"OPA: Positively 60 and Beyond"
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Death in Psychotherapy and Eastern Wisdom Traditions

By Richard Sears, PsyD, MBA

Abstract

Death and change are frequently encountered in psychotherapy, but not often talked about in modern society. This article discusses the need to prepare for dealing with issues of death, and looks at an approach from the Eastern wisdom traditions as a model.

Death is not often systematically studied in clinical training, but often comes up in therapy. Being able to address death directly with clients is important for therapists, and can lead to a greater appreciation of life. This article briefly discusses the existential psychotherapeutic tradition in comparison with the Eastern wisdom traditions.

Death (or more symbolically, "change") is an important factor in the existential psychotherapeutic tradition (Yalom, 1980). Physical death is guaranteed to occur to every human being without exception, and hence, creates a great deal of anxiety (Mikulincer & Florian, 2004). However, modern society in general rarely speaks about death. Clients often come to psychotherapy after the loss of a loved one because friends and relatives are uncomfortable with how to relate to death, often telling the grieving person to "get over it" or "get on with their lives."

With certain notable exceptions (e.g., Becker, 1998; Freud, 1963; Kubler-Ross, 1997; Yalom, 1980), modern society has historically not prepared people very well for the inevitability of death, and most individuals try to avoid talking or thinking about it. Hence, when death does come, people are unprepared to process it. Although being educated about death does not remove the pain of being separated from a loved one, a little preparation does go a long way in helping one through the grieving process. Certain circumstances, such as the diagnosis of a family member with a terminal illness, involve a significant strain on emotional and financial resources, and Sogyal Rinpoche (2002) recommends not contemplating death when one is under emotional strain. However, preparation can help one to grieve fully (whatever that means to the individual or culture) without adding additional anxiety or worries about the grieving itself.

In the Eastern wisdom traditions, death is highlighted prominently (Kapleau, 1989; McDonald, 1984; Sogyal Rinpoche, 2002). In the Buddhist tradition, for instance, there are a set of contemplation exercises designed to help one prepare for death and thereby, to more fully appreciate life. For modern societies, this may seem somewhat morbid, and may remind clinicians of the obsessive thoughts about death seen in those who are severely depressed. But in the East, this experience is liberating. By facing this inevitability head on, in a type of exposure therapy, it loses its artificially inflated ability to provoke anxiety.

Importantly, in the Eastern traditions, one is told not to do the meditations on death if one is feeling depressed (Sogyal Rinpoche, 2002). One needs to be in a stable, affective state to get the most benefit from these meditations. Just as one becomes a safer driver after having an automobile accident and recognizes that the dangers of driving are not merely abstract concepts, an individual may live life a little bit differently knowing how fragile it is.

In the East, death is meditated upon systematically. There are several components to this contemplation process. One is the idea of the universality of death (McDonald, 1984; Sogyal Rinpoche, 2002). One considers that all living creatures, without exception (including oneself), will one day die, including all loved ones, all pets, and everyone who has ever lived or will ever live.

Another component of the contemplation practice is to consider the inevitability of death (McDonald, 1984; Sogyal Rinpoche, 2002). In this phase, one considers that there is no escape from death. This is important, as many individuals feel that certain people will always be in their lives. Even those who are fabulously wealthy can still get sick or die of cancer; even the most brilliant person can die in a car accident. There is no one in the world who has ever permanently cheated death, no one that death has simply forgotten about.

Another consideration is that one does not know when death will occur (McDonald, 1984; Sogyal Rinpoche, 2002). Sometimes children die before parents do. Sometimes babies die in their cribs. Not knowing when death will occur keeps one more appreciative of this moment, for the time that one does have to live.
A further consideration is that one does not know the manner of one's death (McDonald, 1984; Sogyal Rinpoche, 2002). A person could die peacefully while sleeping, or die slowly and painfully of cancer.

In Western Existential psychotherapy, death is one of the "four givens" besides freedom, isolation and meaningless of human existence (Schneider, 2003; Yalom, 1980). By facing these existential truths directly, one becomes inoculated to the anxiety that grows from avoidance of these issues. One is then freed to appreciate each moment of life as it unfolds, and to create a meaningful existence.

By becoming more aware of and comfortable with death and change, clinicians may be able to be more fully present with clients as they face this inevitable given of life. The traditions of the East may inspire modern scientists into researching the effectiveness of systematically contemplating death.

References


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