

# We fear death, but what if dying isn't as bad as we think?

Research comparing perceptions of death with accounts of those imminently facing it suggest that maybe we shouldn't worry so much about our own end

by Jessica Brown, *The Guardian*

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Death terrifies many of us, but is, of course, central to the human condition. What if it's not as bad as we fear?

“The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else,” wrote Earnest Becker in his book, [The Denial of Death](#). It's a fear strong enough to compel us to force kale down our throats, run sweatily on a treadmill at 7am on a Monday morning, and show our genitals to a stranger with cold hands and a white coat if we feel something's a little off.

But our impending end isn't just a benevolent supplier of healthy behaviours. Researchers have found death can determine our prejudices, whether we give to charity or wear sun cream, our desire to be famous, what type of leader we vote for, how we name our children and even how we feel about breastfeeding.

And, of course, it terrifies us. Death anxiety appears to be at the core of several mental health disorders, including health anxiety, panic disorder and depressive disorders. And we're too scared to talk about it. A [ComRes survey](#) from 2014 found that eight in ten Brits are uncomfortable talking about death, and only a third have written a will.

But we don't need to worry so much, according to [new research comparing our perception of what it's like to die](#) with the accounts people facing imminent death. Researchers analysed the writing of regular bloggers with either terminal cancer or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) who all died over the course of the study, and compared it to blog posts written by a group of participants who were told to imagine they had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and only had only a few months to live. They looked for general feelings of positivity and negativity, and words describing positive and negative emotions including happiness, fear and terror.

Blog posts from the terminally ill were found to have considerably more positive words and fewer negative ones than those imagining they were dying – and their use of positive language increased as they got close to death.

Kurt Gray, one of the study's researchers, said, “I imagine this is because they know things are getting more serious, and there's some kind of acceptance and focusing on the positive because they know they don't have a lot of time left.”

The researchers also compared the last words and poetry of inmates on death row with a group of people tasked with imagining they were about to face execution. Again, there were fewer negative words from the prisoners. Overall, those facing death focused more on what makes life meaningful, including family and religion.

“We talk all the time about how physically adaptable we are, but we’re also mentally adaptable. We can be happy in prison, in hospital, and we can be happy at the edge of death as well,” Gray said.

“Dying isn’t just part of the human condition, but central to it. Everyone dies, and most of us are afraid of it. Our study is important because it’s saying this isn’t as universally bad as we think it is”.

But before we get too ahead of ourselves, the research prompts a few questions. Lisa Iverach, a research fellow at the University of Sydney, explained that the study highlights how the participants may have been less negative because the mystery around death was removed.

“Individuals facing imminent death have had more time to process the idea of death and dying, and therefore, may be more accepting of the inevitability of death. They also have a very good idea about how they are going to die, which may bring some sense of peace or acceptance.”

But not all of us will know how, or when, we’re going to die in advance of it happening, and therefore will miss out on any benefits to be had by uncovering its uncertainty.

Havi Carel, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Bristol, agrees with the study’s findings on how adaptable we are. “I think you get used to the idea of dying, like we get accustomed to many things. The initial shock after receiving a poor prognosis is horrific, but after months or years of living with this knowledge, the dread subsides,” she said.

However, Carel also pointed out that there’s an important distinction between positive responses and pleasantness, and that there are some unpleasant and painful events we’d still be positive about, such as childbirth.

“Blogs are written for public consumption and they remain there after people’s death. Using blogs and poetry may reveal only the outward-facing emotions people are willing to share, or even simply created to fashion how they want to be remembered. Do people really tell the truth in their blogs? Perhaps, to an extent, but these are very public media,” Carel said.

“Perhaps they are ‘putting on a brave face’. It is impossible to tell, but blogs are clearly not the most intimate mode of communication. It may have better to use diaries, recorded conversations with loved ones, or even personal letters.”

Nathan Heflick, researcher and lecturer at the University of Lincoln, also warns against interpreting the results to mean that dying people view death as a wholly positive experience. "I think that is a dangerous message, and it isn't a conclusion reflected in the study's data. Being less negative is different from welcoming it or wanting death," he said.

"People will fear death. These people dying feared death. They just didn't fear it as much as people think they would."

If fear of death is, in fact, as inevitable as the event itself – there's one change we can make to help. In Western culture, we tend to pretend death doesn't exist, whereas research has indicated that the East Asian yin and yang philosophy of death – where life can't exist without death – allows individuals to use death as a reminder to enjoy life.

"I think the UK and the US are death-denying cultures, in that death is mostly avoided as a topic," Heflick said.

"The less something is openly discussed, the scarier it becomes. While avoiding talking about death can reduce a little discomfort in the short term, it probably makes most of us much more anxious to die in the long term."

Online source: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2017/jul/25/we-fear-death-but-what-if-dying-isnt-as-bad-as-we-think>