


Chapter 3

Death Anxiety: The Denial of Our Impermanence

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will help counselors and counselor trainees develop the capacity to understand the concept of death anxiety for themselves and for those they serve. Moreover, this chapter will define death anxiety, discuss the history of death anxiety within the helping professions, and provide guidelines for exploring one's own death anxiety and the death anxiety of clients. This chapter will describe terror management theory (TMT) and how the denial of death and death anxiety lies at the heart of human behavior and cultural affiliation. This chapter introduces cultural humility as a foundation for engaging in conversations about death and a model for clinically applying cultural humility is examined. In addition, creative teaching strategies are offered for engaging students in self-reflective learning about death anxiety. Finally, this chapter will provide a foundation to normalize Barbie's question in the blockbuster movie, "Do you guys ever think of death?" (Gerwig, 2023).

INTRODUCTION

"Do you guys ever think about dying?" This was a question that Barbie asked her friends in the middle of a wild dance party scene in the summer 2023 blockbuster movie, *Barbie*. The loud blaring music suddenly stops at her question and Barbie has an uncomfortable look on her face and everyone is staring at her. Barbie's naming of

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a very present death anxiety that is within all of us was just too painful for all those at the party. Noticing the awkward nature of her question, Barbie quickly works to change the subject by saying, “I’m just dying to dance.” The music and dancing quickly resume, and all her friends ignore her original question about dying (Gerwig, 2023). This scene serves as a metaphor for the pervasive denial of death in the US culture. Death is one of those few universals in life, and yet it is so challenging to talk about and to face the reality of our anxiety about death (Becker, 1997; Jong, 2021; Menzies & Menzies, 2021; Ozguc et al., 2024; Solomon et al., 2016). It also begs the question, “Why is it so hard to talk about Death in US Culture?” Perhaps at the heart of this difficulty is that there is pervasive death anxiety that is all around us. But what exactly is death anxiety?

DEFINING DEATH ANXIETY

Humans have been contending with death anxiety since the beginning of time and death has been a constant pariah to manage. One of the key aspects of human experience is that the human creature is the only being on the planet that knows that it will one day die (Becker, 1997; Jong, 2021; Solomon et al., 2004; Solomon et al., 2016). Such knowledge can overwhelm a person and work to create a very present death anxiety. This death anxiety can be overt or covert. Death anxiety is overt when the individual directly faces their mortality and deeply considers it. But such overt death anxiety, as Yalom (2008) has stated is like staring at the sun. A person can only do it for so long without burning their eyes or perhaps in this case, burning their soul.

Covert death anxiety is more insidious in nature and lies at the heart of the human experience and human motivation. It is as though the individual knows subconsciously that they will one day die and are therefore driven to find ways to assuage that anxiety sometimes without even realizing it (Yalom, 2008). Becker (1997) wrote about this type of death anxiety in his book, *The Denial of Death*. He described how each person is engaged on a sort of immortality or hero project in a symbolic effort to live forever (Munley & Johnson, 2003).

Some work to alleviate their death anxiety through an absolute devotion to science and this can be seen through the growing literature on defeating aging and living longer. Others mitigate their death anxiety through getting caught up in trivial things and overstating their importance, through frenetic activity, and in focusing on the petty things in life (Becker, 1997). Today, Becker might even add the extreme devotion to social media to confirm that your own life is better than your neighbors. One study found a positive correlation between social media addiction and death anxiety. This suggests that individuals overuse social media to buffer the threat of

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