die regardless of what they do. Those refusing to conform on the other hand may be attempting to empower themselves in the face of the inevitable.

We also discovered that younger individuals and people with lower levels of education attainment were more likely to have negative attitudes to death. However, it is not all bad news for these individuals. For example, we found there was a relationship between mortality fearfulness and placing a high value on staying healthy. So it would appear that fearing death may cue attempts to control its unpredictability.

The power of legacy

Interestingly, we also found a few positive aspects of pondering mortality. One is accepting it rather than running away or fearing it, which can help us to make the most of our time-limited existence.

We also identified what we call mortality legacy awareness. This is a form of mortality awareness that drives the need to leave something behind after we have gone – thereby outliving and transcending death. This could be a highly creative force.

The need for a legacy turned out to be an important contributor to dealing effectively with the prospect of demise, lessening feelings of hopelessness and a lack of purpose. In the study, legacy awareness was found to be correlated with both trying to be healthy and striving for spiritual growth (such as believing that life has purpose).

This suggests that those who are interested in passing down their succession to future generations as a way to transcend death are also likely to take responsibility for their health and place value on their internal development. Artists are the perfect example of this: through their creative legacies, they live on and are never totally gone. Working on leaving a legacy – whether it be producing art, raising a family, passing on family history or helping others – can also be a way for people to better tolerate ageing and face the prospect death.

Such legacies also help those who remain to cope with their loss. On a more basic level, being aware of our ability to provide a legacy that outlives us can be an excellent way to motivate ourselves to accomplish more, stay healthy, focus on the here and now, and maintain good relationships.

Of course, the results are all based on correlations – we don't show conclusively that striving for a legacy actually does make people feel more fulfilled. Our latest research project (currently under peer review for publication) has therefore studied 10 people's experience of [mortality](#) awareness in depth – through one-to-one interviews. The outcomes of this work confirmed the findings from our first study and offer additional support to the claim that legacy awareness is a major element in people's search for meaning – helping to manage death-related anxiety.

So the next time you face a haunting reminder of your death, remember that focusing on what you would like to leave behind could help you turn something terrifying into a positive motivational tool.

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