

Facing Down the Biggest Fear of All

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(Editor's note: This essay is part of a series from author and speaker Ken Druck, based on work in his book [Courageous Aging](#), which is about how all people can make peace with, and find joy in, every stage of life.)

Our fear of death begins when we're kids. Perhaps we had to face the mystifying idea of impermanence when a beloved pet, parent or grandparent died. The stark reality that this loved one was really gone — and gone *forever*, was both devastating and terrifying. From early childhood, when we're introduced to the concept of "futureless-ness" — that is, old age and eventually death, there are few things as difficult for us to deal with. Facing down the fear of dying requires great strength, humility and spiritual fortitude. But, as you will see, it's worth the effort.

Summoning the courage to quell our fears and come to terms with our mortality may be one of the most challenging things we ever do — but it may be one of the best things we can do. Freeing up the space in our minds and hearts where fear has resided and replacing it with newfound peace, courage and understanding is one of the greatest gifts we can give ourselves.

5 Ways to Overcome Your Fear of Death

Here are several things that have helped me, and those I've had the honor and privilege of working with over the years, to make peace and even find joy as they near the end of their lives:

1. Treat Conquering the Fear of Death as a Process, not an Endpoint

Loosening the grip of death's terrifying, paralyzing and often, depressing hold on us comes with learning to calm our hearts, deepen our faith, bolster our courage, surrender our need for control, give a voice to our fear and reimagine the greater possibilities. The goal is not to obliterate our trepidation about dying or to never again be afraid. This may not even be attainable for most folks. We can, however, learn how to contain, channel and ease our fears. And this alone will be enough to lighten our hearts and improve the quality of our lives.

2. Allow a Humble Unknowingness

We do not know with 100 percent certainty what happens when we die. Or where, if anywhere, we were before we were born. Unknowingness is a natural part of the human experience. We can try to fight it, pretending we know exactly what's going to happen when we pass, or we can remain humble, seek deeper understanding and keep the faith that there is something greater and more important that we will be privy to at some point in our evolution.

3. Death Is Inescapable: Trying to Outsmart, Outrun or Outmaneuver It Is an Exercise in Futility

The fear of death resides in our DNA. We're programmed to live ... and to do everything in our power to survive. Since the thought of dying can be overwhelming, we try to run and hide from it. Opening ourselves to the possibilities of life after death is natural. And so is conducting honest inquiries into the true nature of life and death.

Attempting a spiritual or religious bypass, however, by blindly adopting a faith, can get us into trouble. Some even believe the fear of death and need for a savior have served as the inspiration for the founding of some religions. When the only means of finding peace and quieting our fears of death is to adopt a religion and/or spiritual path, we can become rigid and inflexible. Our capacity for true inner strength, faith, reflection and spiritual awakening weakens if the only thing we do is recite rituals and pray to be saved by a higher power. Assured a ticket to life everlasting in heaven, we cling to blind faith and forgo the opportunity to cultivate faith from the inside.

3. Embrace Uncertainty and "Choose to Believe" in an Organic Faith

That we undergo a transition from this life when we die is indisputable. There are "believers" and "nonbelievers" who claim to live with a clear sense of certainty about exactly what that is. And then, there are people like me, who are uncertain about the true nature of life and death — but choose to place our bets anyway. I choose to believe, for example, that when I die, I'll be reunited with my daughter Jenna, who died tragically while studying abroad at age 21. I remain vigilant and patient, hopeful and humble, in my uncertainty about the mysterious nature of death.

4. Focus on What You Believe Does Go On After You Die

I have found some measure of peace, and my heart is calm most of the time. But there are times when I'm visited by fear, doubt and profound sorrow. Staring into the abyss, scared that I might be telling myself a story to stave off sorrow and fear... I find the idea of a *great nothingness* to be quite frightening. However, these [occasional lapses into despair, when I feel defenseless, are offset by the times when I feel at peace.](#)

Accepting life's terms, reconciling that we don't get to live forever and being eternally grateful for the blessing of having lived, gives me peace. So does being intimately connected to my daughter in the spiritual realm, bonded by an undying love. From the day of her death in 1996 to this very moment, I've experienced *the love that never dies*. Telling Jenna that I cherish her — feeling her love, and even her presence, has soothed my heart and assured me that love is greater than death. And that love does go on. While it has been a source of unspeakable pain in my life, my daughter's passing has also calmed my fears about death. Whatever that transition is, I believe that I will be joining her, my parents, grandparents and others I have loved someday. And that's OK.

5. Pay the Good in Your Life Forward

When we make strides in reconciling the fact that we're here on lease, we can decide to live from gratitude and pay the good fortune, blessings, gifts and miracles we've been able to experience forward to our kids, grandkids and future generations. Leaving a legacy of love is in direct contrast with living from fear, jealousy, bitterness and resentment. Those who fail to face down their fears of dying think nothing of taking it all down with them when they die. They become reckless and/or indifferent to the kind of future they're leaving behind for future generations. The peace afforded to those who choose to look beyond their own lifetime and pay the good in their lives forward allows them to let go when it's time.

And keep in mind, the following ideals of what I call "courageous living" can be of great help when facing down the fear of death:

- Stay humble, and find peace in your unknowingness. You're a part of something so big that it is unfathomable. The true nature of the universe — where life comes from and where it goes when you die — is an unfolding mystery. Just ask the stars.
- Cultivate a calm mind that allows naturally arising fears and doubts to come and go. Learning to breathe and release even your primordial fears is a form of surrender. You can make peace with life itself as it really is.
- Keep the faith that whatever you believe in your heart is true — or what you *wish* to be true. It's okay to abide by a hoped-for narrative without knowing if it's entirely accurate or not.
- It's also just fine to have faith in a divine truth without apology or justification. Do so while respecting and honoring the rights of others who may have a different view.

The Process of a Lifetime

Dealing with death occurs over the course of a lifetime. When it comes to accepting the inevitable, we're all works in progress and a certain amount of existential unrest is part of being human. The seasons, changes, losses, and transitions of life demand upgrades in our operating systems. Summoning courage, faith, understanding and humility requires great determination. Allowing for, and accepting, life's terms, as well as voicing our objections to the parts that are sad and scary, is all part of the journey.

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