

# A life fully lived paradoxically reduces the fear of death

Meaning in life leads to less anxiety around dying



26th September 2025



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1,933 words

Read time: approx. 10 mins

*Studies show that the more fully alive we feel, the more meaning we have in our life, paradoxically, the more ready to die we are. You might think that having a meaningful life makes you more afraid to lose it. But studies reveal the opposite. Psychotherapist Julie Hannan argues that we fear death because we fear losing the opportunity to live the life we have always wanted to, but have lacked the courage to. If you're already living a fully meaningful life, if you're life is already fulfilled, the fear of death simply loses its sting.*

When Australian nurse Bronnie Ware worked with patients in the last weeks of their lives, she noticed recurring themes in their reflections. She gathered them into what became a bestselling book, 'The Top

Five Regrets of the Dying'. The most common regrets were: not having the courage to live a life true to oneself; working too hard; not expressing feelings; losing touch with friends; and not allowing oneself to be happier.

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Each of these regrets is striking not because they are about death itself, but because they are about life that was postponed, ignored, or never fully claimed. People rarely lamented death; they lamented an un-lived life. This tells us something profound: that death anxiety may be less about death per se, and more about the fear of reaching the end of our days with the realisation that we never lived the life we wanted. It is this theme I wish to explore: how a life lived with meaning, alignment, and authenticity can soften the fear of death.

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**"Though the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death saves us."**

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Psychiatrist [Irvin Yalom](#) famously wrote that death is one of the four great existential concerns, alongside freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. For him, death is the "background music" of life: it shapes us even when we do not consciously hear it. Yalom argued that much of human behaviour is motivated by the unconscious fear of death. [Therapy, in his view, helps bring this anxiety into awareness and integrate it.](#) When people accept mortality, they are freed to live with more authenticity, vitality, and gratitude.

Yalom often reminded patients that it is precisely the finitude of life that makes it all the more precious. His phrase still resonates: "Though the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death saves us." The awareness of death can galvanise us into living more fully.

In my own clinical practice, particularly with people in midlife (that is, aged 35-65), I often see a different configuration of death anxiety. Clients rarely fear what comes after death. Instead, their dread is more immediate: that they are wasting time, that they will reach their deathbed filled with regrets. They describe emptiness, boredom, or restlessness. They confess to a nagging feeling that life is slipping through their fingers. I refer to this as the midlife transition, which often prompts an existential crisis of identity.

It is less about fearing death itself and more about fearing dying without having lived fully.

Typical concerns I hear in the therapy room include: "I'm too old to start again," "I don't know who I'm meant to be or what I'm supposed to be doing" "I don't have the energy for this," or "time is running out — time is short." Yet, despite these urgent concerns, many people fail to take action. They become paralysed by their anxiety, creating an even greater turmoil for themselves by wasting more time. Instead of using mortality awareness as a spur to authentic action, they defer and distract. The result is a compounding of regret — a catch-22 where the fear of lost time itself becomes the reason for further delay.

Very often, the discomfort of this awareness leads people to anaesthetise themselves rather than face reality. Alcohol, food, drugs, overwork, or constant busyness provide a temporary buffer against existential unease. But these strategies delay the necessary reckoning and deepen disconnection from authentic values. Research has shown that avoidance behaviours such as substance use are strongly linked to poorer mental health outcomes and higher levels of existential distress. Conversely, those who face this discomfort and begin to take responsibility for change report greater life satisfaction, resilience, and lower death anxiety.

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## **A 2021 meta-analysis across multiple longitudinal studies found that individuals with a strong sense of purpose had lower levels of inflammation, better cardiovascular health, and improved immune function.**

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Like Yalom, I agree that mortality awareness is central. Still, I see death anxiety less as a fear of no longer existing and more as a signal that life has drifted away from authenticity, bringing with it a sense of disconnect from the self. It is the psyche's way of warning: 'Wake up, there is no time to waste.' In Jungian terms, this is the individuation process: shedding old roles and scripts, reconnecting with authentic values, and following one's energy towards the life that wants to be lived. To me, the antidote to death anxiety is not speculation or worry about the afterlife, but the courage to live this one in alignment with our true selves.

This clinical observation is echoed by contemporary research. Modern psychology shows that meaning and purpose are not just 'nice to haves' and not simply to make life feel better; [they actively support health and longevity](#).

[A 2021 meta-analysis](#) across multiple longitudinal studies found that individuals with a strong sense of purpose had lower levels of inflammation, better cardiovascular health, and improved immune function. [A 2022 study](#) published in *Psychoneuroendocrinology* demonstrated that older adults who reported a renewed sense of purpose had lower chronic inflammation and higher well-being. More recently, a 2024 paper in *Psychosomatic Medicine* confirmed that a strong sense of meaning in life is associated with lower mortality risk across a national sample. Purpose and meaning act as buffers against anxiety and depression, providing resilience against stress.

Other studies have found that a renewed sense of purpose can lower the risk of dementia, improve recovery from illness, and enhance emotional regulation. Taken together, this research shows that meaning is not a luxury — it is a protective factor for both mind and body.

Yet meaning is not a one-off discovery. It must be constructed and reconstructed across the life cycle. What gives life meaning at twenty may feel hollow at fifty. What energises us at midlife may evolve again in later life.

In early adulthood, meaning is often tied to belonging, proving oneself, or meeting external expectations. In midlife, these achievements can lose their glow. The question shifts from "Am I succeeding?" to "Am I fulfilled?" Authenticity, self-expression, and contribution rise to the surface for many people. In later life, meaning may reorient towards legacy, wisdom, and stewardship — giving back to others, ensuring the world is a little better for one's having been here.

Problems arise when people cling to outdated maps of meaning. Someone who defined their identity entirely around career achievement may feel lost when that career ends. A parent whose meaning was bound up in raising children may struggle with the empty nest. When meaning is not updated, death anxiety can creep in. The psyche senses the misalignment, and many people will experience this firstly physiologically as anxiety before cognitive understanding kicks in, a phenomenon that many psychotherapists would describe as 'the body keeps the score'.

If we accept that death anxiety is less about death and more about having a life unlived, how do we live in ways that reduce it? Here are my tips for living authentically now:

- Follow your energy: What excites, nourishes, or draws you? Energy is a reliable pointer toward meaning.

- Update your values: Reflect regularly on what matters most to you now, not what mattered a decade ago.
- Resist "someday syndrome": Many regrets are born of postponement or procrastination. Make a start, begin now, however small the steps.
- Treat meaning as practice, not destination: Like physical fitness, meaning requires continual tweaking, flexing and engagement. It is not something you find once, but something you nurture continually. You don't need to know the end goal; you need to start and make choices in life which direct your behaviour towards aligning with your current values.

Death is inevitable. But its shadow need not cast fear across life. The testimonies of Bronnie Ware's patients, the insights of Yalom, the data from psychological science, and the lived experience of midlife clients all converge on the same truth: the fear of death diminishes when we live authentically.

To me, the idea of death is not a threat but a teacher. It reminds us to live now, not later. It urges us to keep meaning alive, dynamic, and aligned. In the end, the best way to ease our fear of dying is to ensure that life itself has been honoured.

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**Because when we live fully — in alignment with who we are becoming — we find that the prospect of death loses its sting. Life has been lived, meaning has been made, and nothing essential has been left unlived.**

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Again, as Yalom wrote: "Though the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death saves us." My own conclusion is similar: mortality awareness, when combined with authentic living, transforms fear into a powerful motivator. It becomes the reminder that time is precious, that regrets are avoidable, and that the second half of life can be the richest chapter.

For those interested in reflecting more deeply, I have created a free Midlife Transition Quiz at [The Midlife Academy](#). It offers a way to explore where you are in your own life cycle and to begin the process of realigning your life with values, energy, and purpose. Because when we live fully — in alignment with who we are becoming — we find that the prospect of death loses its sting. Life has been lived, meaning has been made, and nothing essential has been left unlived.

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