

‘Warm, practical and
expert advice for
managing anxiety’
Vex King, author of
Good Vibes, Good Life

Ten Times Calmer

Beat Anxiety
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Your Life

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Practical
exercises and
easy-to-apply
advice

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How to Tackle Death Anxiety

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Introduction

Throughout my clinical experience, I've encountered death anxiety as one of the most prevalent anxiety issues. Surprisingly, it remains relatively misunderstood and often goes undiscussed, perhaps due to our natural inclination to avoid the topic. Unlike other anxiety problems, there also seems to be a lack of available help and advice on how to tackle it.

Over the years, my focus has been on helping people deal with their death anxiety by gaining a deeper understanding of their fear and navigating through it in a healthy way, so they can feel free from its terrifying grasp. The scope of this topic is immense, and it could easily fill an entire book, one I might consider writing in the future. But for now, in this bonus guide, I am sharing with you what I do to help my patients, with the hope that it will help you as well.

This brief guide is intended to provide an overview for dealing with death anxiety. It is essential to recognize that it does not replace professional treatment. If you require additional support, it is advised that you seek help from a healthcare professional or your doctor. They can offer personalised guidance and help tailored to your specific needs.

What is Death anxiety?

Death is a universal fear, the intense emotions that arise when we think about our mortality are a fundamental aspect of being human. It is natural to worry about the mysteries of death, including what it entails, how it will manifest, and what lies beyond it, whether influenced by religious, spiritual, or other beliefs. While fear and anxiety are typical responses to these existential questions, things can become problematic when this is persistently overwhelming, hindering your ability to fully embrace life. This state of overwhelming fear is what I refer to as death anxiety. Not everyone experiences this fear constantly, for some, death anxiety can be a persistent feeling, while for others, it can come and go.

People who struggle with death anxiety usually experience persistent fear and significant apprehension regarding death. As a result, they often avoid anything related to death, yet they may find themselves preoccupied with it in their own mind, experiencing intrusive thoughts and images. They employ various safety behaviours to lessen their anxiety, they might try to control or avoid situations or activities they perceive as potentially life-threatening. These potential threats to their existence, might include health issues, safety concerns, accidents, travelling, plane journeys, public places, crowded places, separation from loved ones, panic attacks, amongst many others. This hyper-vigilance towards anything that might pose a threat to their existence leads them to miss out on so many aspects of life.

If you're dealing with death anxiety, you've probably encountered distressing thoughts. I'd like to provide some common examples to show that you're not alone in this experience. At times, the mere existence of these thoughts can lead people to believe they must be dying, as if their presence is a sign or something, when it is actually a natural part of the anxiety.

"The terror of not existing haunts me."

"The fear of missing out on life grips me."

"The dread of being forgotten goes round and round in my head."

"The anxiety about dying, the pain, being alone, and the unknown after death overwhelms me."

"I'm so young, and I have such a strong will to live, but I can't help feel anxious about death because of this I haven't achieved much yet."

"Even though I know I woke up yesterday, I have this unsettling feeling that tonight might be the night when I slip away to death in my sleep."

"Every night, when it's time to sleep, terror grips me, and my anxiety convinces me that I won't wake up again."

"I often experience physical sensations in my body that make me believe I'm dying, even when I'm actually not, and it just keeps going."

"The thought of dying and leaving my children/loved ones terrifies me."

"During special events, I can't help but worry about not being there for the next holiday, birthday or Christmas."

"My mind is filled with thoughts about how my loved ones will cope without me, and the fear that nobody will love like I do."

What causes death anxiety?

There are some common causes of death anxiety, although sometimes the origins of this fear can be uncertain. The good news is that understanding the exact origins of your death anxiety is not a prerequisite for overcoming it. While death anxiety can have various triggers, here are some of the most common ones (although this is not an exhaustive list, and there will be other causes as well):

Severe illness: A fear of death can develop after experiencing a major illness that brought you close to death or witnessing such an illness in someone else. These experiences can lead to increased concerns about mortality, and can cause death anxiety.

Traumatic events: Exposure to events that pose a threat to your safety, security, stability, integrity, or existence can also contribute to death anxiety. This can also be the case even if the trauma was not directly related to death.

The death of someone close: Witnessing the death of someone close, including notable individuals or those who died in unusual circumstances, can evoke anxious and persistent thoughts about mortality and death.

Becoming a parent: Having children can profoundly change the meaning of life, and the fear of not being there for them can create immense pressure to ensure your well-being. The thought of something happening to you and how your children would cope without you can be a significant source of death anxiety.

Religious beliefs: These can sometimes play a role in shaping a person's perception of death, the afterlife, and the consequences of their actions in this life and the next. While religious beliefs can offer comfort and hope for some, they can also cause or exacerbate death anxiety for others.

Terminal illness: Receiving a terminal medical diagnosis, such as untreatable cancer, can create significant death anxiety. Living with the knowledge of a life-threatening condition is understandably anxiety provoking.

Panic attacks: Although not immediately apparent, panic attacks, with their intense and distressing symptoms, can trigger or contribute to death anxiety as well. The feeling of potential death during a panic attack is often related to the fears around death.

Life feels too good: Death anxiety can unexpectedly surface even during times when everything else in life appears to be going very well, almost as if life seems too perfect for it to be sustained. This fear arises from the unsettling thought that something might happen to shatter this pleasant and fulfilling existence.

Old age: Old age can also be associated with death anxiety as people become more aware of their limited time. Thoughts about death can become more prominent as they reflect on their mortality. Additionally, the isolation and loneliness that some older adults experience can increase vulnerability to death anxiety. It's important to note that not all older adults experience death anxiety, as they age their perception of death can undergo many changes, this can include a greater acceptance of death too. Now, let's move on to looking at how you can address the factors that maintain death anxiety in the present.

What keeps death anxiety going?

You may have some insight into the cause of your death anxiety, or you may still be uncertain, and that's perfectly okay. If you do have awareness of the cause of your death anxiety, that incident may have little impact on the day to day intensity of your death anxiety now. Instead, what is likely to be perpetuating the fear is the common factor that worsens all anxiety disorders: avoidance. You might go to great lengths to avoid death-related cues, such as avoiding discussions about death, distancing yourself from events like funerals, perhaps even avoiding exercise in case the increased heart rate leads to a sudden death by heart attack. Safety behaviours in death anxiety also contribute to the persistence of this fear. These are actions you take to reduce your feelings of anxiety related to death. While these behaviours might provide temporary relief, they can worsen death anxiety in the long run.

Here are some more common avoidance and safety behaviours that people often exhibit:

1. Engaging in superstitious behaviours or rituals.
2. Frequently checking their own body for signs of illness or any risk of impending death.
3. Avoiding activities they perceive as risky or dangerous.
4. Avoiding news stories or media that involve death or accidents.
5. Becoming preoccupied with things that could cause death.
6. Avoiding discussions about terminal illnesses
7. Avoiding discussing plans for their end-of-life care or arrangements.
8. Avoiding hospitals or medical facilities.
9. Avoiding long-term plans or commitments due to uncertainty about the future.
10. Avoiding travelling or going on vacations, especially to places perceived as unsafe.
11. Avoiding places that remind them of death, such as visiting graveyards or attending memorial services.
12. Limiting interactions with terminally ill or elderly people.
13. Constantly seeking reassurance from others about their health and well-being.
14. Avoiding taking on new challenges or personal growth opportunities due to fear of potential risks, or bad luck.

Let's consider an example where a person's death anxiety resulted from a traumatic childhood experience of having an unwell parent:

During Maria's childhood, she witnessed the trauma of having her parent fall seriously ill and requiring extensive medical treatment. The vulnerability of her parent and the fear of losing them had a profound impact on Maria, leaving her with a deep fear of illness and death. As Maria grew older, she developed a pattern of avoiding discussions or thoughts related to illness and death. She steered clear of medical topics, TV shows, news, or movies involving sickness, and became hypervigilant about her health, and the well-being of her loved ones. Although this avoidance temporarily eased things for Maria, it inadvertently strengthened her death anxiety. Maria's

brain interpreted her avoidance as a sign of genuine danger, intensifying the fear response whenever she subsequently encountered death-related situations, thoughts, or feelings.

In summary, avoidance and safety behaviours maintain and exacerbate death anxiety by preventing you from confronting and processing your fears. When you avoid death-related thoughts or situations, you reinforce the notion that death is something to be constantly gripped by, and terrified of, leading to a cycle of escalating anxiety and unhealthy coping mechanisms. To effectively manage death anxiety, it is essential to identify and gradually confront these avoidance and safety behaviours and, instead develop healthier coping strategies.

What helps with death anxiety?

Let's delve into seven effective strategies for managing death anxiety in a healthier way, with the aim of alleviating its impact.

1. Validate your fear

Validate your fear of death by acknowledging and directly facing the emotions that arise when you experience death anxiety, instead of avoiding or suppressing them. For example, when you find yourself feeling anxious and panicky after a death-related trigger, recognize that it's okay to feel that way. When your mind starts spinning with worries and scary scenarios about death, understand that these feelings are acceptable. Death is a frightening topic, and it's natural to have anxiety about it. Here are two examples of how to validate the fear:

Example 1

I can't stop thinking about that news article about a celebrity's death. It's made me feel overwhelmed with fear and worry about death. I have to remind myself that it's normal and natural to feel anxious when you hear about these kinds of things, and it's okay for me to feel this way.

Example 2

My mind keeps replaying thoughts and scary scenarios about my university friend's death, and it's so unsettling, I hate when I get caught up in this. But I know it's reasonable to have death anxiety after losing someone close to me.

If you struggle to validate your fears relating to death, it can help to consider how you would respond to a good friend confiding in you about their fears of death. You would likely be compassionate and understanding, reminding them that it's normal to worry about death sometimes. Apply the same empathy and validation to yourself when you struggle with your own fears of death.

When you validate your fears and anxieties, you acknowledge their presence and accept that they are a natural part of being human. By doing so, you send a message to your brain that these feelings don't need to be overwhelming. It helps your brain understand that it doesn't have to be constantly consumed with the terror of death anxiety. This helps you become more confident and less overwhelmed when death anxiety is triggered. Embracing emotional validation of death anxiety can allow you to better manage your fear and navigate through it in a healthier, more productive way.

2. Practice Death Acceptance

Death anxiety can be highly distressing, leading to a natural desire to avoid any thoughts related to death. However, evading the topic of death can result in denial, which is ultimately unhelpful and contributes to the persistence of the anxiety. Constantly pushing away thoughts or fears about death inadvertently reinforces your brain's fear of it. Despite your attempts to block death out, your brain is aware that death is an unavoidable reality, this can lead to a conflicting mental battle that also intensifies anxiety. Even if you manage to suppress some anxiety momentarily, the next encounter with the topic of death may trigger a heightened fear response, exacerbating your feelings of anxiousness. This continuous avoidance perpetuates the anxiety, creating a cycle of fear that can be hard to break.

Accepting death as an inevitable aspect of life can actually alleviate the anxiety about it. When you come to terms with the fact that death is a natural part of the human experience, shared by everyone, it sends a message to your brain that contemplating death in the present isn't inherently dangerous. However, suppressing and avoiding thoughts of death can amplify its perceived scariness, causing it to dominate your thoughts and preventing you from fully engaging in life. By succumbing to death anxiety, you allow fear to govern your existence, robbing you of the opportunity to live well. Embracing the inevitability of death can set you free from the grip of terror, enabling you to embrace life more fully and authentically.

Here are some ways to cultivate death acceptance:

Embracing Thoughts with Acceptance and Openness

To practise death acceptance, you need to be willing to tolerate the thoughts of death when they arise, along with any anxiety and discomfort that may accompany them. Instead of instinctively avoiding them, try to face them. Initially, it may feel challenging, but over time, this approach can lead to a healthier relationship with the idea of death. Begin the process of death acceptance by gradually acknowledging and paying attention to the thoughts you experience about death. As you become more comfortable with this practice, you can build upon it. These thoughts may be triggered by various experiences, such as encounters with mortality in media, personal reflections, or memories. Whatever the trigger, accept these thoughts and validate the discomfort you feel while exploring them. By engaging with death-related thoughts in this way, you can process your fears, develop greater resilience and acceptance, all of which can help reduce your anxiety.

Engaging with the Topic of Death in Conversations

When the topic of death arises in a conversation, try to resist the urge to change the subject or avoid it altogether. Instead, take a moment to reflect on your feelings and validate them using the earlier skill described above, and remain engaged in the conversation as much as you can. Again you can start small and build upon your progress.

Engaging with Triggers related to Death

When you come across news or media that mentions death, a TV show about death, a funeral advert, or any related content, challenge yourself to stay engaged rather than turning away. Again you can start by doing this for brief moments, then build to longer periods of time. Remind yourself that it's okay to feel uneasy, but avoiding the topic won't make your fear go away, in fact, it may worsen it. Embrace the discomfort as an opportunity for growth and understanding of your fear.

Use a Simple Mantra

Death acceptance can also be facilitated through the use of a simple but powerful mantra. For example, you can repeat to yourself, "Death is a natural part of life, and I choose to accept its inevitability." This mantra serves as a gentle reminder that, while thoughts of death may be uncomfortable, recognizing its presence and significance is crucial for personal growth and

for your mental well-being. By using a mantra like this you can gradually shift your perspective on mortality, allowing you to confront your fears with a sense of courage, acceptance, and openness.

3. Live by your values

Completely eliminating the fear of death is an unrealistic goal. The key lies in managing this fear the best you can while still choosing to live your life in ways that you value and find fulfilling. Clarifying your values and purpose can be helpful in this process. As you gain clarity on what truly matters to you, you can align your life with these values and make decisions that are in harmony with who you want to be. Knowing what truly matters to you, the things that hold genuine meaning and significance in your life, and the passions that ignite you can be a powerful tool in shifting your focus away from death and towards living more meaningfully. When you align your life with your values and purpose, it acts as a counterforce to your death anxiety. You have the choice to either allow death anxiety to consume you, by engaging with it every minute of the day and letting it take over your life, which only exacerbates the fear. Alternatively, you can acknowledge that the fear of death will be present, yet still engage in the things that hold value and purpose for you. Both scenarios involve some emotional pain, but the latter approach won't worsen your death anxiety, in fact, it can improve your life, and by doing so reduce the grip of death anxiety on you.

If you find yourself unsure of your values or purpose right away, it's important to recognize that gaining clarity on these things is a journey that can unfold over time. Here are some practical steps you can take to help you in this process:

Self-Reflection

Set aside time for self-reflection to contemplate what truly matters to you in life. Think about the activities, relationships, and experiences that bring you joy, fulfilment, and a sense of purpose.

Identify Core Values

Make a list of your core values as a person, the fundamental beliefs and principles that guide your decisions and actions day to day. Consider what virtues are most important to you, such as honesty, compassion, or integrity. This is about who you are, or who you want to be.

Prioritise Your Values:

Once you have an idea about your values, take the step of ranking them in order of importance to you. This can help you recognize the values that hold greater significance in shaping your sense of self, as well as those that are more secondary. By doing so, you can determine how to prioritise and nurture each value accordingly.

Explore Passions and Interests

Engage in activities that you are passionate about or curious about. Exploring these interests can provide insights into what you value, and what truly resonates with you. When you participate in activities that ignite your passion or curiosity, you open yourself up to new experiences and possibilities.

Seek Inspiration from Role Models

Looking to individuals you admire or consider as role models can be a powerful approach to gaining clarity on your values and purpose too. Keep in mind that you don't have to mirror their lives entirely or adopt their values as your own. Instead, you can draw inspiration from them and use it to inform your understanding of your own values. Reflect on how you can adapt and integrate certain principles or values into your life in a way that feels authentic and meaningful to you.

Journaling

Writing can be a powerful tool for exploring your values and purpose in a more introspective way. Keeping a journal allows you to note down the things you enjoy and value in day-to-day life, along with your reflections on these experiences. Additionally, you can document your thoughts on various experiences, interactions, and moments that evoke strong positive emotions or have a lasting impact on you. By consistently writing in your journal over time, you may begin to notice patterns and recurring themes emerging from your reflections, these insights can be instrumental in identifying your core values.

4. Stop catastrophizing about death

People struggling with death anxiety often engage in catastrophizing, envisioning the most terrifying, painful, and unimaginably negative aspects associated with death. While it is true that death involves elements that can be distressing, dwelling persistently on these aspects hinders the process

of overcoming death anxiety. Fixating on these catastrophic negatives distorts your perception of death, leading to a constant state of heightened anxiety and perpetuating the fear with each catastrophic thought reinforcing the next.

Contrary to what might be assumed, there are also less distressing aspects related to death and dying. Taking the time to envision these possibilities can foster a more balanced and realistic perspective on death, alleviating its overwhelming nature and reducing anxiety. By acknowledging the multifaceted nature of death you can gradually work towards cultivating acceptance and a more peaceful relationship with the concept of mortality.

Take some time to reflect on the things that you catastrophize about when it comes to death. Note them down and then bring up an alternative to those thoughts by imagining scenarios that are less distressing.

For instance, if you often catastrophize about a painful and dreadful death, try to imagine a peaceful passing in the comfort of your own bed, surrounded by loved ones. It does happen.

If you find yourself catastrophizing about your funeral, envision a gathering where people share heartwarming and fond memories of you, celebrating your life.

Similarly, if you worry about your loved ones not being able to cope without you, picture them moving forward in life, finding ways to heal and adjust to the loss. While they will undoubtedly grieve, over time, they will learn to cope and carry on.

By visualising these more balanced and positive scenarios, you can develop a more realistic perspective on death, moving away from constant catastrophic thoughts and embracing a healthier mindset with less death anxiety.

By practising opening your mind to less catastrophic images and thoughts regarding death, you can discover that there are more positive or less distressing aspects connected to it. This approach serves as a counterbalance to an excessively negative view of death, which fuels death anxiety.

By embracing more balanced and less catastrophic outcomes in your perspective, you can develop a healthier relationship with the concept of death and alleviate some of the overwhelming anxiety it can trigger.

5. Initiate conversations about death

Engage in meaningful conversations about death with supportive people, especially those closest to you. It is common for people to find it difficult to cope with their fear of death because they believe they are alone in their struggles. Since death is not a typical topic in casual conversations, people often assume that others don't think about it or experience the same fear themselves. However, this assumption is not entirely accurate. While some people may not grapple with significant death anxiety, it is common for everyone to contemplate mortality at some point. Recognizing this truth can alleviate the sense of isolation and loneliness associated with death anxiety.

To combat the feeling of solitude, consider initiating open and honest discussions about death with someone you trust and feel comfortable talking to. Let them know that you'd like to have some conversations specifically centred around the topic of death, and ask them if it's something they've ever thought about. You can call these conversations by any name that feels appropriate for you, such as "mortality conversations," "let's talk about death," "the meaning of life chats" and so on. These conversations can be spontaneous and free-flowing, touching on various aspects related to death. They don't necessarily have to revolve solely around your death anxiety but can explore philosophical viewpoints, how death is depicted in media, discussions about notable figures who recently passed away, or explore themes from films or literature, and the perceptions of death in society. There are multiple ways to initiate and participate in these conversations, and you can certainly share your own fears about death as well.

By engaging in open dialogues about this sensitive subject, you will realise that you are not alone in dealing with these thoughts and feelings. Feeling understood and supported in your fears can be empowering and will help you work through your death anxiety in a healthier way.

6. Consider Reading Obituaries

Engaging in the simple yet effective practice of reading obituaries in the newspaper or online may seem unusual, but it can actually be beneficial in addressing death anxiety. As I mentioned earlier, death anxiety is often

fueled by avoidance and safety behaviours. By reading obituaries, you are actively confronting the topic of death, which is the opposite of avoidance. This helps your brain learn that there is a different perspective beyond being fully engulfed in terror and catastrophes that is at the very core of death anxiety. By facing the reality of death in a controlled and manageable way, you can gradually reduce the intensity of your anxiety and develop a healthier perspective on mortality.

Reading obituaries offers several advantages. First and foremost, it compels you to directly confront your fears of death instead of avoiding them, as I mentioned earlier this is essential for overcoming this fear. Secondly, obituaries are typically brief and can be read in just a minute or two, making it convenient to develop a regular habit of facing death. This regularity can accelerate the process of overcoming your fear and fosters acceptance, which, as I already highlighted, is also crucial in overcoming death anxiety.

Interestingly, obituaries can prove to be more intriguing and enjoyable than morbid and scary, making this practice rather engaging. Furthermore, reading about the reality of death not only reduces death anxiety but also fosters a profound sense of gratitude for life, as it serves as a reminder of its impermanence. Obituaries often showcase the pride that people have taken in someone's life, or even in their own life, which can counter the earlier catastrophizing highlighted. You might be pleasantly surprised by how this practice can positively impact your perspective on life and death, reduce your death anxiety, while also deepening your appreciation for the present moment.

7. Get Creative

Utilising creative outlets to cope with death anxiety can be a remarkably effective strategy too. Anxiety often consumes a significant amount of our time and energy, leaving us feeling distressed and unproductive. By redirecting this energy towards creative and positive pursuits, we can transform our anxious thoughts into fulfilling experiences. Engaging in creative activities not only distracts us from terrifying catastrophic thoughts, but it also reduces our tendency to overly focus on anxiety, thus weakening its grip on our minds. Importantly, this approach is not about avoiding anxiety but rather accepting and validating your thoughts and emotions first, and then channelling your energy, focus, and time into creative, productive, and enjoyable activities.

To experiment with this practice for dealing with death anxiety, try engaging in simple and enjoyable creative activities whenever anxiety about death arises. Here are ten examples:

1. **Gardening:** Looking after plants and being in nature can be calming and meditative, providing a sense of connection with life's cycles.
2. **Cooking or Baking:** Engaging in the culinary activities allows you to focus on the present moment as well as creating something delicious to enjoy.
3. **Photography:** Capture moments that bring you joy or show you beauty, encouraging you to see the positive and valuable aspects of life.
4. **Mindfulness Colouring:** Adult colouring books with intricate designs can be a relaxing way to shift your focus and reduce anxiety.
5. **Music and Dance:** Put on some music and dance freely to release tension and lift your spirits. Both music and dance can be excellent ways to channel anxiety into creativity and enjoyment.
6. **Yoga or Meditation:** These practices promote relaxation and self-awareness, supporting you to find inner peace.
7. **Creative Crafts or DIY Projects:** Engage in home improvement or creative crafts that give you a sense of accomplishment, and also represent your values and aspirations.
8. **Reading:** Dive into books or articles that inspire you.
9. **Exercise:** Whether it's jogging, cycling, or yoga, physical activity can release endorphins and boost your mood.
10. **Playing with or caring for your Pets:** Spending time with pets can be therapeutic, and brings joy and comfort.

If you haven't discovered a creative outlet yet, take some time to explore different activities and see what resonates with you personally, the list above will give you some ideas. Incorporating joyful creative activities into your

routine provides a balance to the tasks I've mentioned earlier, that you might find a bit more difficult. When you feel anxiety creeping in, pause to acknowledge your thoughts and validate your emotions, and then immerse yourself in your chosen creative activity. This deliberate shift in focus differs from avoidance, as it acknowledges the presence of anxiety while consciously choosing to channel attention in more positive and helpful ways. Rather than ignoring or escaping from your anxiety, this approach involves acknowledging it and then intentionally redirecting your attention towards activities that can provide a sense of fulfilment and distraction from your anxious thoughts. By doing this you are not avoiding your feelings but actively managing them through positive redirection.

Remember that you can approach all these tasks gradually, allowing yourself the time and space to explore and engage in activities that bring you joy and fulfilment. Engaging in creative activities has a remarkable ability to counteract anxiety, offering a sense of accomplishment, fulfilment, and even joy. So, the next time you feel overwhelmed by thoughts of death, embrace your creative practice as a way to transform that energy into a positive force in your life.

A final note

No matter what happens in life, keep doing the things that matter because they will keep moving you towards where and who you want to be. This is precisely the essence of the approach here, noting what truly matters to you and consistently pursuing it, especially in moments of death anxiety. Finding that meaningful aspect in your life and staying dedicated to it serves as a compass, guiding you towards a purposeful and fulfilling journey despite life's challenges, and despite death anxiety.

Wishing you all the best.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dr. Kinner". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Dr" and "Kinner" being capitalized and prominent.

Clinical Psychologist and Author of *Ten Times Calmer* - a complete guide for overcoming anxiety.