

IDEA

Memento Mori: The key to living a good life

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What would our existence look like if death didn't exist? Would our lives lose all meaning or gain new ones? **THINK** Magazine explores the ubiquitous psychological approaches to death with mental health senior lecturer **Dr Michael Galea** (Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Malta) and scholar **Prof. Michael Zammit** (Department of Philosophy, University of Malta) to see whether living forever would change our attitudes towards life and death.

In ancient Rome, slaves accompanying generals on victory parades whispered the Latin phrase *memento mori*, 'remember that you must die', as a reminder of their commanders' mortality. The reminder was intended to prevent them being consumed by their pride. Some two millennia later, do we live our lives remembering that they will come to an end? And would our lives be changed if we didn't die?

AWARENESS OF DEATH

Humans seem to be the only animal that is aware of their own death. 'The fact that somehow, at some time, we are going to die seems to be some kind of human element affiliated with our species. In psychology, the fear of death has been widely discussed. We are aware of this reality.

It is an excruciating reality, and therefore we do all that it takes, and normally do so reasonably, to try to keep death at a distance,' says mental health lecturer Dr Michael Galea (Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Malta).

The older we get, the more present a reality our death becomes. As a clinical psychologist, Galea has often seen how people react when they receive a terminal disease diagnosis. Reactions span from denial to acceptance of this painful experience. And usually, this reaction is carried to their death. 'I have witnessed people who lived their last hours with a terminal illness like cancer and died peacefully,' Galea says. 'However, I have seen people stuck to their unacceptance till the last seconds of their lives. This struggle shows even after their death. The tension would show in their complexion and muscles, for example.' ▶



In light of such a crucial moment, human relationships with death vary greatly. 'The problem is that we end up assuming that we are not going to die – at least, not for the time to come. Although we know very well that death is part of life and we hear of death stories near and far, we somehow believe – or rather, assume – that it won't touch our skin, not for the time being,' Galea says. Galea believes that humans carry a number of assumptions to ease their minds about existential worries, such as that we are innately good people, that life always makes sense, or that we may be somehow immune to death for the time being. Yet, although these assumptions may shield us from certain existential realities and challenges, in truth they remain nothing but assumptions.

Take a person who has high cholesterol and has recently had heart bypass surgery. They are faced with a choice. Either live a healthier life to postpone death or carry on as they were, leading to an early demise. However, after surviving such an operation and being inebriated by denial, a person can embrace *carpe diem* by sticking to an unhealthy lifestyle. 'While in psychology, defence mechanisms may assist us in the short term, they are quite risky in the long term. Living in denial is one such scenario,' Galea explains.

A LIFE WITHOUT DEATH

How would our lives change if we could live forever? It is hard to say, especially considering that we rarely think about dying. However, philosophers and theologians have long thought about death and eternal life. Prof. Michael Zammit raises the Sanskrit story *Markandeya* as an example.

Childless parents were presented with two options by Lord Shiva (known as 'The Destroyer'). They could either be given a child of long life but not of great wisdom, or a child of short life but great knowledge. The parents chose the second option, and thus Markandeya was born. As his sixteenth birthday approached, together with his certain death, Markandeya sat in deep meditation as the God of Death, Yama, placed a noose around his neck to pull him into death.

However, as town residents were so fond of Markandeya, they convinced Shiva to save the boy's life for an eternity. As death was eliminated, the town soon realised that insects would swarm their fields, their fruits would rot but never disappear, and trees would grow dead leaves that remained. People learned that the elimination of death eliminates life.

'Mythology is claiming that there is life and death, and they need each other. Indeed, they are parts of the same realm. And yet, at the very centre of this circle of life and death, there is the eternal. It is distinct from both life and death,' Zammit explains, considering the essence of the Markandeya story.

At face value, the idea of eliminating death and living forever may sound attractive. However, as soon as one looks at life without death, it quickly becomes apparent that it raises more problems than benefits.

'If you scratch a bit beyond, there is something unnatural about the thought of living forever. Once death is conditionally removed, there is no meaning to life. Life would be removed alongside it. They are intricately entwined in a deep embrace,' according to Zammit.

'The realm of life needs to express itself in terms of becoming. Without death lubricating the becoming nature of life, life itself is paralysed, turns static,' Zammit explains. Without death, there is no change. Just as the trees in the story rot but don't die, our lives would also stagnate. 'And yet, the non-dual philosophy (that life and death are not distinct, but different aspects of the same) goes a step further, saying that even these two are indeed illusory when compared to what is eternal, what is real,' Zammit adds, leaving it to the reader's philosophical experience to decide and/or seek what the 'eternal' may mean.

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A DEATH WORTH LIVING FOR

So what useful advice can be learnt from these ideas? 'A lot of psychotherapists and psychologists speak about focusing on the here and now. Mindfulness is just that: being in touch with your reality,' Galea says. But what is somebody's reality? Not the past and not even the future, but the present moment.

Living in the present moment and being grateful for what we have is the mindset that helps people accept death. We may easily forget that we have an expiry date. We do not know when the time will come. But what if we knew? 'If I knew that today

was my last day, how would I see my life? Would I have regrets? Would it change how I spend my last day? Think about it as a box of chocolates that you bring home from the supermarket. There is an expiration date on it, and you will eat it before that, not wanting anything to spoil. So why do some people forget about their life having an expiration date and not living to their full potential?' Galea poses the eternal enigma.

He says that through his practice, he has come across many people who have completely changed their lives for the better, who have become more positive and improved their own lives and their communities after learning that they would be dying soon.

So how do we make our lives better? 'I cannot escape death, but at least I can escape the fear of it,' said the great Stoic philosopher Epictetus. Modern psychological research suggests that to address the fear of death, one needs to remember that their days are numbered: *memento mori*. People need to make the best out of their lives, whatever awaits after death. **T**

QUOTE BOX

"Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new."

Steve Jobs - Stanford University graduation address, 2005

