

PERSONAL DEATH AWARENESS

One of the most helpful ways to understand your personal death awareness is to take a moment and recall the number of times today you've thought about your own---not someone else's death or limited span of life. Maybe you thought about your age and evaluated your own progress toward certain life goals. Or perhaps you briefly experienced a fear of dying. If such a thought didn't occur to you at all, then you're probably in the low range today. If these ideas crossed your mind one, two or three times, then you moved up through the moderate range. If you seriously pondered your own death or mortality four or more times, or find it a preoccupation, then you're likely in the high range.

Your PDA is a fluctuating phenomenon, moving up and down daily. Some days you may act and think as though you're going to live forever. The purpose of this is to ask you to raise your personal death awareness so that you can begin to perceive an entire range of choices about your life and death that you might not have been aware of before.

To test the level of your PDA, try this simple exercise. In the space below, draw a line that you think best represents your total life span. The line can be any shape or length that you think is most appropriate.

Some people choose to draw a line from one end of the page to the other; in effect a line without boundaries which ends only because the edge of the page forces the pencil to stop.

Now draw another line of any length, this time a straight one with a beginning and an end. Consider this line to be your total life span. Place a slash mark at any point along the line where you think you are today in your life's chronology.

Now, complete the following sentences by filling in the blanks:

I expect to live until age _____

I am presently age _____

When you compare your present age with the age at which you expect to die, how much of your life do you find you've already lived? A third, a half, two thirds, or more? Now look back at the line with the slash mark. How does your estimate of the time you have left to live on the life span line compare with your numerical estimate?

How did it feel to commit yourself to definite life span? Some people worry that they may jinx themselves by doing this. Old superstitions rise up and haunt them. Does this concern you? Did you feel any other discomfort? If not, what do you think made you relatively comfortable in doing this? Take a minute and write down your responses below:

I was uncomfortable in estimating my remaining life span because _____

I was comfortable in estimating my remaining life span because _____

The death I would most prefer for myself would be _____

The death I would least prefer for myself would be _____

The reasons for my choices are _____

You probably found it easy to pick the types of death that you would not want for yourself. But did you have difficulty picking a death you would want? You have a style of life which you call your own. What would be your style of death? Take a few minutes to compose your own obituary.

OBITUARY

_____ died today at the age of _____

A native of _____, he/she died _____

(Birthplace)

(How you might die)

He/she is best remembered for _____

(How people will remember you)

He/she is survived by _____

(Who in your family will live longer than you?)

Details of the funeral and the burial are as follows _____

What was it like for you to compose your own obituary? Did you feel anxious or upset? Did any of the questions make you think about things you had refused or neglected to think about before? Did you increase or decrease your estimated life span in your obituary?

Right now I am feeling mostly:

anxious _____

frightened _____

sick _____

amused _____

calm _____

oppressed _____

angry _____

bored _____

tense _____

confused _____

happy _____

interested _____

other _____

Think of three people you know well with whom you might share these feelings. Write down their names and anticipate how they might respond to your feelings by checking the appropriate boxes:

Response: Very Helpful Somewhat Helpful Not Helpful

My first choice _____

My second choice _____

My third choice _____

If you checked the “not helpful” box for any of these people, why do you think they would react negatively? Could it be because they keep their own PDA quite low?

SKETCHING THE UNKNOWN

“The grim reaper,” “Jordan’s bank,” the “journey’s end,” “that dreamless sleep,” “the way of all flesh,” “going home,” and “dust,” are just a few images which have been used to describe the end of life, that last unknown which has a different outline in each of our imaginations. The picture that you harbor in your mind may be frightening or comforting, but perhaps you’ve never even thought about death in graphic terms. It’s likely that many of our conscious fears and anxieties are rooted in a shadowy image of death, an ominous anticipation of the unknown that lurks on the edge of your subconscious. To get a clearer idea of your concept of death, take your pen and on the next page draw death as you imagine. Don’t spend a lot of time thinking about it. Begin drawing and see what emerges.

To get a clearer sense of your concept of death, complete the following sentence by writing the first response that comes to mind:

When I think of death, I think of _____

MY PICTURE OF DEATH

PERSONAL DEATH HISTORY

1. The first death that I experienced was the death of _____

2. I was _____ years old.
3. At that time I felt _____

4. I was most curious about _____

5. The things that frightened me the most were _____

6. The feelings that I have now as I think of that death are _____

7. The most intriguing thing about the funeral was _____

8. I was most scared at the funeral by _____

9. The first personal acquaintance of my own age who died was _____

10. I remember thinking _____

11. I lost my first parent when I was _____ years old.
12. The death of this parent was especially significant because _____

13. The most recent death I experienced was when _____
_____ died _____ years ago.
14. The most traumatic death I ever experienced was _____

15. At age _____ I personally came closest to death when _____
