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 _____________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

He/she is survived by ____________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

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 described 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 __________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________