

A Qualitative Study Understanding the Implications on Expectations of Death Versus Reality

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Abstract

The death of loved ones is an impactful event in people's lives, reminding everyone of their mortality. The recognition of one's eventual death remains a prevailing thought for much of the human experience regardless of intentional focus or purposefully avoided. Thus, contemplation of how one will die is effectually inescapable. Nevertheless, the finalization of this event can only be experienced once, and thereafter, no further description can be shared with others. This unknowingness of life's conclusion persists in the human consciousness, which can contribute to adverse mental health conditions. Acknowledging these potential outcomes can prevent them, prepare for them, or address them in a psychologically healthy manner. This phenomenological qualitative study aimed to explore how people experience unmet death expectations. Participants (N=40) were adults aged 20 to 79 from ten national identities. All participants had lost a loved one as recent as weeks and spanning over three decades in the past. Moreover, they shared meaningful conversations about dying and faced challenges during this experience. The participants expressed wishing to have more thoroughly discussed the topic of death with loved ones who had passed. Furthermore, they had preferences on the death they would seek for themselves but often came short on how it relates to their lives. Ultimately, introspection and discussions surrounding the deaths of others and the imminent death of oneself are areas of exploration throughout life.

Keywords: successful-aging theory, death anxiety, grief, death expectations, challenges and solutions

Introduction

Death is a requisite event in the human experience, surpassing the impact of all but birth. Throughout history and across cultures, people have sought a peaceful death, yet this aspiration is often unfulfilled (Gijsbertsen & Kremer, 2021). Instead, disease, regrets, pain, and cognitive decline overshadow the final days of individuals (Supiano et al., 2020). While research commonly focuses on death in the context of aging or terminal illnesses, there is a lack of thorough exploration into the natural connection between the lives of healthy middle-aged adults and their eventual deaths.

Recent studies reveal that less than half of the 70% of Americans who desire to die at home are able to do so, exemplifying the concept of dying in peace (Gijsbertsen & Kremer, 2021). Freedom from disease is universally desired, yet many anticipate dying from an illness. Despite the wish to preserve memories until the end, cognitive decline is prevalent, with Alzheimer's disease and dementia becoming dreaded realities

for many (Rajan et al., 2019). In fact, studies demonstrate that the aging population often expects to encounter these diseases (Anstey et al., 2017).

The expectation of misfortune generates stress, which is the physiological response to perceived environmental pressures (Bourgognon et al., 2021). While rational concerns are normal, persistent worries and fears become anxiety, harming human functioning on various levels (Fali et al., 2018). Stressors overwhelm individuals, leading to inflammation, weakened immune systems, and increased susceptibility to illnesses. Consequently, death anxiety becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the fear of dying from sickness and disease raises its likelihood. Most research on death anxiety focuses on the aging population, overlooking its relevance to all living beings and undermining the universal nature of death in the human experience. Although studies have examined death across the lifespan, none have explored the contrasting expectations of how one desires to die versus how they actually will.

The meaning of our deaths is often overlooked, overshadowed by the creation of meaning in life. The impact of death and loss varies depending on the circumstances and the individuals involved (Ang, 2023). While some may experience guilt or sorrow, others find a renewed perspective on life. Unfortunately, personal growth from such significant events is not commonly sought (Cai et al., 2020). The exploration of deviating from the norm and fully cherishing life is crucial.

Death anxiety is prevalent among middle-aged individuals, with men reporting higher levels of anxiety and women discussing it more openly (O'Donnell & Richardson, 2020). Cultural influences and gender differences may affect reporting (Bassett, 2017). Younger individuals often see death as distant, while the aging population tends to accept it more rationally (Ens & Bond, 2007). Due to its variation across cultures, death anxiety cannot be utterly instinctive of human nature (Chopik, 2017). Death anxiety varies across cultures and is influenced by religion, values (Piotrowski et al., 2019), and contemporary trends such as media exposure to violence and horror films (Niemiec & Schulenberg, 2011).

Health is often and erroneously measured by longevity (Obrizan & Wehby, 2018), as scientific advancements prolong the dying process rather than ensuring a desired death (Olshansky, 2018). The literature on why people do not die as they wish is insufficient (Gijbsbertsen & Kremer, 2021). The connection between a good life and a good death is often fragmented, lacking a comprehensive understanding. It is crucial to address and explore this gap, which goes beyond our deaths and extends to our lifestyles, diets, and environment (David & Coan, 2018).

Death, the final life experience, often evokes angst and fear, with many avoiding the topic altogether (Seifu et al., 2023). While individuals can only experience death once, the imagined notion of how one should die remains prevalent worldwide. The uncertainty surrounding the actual experience of death can contribute to adverse mental health effects (Pandya & Kathuria, 2021). Discussing death during life can better prepare us for this inevitable event (MacKenzie & Lasota, 2020). Despite its omnipresence, there is limited research on the profound impact of experiencing a death that diverges from one's desires. We must acknowledge and accept death's inescapable nature, working to mitigate its negative consequences. Ignoring our intrinsic connection to death will only amplify the hardships it brings.

Purpose

This phenomenological study aimed to examine individuals' experiences of unmet death expectations and the interplay between expectations and reality in the face of death. The study recognized the inevitability of the death experience, whether it occurs unexpectedly or tragically. Given the impossibility of interviewing individuals who have experienced their own death, the target population for this research

encompassed those who have encountered the death of a loved one, seeking their perspectives on the matter.

The study sought to delve into participants' reflections on their own mortality and desires for their end-of-life experience. It aimed to understand whether the death of a loved one influenced individuals to contemplate their own eventual demise and shape their preferences for their own death. Additionally, the research aimed to explore why some individuals may not engage in such reflections, potentially leading to stress or death anxiety. By conducting semi-structured interviews, the study focused on probing the thoughts and emotions of participants, including their anticipation of death and the iatrogenic and idiosyncratic effects of imagining and confronting mortality.

Methods

When delving into the intricate realm of human experiences, quantifying it hinders a comprehensive depiction, as it restricts the richness and depth of description (Peterson, 2019). Quantifiable research demands more structure and less flexibility in data collection, whereas this particular study called for a qualitative approach to allow participants to openly share their diverse experiences through verbal expressions (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). Thus, a qualitative methodology was deemed most suitable and fruitful for this research endeavor.

Within qualitative studies, researchers face the task of selecting a specific analysis method that aligns with the research's nature. While various methods could have been employed, careful examination was required to determine the most appropriate one. Content analysis, although commonly used, tends to narrow the focus to specific moments, making the analysis of life experiences more challenging (Lindgren et al., 2020). Discourse analysis, while useful for investigating social or cultural contexts, did not align with the aim of capturing less specificity in this study (Hjelm, 2021). Thematic analysis, although effective for organizing data, did not align with the goal of exploring and describing individual experiences distinctly (Sundler et al., 2019). Grounded theory, which involves creating a new theoretical approach based on the data, did not fit the philosophical and logical concepts underpinning this study (Maxwell, 2013). Lastly, narrative analysis, despite its potential for interpreting stories, was considered less capable of exploring the unique experiences of the phenomenon compared to the chosen method: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Josselson & Hammack, 2021).

Sampling and Participants

For this study, participants aged 20 and older were recruited using a convenience sampling method, primarily through social media posts seeking volunteers. A total of 40 adult volunteers were recruited, aiming to include a range of experiences for analysis, although the focus was on detailed exploration rather than generalization (Maxwell, 2013). The chosen number of participants sought to surpass the point of saturation, ensuring that recurring themes emerged sufficiently while allowing for the possibility of some participants being more adept at articulating these themes (Peterson, 2019).

To accommodate the diverse international participants, the majority of interviews in this study were conducted using HIPAA-compliant video conferencing platforms like Zoom, Skype, and Messenger. However, five local participants had face-to-face interviews. Out of the 40 participants, the sample consisted of 22 females (55%) and 18 males (45%). The nationalities represented included American (n = 21, 52.5%), Australian (n = 2, 5%), Chinese (n = 1, 2.5%), Egyptian (n = 1, 2.5%), English (n = 7, 17.5%), Mexican (n = 1, 2.5%), Native American (Miwok, Ute, Washo) (n = 1, 2.5%), Russian (n = 1, 2.5%),

South African (n = 2, 5%), and Thai (n = 4, 10%). Some participants disclosed their religious and spiritual affiliations, which ranged from Agnostic, Atheist, Buddhist, Catholic, Christian, Existentialist, Muslim, Seventh Day Adventist, Sikh, to Spiritual. Regarding age distribution, participants fell into the following categories: 20-29 (n = 6, 15%), 30-39 (n = 8, 20%), 40-49 (n = 14, 35%), 50-59 (n = 6, 15%), 60-69 (n = 3, 7.5%), and 70-79 (n = 3, 7.5%). Some participants also disclosed preexisting psychological conditions, including anxiety, grief, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

All participants had experienced the loss of a loved one, ranging from weeks to over three decades prior to the interviews. While many participants mentioned multiple deaths, they were specifically asked to focus on the most significant loss. These losses encompassed aunts/uncles (n = 2, 5%), parents (n = 21, 52.5%), friends (n = 3, 7.5%), grandparents (n = 7, 17.5%), siblings (n = 2, 5%), and spouses (n = 5, 12.5%). Causes of death mentioned in the study included cancers, coronavirus, euthanasia, heart disease, and organ failure. Although some deaths were sudden, all participants had meaningful conversations with their loved ones before their passing, which had an impact on their perception of mortality.

Data Collection

This study focused on understanding the psychological experiences of death and its impact on individuals' perceptions of mortality. A convenience sample of 40 participants who had experienced the death of a loved one was recruited through social media and local communities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing participants to freely share their experiences and insights. Privacy measures, such as anonymity and data protection, were implemented to ensure confidentiality and trust.

Participants read and accepted a consent form approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. The interviews covered topics like personal experiences of loss, secondhand accounts of the deceased's near-death experiences, coping with the aftermath, and shifts in views on mortality. The researcher used predetermined but flexible questions, allowing participants to explore important aspects in their own words.

To protect participants' privacy, no identifiable details were recorded, and digital transcriptions were stored securely offline. Participants had full control over the interview duration, with an additional 10 minutes offered if desired. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured of their ability to terminate the interview at any time. These privacy measures and ethical considerations created a safe environment for participants to openly share their stories.

Data Analysis

As with any researcher, addressing bias was crucial in this study. The research design and literature review introduced certain expectations and biases, which future researchers can consider when replicating or expanding upon the findings. The use of epoché, a mindful process of setting aside biases, helped maintain objectivity during data analysis (Roberts, 2019). Qualitative research involved an iterative process where data collection and analysis coexisted, allowing for real-time discovery of subthemes and the establishment of rapport with participants (De Bruin, 2020).

In qualitative research, ensuring reliability and validity differs from quantitative analysis. Open-ended questions make generalizability difficult, requiring strategies to enhance objectivity and clarity in the interviewing process (Maxwell, 2013). The data obtained from interviews was transcribed and carefully reviewed, corrections were made, and structural coding was applied to organize the dataset. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was then used to identify themes and establish connections between

them, resulting in a hierarchical classification (Saldana, 2021). The detailed reporting of patterns and connections, along with the presentation of contrasting data, offered a comprehensive view of the complexities involved.

While exact replication may be challenging, the detailed description of the research process allows other researchers to understand and adapt their studies accordingly. The study aimed to facilitate understanding rather than propose definitive conclusions, encouraging exploration of alternative interpretations and nuanced perspectives (Maxwell, 2013). By reporting the data collection and analysis in a comprehensive manner, researchers can engage with the process and contribute to the evolving body of knowledge.

Results

The examination of the participants' answers revealed three main themes (along with several subthemes) that characterized the findings: challenges, solutions, the view on one's mortality.

Challenges

Losing a loved one is a deeply personal experience that cannot be fully captured or described, as it is shaped by the individual relationship and the unique psychology of the grieving person (Sabucedo et al., 2021). However, certain themes have emerged to provide some structure to the challenges people face when experiencing such a loss. The first subtheme included caretaking. Caring for a dying loved one at the end of life can be challenging in multiple ways, encompassing various situations and difficulties. Affifi and Christie (2019) described these caregivers as "caring-unto-death" since they don't anticipate their loved one's condition to improve. It is emotionally difficult for caregivers who play a vital role in maintaining family unity to witness the impending death of their loved ones. Sometimes the stress results from a juxtaposition of roles, such as when P12 described, "Being the father figure and the man, he would never let us see him sweat. You know, [he] just wasn't gonna, so I, in turn, wasn't gonna let him see me sweat either." Others describe the situation as stressful, such as when P03 stated, "Caregiver burnout is so real, and it's inevitable in many cases."

Losing a loved one can be psychologically distressing, and it is expected that individuals experience significant angst as a major challenge. Anxiety, as a subtheme encompasses various forms, such as death anxiety, existential anxiety, separation anxiety, distress, and depression, which have been previously identified in research (Beasley et al., 2022; Boelen et al., 2020; Breitbart et al., 2022; Esnaashari & Kargar, 2018; Juhl, 2019). The concept of death itself can induce anxiety, and actually going through the experience can have an even more profound impact, as expressed by P12 who remarked, "That death thing, it's not a thing that I wanna do anytime soon." From his experience, P04 shared, "The anxiety aspect changes sometimes. I'm like, man; I want to get this sh*t over with because life is stressful enough sometimes." As it pertains to death, P28 described, "My body always just takes over with anxiety, so I don't even have room for fear." On the other hand, P26 focused on fear, "And I'm like, I'm going to die one day. My husband's gonna die one day. My mom is gonna die one day. And it's gonna hurt."

Certain individuals described their encounter with death as traumatic, acknowledging that while the term "trauma" may have clinical connotations, it is also used colloquially by people to convey their profound distress. Consequently, any mention of this word in their accounts contributed to this subtheme. When P23 read the autopsy report of his father he explained, "They go into lots of detail, right? Everything bloats, color, and smell, the stench. And it is traumatic." Following a traumatic event, it is possible for otherwise neutral stimuli to serve as triggers for trauma, such as when P33 provided an example of how

she experienced the reliving of trauma through association, stating, "I have so much trauma associated with like phone calls because I can tell you the exact number of the nurses' stations and the names of the nurses."

While the inevitability of death is a concept familiar to everyone, people tend to understand reality based on their past experiences. Since each person only dies once, the death of an individual is always a novel experience. Consequently, participants expressed their shock or surprise, leading to the emergence of this subtheme. For instance, P23 stated, "It seemed like the shock and surprise of his death reminded me about how anything can happen, anything surprising." Optimism may set one up for shock, such as P29 explanation, "His death was quite a shock because my dad was very much alive, very like a lot of charisma, a lot of character, a lot of energy . . . and we were not expecting him to go."

The natural human response to the absence of loved ones is to experience a sense of longing (McLean et al., 2022). This subtheme revolved around the thoughts and memories individuals have about their deceased loved ones, which often presented significant emotional challenges. For instance, P36 was constantly reminded of his late father whenever he visited his childhood home, triggering memories such as his father urinating on the side of the house. These reminders could manifest anywhere, but for this man, they were particularly poignant and personal when he was sorting through his father's belongings. Sometimes individuals associate memories and emotions with certain items, and the loss of such an object can evoke a sense of losing a beloved person. For instance, P28 recounted a personal incident involving her grandmother, stating, "I had her wedding ring that was passed down to me, and I lost it in 2020 when they [a thief] stole my purse . . . that would be the last piece that I had of hers besides my memories."

Previous research has highlighted the desire of individuals to share important moments with their loved ones, resulting in a sense of absence during these otherwise joyful occasions after the loss of a loved one (Neimeyer, 2019). This void represents another subtheme. Following the passing of his father, P22 experienced a series of emotions that revolved around a feeling of emptiness. He expressed, "After my graduation, I wanted to capture that moment with him. Something like that, and, yes, doing activities together, sharing meals, and traveling together." Weddings hold particular significance, especially for women who no longer have their fathers to escort them down the aisle. P26 shared her experience, stating, "When I got engaged, you know, he never had the chance to meet my spouse when I got married. It was tough. He wasn't there to walk me down."

Grief, commonly associated with the loss of a loved one, manifests in various forms, and research by Andrews et al. (2021) emphasizes that individuals experience it differently and describe it based on their personal encounters. The subtheme of grief involved a direct acknowledgment of the associated sadness and sorrow. For instance, P05 expressed his perspective after the passing of his mother, stating candidly, "It didn't make me think, 'Am I going to die? How am I gonna die? When am I gonna die? Like, how do I wanna die?' It didn't really bring those questions up for me. I just felt grief." The experience of grief can lead to introspection for the person going through it. As P10 reflected, "I realized I only cried for myself, that I wouldn't have him here anymore."

Guilt is a common emotion experienced in different ways following the loss of a loved one. This subtheme encompasses any mention, direct or indirect, of feeling guilty. Kőlves et al. (2019) conducted research demonstrating the significant variation in the reasons behind guilt, as well as the diverse sources that contribute to its emergence. For example, P21 shared, "I felt that I had failed him somehow [by] not being there." P28 expressed a similar pang of guilt despite not having committed any wrongdoing, "I feel guilty. I guess it's guilt that I feel that I didn't stay [and] that maybe I could have helped. Maybe she would have

been here. All those what-ifs, those ugly ifs.” Guilt can arise in different situations, such as not being present when a loved one passes away or failing to fully appreciate visits to loved ones near death. P31 described his experience, saying, “I felt more like I should go visit and do this because it's nice to have somebody around . . . so, I did that, but it wasn't exactly fun or fulfilling for me at all.”

Resentment does not equate to hatred; rather, it can manifest in various forms when it comes to the death of a loved one. This subtheme encompassed instances where participants expressed resentment towards certain aspects of their death experience. For instance, P26 shared her feelings about her father's failure to discuss the severity of his condition in his final days. She questioned, “Why couldn't he have even just written me a letter for me to find after he died if his wishes for me was to not see him like that? You know, I've struggled with that a lot.” Resentment may be directed elsewhere, especially to other family members, such as when one woman, a young teenager at the time, was never told about her grandmother's decline in health. P28 shared, “I later learned through some relatives that she did know of her condition, and she only let one person know, and it was her oldest daughter. I had a lot of resentment.” Occasionally, resentment towards a particular situation can endure throughout one's entire lifetime. A notable illustration involves a man who, as a skilled tradesman, missed the chance to learn from his affluent grandfather, a contractor. He delved into his mixed feelings of frustration and nostalgia, stemming from having to acquire business knowledge through challenging experiences. P35 shared, “There was no; I didn't have that guide there. I had to sort of rough it and sort of figure it all out on, you know, by myself.”

Regret has the potential to deeply disrupt people's lives for a considerable duration, extending until their very last moments. When individuals pass away while still burdened by regret, it leaves behind a sense of profound speculation and uncertainty. This underlying theme explores the direct or identifiable mention of regret and its consequences within the given context. P15 remarked, “Dying with any resentments or regrets is a terrible way to die.” Regrets can manifest in leaving things left unsaid with a loved one who has passed. One such instance is illustrated by P23, “That was my plan, the next time I saw him, to open up a bit more and kind of really try to get down to resolve, have those conversations about all those things in the past.”

Upon death, certain aspects of a person's life are revealed in ways that were previously undisclosed. This subtheme encompasses situations where loved ones uncover previously unknown information that surfaces either during the dying process or after the individual has passed away. P28 shared an aspect in this regard with which she still struggles, “With my mom, I learned that it was a jealousy factor towards me. She didn't like that my dad loved me more than her, and I don't know what kind of thing there was with her.”

Solutions

The research explored distinct themes associated with coping with a loved one's loss and the subsequent challenges of returning to normality (Eisma, et al., 2022). Recognizing the uniqueness of each challenge, the study emphasized understanding each coping strategy in its specific context. This exploration was geared toward solutions and efforts to tackle personal challenges. Themes were carefully organized to represent both the methods and outcomes from the participants' views, encompassing areas such as time, productivity, thought and emotion control, counseling, spirituality, relationships, making amends, acceptance, health, substance use, humor, honoring the dead, a good death, and a bucket list.

“Time heals all wounds.” Is this statement a cliché or conventional wisdom? Many participants in the study affirmed that this line embodies truth. The theme emerged when participants identified time as a

solution to the challenges faced after losing a loved one. Some spoke directly about this notion: “For me, it’s just time. Like anything, time heals” (P36). Similarly, P27 remarked, “For me, it was just time, and I thought it would be one year. It took two years, and I think the solution is just time.”

Many participants noted how productivity helped them cope with losing a loved one, with the theme emerging from their actions to confront the challenge. For instance, P32 expressed the importance of physical activity in managing depression, saying, “It’s just going back and doing things like being active,” and further elaborating, “like physically active, like you know, renovating the house was really great . . . you see the fruits of your labor.” Exercise was a common remedy for negative feelings, as P33 affirmed after her husband’s death, “I exercise sometimes, and that’s helpful. I’m trying my best to get healthy hormones and healthy emotions in my head and create those hormones via exercise.” The physical aspect of activity or the achievements it produces became a means of coping, as P29 shared after losing her father, “Everybody else in my family is running off with some addiction, and some like hitting rock bottom. And, for me, it was like, I’m gonna bury myself in achieving.”

Participants revealed how controlling thoughts and emotions served as coping mechanisms for challenges faced during a loss. P04 shifted his thinking, stating, “Death is the only adventure I have left,” while P05 emphasized positivity, “The only thing I can do is to try to affect people positively.” P39 found solace in a silver lining, “I was able to be on her deathbed and tell her how important she was to me.” Some controlled emotions to maintain order in their lives. P10 shared how he dealt with his brother’s loss, “I just put it aside and just be normal and save my grief.” P28 described withholding emotions, stating, “I suppressed it, like, I stopped doing things that we used to do.” P33 also mentioned disassociating as a coping method, “I’m very practiced at disassociating, so honestly, like that is a method of coping.” These strategies underscore a complex interplay between thoughts and emotions in managing grief.

Many participants found comfort in speaking about their challenges, whether with professionals or those close to them, while dealing with the loss of a loved one. This theme encapsulated any reference to the positive effects of verbal communication or therapy. P12 extolled the virtues of group therapy, noting, “Getting around people that have experienced that same thing. It’s good for you.” P33 detailed the ongoing comfort she found in professional help, explaining, “I mean, it gives me kind of a place to, kind of, like, melt into an environment where I feel safe and like my feelings can be validated.” P32, after his father’s death, found unexpected catharsis in speaking with a neighbor while cleaning up his father’s house, describing their connection as, “There’s one guy, who’s a bit older than my dad, who lived in one of the houses, and I’d often chat to him . . . and he became almost like a surrogate father figure, ‘cause he was always really warm.” These reflections emphasize the therapeutic power of conversation in the grieving process.

Some individuals find relief in spirituality, faith, or a higher realm of existence when grappling with the loss of a loved one. This theme includes references to any metaphysical comfort or understanding. A Sikh man found peace in Buddhist texts, with P16 stating, “The thing that brought me peace brings me some comfort was the Dhamma Sutrara . . . [it] talks about things being temporary and transient.” Religious beliefs can provide peace, as P03, a Seventh Day Adventist, found comfort knowing that “my grandma is not looking down, seeing all of us crying.” P09’s belief that his mother is “in a better place” with her deceased son brings him peace. Even those without religious affiliations find metaphysical concepts helpful, like P04’s idea of meeting in “infinite energy” after death. Traditional practices also offer comfort, such as P19’s experience with Native American sweat lodges: “They’ll have a sweat lodge right after that [funeral] . . . if you have a prayer.” P22’s study of natural medicine as a monk provided wisdom that he

now uses to help others. These varied approaches reflect a universal search for understanding and consolation in the face of mortality.

Losing a loved one often highlights the importance of family and friends, leading many to spend more time together to cope with the loss. This theme captures instances where the presence of close ones alleviates the pain associated with death. P07 emphasizes the value of family, stating, "I'd rather die with my family and friends, even if it ended tomorrow than say move to f*ckin Arizona." The influence of a lost loved one can continue through family, as P13 explained, "They know him through us." Practical considerations also emerge, such as P21 arranging life insurance and P28 focusing on her children's wellbeing: "My only focus is my kids, to make sure they're okay." Children, in particular, become paramount, not only in valuing life but also in preventing despair, as P28 expressed the desire to be kept alive for her children, and P09 preferred to "wait to see what the kids make of themselves" instead of contemplating suicide. For some, family serves as a legacy, with P35 confirming, "The continuum of your legacy, at least to me, it means a lot." These statements reflect a collective emphasis on family as a vital coping mechanism and a source of strength and continuity.

This theme explores the intrinsic value of doing good and making a conscious effort to better oneself or others, particularly in the face of death. It can manifest as a desire to improve or a way to cope with guilt or regret. For example, P18 was inspired to become a better person after witnessing her friend's death, saying, "I just keep wanting to be a better person. That's about it. Really, just being [a] better person." Some individuals engage in positive actions to compensate for past mistakes or make amends with a loved one. P01, despite regrets about arguing with his mother, found solace in resolving issues with his father before his passing. He reflected, "I was able to spend a little time with him ... I did acknowledge some of the issues we had, and you know, took responsibility for it." This theme underscores the transformative power of loss in motivating personal growth and reconciliation.

Accepting the reality of mortality emerged as a common antidote to death anxiety among participants, even though it wasn't extensively discussed. P27 found consolation in understanding death as a natural process, stating, "where I find my comfort, in knowing that this is a process of life." Another participant's perspective shifted after reading a Mexican hospital's wall, "It read, 'Treat often, cure sometimes, comfort always.' And that gave me a different perspective, that we have to accept death." This acceptance often led to a focus on living healthier lives. P04 acknowledged, "I don't always eat the healthiest, but I try to eat healthy [sic]." P13 concentrated on eliminating bad habits, saying, "I quit smoking when I was 40. I was 48 when he passed. So, I don't smoke, a couple of cocktails, that's it, you know? So I don't, I don't overdrink, I exercise." P26 added, "I have paid more attention to my body, and like what I consume both food, drink, TV, even things I listen to . . . 'cause everything we consume at some point is poisoning us, so I just do the little things that I can to make my life and my body more healthy [sic]."

This theme encapsulates how participants used alcohol or substances to manage the challenges and emotions associated with losing a loved one. Although recognized by many as a problem itself, the use of alcohol and substances was often cited as a means to cope with emotions such as anxiety, trauma, shock, grief, guilt, and regret. The challenges and solutions often intertwined, as these methods of coping can lead to additional problems, including addiction. P22, for example, turned to marijuana to curb grief and anxiety. P06's experience illustrates the complexity of this theme. While caring for his dying grandmother, he used methamphetamine to find the courage to help her, stating, "I think I'll do crystal [methamphetamine] and go clean my grandma's house tomorrow. It gave me the courage, like the mental breakthrough, to be like, I'm gonna go help out." His reliance on substances extended to other encounters

with his grandmother, as he later noted, “I just remember being like, you know, like, I want to get some pills before I go over there. Like, I don't mind being around her. I just want to get like; I just want to feel numb.” The theme highlights the complexity of dealing with loss, where the coping strategies themselves can become new challenges.

Humor emerged as a common coping mechanism among participants dealing with various challenges related to death, forming this theme. They often used laughter to lighten dark topics and alleviate anxiety. P03 made light of pain medication while discussing dying in pain, quipping, “You can't spell morphine without more.” He also jokingly addressed death anxiety with his mom, likening her to the Cryptkeeper. The theme extends to more unconventional approaches, such as P25, who shared conversations with his cousin about suicide fantasies, using humor to discuss it with statements like, “start up a cold mountain with a bottle of vodka, and some tranquilizers, and a big joint, and then watch the sunset.” Even individuals on their deathbeds contributed to this theme, using humor to ease the worries of those around them. P13 recalled her dying husband's jokes, including one about life insurance that led to a playful suggestion for her, saying, “I want you to get a recorder and put it in the casket, and then people come up to look at me, I'll say, well, what are you looking at? You're not getting anything.” Overall, the theme illustrates the multifaceted ways humor can serve as a coping strategy in the face of death, whether through self-deprecating humor, dark jokes, or even laughter at one's own mortality.

This theme revolves around the desire and actions to honor someone, often helping individuals cope with the loss of a loved one. For instance, P36 remembered his father's wish to be remembered, connecting with him through memories and an inherited mountain bike, reflecting, “Hopefully, you'll remember when I'm dead and gone.” P03 found a unique way to honor his grandparents by spreading their ashes in locations they had once visited together, creating a personal tribute to their shared experiences. Honor is not only expressed in memorials but also in fulfilling a loved one's desires or principles. A woman found honor in taking care of a family member during the most humbling moments. P26 furthered her education to honor her father's wishes, a decision that guided her through anxiety, stress, and grief. She described her academic struggle, emphasizing her success in fulfilling her father's dreams for her, saying, “I almost failed out that semester... I didn't luckily 'cause all he ever wanted for me to do was go to school and get a degree, which I ultimately did.” The theme emphasizes various ways that honor can be a profound, personalized coping mechanism in dealing with loss and remembering those who have passed.

In the context of understanding participants' views on mortality and exploring what constitutes a “good death,” various answers were provided. Aligning with Adair's (2021) research, a strong preference to die at home was noted. Participants' responses ranged from desiring a death full of enjoyment to a quick, painless end. P03 emphasized living life to the fullest, saying, “I'm here for a good time, not a long time, you know. We're going to go visit a loan shark, and I'm gonna take out a bunch of cash, and we're gonna party.” Others expressed wishes for a quick death; P34 hoped to “die in my sleep or get shot in the head,” while P24 and P17 desired no pain or hurt. P26 shared a fear of anticipation, preferring a quick death, a sentiment echoed by P09, who considered “a really quick car wreck.” Conversely, P08 found it a shame not to experience death, and P04 wanted to “feel me shut off. Peacefully, if possible.” P35 and P16 discussed what they wouldn't want, such as a slow disease or dying with unfulfilled desires. P13 and P07 also added preferences for a peaceful death without sickness or torture. The location was significant for some, with P23 describing a natural setting as ideal, such as “the top of a mountain and a forest.” The participants' varied responses highlighted a spectrum of desires and fears surrounding death, reflecting individual preferences and philosophies.

Towards the end of the interviews, the concept of a "bucket list" emerged, with traveling being the most common desire, in line with research by Periyakoil et al. (2018). Participants expressed various aspirations, ranging from specific adventures like hot air balloon rides or European travel to more personalized goals. P32 detailed a diverse list including "Finish second masters, scuba diving, sailing, motorbike, learning Thai... chef school in Spain," while P31's desire was singular, wanting to "take some drugs that I'm scared [of] today, like LSD." Others spoke about living life to the fullest or focusing on practical, achievable dreams. An example was a man in his seventies, P10, who initially lamented his financial limitations but later envisioned returning to his artwork, saying, "I'm hoping that ... I can get back to my artwork in some way and do a little bit more before I go." The desire to create or express oneself artistically was a common thread, as exemplified by P17's aspiration to explore "alternative building and stuff, like natural building." These bucket list items highlight the diversity of personal desires and passions that individuals hope to pursue before the end of their lives.

Mortality

Although some participants consciously strived to avoid contemplating their mortality, tangible changes often resulted from the experience of losing a loved one. Specifically, the presence of death led people to reflect on their own mortality. The death of a loved one triggers reflections that can significantly influence the way people live their lives (Prayag et al., 2021). To more fully understand which aspects of experiencing death are most prominent and how they affect individuals, specific emerging themes were identified and organized in the following sequence: facing death, realization of death, death-related conversations and last words, conditions of dying, control over death, positive emotions, symbols and spiritual references, perspectives on life, and viewpoints on death.

The absence of a loved one only begins to describe the loss experienced. In this study, participants intimately engaged with death, whether present at the moment or in close communication throughout. The theme of facing death encompassed firsthand accounts of both the deceased's final moments and the participants' subsequent experiences. Some individuals may deny or hide their impending death to protect loved ones, or due to pride, like when P20 said of her late husband, "He was a proud man, and he didn't want people to know." This evasion aligns with Banner et al. (2019), who define it as a stage of preparedness. The reality of death often emerges through a diagnosis, sometimes inspiring a fight against death, as when P12's father declared, "I'm going to fight it." Most people, however, reach a point of acceptance, like when a woman shared her mother's knowing farewell. This acceptance, particularly when death is peaceful, aligns with what Gijbetsen and Kremer (2021) describe as a valid death goal, as one caregiver expressed, saying her uncle could "just go."

Some individuals struggle with the concept of losing a loved one, finding it surreal, like when a man compared his granddad's death to the loss of a distant figure, stating, "So yeah, after he died, it was like not real." The realization can be painful, as one woman reflected on her father: "But, like I said, he was my hero." Conversely, anticipating the death may ease acceptance, as one woman found it "easier knowing that my dad was dying than mother who died unexpectedly" (P40), aligning with research by Feathers and Rowe-Haynes (2020). The impact of such a realization can linger; P04 recalled touching a cold body at a young age, and P14 said, "It didn't hit me until the day where I saw his dead body at the funeral." This contrasts with cases where the reality takes time to sink in, like P20's reflection on her father's death: "It kind of was like weird." The varied experiences around accepting a loved one's death highlight the complex emotional journey that accompanies such a significant life event.

Discussing death, even at the end, can be an awkward and challenging topic for many. Open conversations about dying and final words are often avoided, as one man stated, "I have hella people that I'm close to that passed, but I don't think I actually talked about death with any of them" (P19), and another noted, "We never, never talked about death, like I said. But my dad didn't talk about feelings, you know? So, no, it wasn't discussed" (P32). Some family members recall actively avoiding the subject, like P29, who found it "ugly," and P31, who wondered what the conversation would have been like if she had asked her dying uncle about death. However, those who have accepted their deaths may leave last words of wisdom or advice, highlighting their significance to the family. P36 recalled his father's final words, saying, "He went out like a champ." This phenomenon is not just personal; Yetzer and Pyszczynski (2019) note its importance in validating the worth and lasting impressions of the dying. The gravity of these final conversations may even come as a clear sign of approaching death, such as when a woman recalled her father's stern words about her daughter, emphasizing their deep meaning.

The cause of death can be either clear or complex, and the conditions leading to death are diverse and varied. These intricacies play a significant role in the experience of death, often adding to suffering, as explored by Krikorian et al. (2020), rather than a simpler passing from old age. Some experience psychological disturbances, such as a man's mother with dementia who became paranoid (P05), or a woman who lost her great aunt to cancer, resulting in hallucinations due to chemical imbalances (P27). Others describe the overwhelming conditions faced by loved ones, such as a daughter recounting her mother's "fall from grace when she fell and hit her head, causing a slow brain bleed followed by rapid cognitive decline" (P15), or a woman whose husband had various autoimmune diseases, stating, "he needed a heart and lung transplant, but he wasn't a candidate because of the disease . . . [it] wouldn't have worked for him. So, you know, we tried everything, and [it] didn't work" (P13). These accounts illustrate that death can range from peaceful to intensely traumatic, as exemplified by one man's description of his grandfather's agonizing disease, which "was making his organs literally turn into like calcium, or his organs were like calcifying, so this horrible slow death" (P35).

Death often conjures feelings of sadness, grief, or despair, but it can also lead to positive and healthy emotional responses such as pride, relief, and thankfulness, all contributing to personal growth. Research by Mroz et al. (2020) delves into the personal growth from these emotions, although it doesn't detail the emotions themselves. One man spoke of feeling proud of his father's full life, stating, "I felt a power, like a good shiver... almost proud. I almost felt proud" (P08). Relief is a frequent sentiment, described both for oneself and the deceased; P06 simply declared, "it was like a relief." Another participant described relief for everyone upon her mother's death due to her unhappiness. Feelings of thankfulness also manifest in various ways, from being grateful for a peaceful death to the ability to make a final connection. P09 expressed thankfulness for his mother's peaceful passing, while another participant cherished the way her grandmother died, surrounded by family. P39 recalled her memorable experience of expressing gratitude to a loved one on her deathbed. These examples underscore the complex and often unexpected emotions that the experience of death can evoke, showing that it is not solely a source of sorrow.

Death is often perceived as a spiritual experience, a perspective that aligns with research by Generous and Keeley (2020), explaining the positive outcomes from such a viewpoint, and theories in TMT (Arrowood & Cox, 2020; Juhl, 2019) relating it to evolution. When participants in the study referred to supernatural or metaphysical aspects of death, they were grouped under this theme. For example, one man's grandfather spoke of angels and a song (P04), while another individual, P12, reflected on how losing someone had shifted his beliefs about God and the afterlife. People also reported seeing signs in the natural world

following a death. P07 shared an experience of seeing a worm after his father's death, considering it a reincarnation. Signs were also found in numbers, such as P26's experience with the auspicious number four after her father's passing, noting "I was obviously a hot mess, and I was like crying on my living room floor. And I look[ed] over at the clock, and it was 4:44 in the morning ... then after that, I just saw it everywhere." These accounts emphasize the multifaceted spiritual reactions to death, showing it as an experience that can deepen connections to the metaphysical world.

Losing a loved one often prompts diverse reactions to the concept of death. Some individuals, like P05, might go into denial, avoiding the thought of death altogether, saying it's "definitely something I'm in denial [about]. I don't dwell on it...I just feel like I'm going to live my life. And then one day I'm just going to drop, and that'll be the end of it." This avoidance can also appear in reflections on life's transient moments, as when P16 realized the "temporariness" at his high school graduation. Others advocate for a more open discussion about death, consistent with Götze et al. (2018)'s research on death anxiety. P21 criticized the societal taboo against discussing death, especially with children, while P28 and P27 emphasized the importance of open family conversations about the subject. Some even contemplate life after death, like P35, who said, "There's no not existing...Once you exist, you exist ... My thing with death is I think it's where I was before I was here." These differing attitudes underline the complexity of human responses to death, ranging from denial and avoidance to acceptance and philosophical contemplation.

Discussion

The study investigates the profound effects and varied experiences associated with the death of a loved one. It underscores that the way an individual confronts death, either personally or through the passing of a loved one, is unique and often deviates from prior expectations. Contrary to the popular belief that the inevitability of death primarily concerns older or terminally ill individuals, this study highlights that death is an integral part of the human experience, irrespective of age or health status (Carroll, 2019). However, this universal experience remains elusive, as individuals typically only grapple with it when confronted with the loss of a loved one (Cai et al., 2020). A salient point to note is that people only truly experience death once, making its exact nature perpetually mysterious. This study doesn't delve into the angst caused by this uncertainty but rather the general reluctance to confront it.

Central to the research was the examination of the disparities between anticipated and actual experiences related to death. Given the finality of death, it's impossible to fully grasp the sensations felt by those at the brink of passing. Nevertheless, by delving into experiences surrounding the deaths of loved ones, the research attempted to shed some light on the sensations associated with fading consciousness. A significant aspect of the study was analyzing the aftermath—how the death of a close individual influences the lives of the survivors.

To further deepen the understanding, the study leaned on Rowe and Kahn's (1997) theory of successful aging. This theory offers a lens to assess how different life stages, milestones, and age influence perceptions of death. It posits that regardless of one's life experiences, death remains a consistent reality, but our relationship and understanding of it vary widely. This theory aids in framing expectations people have for their lives and eventual deaths.

The research methodology employed was the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This approach was chosen for three primary reasons: it acknowledges the deeply personal nature of experiences (Peterson, 2019), it recognizes the unique verbal descriptions that can't be condensed to mere data (Tzur Bitan & Lazar, 2019), and it permits open-ended inquiries, granting participants the liberty to chronicle

their narratives uninhibitedly (Sawatsky et al., 2019). The use of IPA ensured that the qualitative data, rich in personal accounts, remained unquantified, preserving the authenticity of the shared experiences while addressing the study's core questions.

The profound challenge of losing a loved one has been extensively studied, and this research has unearthed new insights. One novel finding is the cultural or perhaps subconscious legacy of caregiving: children who observed their parents caring for their grandparents felt a stronger sense of duty and honor to care for their own parents later in life. Furthermore, they conveyed this responsibility to their offspring, emphasizing the tradition's importance.

The kind of care a child bestowed upon their elderly parent reflected the nature of care they themselves had received. Notably, children of reserved parents, who concealed their parenthood challenges, emulated these behaviors in their caregiving roles. Concealing these struggles, unfortunately, sometimes culminated in issues like substance abuse. Existing research by Jimenez et al. (2018) postulates that open dialogue about these challenges might prevent such adverse outcomes.

While caregiving's tangible demands diminish after the passing of a loved one, other psychological burdens may intensify. This study identified heightened death anxiety post the loved one's death, stemming from introspection about one's mortality and fears of losing other close relations. This indicates that while the tangible burdens of caregiving might fade, mental challenges might surge in the aftermath of death.

An interesting observation was that emotional responses typically associated with sudden deaths—like guilt, shame, and resentment—were also reported in instances where death was anticipated. This suggests that the sheer uniqueness and unpredictability of the experience, even when expected, can evoke powerful and unexpected emotional reactions.

Regret was a pervasive emotion for many participants. In alignment with prior studies suggesting that individuals strive for a life without regrets (Gijbsbertsen & Kremer, 2021; Hine, 2022), the research emphasized that unresolved issues and unexpressed sentiments towards the deceased were significant sources of distress. Keeley & Yingling (2007) have noted that fulfilling final conversations can aid acceptance of death, indicating that leaving words unsaid can result in lingering remorse.

Participants' experiences with grief varied; some had navigated their grief journey, while others were still grappling with their loss. This diversity in grieving stages is essential in comprehending the bereavement process. A crucial aspect of grief highlighted in the study is its multifaceted nature—emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes that manifest differently depending on cultural, social, and individual factors (Andrews et al., 2021). Professional assistance in dealing with grief was beneficial for participants, with many expressing personal growth and a newfound perspective after confronting a loved one's death.

The quest to find meaning after the death of a loved one is a recurring theme in grief research, as outlined by Neimeyer (2019) and others (Christian et al., 2018; Mroz et al., 2020; Piotrowski et al., 2019). While many studies have explored deep personal growth and spirituality as avenues to finding this meaning, the current research presents a different perspective. It suggests that sometimes, meaning could arise from simpler revelations, such as discovering more about the loved one through their personal belongings or writings, providing unexpected clarity or closure.

The age-old adage "time heals all wounds" is supported by research (Titlestad & Dyregrov, 2022), and was reflected in the sentiments of many participants. However, upon closer examination, time alone was not the primary healing factor. Productivity, or engaging in meaningful activities, emerged as the more influential agent in the healing process. Time's value was in the opportunities it afforded for action and progress.

The therapeutic power of humor in the grieving process, previously highlighted in research by Potter (2023) and Campbell (2020), was evident in the current study. Participants occasionally used humor during interviews, possibly to manage their emotional responses. The juxtaposition of laughter and tears might have been an emotional release or perhaps a coping mechanism to present themselves more composedly to the researcher.

Acceptance of mortality is a pivotal step in navigating grief, and it can manifest in imagining one's own ideal end. Krikorian et al. (2020) defines a generally accepted ideal death as one that is peaceful and natural. However, this study elaborated on this general understanding, with participants detailing their unique perspectives on a "good death." Some placed emphasis on the actual moment of passing, desiring a calm, pain-free end with time for farewells. Others prioritized the quality of the life lived, emphasizing achievements, minimal regrets, and the legacy left behind. When asked further, many expressed a desire for both a life well-lived and a peaceful demise, but initial responses often concentrated on one aspect over the other. This discrepancy sheds light on how individuals visualize life and death on their mental timelines, suggesting diverse conceptualizations of what a "good death" truly entails.

The concept of a "bucket list" serves as a nexus between leading a fulfilling life and experiencing a satisfactory death. A study by Periyakoil et al. (2018) revealed top desires on individuals' bucket lists, such as travel, accomplishing significant goals or milestones, spending quality time with family, achieving financial prosperity, and engaging in adventurous activities. Participants in the current study echoed these aspirations. However, a distinct emphasis emerged on the desire for artistic self-expression, manifested through pursuits like video editing, writing, and construction.

Equally intriguing was the internal lens some participants adopted. Instead of pinpointing external achievements or experiences, they fixated on internal growth and self-improvement. The vagueness surrounding this desire hinted at underlying dissatisfaction, possibly stemming from regrets or perceived missed opportunities. Furthermore, the study revealed that some older participants had seemingly relinquished their bucket list dreams.

The therapeutic value of verbalizing emotions and experiences was a recurrent theme among participants. Whether through professional counseling or candid conversations with loved ones, the act of sharing and processing grief proved cathartic. Giacomucci (2020) emphasized the importance of not seeing these communication methods as mutually exclusive. Diverse avenues for expressing emotions can be synergistically beneficial. Notably, the current research itself, through its interview format, offered participants a reflective space. Many reported gaining fresh insights or perspectives on their experiences, emphasizing the power of revisiting and re-articulating their feelings and thoughts on the matter. This highlights the importance of both professional therapeutic interventions and personal, intimate conversations in the healing process.

The exploration of death and dying, while universally pertinent, remains a challenging and often avoided subject. This study builds upon existing literature by emphasizing the regrets of individuals for not discussing death more openly, especially with loved ones approaching the end of their lives.

Consistent with Riley's (2020) findings, talking about death remains taboo across various cultures. However, what this research adds to the discourse is the expressed desire by participants to have broached the topic more deeply. Many expressed regret over not having inquired more about their loved one's personal experience of dying, despite the inherent awkwardness of the subject.

While previous work by Banner et al. (2019) underscores the intentional evasion of discussing death, especially in the face of a grave prognosis, they stopped short of pinpointing the reasons for such

avoidance. This study's participants shed light on this mystery. While some admitted their own discomfort in initiating discussions about death, many felt that the dying individuals themselves were not transparent in their communications. Explanations ranged from denial, insecurity about their own mortality, or even a misguided attempt to protect their loved ones from premature grief. This protective stance is particularly thought-provoking. The suggestion that a dying individual might deliberately mislead their family, not to shield them from pain, but to spare themselves the distress of witnessing their grief, adds a nuanced perspective to the dynamics of death.

Moreover, this research unearthed intriguing patterns in parent-child relationships, particularly between fathers and daughters. The observed avoidance tactics exhibited by some fathers at the end of their life may be indicative of similar behaviors earlier in the relationship. For instance, a father might evade facing the pain he caused his daughter due to absenteeism during pivotal moments. The inclination to bypass immediate confrontation could be extrapolated to the approach taken during the dying process. The study underscores the profound hurt and resentment felt by those left in the dark, casting doubt on the veracity of such protective measures by dying parents. This poses a significant question: is it truly a selfless act aimed at shielding a loved one from imminent grief, or is it a self-centered endeavor to escape witnessing the immediate pain their departure causes?

Limitations

Phenomenological research delves deep into the lived experiences of individuals, yielding rich and in-depth insights. However, like all research approaches, it has its limitations. One such limitation in this study revolves around the inherent challenge of the topic under investigation: the experience of death. Clearly, a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon remains elusive since those who have experienced death firsthand cannot be interviewed. While the testimonies of the participants in this study provide valuable perspectives on death, the confines of the sample size mean that not all facets of the death experience are likely represented. There might be countless other nuances, feelings, and experiences that remain unexplored or inadequately addressed.

Compounding the complexity of understanding death are a myriad of factors that vary across instances of death. Variables such as the relationship dynamics with the deceased, the circumstances surrounding the death, the age at which the individual died, and the time elapsed since the death, all interplay to shape an individual's experience. Although these factors undoubtedly influence the grieving process and perceptions of death, their precise impact was not measured in this study. While recognizing their significance, assessing these variables was outside the study's purview, suggesting avenues for future research to delve deeper into these multifaceted experiences.

Conclusion

Death is inevitable; therefore, any attempt to evade its realities inherently causes tension for an individual. This research underscores the profound relationship humans have with death. Through the exploration of personal experiences surrounding death, the significance of addressing this topic during one's lifetime becomes clear. While the overarching conclusion is broad, it can be distilled into three distinct insights:

1. Individuals often regret not discussing death with their loved ones before their passing.
2. Many wish to understand a loved one's perspective on death when they are dying but hesitate or fear initiating the conversation.
3. People have distinct preferences for their own passing, yet often neglect to plan for it.

Life presents a myriad of choices, with death being one of its certainties. The inevitability of death grants us a lifetime to prepare. While the vibrancy of life typically overshadows thoughts of its end, this may lead to unforeseen challenges. Death can strike suddenly and traumatically, warranting recognition. However, more often, the approach of death is a gradual process, perceptible over months or even years. Although predicting the exact moment of our demise is impossible, the natural course of aging affords us considerable time to ponder our ultimate destiny. By understanding how lifestyle choices impact health, we can discern how these decisions influence the manner of our death. Even if health or longevity isn't a primary concern, creating a "bucket list" can help individuals gauge the time they believe remains in their life. Despite the unpredictability of death, decisions regarding it are ever-present throughout our lives. Unquestionably, death is a part of life and, ultimately, the concluding experience of it. The gravity of this event varies from person to person, eliciting a gamut of psychological responses, from anxieties to aspirations. Significantly, death is a unique event, unparalleled by any previous life experience, and perhaps only comparable to birth. Imagining death in its entirety remains a mystery for anyone. Yet, a substantial part of what death encompasses is accessible to understanding. Choosing to avoid reflection on this imminent event only exacerbates the distress stemming from the unknown. Engaging in conversations about death, both internally and with others, can be invaluable in shaping and navigating one's life journey.

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