

# Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

# What Keeps Death Anxiety Going?



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## Description

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Worries about dying or losing a loved one are a normal part of life, but if your thoughts about death (or dying) are extremely distressing, time-consuming, or stop you from doing important things, you might be experiencing death anxiety. Some of the key signs of death anxiety include:

- Feeling extremely distressed about death and dying.
- Spending lots of time dwelling on your death or other people dying.
- Having unwanted and distressing images related to death ('intrusions').
- Avoiding places or activities that remind you of death or dying.
- Going to extreme lengths to prevent or minimize the risk of dying.

Research studies indicate that cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is an effective treatment for death anxiety. CBT therapists work a bit like firefighters: while the fire is burning they're not so interested in what caused it, but are more focused on what is keeping it going, and what they can do to put it out. If they can work out what keeps a problem going, they can treat the problem by interrupting the cycles that maintain it.

The *What Keeps Death Anxiety Going?* information handout describes some of the key factors which act to maintain death anxiety, illustrating them in a vicious flower format in which each 'petal' represents a separate maintenance cycle. Helping clients to understand more about these processes is an essential part of cognitive therapy for death anxiety. Therapists can use this handout as a focus for discussion, or as a template from which to formulate an idiosyncratic model of a client's experiences.

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# Instructions

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## Suggested Question



*One interesting way of thinking about death anxiety is to look at why, for some people, it does not get better by itself. This handout shows some of the most common reasons why some people keep experiencing symptoms of death anxiety. I wonder if we could look at it together and think about whether it describes some of what is happening for you?*

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# References

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# What Keeps Death Anxiety Going?

There are lots of uncertainties surrounding death: when it will happen, how it will feel, and what happens afterwards. If you have death anxiety, these 'unknowns' can be very anxiety-provoking and difficult to tolerate. One way that people try to feel more in-control and prepared is by worrying about death, or by trying to reduce uncertainty by making life as safe and predictable as possible. Unfortunately, worry makes you feel more anxious, and trying to reduce uncertainty can make it even harder to tolerate the inevitable uncertainties around death.

Fear of death leads to negative thoughts, beliefs, and expectations about what dying will be like. For example, you might catastrophize about how awful it will be, blame yourself for causing suffering to others, or think of ways you should prevent or control death.

These negative beliefs intensify your fear of death, and may seem to confirm just how dreadful it will be for you or other people (which can lead to even more negative thoughts about death).

**Trying (and failing) to be certain about death**

**Thinking negatively about death**

What keeps it going?

**Death Anxiety**

**Coping with your fear in unhelpful ways**

**Avoiding reminders of death**

If you can't avoid your fear of death, you might do things to cope with your fear. These 'safety behaviors' might include checking that you or other people are safe, gathering information about death and dying, or asking for reassurance. Your coping strategies might seem helpful, but they mean that you don't get the chance to discover that nothing awful happens when you don't use them. Sometimes they lead to more confusion and uncertainty about death, which further increases your fear.

Avoidance is a natural response to things that scare you, including death. You may try to protect yourself by avoiding things that remind you of death, including places, activities, objects, or thoughts that make you feel uncomfortable. In the short term, avoidance makes you feel safer...

...but in the long term, avoidance makes your fear worse. This is because avoidance stops you from learning that you can tolerate your anxiety and that your worst fears don't come true. As a result, your fears about death don't change, which leads to more avoidance.

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