

To Be Remembered: Exploring Coping Mechanisms for Death Anxiety Through the Lens of Ernest Becker

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ABSTRACT

If there was a field combining existential psychology and cultural anthropology, Ernest Becker would have been the founding father of that field (*Becker's Synthesis - Ernest Becker Foundation - Illuminating Denial of Death*, n.d.). Ernest Becker's intellectual contributions have earned a lot of accreditations. One of those accreditations is Pulitzer Prize for his 1973 book, "The Denial of Death". This is not simply a book, but a tool to make an individual question their purpose, meaning in life and most importantly their perspective on life and death (*Becker's Synthesis - Ernest Becker Foundation - Illuminating Denial of Death*, n.d.). Becker argues that the primary force behind human behaviour is the deep-rooted existential anxiety caused by thinking about one's own mortality (*Becker's Synthesis - Ernest Becker Foundation - Illuminating Denial of Death*, n.d.). His perspective on death making it a driving force behind human behaviour provides revolutionary perspective, providing a multidisciplinary approach from the fields of psychology, philosophy and anthropology (Scimecca, 1979). It's ironic that Becker's proposition about achieving symbolic immortality can be reflected through his last book that he wrote before dying titled "Denial of Death". It is worth noting that this book is the contemplation of Becker's own confrontation with mortality through terminal illness (Becker, 1997). This paper aims to explore the core facets of Becker's "The Denial of Death" along with providing its empirical evidence.

Keywords: *Denial of Death, Ernest Becker, Death Anxiety, Terror Management Theory, Existential Psychology*

Death Anxiety is a unique type of anxiety only experienced by the human race due to our contemplation about our own mortality (*Becker's Synthesis - Ernest Becker Foundation - Illuminating Denial of Death*, n.d.). Human beings are gifted with the cognitive capacity to have creative thinking, create new innovations and solve problems, but this cognitive capacity is also the reason why humans are able to foresee their eventual cessation (*Ernest Becker on the Denial of Death and Heroism*, 2023). This realization of their own mortality elicits an impactful existential distress called "Absolute Annihilation" by Becker (*Ernest Becker on the Denial of Death and Heroism*, 2023). This deep rooted anxiety is not conscious but at a subconscious level, it becomes a central and core motivating factor driving nearly every aspect of human behaviour. In addition to fear of death, this terror is also associated with the void of meaninglessness which comes as a part and parcel of it

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(*Becker's Synthesis - Ernest Becker Foundation - Illuminating Denial of Death*, n.d.). The terror of death anxiety can be so intense that it becomes imperative to find certain necessary mechanisms through which an individual can make this inevitable truth digestible (Hughes, 2023). The primary purpose behind this paper is to unearth certain mechanisms that human beings employ in everyday life to cope with unconscious death anxiety.

DISCUSSION

Achieving Symbolic Immortality

This realization that an individual can have sudden demise can elicit pervasive anxiety in one's self. Unconsciously, human beings try to engage in creating "symbolic immortality" to alleviate this anxiety (*Becker's Synthesis - Ernest Becker Foundation - Illuminating Denial of Death*, n.d.). The finitude of existence provides an individual a harsh reality check of how insignificant and impermanent a life can be. Hence, humans strive to achieve "symbolic immortality" through various means. Religion is one of the strong narratives which provides individuals with a rich framework of afterlife and eternal soul, making life seem unending (*Ernest Becker on the Denial of Death and Heroism*, 2023). Another way to achieve symbolic immortality is through leaving tangible evidence of existence by pursuing artistic endeavours such as literature, music, painting and other creative expressions. These pursuits aid in transcendence of human life by serving as a platform which is not bounded by time, reaching to generations beyond individual lifespan (Axel, 2017). The way to surpass physical death is not merely achieved through creative pursuits, but also thorough striving for groundbreaking scientific discoveries. By innovating something new or by discovering an unknown pattern, scientists and educators achieve symbolic immortality, making them a part of something greater beyond themselves (Axel, 2017). Individuals who are not interested in achieving fame through either artistic pursuits or scientific discoveries, tend to achieve symbolic immortality by leaving their legacies in the form of families, establishing institutions or contributing to the good of society in any form. In tribal communities, symbolic immortality is achieved by taking care of elders. At the core, every single person wants to leave their mark on this planet (*Indigenous Culture and Denial of Death - Ernest Becker Foundation - Illuminating Denial of Death*, n.d.). In addition to this, identification with the national identity or being a part of a group provides a sense of belongingness that can outlive the individual (*Ernest Becker on the Denial of Death and Heroism*, 2023).

The striving of symbolic immortality offers an individual with a necessary defense against death anxiety. Without such psychological mechanisms, humans would be in a constant state of existential dread, creating unbearable anxiety. Such immortality projects creates a sense of purpose which acts as a significant motivator in an individual's lives through which they can associate their finite existence with something that is perceived as infinite (Scimecca, 1979). However, such pursuits of symbolic immortality can also be the source of conflicts and disagreements. These immortality projects are strongly linked with an individual's self worth. Confronting different ideologies or immortality projects which goes against the individual's belief system or poses a direct threat to their self worth can lead to conflicts and in worst case even wars and violence (*Becker's Synthesis - Ernest Becker Foundation - Illuminating Denial of Death*, n.d.).

In essence, it seems ironic that the same immortality project which can foster unity and common goal also has the potential to create social division leading to wars and violence.

Projecting Security

One of the most profound ways to deal with existential anxiety, according to Becker, was through “Transference” (*Transference*, 2021). From the Beckerian perspective, “Transference” is characterized by the unconscious process of an individual which provides them with a space to project their implicit fears and desires onto external figures. These external figures could be their leaders, romantic partners, parents, close friends, the idea of God or even any form of ideologies. This mechanism enables an individual with a sense of security and stability in a world where nothing is certain. Through projecting their emotional turmoil onto external figures, individuals create psychological schemes to reduce the terror experienced due to mortality (Liechty, n.d.).

It's a human tendency to seek control when faced with uncertainty. One of the ways to assert control is through the identification process. Individuals tend to identify and associate their sense of self to a particular external force. That force can have various forms. It can be parents, leaders, belief systems, religious faith or an ideology. They tend to look for someone who can be their guide in the face of uncertainty and chaos (Semko, 2023). The natural occurrence of transference can be seen in familial and romantic relationships where individuals transfer their fears and desires onto the closed ones to seek support and validation. Validation and support is a fundamental need but the excess of that can lead to dependency (Semko, 2023).

It is impossible to have higher cognitive processes and still not develop a belief in some sort of ideology. Adhering to any particular ideology or belief systems, be it religion, nationalism, philosophical or a scientific paradigm can provide a sense of security and most importantly, a sense of belongingness. The belief system is such a powerful and addictive tool that an individual would be ready to surrender personal autonomy in order to belong somewhere (*ZIZEK, NORMAN O. BROWN, AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CULTURE*, n.d.). The downside of such a transference mechanism is that projecting a perfect image onto external figures has the potential to lead to immense disappointment as nothing can bear the heavy expectation of perfection, namely “Transference Terror” (Liechty, n.d.). Such instances are evident in everyday life when political leaders, famous celebrities, spiritual gurus become the recipient of transference of countless individuals. Many political as well as spiritual propaganda take advantage of such transference dynamics to exploit people. Becker puts an extra emphasis on being cognizant of such transference mechanisms along with encouraging critical thinking (*ZIZEK, NORMAN O. BROWN, AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CULTURE*, n.d.).

This transference mechanism can multiply tenfold during times of crisis which can make us confront mortality, such as death of loved ones or war. Such times of uncertainty can result in an overwhelming sense of terror leading to greater transference towards external entities (Semko, 2023).

Surrendering to Conformity

Being a human is an epitome of walking conflicts and contradictions. Individuals experience an innate desire to express individuality and yet they succumb to societal pressures of following the norms. This duality exists because of inherent need for meaning and belongingness. It is the two sides of the same coin, one side compelling individuals to assert their autonomy and sense of agency and the other side forcing them to conform to societal standards and norms. Societal framework provides an individual with a deep sense of order

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and structure that helps them in mitigating existential dread and anxiety. These frameworks provide individuals with a collective goal that offers them a way to transcend their mortality. These cultural frameworks also provide an individual with a sense of purpose and meaning in an absolute meaningless world (Scimecca, 1979).

Cultural systems referring to collective immortality projects such as religion, nationalism or social institutions are shared projects through which individuals can attain mortality. This can make an individual believe that their existence has a lasting influence. Even society itself is a defense mechanism employed against death anxiety to create meaning (Scimecca, 1979). However, in order to belong to and be part of the shared immortality project, individuals have to pay a heavy price. Conformity to societal structures comes at the cost of suppression of individuality. In order to belong somewhere, an individual has to follow certain norms dictated by someone else. This creates an inner conflict where societal expectations are often prioritized over individual expression (Chopot et al., 2024).

As social animals, humans are extremely sensitive to any form of social rejection. Being marginalized and discriminated elicits an intense amount of terror, reinforcing existential anxieties. This terror can lead individuals to suppress their authentic self and merely become a puppet of society (Chopot et al., 2024). The purpose of societal frameworks and traditions was to help alleviate death anxiety but the ironic part is it can also be the cause of experiencing such existential anxieties.

In contemporary society, especially with the advent of social media, the terms like “be yourself”, “find your true self” and “be original and authentic” are constantly posted. However, following the trend of “being yourself” also means adhering to implicit norms of that particular trend and staying relevant. This increasing expectation of being constantly visible and accessible fuels the need to stay relevant but through compromising actual self expression (Chopot et al., 2024).

In conclusion, Becker highlights the importance of conforming to societal standards as they provide a necessary structure but to also question those same standards when they threaten individual expression. He proposes to utilize the social structures as a means to voice out authenticity, not as a means to suppress it (Becker, 1997).

Seeking Control

The only certainty of life is death, rest everything is uncertain. This uncertainty and unpredictability of life can compel an individual to develop a psychological mechanism which can provide a sense of control (Becker, 1997). By creating systems, beliefs and routines, the random world gets transformed into a predictable world, offering crucial stability (Piven, 2024).

Cultural and social systems play a significant role in offering such an illusion of control by establishing a sense of order and purpose. Scientific pursuits also makes humans feel invincible by asserting control over nature, singing the never ending heroic song of human mastery over the unknown. At an individual level, people develop routines and habits to inculcate a sense of control over their daily lives which reinforces the illusory belief of being in control. This illusion of control that every human seeks serves as a warm psychological comforter. Along with this, it also motivates an individual to pursue meaningful goals and fill the void of nothingness with meaningful something (Yarritu et al., 2013).

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In spite of all the necessary advantages this illusion of control provides an individual, it is extremely fragile and breakable, exactly like life. Confrontation with instances of mortality like illness, natural disasters or loss shatters these carefully crafted illusions. These confrontations fills an individual with an existential dread forcing them to grapple with the harsh reality of having absolutely no control over anything. Instances of COVID 19, wars or sudden attack makes people realize how utterly helpless and powerless all of them are (Yarritu et al., 2013).

Hence, Becker proposes that the only way out of experiencing this terror is moving beyond permanency and accepting the real inherent nature of impermanence and detachment. By mastering the art of detachment, individuals can cultivate a deeper existential resilience, helping them navigate the unpredictability of life (Yarritu et al., 2013).

Avoiding Accountability and Responsibility

The ultimate freedom of human life lies in the realization that every individual possesses a chance to mould their life the way they want. The realization that there is no inherent meaning and one has a chance to create their own meaning can be refreshingly liberating as well as utterly daunting (Scimecca, 1979). The famous philosophical concept of “Existence precedes Essence” postulated by equally famous philosopher Sartre summarizes the idea that there is no preordained structure or meaning to life, every human being can give their own meaning by choosing their actions (*Existentialism - Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2023).

The liberating aspect of this realisation encourages autonomy and empowerment. This insight into existential freedom can be life changing for an individual, making them realize how significant they are in influencing their life choices. Along with such profound liberation comes the burden of responsibility. The freedom to choose one’s life choices can instill a deeper sense of making wrong choices that can lead to failure or an unfulfilled life. Moreover, this realization that one is ultimately alone in the personal experience of life can further exacerbate the feelings of loneliness, leading to existential dread (Becker, 1997).

To find a delicate balance, Becker posits that acceptance of mortality and letting that guide the decision-making process of creating meaning is a crucial step to achieve transcendence. There is a different type of meaningful insight an individual experiences that comes with the realization of one’s finitude (Hughes, 2023).

The concept of existential freedom offers valuable tools in the field to psychology. Various therapeutic approaches aim to enhance this realization in motivating individuals to change their lives and contribute to something larger than them (Donovan, 2024).

CONCLUSION

“The Denial of Death” by Ernest Becker serves as an existential mirror which makes an individual confront their most fundamental motivating factor which is “Death Anxiety” (*Becker’s Synthesis - Ernest Becker Foundation - Illuminating Denial of Death*, n.d.). His primary thesis explores the powerful framework through which every single human act can be explained (*Becker’s Synthesis - Ernest Becker Foundation - Illuminating Denial of Death*, n.d.). Through his analysis, Becker had discovered various psychological mechanisms that individuals employ to deal with existential death anxiety. His work has been theorized in the form of Terror Management Theory (*Becker’s Synthesis — Ernest*

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Becker Foundation - Illuminating Denial of Death, n.d.). The relevance of his work is so profound that it has timeless applicability (Bufill, 2024).

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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