

EVERYDAY AWARENESS OF DEATH: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION



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Summary

This article concerns two important topics. The first is the results of clinical qualitative research on death awareness experience in adults, and the second is research procedures of clinical qualitative investigations based on a hermeneutical approach. The theoretical assumptions of this study are based on humanistic-existential psychology and life-span developmental psychology. Descriptions of the death awareness experience from 12 physically healthy women were obtained and analyzed using a hermeneutical approach. Three components of the death awareness experience were obtained: context of death, psychological phenomenon related to death of the self and closely related persons, and the impact of an awareness of the death experience on one's life. Clinical applications of the research are discussed.

This article describes a qualitative, clinical investigation of the awareness of death, which appears in the everyday life of



Journal of Humanistic Psychology, Vol. 39 No. 3, Summer 1999 73-95
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physically healthy, middle-age women and is not caused by the recent death of a closely related person (Widera-Wysoczańska, 1996, 1998). This study does not concern people's reactions to the traumatic experience of actual deaths of closely related persons nor to participants' own imminent deaths. Nor does this study concern what is known as "near death experiences," on which many studies have been conducted. Rather, this investigation deals with how the general knowledge and the concept of death, the realization of one's mortality, as well as that of people close to oneself, contribute to personal development. The conviction that the subject is worthy of study came from my clinical practice, where I met people who could not cope with their existential fear and other feelings about death, which affected their subjective well-being.

Studies of the literature of thanatopsychology show that the topic of death appears in reflections of researchers in almost every field of mainstream psychology: psychoanalysis, cognitive, developmental (Becker, 1973; Erikson, 1980; Freud, 1967; Jung, 1976; Kelly, 1955). This topic is of particular interest to theorists of humanistic-existential psychology (Boss, 1967; Dabrowski, 1986; Frankl, 1963; Yalom, 1980). In their opinions, death is strongly connected with the process of life and defines its content. Existentialist Medard Boss (1967) writes that awareness of death affects a person's reflection of himself or herself and personal feelings of responsibility for his or her own life. A review of psychological literature showed that most studies about death were placed within the nomothetic, correlative model of methodology and deal with attitudes toward the death of a closely related person. There are only a few idiographic studies in psychological literature relating everyday experience of this realization of death to personal growth or pathology. No such research has been conducted by Polish psychologists.

Viewing findings about everyday awareness of death within an existential framework opens up areas of interpretation that are largely neglected in death literature. The second purpose of this research is to present the clinical qualitative methods of my investigation, based on a hermeneutic approach, into death studies.

EXISTENTIAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE DEATH EXPERIENCE AS A THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF THIS STUDY

Since I was going to study people's experiences, I based my investigation on the theoretical foundations of humanistic-existential psychology (Bugental, 1967; Giorgi, 1992; Jaspers, 1989; May, 1967; Yalom, 1980), supported by the ideas of life-span developmental psychologists (Batles, Reese, & Lipitt, 1980; Erikson, 1980; Freeman, 1994). The humanistic-existential psychological perspective maintains that people's attitudes toward death are an experience involving self-actualization and search for meaning. Life-span developmental psychology places this experience in the cycle of change and crises management, from birth to death. It allows me to understand better the dynamics of personal experience of death awareness in life. Death is understood as a symbolic reality that occurs in an indefinite future. Thoughts and feelings that we have "here and now" concerning death can cause an internal change in the person's life. To paraphrase the thoughts of psychologists from life-span developmental psychology who talk about the past as being in the present, it is likewise valid to speak of the death experience in the future as being here and now. The awareness of death could provoke a person to interpret or reevaluate his or her personal life and surrounding realities. Existential death awareness experience is understood in this study as the collection of feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and bodily sensations that take place under certain circumstances and that express the person's attitudes toward the finiteness of his or her own life or that of a closely related person. Because of the demands of the hermeneutical procedures of qualitative methodology, only a general explanation of the awareness of the death experience will be presented at this point in the article. The research reported in this article allows for supplementary developments to the above basic views.

HERMENEUTICAL METHOD OF UNDERSTANDING THE DEATH AWARENESS EXPERIENCE

This qualitative research was conducted using the hermeneutic approach. This approach is centered on a holistic description and

interpretation of the psychology of a person's life, based on his or her personal history. This is achieved by focusing on the subjective interpretation of life as presented by the person in his or her own expressional language (Packer, 1989). In this study, I employed the method described by Eckartsberg (1986) and Tesch (1990) as an actual life-text study method. This method permitted me to obtain a description of the death experience from the internal perspective of the individual with regard to her current life situation. I used two open research questions: What is the nature of the awareness of one's own or others' (closely related persons) death, and What is the meaning of such experience in a person's life?

DIALOG AS A METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

The basic research method was an in-depth interview based on a guide containing open-ended, unstructured questions. It was supported by projective methods. Questions were asked about the past, present, and future of the person to elicit vivid descriptions concerning (a) feelings, thoughts, actions, and life events related to the imagined death of oneself or a closely related person, or the real death of a closely related person, and (b) the impact of death experiences on the person's life.

The dialog constructed for this research was composed of three stages. The first, called the spontaneous stage, contained general and open-ended questions. At this time, the person could say anything that seemed important. The second, called the concretization stage, contained questions that arose from the statements made by the person and were intended to prompt a broadening, a completion, and to concretize those parts of the history that were important for the subject of investigation. At this stage, the dialog was completed for the purpose of studying a death awareness experience. Using a modified version of the "Life Line" method of James and Cherry (1988) and the "Confrontation with one's own life" method as developed by me, the third stage, called the verification stage, of the dialog consisted in checking my understanding of the person's statements with the person herself.

In the Life Line method, the person draws a line of her own life and marks on it events associated with her own death experience or that of closely related persons, as well as describing those events. The goal of this method was to simplify for the person an

immersion into past and present events associated with death awareness experience, as well as to anticipate events in the future. The "Confrontation with one's own life" method has the form of a dialog between persons, concentrating on important matters in one's life from the perspective of the death awareness experience. The woman would write within sections of a pie graph about important matters in her life, the methods of realization, and feelings and thoughts related to them, associating these matters with the past, present, and future. The purpose of this method was to help participants describe how the death awareness experience influences their lives.

After a brief interval to establish rapport, I began each interview by saying, "I am interested in knowing about your experience of death and what it has meant to you and your life." This approach encouraged respondents to describe their experiences in their own ways. I tried to stay with their flow of experience.

PURPOSEFUL SAMPLING

I used purposeful sampling. It allowed me to meet people who provided me with rich, deep, concrete material. Using the "Snowball Strategy," I obtained texts from 12 adult, physically healthy women ages 21 to 47, who had not experienced the death of a closely related person within at least 5 years. The research conducted with each individual person was recorded on audiotape cassettes. I met twice with each person. Verbatim transcriptions were made of each taped session. Each transcription contained about 40 pages of written text (e.g., Kuzel, 1992; Miller & Crabtree, 1992; Mishler, 1992; Widera-Wysoczańska, 1995b, 1997).

HERMENEUTIC PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

A hermeneutic psychological analysis of each individual transcript involved the following steps.

Step 1: Open-minded reading of the transcript. In the beginning of the analysis, the texts were reread a number of times with an open mind. The purpose of these rereadings was to gain a more sensitive view of the death awareness experience as described in

the transcript. This allowed me to immerse myself in the experience of the person and learn about her life from an inside perspective, because I wanted to obtain the deepest possible understanding.

Step 2: Searching (or looking) for themes. During repeated readings of the text, themes that appeared important were marked, and ideas about meanings discovered were written down. To check my understanding of the themes related to death awareness experience, I proceeded to the analysis dividing the text into segments.

Step 3: Discovering key words. Reading the text again, key words or key sentences that appeared to be essential for an understanding of the person's death awareness experience were sought. These were words that had meaning for further analysis. Their essentiality did not depend in any way on their frequency of occurrence in the text.

Step 4: Looking for unity of meanings. Based on key words, the "unity of meanings," which represented only one idea or piece of information, were marked. They may have appeared in the transcript several times, each of which could have been one line in length or several pages. A similar process, which Tesch (1990) called decontextualization, consisted of separating the fragments of the text from the context. Selected fragments were described in the margin of the transcript, with the help of quotations from the person's statements. The purpose of this was to show the source of the interpretation. Next, I returned to these segments repeatedly for detailed analysis. This was called "line-by-line" analysis, during which time great attention was paid to concrete sentences and even to words.

Step 5: Creation of "poles of meaning." Units of meaning consisting of the same idea were removed from the original places in the text, collected together, and placed in the order of their appearance in the transcript, creating in this way a pole of meaning. In other words, the segment was placed with other segments of the same transcript dealing with the same idea, situation, or episode. A similar process is known as recontextualization (Tesch, 1990), which means to place units of meaning in a new context. In this manner, I was able to reconstruct the content of the personal pole

of meaning, describing different aspects of the death experience. During this interpretation of the text, the comparative method was used to check for differences and similarities of the meaning of these segments. I searched for contradictions in the text to determine their causes and functions.

The text was searched for connections between elements. Special attention was given to statements containing phrases such as “never,” “always,” “it is impossible,” “everybody knows that . . .,” “just like other people . . .,” “there is no reason to talk about that. . .” These phrases signaled (or indicated) that special attention should be given to those sentences. The meanings indicated from this type of analysis are shown in graphs (e.g. Berry & Bennett, 1992; Runyan-McKinley, 1992).

Step 6: The formation of a personal picture of the death awareness experience. In this step, I combined these graphs to create a complete picture of the death awareness experience of the participants.

Step 7: Formation of a personal model of the death awareness experience. Looking through all the graphs, I searched for important topics that I used to bring order to the interpretation of the experience. These topics allowed the creation of a personal model of the death awareness experience. The dominating topics referred to circumstances concerning death of oneself and close relatives, feelings and thoughts about death of oneself and close relatives, and the impact of death in the person’s internal and external life. Within every main theme, there appeared subthemes that, when arranged according to the subject’s age at the occurrence, gave insight into the personal process of the person’s death awareness experience. This ordering was necessary when working with the dialog data, which had a tendency to jump around in time.

I continually returned to the text, complementing the pole of meaning with new information, as well as excluding unnecessary information.

LEVELS OF DATA PRESENTATION

I recognized three levels while presenting the data. The first two are the idiographic and group levels. On both of these levels, I car-

ried out a description of the death awareness experience, with the help of several quotations placed in chronological order in accordance with the age at which the person had a death-related experience. On the idiographic level, a description, then an interpretation, of the 12 personal models of the death awareness experience in my study were made separately. The aim of this presentation was to show the idiographic meanings that were typical as well as exceptional for the given person.

On the group level, a cross-portrait analysis was carried out, in which a group model of the death awareness experience was described. This was done with the help of quotations drawn from all the texts. This material was then the subject of the psychological interpretation. The purpose of such description and interpretation of the material was to arrive at the most general level of analysis. While doing this research, I adhered strictly to the rules of validation of qualitative studies. In accordance with the triangulation criteria, I employed more than one method of collecting data about the awareness of death experience. When using the criterion of persuasiveness, quotes from transcriptions allowed me to prove that interpretation is a trustworthy approach. In describing the connections between the theoretical foundations of this study, data collection methods, procedures of analysis, and the results obtained, I applied paradigmatic criteria. Complying with the rules of creativity, I did psychological interpretation of the women's personal awareness of the death experience. Also, through the process of revelation, I show problems inherent in using the qualitative approach in this study, and try to suggest possible solutions (Mishler, 1990; Packer, 1989; Reason & Rowan, 1981; Widera-Wysoczańska, 1995a).

MODEL OF THE DEATH AWARENESS EXPERIENCE

Based on hermeneutical analysis, I created a Model of Death Awareness Experience. This model has a metaphorical, idiographic character and is a generalization only for the group of 12 women investigated. It is both contextual, related to the content of the elements of the death experience, and longitudinal, representing transformations of the death experience during a person's life span. From analysis of the data collected, the definition of the

death awareness experience includes a varying degree of the person's awareness of the emotional, intellectual, and volitional psychological phenomena and the behavior connected with these phenomena. These are concerned with images of personal death and imagined or real death of close relatives. These thoughts and feelings are common occurrences. The person's understanding of the death experience is changed and re-created throughout the person's life. The elements of the Model of Death Awareness Experience are phenomena related to the context of the death experience, the psychic phenomena related to death of oneself or closely related people, and the impact of death on a person's life.

THE CONTEXT OF THE DEATH AWARENESS EXPERIENCE

The context of the death awareness experience means the internal circumstances and various external life events accompanying the death awareness experience. The respondents indicated awareness of internal events. Some women studied felt the presence of death in their lives, especially when they experienced the fear of separation from a close one during their childhood. Five respondents expressed the recurring feeling of despondency, a negative self-image, low self-esteem, and depression. In addition, they had problems accepting commonly held expectations of women's roles, and presented a negative view of the world.

The participants sensed the presence of death because of many external events. The most crucial was their relationships with people important in their lives, such as parents and grandparents, which became bad, empty, and distant. Also, the anxiety of death arose from a sense of physical and sexual abuse during childhood that took place in the family setting. The absence of the father through divorce or death also had a major impact for three women. Next was the lack of discussion in youth of the death experience or the lack of sensitivity shown by adults to the child at the loss of a pet or finding a dead bird. Six women talked only about destructive, closed interchanges, wherein adults were silent or evasive when dealing with topics of importance to the child.

Nobody ever talked with me about death. I was punished when I tried to discuss it.

After the death of my grandmother, they screamed at me when I dressed in black. But I was just trying to provoke a discussion of death itself and my feeling about it.

Sometimes, reflections about death were the result of the women thinking about the death of a grandparent before their birth. One young woman described it in this way: "Death has not been fair to me because it stole my grandfather 12 years before I was born. My life would have been much better if he had been still alive." Reflections about death are provoked by real and imaginary events that threaten oneself or someone close, such as a late return home, a car accident, a real or imagined illness, or lack of children or husband. Some of the other women's feelings about death were brought about by close and warm relationships with loved ones: "When I think about losing my partner, I think about the passage of time and death itself."

Longitudinal interpretations of the context of the death awareness experience show that reflections about death in childhood ages (5-18) were the result of the quality of the relationships with other loved ones and of the type of verbal and nonverbal discussions with others in the family. During youth and young adulthood ages (17-24), the important points were shifted to thoughts and feelings about the self. And in adulthood (25 and older), these reflections then were moved to considerations of real and imaginary circumstances.

THE PSYCHIC PHENOMENA RELATED TO DEATH OF SELF OR CLOSELY RELATED PEOPLE

The death awareness experience included feelings, thoughts, associations, intuitions, and bodily sensations about imaginary deaths of the self or closely related persons or about the real death of a closely related person.

Grief Over Anticipated Loss of Own Life

Eight women expressed grief over the anticipated loss of their own life. Six women had the sense that their lives were determined by death, and there was no escape. They felt powerless, helpless, and anxious over this irrevocable fact. One respondent describes her ideas about death: "Death looks like a necessity, and everything

is determined on high. I know that my future has been written from above, but I can't accept that." They felt fear over the mystery and unexpectedness of death. Another woman said, "Will I be ready when the time comes? The mystery of what will happen to my body and my soul after death has been torturing me for the last 20 years." Some of the women expressed a feeling of being encircled by the paralyzing energy called "death," from which there is no escape. Death also was experienced as a person who could attack at any minute, with no defense available. Many of these women talked about the destructive impact of death on their control of their lives, loss of personal activity and everyday experiences, loss of relationships with people, and finally, the total destruction of the body.

Death is paralysis. I'll have no influence over anything. I won't be able to finish what I have begun. When I think about the end of my life, I grieve over all the opportunities and experiences I will miss. It's an overwhelming sorrow I feel when I think that I will disappear and my close ones will suffer my passing.

For other women, death was seen as a natural destiny, a law of nature. "I perceived death as being merely a natural element, like frost, flood, or a mighty wind, and I was no longer so frightened."

Death Viewed as a Value

For seven respondents, death itself was seen as both a constructive and a destructive force. In a constructive way, death motivates one to take up different activities. As one woman said, "I have to mother hen the time I have remaining." Someone said that the fear of death protects against self destruction, for example, drug usage, prostitution, and so on, and can motivate one to create a satisfying life. We see it in their words:

I was afraid of death itself, and only that fear kept me from committing suicide.

It was fear that protected me. And thanks to this fear, I was able to recreate my life.

Anger, even rage, at death intensifies the energy to attain success in life, today before it is too late. There was also an increase in the

search for knowledge of one's place in the world, here and now. For these participants, awareness of death caused improvement in relations with others.

The destructive value of death is seen in the possibility of committing suicide, which frees one from life. But suicide also can be used as a means of punishing relatives for a lack of love or close, open relations. One respondent expressed that idea thusly: "All right, if you don't care about me, I'll show you. I'm going to kill myself—then you'll be sorry." The value of death also is seen in wishes for the death of a relative, as a very strong way of expressing anger.

Death as a Life Companion

Six women found that death appeared and accompanied them as a fellow traveler in their lives. They felt a sense of death in loneliness, in the loss of a closely related person through death or by divorce, or during unpleasant relationships with other people. The awareness of death experience arose from the aging of the body, pain, illness, old age, dependency on others, lack of control, and depression. The experience of the death of a closely related person fits in with the feeling of death as a lifelong companion, wanted or not. Some of the respondents described the touch of death in life in the following words:

Broken relationships, lost friendships, and unsuccessful love are strongest expressions of death in my life. Loneliness, abandonment, and not feeling needed are also ways death touches me every day. I can see changes in my body and my relatives all the time. Old age, clumsiness, and dependency are constant reminders of the pain of death. It seems that I died in the eyes of my father many years ago when he left after my parents divorced. And I have felt like a dead person ever since then.

Grief Over Unknown Closeness

The experience of the death of a close relative, such as the grandmother or grandfather, before the woman's birth, shows up as grief over unknown closeness. Three women had been grieving because they never got to know some person. They felt that life would have been much better if they had known the missing relative in person, not just in fantasy, myth, or photograph. It seemed to them that if

the relative were alive, they would have more love and tenderness, and the missing relative would have protected the women from so much harm. "If only my grandmother were alive, my life wouldn't be so miserable," said one woman.

Grief Over the Anticipated Loss of a Close One

When the 10 women began to anticipate the loss of a close one, such as mother, grandparents, or husband, they felt fear of their own loneliness, emptiness, loss of happiness, and powerlessness in their lives. One woman described such insight as the following:

When I was 6 years old, I had a sudden realization that I could be alone by myself when my parents died. That's when I was crushed by the fear of loneliness, powerless. And this feeling persists yet till today.

A 26-year-old respondent said, "I can't possibly imagine my grandmother dying. When the thought of her not being with me crosses my mind, I feel great emptiness and despair. I feel tremendous anxiety about not being able to do anything about it." There was also anxiety and sadness because of parents' old age and the inevitability of their passing away.

Longitudinal interpretations of the psychic phenomena related to the death awareness experience show that during childhood ages (5-10), curiosity about death, fear of loneliness, and helplessness in life after the anticipated loss of a closely related person dominate. During late childhood and adolescence ages (10-19), some people see the viewed death as a value. In youth and adulthood ages (16-25), the women in my study showed that they were more aware of the fear of death's influence on the destruction and determination of their characters. During adulthood ages (26-47), death awareness became a life companion.

IMPACT OF THE DEATH EXPERIENCE ON ONE'S LIFE

The next element of the death awareness experience, which I call the impact of the death experience on one's life, includes two main aspects.

The Means of Protection Against Death

The first is the means of protection against death. It is a behavior intended to protect the self, or ego, against feelings and thoughts about death that freeze or paralyze the person. These thoughts and feelings are about a real or imagined annihilation of one's own or a relative's life. These means of protection are divided into active and passive ways of coping with death.

Using the passive approach, nine women started to create a vision in the form of thoughts of reincarnation, or of a supreme or absolute being. A typical expression was,

I see my soul as being energy. Maybe it seems funny, like a fairytale, but I believe that souls can contact each other in the after life. I see life after death as a tunnel full of light, the light of love.

Another woman said, "What awaits us on the other side? Maybe reincarnation? Maybe only wandering souls?" Only a few of the women talked about increasing their contact with Jesus and the Christian religion. Some women used negation, such as, "Death doesn't concern me, so I don't have anything to say about it." Some respondents used denial of death (Becker, 1973), expressed in the following words: "I go into denial when thoughts of death creep into my consciousness, because such thoughts could be dangerous to me."

Coping with death in an active manner allowed other women to feel more in control of their own destinies. To protect themselves from the fear of death and desertion, or abandonment, they searched for safety in relationships and tried to fulfill every expectation they could for other people.

I took good care of my family; I was a good girl, student, daughter, because my family was good about soothing my anxieties over death. I needed their help, so I was quite willing, even eager, to fulfill their every need.

They tried to use "magic" to control the effects of death. Some believed that they could move death aside by using positive thinking. Some of the respondents in this study were making the transition from focusing on the past to facing the future. They planned and focused strongly on setting goals for the future, which they worked very hard to achieve. As many respondents said,

This is how I imagine it: The past is only a short period, the present is merely a little point, but the future is a very long line. I am always pushing death away from the here and now, and the harder I shove, the further death recedes. I fill my time in every way I can. I plan ahead and drive death away from me using fivefold energy.

Others described such ideas as follows: "I know that by using my willpower that I can drive death away from me. And through activity, I can change my lot in life." Their will to control death through the use of magic also was evidenced in the language they used. They repeated the pronoun "I," in spite of the absence of such permissible grammatical structures in the Polish language. The personal pronoun "I" is not used in the spoken or written Polish language because it is understood through declination. When the personal pronoun "I" was used, the speaker was indicating that she wanted to strongly demonstrate her own personal vitality (Buchowski & Burszta, 1992).

The active means of dealing with death had strong connections to a creative approach to life, while passive acceptance was a resignation from a part of one's personal needs (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988). From an existential perspective, an important criterion of health is the person's willingness to take responsibility for personal finitude (Koestenbaum, 1971, p. 38). Clinical impressions suggest that defenses erected against an awareness of death can be maladaptive, resulting in psychopathology. In contrast, facing death can lead to courage and seriousness about life.

Longitudinal interpretation showed that in childhood and youth ages (6-18), the women already had searched for means of coping with death in relationships with loved ones. But in adulthood ages (18-47), not having had a proper relationship with their parents during childhood, they denied their thoughts and feelings of death. Good relations with parents for some women meant strength to develop magical coping strategies.

The Meaning Given to the Self and Surrounding Reality

The second aspect of the impact of the death experience in one's life is the meaning given to the self and surrounding reality. This element of the death awareness experience consists of thoughts, feelings, visions, judgments, needs, plans, goals, and actions directed toward developing a personal life and creating the sur-

rounding reality. This resulted in an individualized lifestyle. I divided the meanings given to the self and surrounding realities into two groups. The first was feelings, thoughts, and relationships. The second was personalizing and depersonalizing actions and behaviors.

Eight women in this study talked about feelings, thoughts, and relationships that demonstrated helplessness, powerlessness over anxiety of the future, because of the determination of death. "Death is so awful that life has absolutely no sense." There was anger toward themselves because of this perception of weakness and fear of death.

I hate my anxieties over death and myself for it. I am low in my own self estimation. I have passively surrendered to my lot in life, while at the same time, I have a lot of self-pity for my condition and helplessness. Oh, I'm so pitiful and unhappy.

Another woman said, "I feel angry with myself when I think about death, and it pushed me to be creative." Their relationships with close relatives demonstrated anger, resentment, and rancor. They felt loneliness, lack of trust in other people, and nostalgia. Attention also was given to the shame of needing to discuss the death of the missing loved one during the women's childhood, a need that was never met.

The "personalizing" process indicates that the women's images of death of the self or close relatives motivated them to develop their personalities. They did this by focusing on their faith in themselves and recognizing internal opportunities available and that it was important to enjoy their lives, create some distance from negative events and influences, focus on living more fully in the moment, more intensively, and give more serious attention to their psychological state or mental health. One respondent described it in the following words:

I have begun to be responsible for my own life, and this is the way I am preparing myself for death. I don't like the idea of crying over spilt milk at the end of my life. So I am actively searching for ways to make my life as whole as I can.

And another expressed it as,

I am drawn to the reflection that life is beautiful and to live every day as if it were the last day in my life. To me, everything is like a gift. I enjoy all the common things I do every day and feel happy when it's done. I do so because I had touched death in the past.

Death is like a veil over everything and lowers the intensity in life. That is how I learned to distance myself from the negative side of life.

In contrast, the women who took the depersonalizing road began to withdraw from relationships because they did not want to suffer from negative consequences of bad or temporary interactions or from losing another person important to them. Some of these women did not have husbands because they had anxieties about pain and grieving over loss. Still other women stopped being spontaneous and freely expressing their feelings, gave up trying to satisfy their "self" needs, and chose safety from death by maintaining proper and correct, but distant, cold relations with other people.

The longitudinal analysis of meaning given to the self and surrounding reality showed that during childhood ages (6-12), the women investigated said that emotional closeness to death immersed them in the importance of having many and lovely relationships with other people. In youth and young adulthood ages (12-20), they concentrated on building an individualized lifestyle and on meeting their personal needs. In adulthood ages (20-47), they focused on personal and family responsibilities connected with physical changes in the body and the health of close relatives.

Lifestyles: To and From

"Closeness" to death can sharpen the impact of death into two differing lifestyles. These two generally can be described as directed away from life and directed toward life. The first lifestyle consists of negative thoughts and feelings about self-helplessness and lack of power, which interfered with creative approaches to life. In general, consequences included a withdrawal from creativity. The second lifestyle is a form of development that is based on a belief in personal ability plus enough anger and hope to provide the energy to be a creator of one's own situation, in short, confidence. The "from" style has as a dominant behavior directed people to val-

ues guaranteeing safety in a risk-free life. But the women in the “to” style of life sought values that supported their growth, a sureness in themselves, and self-respect.

THREE TYPES OF THE DEATH AWARENESS EXPERIENCE

The last portion of my research was settling on types of the death awareness experience. I decided on these types based on participants’ relationships with close relatives, dominant feelings concerning death, images of death, active and passive approaches to coping with death, and personalizing or depersonalizing behaviors.

Type A: Death Creates Life

The first type shows that the support obtained in childhood, discussions about passing away, and a conscious experience of fear and anger about death as annihilation, nonexistence, and destruction are a basis for a positive creation of life and can be an opportunity to develop greater independence and personal freedom, fulfillment, and integrity. This personal lifestyle is directed toward internal growth.

Type B: Death Limits Life

The second type involves lack of support from closely related persons in childhood, unconscious fear of death, feeling of powerlessness in relation to death, and passive coping behaviors with death, which are connected with helplessness, uncertainty, despair in life, and resignation from self-growth. In the “from” lifestyle, the women’s personal power is dependent on a predetermined fate, or lot in life, and external influences and pressures.

Type C: Death is Loneliness

The last type demonstrates the connection of the death experience with interpersonal relations. The lack of support while experiencing a fear of death in childhood, a lack of discussion or any

meaningful communication about death during childhood, and a feeling or sense of rejection by relatives cause deep self-criticism and a lack of real trust in others. Some of the women seek safety from death in relationships with others but wind up paying the high prices of lost spontaneity, a loss of free expression of their feelings, and a compulsion to comply with the expectations of other people.

Another group of women believe that the price of broken relationships is too high, because they cannot bear the suffering after a close one has gone. As a protective measure, saving their hearts, they avoid forming any meaningful connections, live alone and lonely and without close emotional engagement or real involvement. Such behavior results in alienation from the self and also from others.

SUMMARY

The results of this research confirm the concepts of existential psychologists such as Boss (1967), Dabrowski (1986), Frankl (1963) and the results of other studies concerning the meaning of conscious meetings with death in everyday life for the search for meaning in our lives. Also confirmed were both that denial of the death experience retarded personal development and that parental support is important in providing a sense of safety to the child in dealing with death (Bolt, 1978; Butler, 1975; Neimeyer & Chapman, 1980; Wood & Robinson, 1982). Based on material gathered in this study, I created three types of the death awareness experience. In these types, we can see that childhood awareness of death can result in negative or positive consequences in adulthood.

CLINICAL APPLICATIONS

Now I would like to address some of the problems that became apparent during my research. It seems obvious to me that we need much more information about how children experience awareness of death and cope with it and about the circumstances of the death awareness experience itself. This study shows the importance of the parents explaining different situations connected with death,

the funeral, for example, and how it is crucial to have open, clear communications, both verbal and nonverbal. The goal of this discussion is to reduce the fear of death and facilitate the use of the natural potentials within us all to create a higher quality of life. The result of this study shows that the way a person experiences and understands death as a child has a great impact on how the person, as an adult, deals with life in later years. Adults cannot protect children from death, but open discussions about it can allow children to deal with death in a realistic, healthy fashion. If we, as parents and psychologists, during our daily lives deal effectively with events that could increase anxieties about death, we can help to protect the person from the suffering surrounding death. It is critical to observe the child's behavior and feelings at the time of the death of a grandparent, because the grandparents are often the most important persons to children in Poland and other societies. In Poland, the grandparents are often the real, or primary, caregivers for many children in their first decade of life. The devastating impact of the trauma of the death of the grandparent on the child often is overlooked, or unappreciated, by the child's birth parents, and the tragedy often is acted out in the person's psyche in later years. We need to know what effects the funeral itself and the final contact with the deceased loved one have on the child's psyche. We also need to be aware of how we, as adults, feel about separation. Results of this research show that people commonly are not adequately prepared to deal, or to help others deal, with death and bereavement and divorce. Our societies commonly expect that people should cope with death by themselves and suppress feelings of insecurity and pain and wear the mask of "everything is okay." We are not allowed to interfere with the peace and serenity of our immediate peers. Also apparent in my research is that we need to become much more sensitive to the nonconstructive ways people react to death and the effects of these coping strategies in later years. The next projected research will be to analyze and compare differences and similarities of men's and women's reactions to death. In sum, I would like to say that we need to establish therapeutic programs and methods in Poland and elsewhere to help people cope with grief and bereavement and with the fears of death that some people carry with them in daily life.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative research allowed for an understanding of 12 Polish women's experience of the awareness of death. Also accomplished in this study was a detailed description of a method of conducting hermeneutical qualitative psychological research. This study is a preliminary step toward developing a phenomenology of the death experience in everyday life. These findings teach us more about relationships between the awareness of death and a deeper appreciation in our lives. By sharing their intensely personal experiences, these women in my study have enabled us all to increase our, and society's, understanding and awareness of the potentials for growth and a better attainment of wholeness in our lives.

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