

Karen M. Wyatt, M.D.

Author, *'What Really Matters: 7 Lessons for Living from the Stories of the Dying'*

6 Steps to Rise Above Your Fear of Death

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/6-steps-to-rise-above-your-fear-of-death_b_6125288

Posted: 11/11/2014



Let's face it: If you're human you have most likely experienced a fear of death at one time or another in your life -- or else you may have been in complete denial of your fear and repressing it. That's because the fear of death is normal for us Earthlings -- we have a survival instinct that motivates us to avoid death-inducing situations.

Death represents the ultimate unknown, a territory in which we have no experience and no control. So it is natural to feel fear when we think about death and also natural to avoid those thoughts whenever possible. But it turns out that this avoidance of death doesn't serve us well in the end.

When we haven't thought about death's meaning or impact for ourselves or our loved ones, we can be caught unprepared and unable to cope when sudden tragedy strikes. Then we are more likely to make hasty decisions out of desperation that we may later regret.

I have witnessed many families who agreed to life-prolonging measures for a loved one in an emergency situation because they hadn't previously thought about or discussed what to do in such a crisis. Then, after taking time to think through the wishes of their loved one, they had to reverse their decision and stop the heroic measures that were taking place -- all at a great emotional and financial cost.

The solution to this heartbreaking situation is to spend time contemplating and preparing for death before it becomes a critical issue. But to follow through on the necessary preparations, you must first overcome your own natural fears about death and dying. Here are six approaches to working through the fear:

- 1. Think about it.** Spend some time each week allowing yourself to think about death in a personal way. Imagine that you are on your death bed taking your last breaths: who would you want to have with you, where would you like to be, what would you want to say to your loved ones?
- 2. Write about it.** Use your journal to record your experiences from the first exercise above. Then explore your fears of death -- what exactly are you afraid of? Where have those fears come from? Do you actually believe they are true? Writing about these thoughts in your journal will help you track how your feelings about death begin to change over time.
- 3. Read about it.** There are many excellent books available right now that discuss death and dying from various perspectives: medical, spiritual, historical, sociological, psychological, metaphysical, and more. Choose the approach that best fits your interests and spend some time with a good book. You'll find that reading stories about death and dying can help ease your fears and answer some of your questions, as

well. There's a list of books that are [Recommended Reading](#) at End-of-Life University, which is a good place to start your search.

4. **Learn about it.** There's nothing better than education to counteract fear, so take time to learn some factual information about death and dying. Try listening to the interviews with expert speakers posted each month at www.eoluniversity.com and expand your knowledge base.

5. **Talk about it.** Sign up for a [Death Café](#) event where you can join in conversations about death and dying with other people who have an interest in the subject. Or download the Conversation Starter Kit from www.theconversationproject.org to help you talk with your friends and family about the end-of-life.

6. **Work with it.** One of the best ways to rise above the fear of death is to become a volunteer for a hospice or palliative care organization in your community. You will receive training to work with patients and their families as a volunteer and you will discover the beauty that arises at the end-of-life. In my experience as a hospice medical director, most volunteers find that their fear of death is greatly diminished through this work.

No matter which approach you choose to help you rise above your fear of death, you will benefit a great deal from working through that fear. You will be able to contemplate all of the aspects of life, from birth through death, with less anxiety and you will experience increased peace of mind about all of life's uncertainties.

In addition you will be able to prepare yourself for the later years of your own life, when unexpected situations can arise and quick decisions may be required. If you have discussed and planned ahead for that time of life, then you and your loved ones will be better off because of your actions.

There's no better time to start facing your fears than right now because, as Sogyal Rinpoche reminds us in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, "Death is real and comes without warning." Take comfort in knowing that you are not alone on this journey since each of us must do this same work of rising above the fear of death.

Dr. Karen Wyatt is a hospice and family physician and the author of the award-winning book "What Really Matters: 7 Lessons for Living from the Stories of the Dying." She is a frequent keynote speaker and radio show guest whose profound teachings have helped many find their way through the difficult times of life. Learn more about her work at www.karenwyattmd.com.

Follow Karen M. Wyatt, M.D. on Twitter: www.twitter.com/@spiritualmd