
The Emergence of Death Anxiety—A Study Based on Psychoanalytic Perspective

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Abstract: Based on Freud’s psychoanalytic theoretical framework and combined with real case materials, this paper deeply explores the psychopathological mechanism of death anxiety. The analysis shows that the core symptoms of death anxiety and typical dream images both point to the “hero fantasy” defense structure in the individual’s subconscious. Through dream interpretation and tracing back to childhood trauma, this paper reveals that the root of this kind of anxiety lies in the “hero fantasy” generated by the high-pressure environment of the original family. Its essence is a psychological defense constructed to avoid symbolic “castration anxiety.” Death, as the ultimate uncontrollable experience and the highest embodiment of the reality principle, breaks the patient’s “perfectionism”-based fantasy self, exposes the deeply buried childhood traumatic fears, and triggers a systemic psychological crisis. The key to overcoming this kind of anxiety is to guide the patient to give up compulsive safety behaviors, face the reality of death and the ordinary self, and ultimately achieve the integration of traumatic experiences and the acceptance of the real self.

Keywords: Death anxiety; Hero fantasy; Original family; Castration anxiety

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1. Introduction

Death stands as humanity’s ultimate concern. Worrying about death is a natural emotion; faced with mortality, people feel powerless, for it signifies extinction and ceasing to exist. As the ancient saying goes, “To live is to face death.” Only when people recognize life’s limitations do they often learn to cherish it more deeply and seize the present moment. Fear of death is “rational”, and a certain degree of apprehension can be beneficial. However, such fear typically arises only when death draws near. Anxiety, however, does not depend on external threats. When death anxiety surges toward an individual with overwhelming force, the long-term accumulation of anxiety erupts, forming symptoms that disrupt normal life.

2. Symptoms of death anxiety and alienation from life

In “Repression, Symptoms, and Anxiety”, Freud noted that anxiety is the ego’s warning response to dangerous situations. As a pervasive fear of existence, death anxiety manifests clinical symptoms far exceeding ordinary worry, presenting as an

all-consuming psychological reality.

Human death anxiety primarily encompasses four dimensions: First, fear of one's own death, dread of death-related suffering, and concern that one's demise will cause pain to loved ones. Second, fear of others' deaths, manifested as anxiety over the loss of family and friends. Third, dread of the irreversible fact of one's eventual mortality. Fourth, the terror of the unknown state beyond death.

Similar to other pathological anxieties, death anxiety triggers somatic symptoms such as profuse sweating, shortness of breath, and palpitations. Sometimes, thoughts of death may cause insomnia or sudden awakenings from dreams^[1]. Alongside these physiological manifestations, other alienating behaviors emerge in daily life. Through analyzing discussions on social media platforms about "death anxiety" and "Do you fear death?", the author has identified the following typical behaviors:

2.1. Somatic monitoring and compulsive medical-seeking behavior

Patients become intensely preoccupied with their physical health, exhibiting pathological sensitivity to bodily signals. "In recent years, I've become extremely focused on my physical condition. Even minor discomforts make me rush to the hospital. Yet when doctors assure me there's nothing wrong, my anxiety intensifies—I constantly worry about my body." Driven by anxiety, sufferers enter a vicious cycle: excessively monitoring their bodies, repeatedly seeking medical attention, and in extreme cases, refusing prescribed medications out of fear that "all drugs are poisonous" and could cause unpredictable side effects.

2.2. Catastrophizing

In such states, anxiety and fear of death spill over into extreme intolerance toward all uncertainty. Some describe intense fear of flying, dreading the possibility of a plane crash leading to death. Others fear "general anesthesia" during surgery or sleep itself, perceiving these unconscious states as the closest proximity to death. A deeper alienation lies in the distortion of life experience. One patient confessed to avoiding joy, believing that happiness inevitably leads to sorrow. Consequently, they must amplify minor uncertainties into catastrophic disasters to "prepare" for the failure of control, or maintain a state of "safe anxiety" to avoid potential "punishment" after experiencing pleasure^[2].

2.3. Dissociation of life meaning

When death anxiety becomes the dominant force in one's psychological structure, the lived world collapses. One case study describes a former corporate elite with clear career ambitions and a fierce competitive drive. After a serious illness, this individual suddenly realized that health was paramount, declaring that "Health is the 1; everything else is 0." Consequently, they shifted their entire life focus to maintaining health, abandoning all other values and goals, leading to the complete dissociation of life's meaning.

3. Triggers of death anxiety

Humans are not born perpetually enveloped by death anxiety; it is triggered at specific moments. Typically, major life events often ignite this anxiety^[3]. For instance, the loss of a loved one, a serious illness, the breakdown of an intimate relationship, or major traumas like being in a car accident or witnessing an unexpected death—such scenes directly confront us with mortality and life itself, triggering immediate associations. Significant life milestones like graduation, starting a job, quitting a job, retirement, children becoming adults, or aging also serve as pivotal turning points. At these junctures, people may contemplate the meaning of life, sparking anxiety about death.

However, a portion of death anxiety does not stem from major events or turning points. Instead, it arises from witnessing beautiful scenes in life or experiencing the joy of living. "Whenever I see my wife and children living exceptionally happily, and our family life improving day by day, I suddenly become anxious. I fear that if I die, I will never

feel such happiness again.”

Thus, death anxiety isn't solely triggered by negative or catastrophic events; conversely, happiness can also evoke anxiety. So what is its true source?

4. The manifestation of dreams: The “great man fantasy” in the subconscious

Freud regarded dreams as “the royal road to the unconscious.” Therefore, analyzing the dreams of those experiencing death anxiety may decode its source and essence. By categorizing and analyzing dream cases found online, several recurring symbolic motifs emerge, offering clues for deeper interpretation ^[4].

4.1. The overlooking god's-eye view

A corporate executive recounted a recurring dream during analysis: “I dream I'm suspended high above the city, with all people beneath me, tiny like ants.” This imagery precisely mirrors his unconscious self-positioning as an observer transcending the mundane world. Freud noted in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that spatial elevation in dreams often symbolizes psychological hierarchy. This dream uses exaggerated visual order to reveal that, in his unconscious state, he did not see himself as an ordinary person but as a “god” transcending all existence, towering above everyone, and capable of controlling everything.

4.2. Flight dreams

These dreams typically involve the dreamer feeling that “with a slight effort, they could soar into the sky, flying for extended periods at great heights.” Freud associated flight dreams with childhood play memories, such as being tossed and caught. However, in pathological states, the dreamer achieves flight without external aid—effectively overcoming gravity and defying objective reality. While awake, the patient fears death due to physical frailty. In dreams, the unconscious declares an ideal state “unbound by birth, aging, sickness, and death” by defying physical laws.

4.3. High-level social settings

In such dreams, anxious individuals often imagine conversing with national leaders or field experts, or appearing in exclusive social circles beyond their reach—participating in crucial decisions ^[5]. These dreams achieve dual psychological objectives by placing the individual at the center of power: first, using authoritative figures and events as validation to affirm their “great person” identity and demonstrate their exceptional existence; second, the anxious individual subconsciously perceives such authority as immortal, constructing an imagined “privileged class” identity exempt from death, thereby further denying their own mortality.

In summary, recurring dream motifs like “bird's-eye views”, “flight transcending physical constraints”, and “social integration into power centers” are not random occurrences. They represent specific defense mechanisms at the subconscious level, designed to cope with death anxiety. These dreams serve a core psychological purpose—denying the finite, fragile, and inevitably mortal nature of individual existence—by constructing transcendent self-positions such as omniscient perspectives, immortal states, and privileged identities ^[6]. The underlying psychological mechanism involves unconsciously attempting to dissolve the fundamental anxiety stemming from life's finitude by imagining the self as a “great figure” or “immortal being” unconstrained by natural laws such as gravity, aging, or death. This validates Freud's core assertion that “dreams are wish fulfillments”, where such dreams symbolically satisfy the deep psychological desire to “overcome the fear of death.” Thus, these dreams can be understood as psychological defense strategies activated by the unconscious to counter death anxiety, characterized by omnipotent fantasies.

5. The roots of death anxiety: “Great man fantasy”, childhood trauma, and the collapse of reality

5.1. The family of origin: The emergence of the perfectionist superego

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud noted that death anxiety and castration anxiety share a common origin, both stemming from the primal fear of “loss of integrity.” Within the psychoanalytic framework, castration anxiety transcends the physiological level, symbolizing the ultimate threat of subjectivity deprivation. The formation of a perfectionist superego within the family of origin fundamentally involves children internalizing the unconscious fear that “imperfection equates to being stripped of one’s value” during Oedipal conflicts. This fear manifests in families where parents project excessive ideals onto their children, inducing existential anxiety that “failing to meet expectations will result in ‘castration.’”

For instance, an anxious individual might recall childhood experiences where parents held immense expectations. A single major exam failure deeply disappointed the father, who reacted with extreme intensity—kneeling before the child, declaring his own inadequacy, and pleading for the child to “prove himself worthy.” Such extreme responses inflict profound trauma, essentially imposing the omnipotent fantasy that “children must be perfect.” The underlying psychological logic is: If my son isn’t perfect, it means my authority as a father is negated, and you, as my child, lose your right to be loved.” This projection creates a traumatic association in the child’s subconscious: “imperfection leads to castration.” To avoid this symbolic “existential crisis”, the child internalizes the parents’ strict standards as a superego, compelling themselves to pursue “heroic” perfection. Similarly, another patient with death anxiety experienced his father’s early passing. The father’s final wish before dying was for his child to attend a prestigious university and bring honor to the family. This fundamentally projects the parent’s unfulfilled aspirations as a “condition of love” onto the child. As the child grows, they gradually internalize the belief that only by achieving “extraordinary accomplishments” can they avoid being “castrated” by parental expectations and earn emotional validation from their parents^[7].

This family dynamic fosters a dual psychological defense in children: on one hand, they internalize their parents’ perfectionist demands to alleviate the fear of “castration”; on the other, they construct a “hero fantasy” as psychological compensation—believing that becoming an “infallible superhuman” will transcend the threat of “castration.” As Freud noted, the essence of castration anxiety is the fear of “losing the love of the object”, and the love conditioned on “perfection” within the family of origin effectively transforms ‘imperfection’ into a symbol of “existential death.” This forces children to unconsciously erect defensive barriers using a “perfectionist superego” and the “hero fantasy.” Consequently, they gradually develop a distorted understanding of life and existence, believing that everything should be perfect and under their control, forming the psychological foundation for anxiety.

5.2. The formation of anxiety: Death reality shatters fantasy

As previously described, individuals in high-pressure family environments construct a psychological defense structure centered on a “perfectionist superego” and manifested through a “hero fantasy” to evade symbolic “castration anxiety” and existential fear. This structure may maintain stability through specific strategies during early life and even extended developmental stages, providing a sense of control and worth while temporarily masking fundamental anxieties about vulnerability and finitude. For instance, individuals may excessively invest in relationships to maintain perceived controllability, manifesting as a people-pleasing personality. Alternatively, they might pursue extreme achievement to validate their uniqueness, striving for perfection in career or academic performance to fulfill internalized expectations of “bringing honor to the family.” These strategies often temporarily “repair” the fantasy and preserve a sense of omnipotence when challenges remain within the realm of what the “superman fantasy” can explain and control, achieved through redoubled effort or strategic adjustments^[8].

However, death—as the ultimate, irreversible, and universal reality—absolutely declares the finitude of human existence, the mortality of the flesh, and the complete futility of individual control over life’s course. When individuals confront or deeply perceive death’s approach, their meticulously constructed defenses suffer a fundamental, irreconcilable rupture. They begin to recognize life’s inherent imperfections, realizing that death cannot be altered, postponed, or nullified

through individual “perfect performance”, extraordinary achievements, or redoubled effort. Simultaneously, any strategy relying on others’ approval or relationship maintenance to gain security and value becomes utterly ineffective in the face of death—this ultimate loss is irreversible. The eruption of death anxiety is precisely the unconscious affirmation of the “reality principle”, a collision with the original fantasy.

Thus, the eruption of death anxiety is not merely a fear of death. Its essence is a systemic psychological crisis triggered when the “great man fantasy” defense structure encounters reality—especially the reality of death—and disintegrates completely. It forces individuals to acknowledge, consciously or subconsciously, that they are not omniscient, omnipotent “gods” or “immortals” untouched by natural laws, but rather ordinary, fragile, mortal beings destined to die. This fundamental reversal of self-perception exposes the primal fears buried beneath the “great man fantasy”, fears rooted in childhood trauma.

At this juncture, all secondary defense mechanisms that once served to sustain the “great man fantasy” and mask deep-seated fears—such as hypochondriacal somatization monitoring, compulsive medical-seeking, and catastrophic thinking—not only lose their original protective function but violently backfire. They transform from tools sustaining an illusion of control into amplifiers and tangible manifestations of inescapable anxiety and terror—experienced when individuals confront the stark reality of mortality and their ordinary selves after the fantasy shatters. Patients become trapped in a paradoxical predicament: outdated defenses have failed, yet confronting stark mortality and ordinary selfhood induces unbearable anxiety. Consequently, these secondary defense behaviors intensify, creating a vicious cycle that manifests as clinically significant death anxiety symptoms.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the pathway of death anxiety emergence can be outlined as follows: The patient’s family of origin projects perfectionist expectations onto the child, leading to the internalization of a harsh superego and the formation of traumatic cognition. To evade the castration anxiety associated with this cognition, the individual subconsciously constructs a “great man fantasy” to resist the threat of death instincts. When reality shatters this fantasy, the individual becomes acutely aware of their own fragility and the irreversibility of death. Under this impact, the fantasy collapses, ultimately triggering an explosion of death anxiety.

The core of resolving death anxiety lies in guiding patients to deconstruct the “great man fantasy” and accept the finitude of life and their authentic self. Psychoanalytic techniques such as dream interpretation and childhood trauma tracing can reveal the pathological roots of defense mechanisms. Patients should be assisted in relinquishing “compulsive safety behaviors” to confront death’s reality and their ordinary selves. Ultimately, integrating traumatic experiences under the “reality principle” enables the self to shift from fantasy omnipotence to acceptance of its actuality. This alleviates anxiety symptoms and rebuilds life meaning grounded in the authentic self.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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