

Reducing anxiety and fear among older adults through the practice of death contemplation

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Key highlights:

- Death contemplation is a Buddhist meditative practice which involves reflecting on one's own mortality and unpredictability and inevitability of death.
- Death contemplation has been associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety about death, potentially promoting gratitude and mental well-being among older adults.
- This practice may be particularly beneficial for older people as they face more frequent reminders of mortality

What is death contemplation?

Death contemplation is a meditative practice, one of the ten recollections within Theravāda Buddhism that are used for spiritual development. Broadly, there are two types of meditation: Samatha, which focuses on developing deep concentration and mental calmness, and Vipassana, which aims to gain insight into the nature of reality, characterized as impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and empty of inherent identity. Death contemplation is considered a Samatha practice, though it may provide vipassana insight with practice. Other Samatha practices are recollections of the breath and body, with the remainder of the Ten recollections being Vipassana practices that include contemplation of the qualities of the Buddha, *dhamma* (teachings), *sangha* (esteemed monks), virtue (moral conduct), *dana* (generosity), *devas* (celestial beings), and *nibbana* (peace found in non-suffering).

Death Contemplating procedure

Unlike death anxiety, which involves fear or apprehension about one's own mortality or the process of dying, death contemplation is a more deliberate and introspective process of reflecting on or thinking deeply about death and one's mortality. Death contemplation is a common practice among Thai meditation practitioners. It is a component of meditative practice, typically performed during contemplative states and often combined with other forms of reflection. This practice involves contemplating the possibility of one's own death and recognizing that it could occur at any moment. It frequently includes exploring the body and its organs beneath the skin, with the aim of connecting with the reality of the body and reducing attachment to it.

Mechanism of action/how death contemplation works in better mental health in older people

Death contemplation isn't merely a counterphobic strategy for older people; rather, it's like preparing for a storm by understanding its patterns. By facing the fear of death with wisdom, one can effectively manage this fear. This approach can be seen as a pre-emptive strike—akin to reinforcing your house before a hurricane hits. Acceptance of death through wisdom might be expressed with a calm acknowledgment, such as, “Ah, I knew this was going to happen eventually—just like how we all expect the seasons to change.”

Through meditation, the brain and bodily functions settle at deeper states, leading to a clear and insightful mind. In this state, any subject under consideration is understood completely and thoroughly. At this point, one can gain a profound glimpse into the reality of death, seeing it from a new and authentic perspective. In other words, the most intimidating aspect of human experience—death—is gradually explored, examined, and understood. After successful sessions of death meditation, practitioners often experience a sense of calm, serenity, and equanimity, along with valuable insights. Fears become perceived as ordinary occurrences, much like the sunrise and sunset. Frustrations are recognized as the mind's resistance to the natural flow of life. This is where the “acceptance” of aging, illness, and death emerges in the minds of meditators. Research has shown that attitudes toward death significantly influence interpersonal relationships and cognition, often leading to increased gratitude and a tendency toward more selfless behaviors.



The benefit of death contemplation on mental health of older people

Death contemplation fosters an acceptance approach to death, as opposed to avoidance and anxiety, and can promote the development of positive psychological factors necessary for the maintenance of mental health.

Older people may be faced with more reminders of mortality due to losses of loved ones, medical issues, and declining cognitive capacities. As such, the elderly must have an accepting attitude towards such reminders and thus protect themselves against anxiety and depression. This notion is supported by previous research that found that accepting attitudes toward death is associated with

less grief symptomatology. In addition, people with a heightened awareness of death often experience increased gratitude for several reasons, such as being aware of mortality can shift one's perspective, making everyday experiences and relationships feel more precious. Recognizing the finite nature of life often leads to a greater appreciation for the present moment and the people in one's life or understanding that life is limited can help individuals prioritize what truly matters. This often leads to a focus on meaningful experiences and relationships, fostering a sense of gratitude for what they have.

Measures on death contemplation

Death contemplation can be measured using self-report. The following two measures can be used together to comprehensively capture the construct.

Morana Questionnaire- MoQ

This tool was developed by Wongpakaran & Wongpakaran (2017) and measures death contemplation and anxiety, consistent with Thai Buddhist beliefs. The scale consists of 20 items, divided equally between death contemplation and death anxiety, including items such as: "If my life were to end now, I would be content."

Modified Meditation Evaluation Questionnaire- MMEQ

This is a new tool (DeMaranville et al, 2022). The original tool measures the frequency of meditation practice, duration of practice per day, types of meditation, and associated feelings. The modified version specifies a particular meditation practice, i.e., death contemplation, so items inquiring about meditation types were removed.

Research on death contemplation





Research indicates that mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety are linked to thoughts about death. Although specific studies on death contemplation are limited, existing research suggests that embracing Buddhist beliefs about death is associated with greater acceptance of mortality. This acceptance appears to correlate with fewer symptoms of depression and reduced anxiety about death among older adults, potentially offering some protection against mental health issues. However, the impact of death contemplation on mental health and overall well-being is not yet explored and warrants further investigation.

For further reading:

- Buddhaghosa, B. (2010). *The path of purification (Visuddhimagga)*. Samayawardaya printers. Retrieved August 15, 2024 from <https://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/nanamoli/PathofPurification2011.pdf>
- DeMaranville J, Wongpakaran T, Wongpakaran N, Wedding D. Meditation and Five Precepts Mediate the Relationship between Attachment and Resilience. *Children (Basel)*. 2022 Mar 7;9(3):371. <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-9067/9/3/371>
- Thavaro, V. (1982). *Handbook of meditation practice* (2nd ed.). Chuanpim. Bangkok, Thailand.

Wongpakaran T, Wongpakaran W. **Morana Questionnaire- MoQ**. Retrieved August 15, 2024 from <https://www.wongpakaran.com/index.php?lay=show&ac=article&Id=2147669228>

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