

ACHIEVING LIFE-AFFIRMING DEATH AWARENESS

BEYOND DEATH ANXIETY



ROBERT FIRESTONE
JOYCE CATLETT

SPRINGER  PUBLISHING COMPANY

Beyond Death Anxiety

*Achieving Life-Affirming
Death Awareness*

**ROBERT W. FIRESTONE, PhD
JOYCE CATLETT, MA**

**SPRINGER PUBLISHING COMPANY**
New York

Robert W. Firestone, PhD, is a clinical psychologist, author, and artist, who has established a comprehensive body of work that explains how defenses formed by children early in life in relation to interpersonal pain are strongly reinforced as they become aware of death. These defenses impair people's ability to sustain intimate adult relationships and have a damaging effect on their children. Dr. Firestone was engaged in the private practice of psychotherapy from 1957 to 1979, working with a wide range of patients, expanding his original ideas on schizophrenia, and applying these concepts to a theory of neurosis. In 1979 he joined the Glendon Association as its consulting theorist. Dr. Firestone's major publications include *The Fantasy Bond*, *Compassionate Child-Rearing*, *Fear of Intimacy*, and *The Ethics of Interpersonal Relationships*. His studies of negative thought processes—or internalized “voices”—led to the development of an innovative therapeutic methodology described in *Voice Therapy*, *Suicide and the Inner Voice*, *Combating Destructive Thought Processes*, *Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice*, *Creating a Life of Meaning and Compassion: The Wisdom of Psychotherapy*, and *Sex and Love in Intimate Relationships*. In collaboration with his daughter, Dr. Lisa Firestone, he developed three assessment instruments based on the concept of the voice process: *The Firestone Assessment of Self-Destructive Thoughts* (2007), *The Firestone Assessment of Suicide Intent* (2007), and the *Firestone Assessment of Violent Thoughts* (2008).

Joyce Catlett, MA, author and lecturer, is the coauthor of *Fear of Intimacy* (1999), *Psychological Defenses in Everyday Life* (2000), *Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice* (2002), *Creating a Life of Meaning & Compassion: The Wisdom of Psychotherapy* (2003), *Sex and Love in Intimate Relationships* (2006), and *The Ethics of Interpersonal Relationships* (2009). She has collaborated with Dr. Robert Firestone in writing peer-reviewed articles and several other books, such as *The Fantasy Bond* (1985), *Compassionate Child-Rearing* (1990), and *Voice Therapy* (1988). Ms. Catlett is a lecturer and workshop facilitator in the areas of child-abuse prevention and couple relations. She has coproduced 40 video productions for the Glendon Association in the areas of parent-child relations, suicide, couple relations, and voice therapy. A child mental health specialist, Ms. Catlett has developed and trained instructors in the *Compassionate Child-Rearing Parent Education Program* throughout the United States, Canada, and Costa Rica.

Copyright © 2009 Springer Publishing Company, LLC

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of Springer Publishing Company, LLC, or authorization through payment of the appropriate fees to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, 978-750-8400, fax 978-646-8600, info@copyright.com or on the Web at www.copyright.com.

Springer Publishing Company, LLC
11 West 42nd Street
New York, NY 10036
www.springerpub.com

Acquisitions Editor: Jennifer Perillo
Project Manager: Mary Zemaitis
Cover design: Mimi Flow
Composition: Publication Services, Inc.

Ebook ISBN: 978-0-8261-0552-3
09 10 11/5 4 3 2 1

The author and the publisher of this Work have made every effort to use sources believed to be reliable to provide information that is accurate and compatible with the standards generally accepted at the time of publication. The author and publisher shall not be liable for any special, consequential, or exemplary damages resulting, in whole or in part, from the readers' use of, or reliance on, the information contained in this book. The publisher has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Firestone, Robert.

Beyond death anxiety : achieving life-affirming death awareness / Robert
W. Firestone, Joyce Catlett.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8261-0551-6

1. Death. 2. Fear of death. I. Catlett, Joyce. II. Title.

BF789.D4.F57 2009

155.9'37—dc22

2009015802

Printed in the United States of America by

Contents

Foreword ix

Preface xi

Acknowledgments xv

PART I: THE SUBJECTIVE IMPACT OF DEATH AWARENESS AND ITS DENIAL 1

- 1 Overview 3
- 2 The Uncharted Terrain of Death 15
- 3 The Dawning Awareness of Death and Its
Impact on the Developing Child 29
- 4 The Effects of Death Anxiety in Everyday Life 57
- 5 Literal and Symbolic Defenses Against Death Anxiety 83
- 6 Microsuicide: Death of the Spirit 107

PART II: CORE DEFENSES AGAINST DEATH ANXIETY 133

- 7 The Basic Defense Against Death Anxiety: The Fantasy Bond 135
- 8 Separation Theory, the Voice, and Voice Therapy 163

**PART III: CHOOSING LIFE WITH THE FULL
REALIZATION OF DEATH 191**

- 9** Challenging Defenses That Interfere With Living Fully 193
- 10** The Value of Psychotherapy 227
- 11** Facing Death With Equanimity and Appropriate Feelings 255
- 12** Learning to Love 285
- 13** Dimensions of a Meaningful Life 309
- 14** My Life and Legacy 341
Robert W. Firestone
- References** 355
- Index** 375

Foreword

This book represents a towering synthesis of personal and clinical wisdom about death. Particularly for the first author, Robert Firestone, this book could be viewed as a capstone for his illustrious career as both existential-analytic practitioner and theorist. However, *Beyond Death Anxiety* is much more than a book about death: at its heart, it is a meditation on life and how to live it really well.

Beginning with a superb overview of the psychology of death and death anxiety, the volume gradually and methodically wends its way through Dr. Firestone's development of both Separation Theory and Voice Therapy. In his formulation of these theories, Dr. Firestone draws on the best of the existential-humanistic as well as the psychoanalytic thinkers to address a flourishing path toward self-realization. I am especially moved by the authors' embrace of spirituality and awe—within their worldview, and by the personal and practical nature of their findings. If one is to address a topic as nebulous and intricate as death anxiety, it is essential to ground one's observations in both practical and living case illustrations; and this, the authors accomplish with aplomb.

Although the authors focus ostensibly on the negative voices (or *voice attacks*, as they call them), their aim ironically is to help clients find their authentic voice or true self. To this extent they affirm the transformative power of the voice dimension, which is much subtler than is generally recognized. Indeed, as R. D. Laing, one of Dr. Firestone's most ardent supporters, well knew, the voice is an instrument of one's whole bodily being—one's whole sensibility about life—and not merely the movements of some isolable vocal chords. To find one's voice, as the early Gestalt, analytic, and existential-humanistic pioneers also tacitly (as well as on occasion explicitly) recognized, is to find one's way, comparatively unencumbered, toward what really matters; and what really matters is the centerpiece around which this volume revolves.

To sum, this book shows how the finding of one's authentic voice is integral to death awareness and to the absorption of the anxiety related to that awareness. In this light it is both akin to and a practical application of the writings of Ernest Becker, whose insights into the vicissitudes of death, as well as its denial, are unsurpassed.

If we are to achieve a sane existence, much more of this terrain needs to be plumbed in the coming years; and much more will be, I'm convinced, in the wake of this volume.

—**Kirk J. Schneider, PhD**

Part-time faculty, Saybrook Graduate School

*Author, *Existential-Integrative Psychotherapy* and *Awakening to Awe**

Preface

In essence, we attempt to escape from death concerns by avoiding life. The unique purpose of this work is to suggest that the acceptance of death and dying as a reality and an awareness of the typical defenses that people develop to counter the dread can be life-affirming rather than leading to cynicism or depression. Challenging psychological defenses formed in childhood and reinforced by death anxiety can lead to more personal satisfaction in living and expand the opportunity for self-realization. Facing one's mortality and feeling the appropriate emotions of sadness, anger, and fear can give greater meaning to life and make it all the more precious. This awareness also places one's experience in perspective and helps to avoid trivializing one's existence.

This book is *not* about dying and death; rather, it is about facing death in the prime of life instead of limiting life through the process of denial. The book, with its numerous personal stories, illustrates an important truth: that defensive denial of death has profoundly negative consequences for each person's life.

Most people spend their lifetime without a great deal of self-awareness, living lives of emptiness and drudgery based on their early programming. They rarely reflect on their circumstances but rather are addicted to a lifestyle of form and routine. Few develop a life plan or project that gives value and substance to their daily lives. The search for transcendent goals, supported by death awareness, makes life more meaningful. Humans are a meaning-seeking species. When this experience is limited or entirely excluded, one is deprived of one's human heritage.

However, when one breaks through one's defensive barriers, there is always tension and anxiety and a marked tendency for the issue of death to manifest itself. Uniquely positive events make one aware of the value of life, but are also a reminder that life is temporal. The more we invest in life and love, the more we achieve, the more we are valued, and the more we are aware of our existence, the more we are reminded

of our eventual non-existence. When we love life and the people closest to us, we must mourn the ultimate loss of loved ones and ourselves. This explains why most people limit their experiences, forsake a purposeful life, and hold on to illusions that help them escape from painful realities.

Death denial has other destructive complications. Religious faiths that offer the promise of an afterlife provide comfort but tend to polarize people of different beliefs against one another. People are threatened when their defensive resolutions of the death issue are challenged by nonbelievers. They become hostile and aggressive when their defenses are disrupted by people with different attitudes and customs. Much of the destruction caused by warfare and ethnic cleansing is due to these defensive machinations.

In some sense, all people maintain a belief that they will not die despite conscious awareness to the contrary. In their magical thinking, free from logical constraints, they are able to maintain the fantasy or dream of immortality in their unconscious minds. Certain attitudes and belief systems support the illusion whereas other events and circumstances challenge it. For example, moving along the life cycle from childhood to maturity, separation experiences that make us aware of our aloneness and signs of aging and ill health dispel the illusion, whereas religious beliefs, an imagined fused identity in personal relationships, vanity, and fantasies of omnipotence help to maintain it. When this internal fantasy process is disrupted, the original suppressed fear reaction is activated and there is considerable hostility directed toward the source.

Lastly, the authors feel that the subject of death must be brought out of the closet. People need to be free to think, feel, and talk about the subject. Addressing the issues surrounding death has a therapeutic effect. However uncomfortable or painful this may be, it is preferable to the emptiness of the unexamined life.

This book is divided into three sections. The first section explains the impact of death anxiety, particularly unconscious death anxiety, on the life experience. Most people do not think much about death on a daily basis, and many feel that they have come to terms with the fact of death. But the majority are still driven by unconscious death fears and resort to a variety of defenses that exert a negative influence on their lives. This section also describes the dawning awareness of death in children, the psychological defenses that characterize everyday life, the literal and symbolic defenses against death anxiety, and the dynamics of microsuicide that arise as an attempt to achieve mastery over death concerns.

The second section presents the first author's (Robert Firestone) theoretical position. It describes the *fantasy bond* as the core defense against separation and death anxiety. The fantasy bond refers to a fantasy of connection or fusion with other individuals, starting with the mother or primary caretaker. The illusion offers a false sense of continuity and security at the expense of honesty and a genuine attachment. Eventually it is applied to one's relatives, one's couple relationships, and one's children. The sense of merged identification is extended to one's neighborhood, city, country, etc., and is encompassed in one's religion and nationality. One feels a sense of superiority toward other people with different beliefs and they are seen as outsiders.

Separation Theory combines psychoanalytic concepts and the concepts of existential psychology. It explains how defenses formed in childhood in relation to interpersonal stress are intensified and rigidified as the child becomes aware of his or her mortality. The combined effect of the defended posture acts as a core resistance in psychotherapy and is a harmful, maladaptive barrier to personal growth and the evolution of the self. The *voice*, a critical and destructive thought process, supports a mode of defended living. This process, which is sometimes conscious but often unconscious, can be accessed in Voice Therapy. Action can then be taken to release the associated feelings, identify and challenge defenses, and alter self-limiting and self-destructive behaviors, thereby helping the individual move toward a more positive, fulfilling life.

The third section examines several subjects that enhance life in the face of death. Chapter 9 deals with challenging the defenses that interfere with living a full life, including breaking destructive addictions and routines, disrupting the fantasy bond, and maintaining independence and respect in couple and family relationships. This chapter also discusses the importance of being aware of microsuicidal tendencies and of breaking with religious dogma and cultural worldviews that are limiting and damaging to self and others.

Chapter 10 addresses the value of psychotherapy for the so-called *normal* individual, the personal qualities of an effective therapist, the death of depth therapy and psychoanalysis, the practice of Voice Therapy, and the effectiveness of corrective suggestions.

Chapter 11 discusses facing death and dying with appropriate emotion. It describes the merits of sharing one's death anxieties in an open forum.

Chapter 12 elucidates the concept of love. It defines the dimensions of a truly loving relationship and distinguishes love from emotional

hunger. It describes how the ability to love can be learned like any other skill, and how a person can develop in relation to both giving and receiving love. It speaks of the importance of sexuality and of respect for each other's goals, personal boundaries, and personal freedom.

Chapter 13 delineates the various aspects of a meaningful life. It emphasizes the importance of love, generosity, the therapeutic value of friendship, the development of empathy, and a love and respect for all people. It also includes accepting one's feelings uncritically, developing self-knowledge, formulating one's unique value system, pursuing a personal project or search for meaning in life, transcendent goals, and spirituality. In concluding, the authors outline many of the significant insights that were learned within a unique reference population.

The first author begins Chapter 14 with a brief autobiography. He then describes the evolution of his perspective on life and of his personal system of values. He discusses his relationship to the reference population and the development of his ideas in the field of psychology. He concludes the book with a reflection upon his life. In conveying his professional legacy, he briefly summarizes the scope of his fifty-year investigation of resistance in psychotherapy and people's resistance to a better life in general. The chapter closes with his personal legacy in relation to his loved ones.

Acknowledgments

We wish to express our appreciation to Tamsen Firestone, Jo Barrington, and Susan Short for their exceptional skill in editing the manuscript. We are also grateful to Anne Baker, who worked closely with us to reference and complete the final draft of this work. Our thanks go to Jennifer Perillo, Acquisitions Editor at Springer Publishing Company, for recognizing the book's potential value.

We want to acknowledge Neil Elgee, Director of the Ernest Becker Foundation, who sponsored lectures on “Life-Affirming Death Awareness” at which documentary films about people's defenses against death anxiety were shown. We want to thank Sheldon Solomon, Terror Management theorist and researcher, for his support and encouragement. Lastly, we are grateful to Fred Branfman, who convinced the first author that this book needed to be written.

We express our gratitude to the men and women whose personal stories are recounted throughout this work. We thank them for their courage and honesty in describing their feelings and thoughts about a topic that is difficult still for many people to openly discuss. They were strongly motivated to share the insights they gained so that others might benefit from their experiences.

The names, places, and other identifying facts in the personal stories contained in this book have been fictionalized, and no similarity to any persons, living or dead, is intended, with the exception of Robert Firestone, Tamsen Firestone, and Fred Branfman.

The Subjective Impact
of Death Awareness
and Its Denial

PART
I

1

Overview

When I was a teenager I realized that most people were living as though death did not exist. I saw men and women trivializing their relationships and lives with petty arguments and melodramatic reactions to insignificant events, while failing to notice basic issues of personal identity and ignoring existential realities. Their passivity, conformity, and inward lifestyles indicated their lack of regard for themselves as unique, feeling entities.

As a boy I shared a room with my grandfather, who as he got older was afflicted with various physical ailments. He would cough and moan in his sleep and sometimes he would sound like he couldn't catch his breath. At those times I would wait with mounting suspense until his breathing would return to normal. Sometimes there would be a loud gasp, like a death rattle, and I would be sure that he was gone. He had trouble with his eyesight and I would imagine what it would be like to lose my vision. It tortured me to picture a life of blindness. The thought of being deprived of all images was akin to death, a kind of living death. I realized that at some future date, the clock would advance and it would be my turn to sit on the edge of life, close to the ominous event.

My grandfather had lived with my family since I was born and so I knew him well. He had spent his life in a kind of half-dazed, yet somehow contented, state of mind, and now he was nearing the end.

It seemed like he had no real sense of his impending death. I dreaded the possibility that he might suddenly wake up one day as from a sleep and realize that he was at the end, that only yesterday he had been a boy like me, and that he had spent the intervening years not really living. I was terrified that he would recognize then that he had wasted his life in meaningless grievances, family disputes, and long, tedious hours at a job he hated. He would be struck by the realization that it was too late—that there was no time left to live.

To my mind this would be the most horrifying thing that could happen to my grandfather. I hoped that he would not wake up but just die peacefully without this unbearable realization. The years passed and he died, leaving me with a lasting impression of a man who had missed his own life.

From this experience came a strong motivation on my part to try to live differently than my grandfather. I never wanted to be faced with the kind of final realization that I had dreaded for him. I wanted to experience all the facets of my life, the bad and the good—all of the painful and joyful events (Note 1).

This book is not about death as such, nor is it about the process of grieving—subjects usually addressed by books of this genre. It is about the impact of defenses that deny mortality and death anxiety and their effect not only in limiting but also in damaging people in their everyday lives. It outlines an approach to nondefensive living that exposes and challenges psychological defenses formed in childhood. It teaches people the importance of facing death awareness, how to cope with existential angst, and then goes on to describe significant dimensions of the *good life*. In addition it explains how once these defenses against death anxiety are developed, protecting them is at the core of resistance in psychotherapy and indeed at the core of resistance to a richer, more fulfilling life. Ironically, the awareness and acceptance of one's mortality combined with learning to express one's sadness, anger, and death fears can lead to a potential for deeper satisfaction, more personal freedom, and a greater appreciation for the gift of life.

For the past four decades the coauthors and their associates were involved in studying a group of 150 or more individuals, families, and friends who had a strong interest in philosophy and psychology. They also shared many other aspects of living, including business ventures, travel, and child-rearing functions. During this time they maintained an open forum for honest communication, in which they revealed their deepest thoughts and emotions and where no subject was taboo. In discussion

groups and seminars, they spoke of concerns in their personal and family lives, relationships, and sexuality, as well as issues of aging and death.

In both observing and participating in this unique psychological milieu, we accumulated considerable data indicating that death anxiety and death awareness play an instrumental part in people's lives. In their discussions, these individuals repeatedly reported incidents where unusual successes, positive experiences, a close, loving relationship, or other new, significant developments in their personal lives led to the surfacing of previously suppressed thoughts of death and feelings of fear and apprehension in relation to that awareness. In addition, many people said that they had more dreams or nightmares following positive experiences that were especially meaningful to them.

It became increasingly apparent that the converse was also true that in order to avoid death salience and stirring up unconscious fear and anxiety, people tend to give up significant parts of their lives. The participants in the discussion groups spoke honestly and straightforwardly about the negative behaviors and habit patterns they utilized to avoid psychological pain. They revealed personal defenses and behaviors that restricted their lives and attempted to work past these destructive patterns. Breaking with defenses invariably led to anxiety and increased thoughts about death. Nevertheless, talking and expressing their emotions about death concerns in the group experience strengthened these individuals, helped them to expand their lives, and gave the majority a sense of community and purpose.

In recent years, we have observed the evolution of a more philosophical point of view about death among many of these people. For example, in a discussion that took place last year, Tamsen, who once recoiled from even thinking about death because it was *too unbearable*, talked about a fundamental change that had taken place in her attitude and feelings about the subject.

Today I feel that life is an incredible gift. I'm aware of death as a reality, so there's always a certain sadness in everything that I experience. All my happiness has a poignancy to it that actually makes it deeper and richer than when it was just 'happy.'

Tamsen's statement reflects one of the major themes in this book: the fact that facing death openly and with feeling challenges defenses, and therefore enlarges life experiences and enhances the meaning of existence. In a sense people are split between having an alliance with death

and an alliance with life. In aligning oneself with death, one chooses destructive inward patterns of defense that preclude love and compassion and shrink one's life space. One conserves life to avoid death. By contrast, aligning oneself with life enables one to experience the full range of feelings, both positive and negative. The less defended individual feels more alive, has the opportunity to experience more freedom and independence, and has a greater chance to evolve and fulfill his or her human potential. Making this choice is what the authors refer to as *life-affirming death awareness*.

The authors' purpose in writing this book is to stress the implications—psychological, social, and political—of the subject of death in contemporary life and to advance our knowledge regarding belief systems and maladaptive behaviors that represent defensive solutions to this existential reality. Our second, equally important objective is to explore methods for ameliorating the destructive consequences of these defensive solutions and to suggest ways for people to use the fact of their mortality to live more fully, with compassion for themselves and for others as they all share the same fate.

The human experience is such that people are both blessed and cursed with the capacity to make use of abstract symbols, enabling them to have an awareness of their own existence. Their remarkable propensity to experience life on a feeling level combined with their ability to utilize symbolic logic adds a multitude of dimensions to the life process. These unique characteristics of *Homo sapiens* allow for creativity and magnificent accomplishments in music, art, literature, and science. Like the God they worship, people have created a vast and wondrous world on earth. They fly through the air, sail on the sea, bridge the raging rivers, and harness the forces of nature. They have enormous power to shape their environment and the intellectual resources to forge their own personal destiny. Along with these endowments, human beings have the exquisite sensitivity to feel deep emotion. They can feel for themselves and their own lives, and they have the capacity for empathy toward their fellows as well. Without these rare and distinctive qualities they would be less than human. Tragically, this singular energy source or force has not only been utilized for extraordinary achievement and constructive purpose but also for extraordinary destructiveness; not only for expressions of kindness and sensitivity but also for manifestations of cruelty and evil that surpass other creatures in all dimensions.

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

Human beings are very frightened animals because they are privy to the conscious awareness of their own mortality. This “curse of consciousness . . . gives rise to a fear reaction of serious proportions. Indeed, the manner in which an individual handles death anxiety as an evolving being, faced with growing knowledge of existential issues, acts as one of the primary determinants of the course of his or her psychological life” (R. Firestone, L. Firestone, & Catlett, 2003, p. 185).

All children go through a series of developmental stages as they learn about the finite span of life: first an awareness that their parents will die, then that they cannot sustain their own lives, and finally that humankind and the earth itself most probably will perish. Faced with this tragic awareness, the child must choose between a life of denial and regress to an infantile state of nonawareness or accept the painful reality and embrace life in spite of death. A person could choose to cherish every moment of his or her life all the more because of its temporal quality. Rather than denying death and employing defenses to avoid painful existential realities, a person could face the fact of death and use it to give life more meaning.

However, this is not a philosophical decision where the advantages are meticulously weighed as pros or cons by a judicious mind-set. The resolution of this conflict is born of turmoil and emotional upheaval that is torturous for the vulnerable little person. And it is a real problem for real children as early as three or four years of age.

What factors determine whether this dilemma is resolved in a negative or a positive fashion? This is a proper question of extreme relevance. To answer it, one must look at the psychological dimensions of each child’s earlier life experience—before he or she developed an awareness of death—and thereby come to understand how the defenseless infant learns to cope with life in a relationship constellation.

A certain amount of defense formation is a necessity even when the parental atmosphere is ideal because there is inevitable frustration in the developmental process. However, when the child is the victim of immature, inadequate, or hostile parenting, the traumatic impact of extensive frustration on the all-encompassing reactivity of the infant causes incredible psychological pain and the only escape is an excessively defended posture. The hurting child defends him or herself by adopting a fantasy process, and a marked tendency to suppress or repress primal pain takes

over in an attempt to ease the suffering. The child ceases to identify with him or herself as the helpless victim of abuse by identifying with the overpowering aggressor. Thus the child joins with the powerful mother, parent, or caretaker, and this imaginary fusion reduces anxiety and provides partial relief of the tension associated with the frustration of basic needs. The illusion of connection to the powerful parent, together with self-nurturing patterns, such as thumb-sucking, nail-biting, and masturbation, act to alleviate the distressing feelings of hurt and frustration. This defense, which is called the fantasy bond, creates an illusion of pseudoindependence in an effort to avoid ego disintegration (R. Firestone, 1984, 1985).

The greater the rejection, the stronger the imaginary attachment in fantasy and the greater the loss of reality testing. The rejected child clings desperately to the family, idealizes his or her parents at his or her own expense, internalizes a negative self-concept, and projects the destructive characteristics of his or her parents onto the environment at large, fostering a paranoid view of the world.

Somewhere between the ages of three and six, the child becomes aware of death; and no child is spared. Even the child who is provided with the necessary emotional sustenance by loving parents and is then able to live in the real world, with less need to depersonalize or develop defenses to avoid psychological pain and frustration, still faces death. The defenses that children have developed to deal with their early separation experiences bear directly on how they deal with this ultimate separation experience. The child is now faced with the core conflict—when confronted with an awareness of death, whether to feel his or her emotions or to disconnect from emotional investment in life; whether to develop compassion for him or herself and others or to resort to an inward, self-protective lifestyle where relationships with people play a less significant role. The greater the pain and frustration before the child's full realization of death, the more likely it is that the child will choose the defensive alternative (R. Firestone et al., 2003) (Note 2).

OPEN vs. DEFENDED LIFESTYLE

Therefore, the critical issue pertinent to pursuing an undefended rather than a defended lifestyle is the emotional climate that the child is born into. In that sense a damaging psychological environment condemns the child to a substandard existence and a situation that is difficult to reverse.

This is not to deny that people can change. However, “All the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Humpty together again.”

To the degree that people succumb to a defensive posture (e.g., by distorting, projecting, or forming addictive attachments and habit patterns), their adjustment will suffer and it is unlikely that they will approach their potential. Although these self-protective mechanisms may succeed in temporarily minimizing psychological and existential pain, as with any other addiction, there are unhealthy side effects. The suppression of feelings and the distortion of reality brought about by fantasy processes are inextricably connected to pathological symptom formation. There is no way to cut off emotions without elevating anxiety and bodily tension. The symptoms manifested may be psychological or psychosomatic, but in either case they are detrimental to the person’s well-being. Worse yet, people cannot be innocently defended; their defenses have a damaging effect on their loved ones and are particularly destructive to their children (R. Firestone & Catlett, 2009).

If one chooses to embrace life and lead an honest undefended lifestyle, one will experience both the joy and the pain of one’s existence; whereas, the defended person’s attempt to block out pain neutralizes the life experience and deprives the individual of life’s enrichment. Understanding people in relation to both interpersonal pain and death anxiety helps to explain many strange and puzzling phenomena about human behavior, not the least of which are human beings’ propensities for self-destructive thoughts and behaviors.

The concept of the fantasy bond helps to explain why people are prone to make self-defeating, self-limiting choices that condemn them to repeat the unfortunate circumstances of their early lives. This defense is erroneously considered to be a matter of life and death, and must therefore be protected. A person utilizing this defense can only tolerate gratification in fantasy; therefore, real gratification and goal-directed behavior threaten the equilibrium of the defensive solution. Subsequently, real achievement and accomplishment in life are avoided to protect the fantasy bond.

People very often do not want what they say they want. They relinquish their freedom, give up their point of view, choose conformity over personal expression, and find innumerable ways to sacrifice their autonomy and humanness. Indeed, to varying degrees people choose suicidal alternatives and even actual suicide in place of a full-blown life experience. Many avoid personal gratification and prefer not to be loved and valued by others because it makes them more cognizant of their own

death. They choose to merge with others and lose their distinctive characteristics rather than invest in a life they must certainly lose. “Why care, when your destiny is so futile? Why want anything? Who gives a damn? Who needs people anyway? So what if you do find someone to love; relationships don’t last forever. If you don’t want anything, you won’t be disappointed” (R. Firestone et al., 2003).

THE EFFECT ON SOCIETY

Individual lifestyles based on psychological defenses combine to affect social phenomena. Social pressure then acts back on the individual, creating a perpetual cycle. Most people choose reliving over living, bondage over freedom, the old over the new, the past over the now (R. Firestone, 1984). They try to recreate a parent or parents in other persons or institutions and search for a personal savior on earth or in the heavens. Their solution is the abrogation of real power in exchange for a form of childish dependency. They are willing to relinquish genuine friendship, free choice, and love in favor of familiarity and false safety.

People have a stake in their mode of defense and are threatened by those with different outlooks and customs. They are afraid of alternative philosophies and ideologies because they perceive them as threats to their own defensive solution. Faced with differences in race, color, religious beliefs, lifestyles, and habit patterns, they experience anxiety, aggression, and hostility. One must either convert those who are “misguided and mistaken” or take the necessary action to eradicate them, for they disturb one’s frame of mind. They are the enemy.

On a societal level, such thinking is at the core of nationalism, patriotism, and other *isms*. This accounts for the pervasiveness of ethnic strife in the world today. People around the globe continue to fight about age-old religious differences without the slightest conception of why they hate and why they must destroy each other. Yet these ethnic and cultural differences threaten to annihilate life on the planet (R. Firestone, 1996).

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Religious ideology and secular belief systems represent serious efforts to cope with and allay death anxiety. They offer a good deal of comfort and security but they fail to completely reassure us about the subject

of our own death. Besides, there is a marked tendency for believers to sacrifice important elements of their present day lives for their imagined afterlife.

In addition, few people are completely satisfied by the idea that living a pious life will lead to the hard-won victory of an afterlife in heaven. It is difficult to conceptualize the form this eternal life will take; the concept of an infinite life is in itself disquieting. Nor does the postulation of one's salvation through reincarnation or becoming at one with the universe offer total relief.

Human beings are terrified about any change in the present shape or form of their existence. The anticipation of an altered state of consciousness is horrifying; any transition is frightening, and death clearly represents a transition of major proportions. Both Western and Eastern religious doctrine sacrifice the body, the ego, or the self-system for the higher good, but neither salve the break in continuity.

Whether a person believes in religion, an afterlife, a spiritual oneness with the universe, or some other form of enlightenment, or if one chooses to suspend belief or even to disbelieve, the true realization of death, the cessation of all consciousness and feeling for oneself as well as the loss of loved ones, remains an experience of agonizing proportions. The only appropriate response is despair. According to Kierkegaard (1849/1954), despair is endemic to the human condition and the inability to experience despair is an even greater torture.

An effort can be made to transcend or obscure this pain by relinquishing every aspect of ego or self and by disconnecting from love objects in an attempt to achieve spiritual enlightenment. In the authors' shared opinion, this cannot be attained without a significant loss of feeling and a deadening restriction of human potential for love and experience. Distance and detachment are too great a price for peace of mind. Irvin Yalom (2008) has stated: "Death anxiety is the mother of all religions, which, in one way or another, attempt to temper the anguish of our finitude. God, as formulated transculturally, not only softens the pain of mortality through some vision of everlasting life but also palliates fearful isolation by offering an eternal presence" (p. 5).

People cannot tolerate direct confrontation with the concept of death or the interminable cessation of conscious awareness, and the majority retreat from these realizations. Nonetheless, most people are confronted with the essential ambiguity of life and with fears of the unknown that exist in their unconscious. As Piven (2004b) rightly observed: "Immersion in personal or social fantasies quells the conscious fear of death. . . . These

fantasies do subdue conscious fear, but conscious feelings of security do not dispel unconscious tremors. Underneath these fantasies, dread and terror impel rigid adherence to whatever fantasy system provides subjective feelings of safety and salvation” (p. 245).

Faced with this inescapable dilemma, how can an individual live a constructive life? The answer is to appreciate the mystery of life and death without false resolution by transcending vanity and illusions of omniscience and accepting vulnerability without shame. The truth is that we can give value to our lives and that of our fellows in spite of acknowledging our finite existence in the world. We can live without sacrificing our integrity and without resorting to deadening painkillers, dishonest manipulations, and a myriad of other psychological defenses. To achieve this goal, we must face the fact of our own mortality, accept our destiny, and live with existential despair. In a sense we must mourn the eventual death of our loved ones and ourselves and thus feel the true sadness of life. Paradoxically, only by facing this essential despair can we enjoy life to its fullest for self and others, and only turn to battle in self-defense (R. Firestone, 1996).

CONCLUSION

One cannot face one's mortality directly without protecting oneself; therefore, some defenses against the painful realization of death and dying are essential. Defenses against death anxiety are manifested by all people to varying degrees. The problem is that when children are damaged in their upbringing, they rely excessively on defense formation and these defenses are compounded by death anxiety. Even when the parental environment is more or less ideal, the issue of personal mortality is so painful that it must be blocked out to varying degrees from conscious awareness. The authors describe the many defenses against death anxiety that are adverse to personal fulfillment in life. They suggest a methodology for challenging these defenses and coping directly with existential feelings of sadness, aloneness, and death fears. Lastly they describe a positive approach to death concerns that enhances life and gives meaning to one's existence.

In concluding, not enough interest and research in the field of psychotherapy have been devoted to the subject of death anxiety as it affects human behavior. However, Becker, Yalom, Langs, and Piven, among others, have approached this topic and have made significant contributions.

Our work is based primarily on clinical evidence from patients in an extensive psychotherapy practice and from an observational study of individuals and families over a 36-year period.

In addition, our concepts and conclusions are supported by empirical data accumulated over the past 25 years by researchers in Terror Management Theory (TMT). For example, numerous studies by Sheldon Solomon, Tom Pyszczynski, and Jeff Greenberg have repeatedly shown people's increased reliance on defense mechanisms as a result of experimentally manipulating their death salience and have described the effect these defenses have on human behavior and choices (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004). Their systematic research has added a great deal to our understanding of the rich source of material provided by Ernest Becker (1973/1997), specifically his theory that an awareness of death impels people to first construct and then immerse themselves in cultural worldviews and institutions that deny death. The authors are indebted to these researchers for their persistence in investigating Becker's original thesis and emphasizing the important impact of death anxiety on the life process.

NOTES

1. Throughout the book, the first author's personal statements appear in italics.
2. Attachment theorists have found that an insecure attachment pattern between parent and child is often correlated with early separation experiences, deprivation, trauma, or loss. Whether a child develops a secure or an insecure attachment appears to partly determine his or her subsequent reactions to his or her evolving knowledge of death. For example, findings from two studies (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000; Mikulincer, Florian, & Tolmacz, 1990) that investigated differences in attachment styles as related to the fear of personal death indicated that, in general, secure persons reported less fear of death than insecure persons as assessed on Hazan & Shaver's (1987) questionnaire on attachment history. Interpreting these results, Mikulincer and Florian (1998) concluded that: "Adult attachment style [which has been shown to be correlated with childhood attachment patterns] shapes the way people cope with the terror of their own mortality" (p. 149).

2

The Uncharted Terrain of Death

The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive.

—**Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (1973/1997, p. 66)**

I often feel that death is not the enemy of life, but its friend, for it is the knowledge that our years are limited which makes them so precious.

—**Rabbi Joshua L. Liebman (1961)**

We live in a suppressive culture of denial in relation to the subject of death and dying, and this defensive attitude has a profound negative effect on people's lives. Like other painkilling drugs and habit patterns that insulate us from feeling the anguish of the core existential issues that confront humankind, there is a price to pay for this indulgence. In a somewhat futile attempt to cut off negative emotions, we are inhibited in our capacity for joyful living and lose our human initiative.

Society represents a pooling of individual defenses, and eventually the social mores of the culture at large reflect on the individual in a feedback loop that intensifies defensive modes of living. Over the millennia people have created increasingly complex institutions, social mores, and belief systems in their attempt to adapt to death anxiety. Each succeeding generation has added its own building blocks to the system of denial,

which is imparted through the socialization processes within the family to the next generation (R. Firestone, 1990b). It is now possible to imagine all that is human disappearing, with people progressively losing contact with feeling, embracing self-deception, exiting from reality, and accepting substitute gratifications that destroy the real self in favor of provisional roles that are designed to make people *feel better*. Throughout history, in spite of our scientific achievement and greater understanding, there is a tragic progression toward defensive denial and depersonalization. As our advancing technologies outrun our rationality and our humanity, this evolution constitutes a threat to our very existence on the planet.

DEFINITION OF DEATH ANXIETY

The authors have described death anxiety as a complex phenomenon that represents the blend of many different thought processes and emotions: the dread of death, the horror of physical and mental deterioration, the essential feeling of aloneness, the ultimate experience of separation anxiety, sadness about the eventual loss of self, and extremes of anger and despair about a situation over which we have no control. In some ways death anxiety reflects a basic paranoid attitude because from the beginning of life human beings are at the mercy of physical and social forces beyond their power to control—forces that threaten their very existence. But it is tragic when this core paranoia frames the perception of their interpersonal world. Although death anxiety includes a broader spectrum of painful emotions as noted above, the first author's essential definition refers to both the unconscious anxiety about and the conscious realization of the fact that our lives are terminal, that we face separation from loved ones, and find ourselves conjuring up painful imaginings of infinite nothingness or nonexperience, a mental state that when faced directly is truly intolerable (R. Firestone, 1994b, 1997a) (Note 1).

In describing his experience of death anxiety, one client wrote that, "The concept that my life is terminable is too awful. How could it be that life ends when it feels so permanent? I know it can't really end; there must be a way out. How can death stalk on such a sunny day? Death should be reserved for the nighttime or at the very least for a cloudy or rainy day. Is there no respite? I thought of Orpheus and Eurydice and their desperate struggle to escape the dark shadow that followed her. He fought valiantly for her, but he could not save her, or himself.

"I tried to imagine the possibility of eternal life. I pictured my wife and myself walking through life together hand in hand. This gave me a

modicum of comfort at times, but the concept generally eluded me. I could not stand the ghastly alternative of facing death all alone, forever. With all these thoughts, my emotions ran the full gamut: sheer terror, blind fury at my destiny, a monstrous outrage.”

One woman conceived of death as a punishment: “What have I done to deserve this predicament? Is it some sort of punishment? I have searched my memory for clues to unimaginable crimes I might have committed and then banned from my consciousness. When I couldn’t make that connection, I sought other explanations. Maybe my crime was related to intention rather than action. I imagined that I was being punished for my thoughts rather than my deeds. What good is it to protest my innocence? The verdict is already in; my crime will remain unspecified forever. It might provide some solace if I could fathom the charges. Then perhaps there would be the possibility of atonement.”

Death anxiety can be distinguished from the poignant feelings of sadness that emerge when we contemplate the inescapable end of our existence. We can never overcome the sadness associated with the obliteration of the self as we know and experience it in our everyday lives. In a sense we must mourn this anticipated loss to retain our capacity for genuine feeling. Sadness is therefore an inescapable part of a feelingful existence (R. Firestone, 1994b).

To a fully alive, feeling person who has invested meaning and affect in his or her life experience, no death is acceptable—instantaneous death in a car accident or plane crash, an extended and painful illness, senility, or a quiet death in one’s sleep. As Simone de Beauvoir (1966/1976) wrote concerning her mother’s death:

The knowledge that because of her age my mother’s life must soon come to an end did not lessen the horrible surprise. . . . There is no such thing as a natural death: nothing that happens to a man is ever natural, since his presence calls the world into question. All men must die: but for every man his death is an accident and, even if he knows it and consents to it, an unjustifiable violation. (p. 526)

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS TO DEATH ANXIETY

In reacting to death anxiety, most people regress and become emotionally cut off. To varying degrees they choose to depersonalize. Their defensive posture tends to limit their capacity to relate to others, restricts their

ability to make choices, and narrows their life experience. Rigid belief systems offer some respite from death fears but often inspire distrust and hatred. Many religious wars involving mass destruction have been fought over sectarian systems of thought.

Nevertheless, there are people who show unusual courage and are able to turn the issue of death's inevitability to an advantage, giving greater meaning to their lives and more consideration and respect for the lives of others. In *Creating a Life of Meaning and Compassion* (R. Firestone et al., 2003), we wrote of a conversation with a 54-year-old political analyst/journalist and the encounter with death that had a powerful impact on his life:

In August 1989, I had an experience which was to change my life forever. I was ... spending time with my mother who had recently suffered a stroke. The experience had shaken the foundations of my psyche, loosening rigid structures that only those who have participated in the slow deterioration of a parent can fully understand. Also, I was doing a lot of meditating during this period, focusing on observing my thoughts, feelings, and body sensations as they arose. It was thus perhaps no coincidence that I had this particular experience at this particular time.

It was early in the morning, 3 or 4 A.M., and I awakened from a deep sleep.... As I lay there, half asleep, half awake, I noticed a fear of death beginning to arise. For the first time in my life, I noticed the fear as it emerged and noticed myself automatically start to push it away as well. And, suddenly, I found myself saying, 'No! I won't push it away this time. Let it come!' And I did. I let it come.

The next minutes were the most excruciating I had ever experienced. My whole body went into shock. I felt paralyzed, as if I could not move. I had difficulty breathing; at times I felt as if I were suffocating. At other times, I felt like I was burning alive.... I was out of my head, in some kind of an unexpected hell.... What I remember most was screaming at the top of my lungs. Only I was so in shock, so paralyzed, that no sound would come out.... I felt as if I would not, I could not, survive what was happening to me.

Finally, after what seemed like a lifetime, it was suddenly over. At first I felt just sort of numb, shaken, still halfway between two worlds. And then, all of a sudden, out of nowhere ... I suddenly began feeling more alive than I had ever felt before. I began experiencing both an aliveness and a sense of deep peace that I had never before dreamed existed. I do not mean that I suddenly found myself feeling, 'Oh boy, I'm still alive! I didn't die after all.' There was no verbal content.... It was about having a very different experience of life, a state of being. (p. 188)

In a later conversation, this man provided additional details of what he referred to as his *transformation*:

On the simplest level, I saw things as I had never seen them. If I were to try to verbalize it, I would use words like ‘aliveness,’ ‘quiet joy,’ ‘deep peace,’ ‘happier than I’d ever been.’ And words were not important. I was transported into another realm, another dimension, very different from the one in which I had lived my entire previous life. It was a dimension in which prior concerns seemed unimportant indeed.

This feeling persisted. I remained far more alive than I had ever been. The morning light was precious, as was an orange, the smile of an old person, almost any feeling at all. I felt the deepest possible love for my mother. And within, I felt a loosening of fears never before understood.

Until this experience, I had intellectually known, of course, that I would one day die. But it had been an ‘idea’ not an ‘experience.’ Actually experiencing my feelings about my death had changed everything.

First, until that moment, my reaction to death was similar to that of most people I know: I thought that I would only worry about it when I had to, that it was not relevant to my present life. This experience proved beyond any doubt, however, that I was harboring enormous *unconscious* death anxiety; otherwise I could not have had such a powerful experience. I realized that my attitudes toward death were having an enormous impact on my life, but that I had no real idea of what that impact was.

Second, I decided overnight to abandon my relatively successful political career, including my present position leading a think tank advised by many of the nation’s leading economists. My experience of aliveness after my encounter with my unconscious feelings about death had been so powerful that it made my present work-life seem dull and boring by comparison. I wanted not only to understand what had happened to me, but also to reexperience both the painful and joyful feelings that I had touched for the first time as a result of facing my death.

Because death anxiety exists on an unconscious as well as on a conscious level, most people would say they do not consciously think about death. However, on an unconscious level, the fear of death influences significant aspects of their lives and motivates many of their actions. People avoid death anxiety in a variety of ways. Although this defended approach does help to avoid anxiety states, it has numerous costs in terms of the damage inflicted on the individual, the family, and the children. Unlike the example above, most people respond negatively to being confronted with death awareness.

Rachel, 18, moved home to California after her freshman year in college. She had not been happy in school—she did not like living in the small college town, she had few friends, but worst of all, she was involved in an abusive relationship. After she moved to California, her boyfriend called her often, but she made it clear to him that their relationship was over. Rachel was glad to be back in her hometown among her old friends, and she began making plans to continue her schooling at the nearby university. She said that she was beginning to feel like her free-spirited old self again.

Soon after coming home Rachel visited Helen, 65, a woman who had offered Rachel valuable counsel and support during her teenage years. Rachel had come to regard Helen as a personal friend and a mentor. Since Rachel had been away Helen had been diagnosed with cancer and was given less than a year to live. Over the next six months, Rachel visited her often. Rachel felt deeply sad as Helen's health deteriorated, and when Helen died Rachel wanted to commemorate the life of this woman who had been so important to her. Rachel decided to make a documentary about Helen, and over the next months she interviewed people, gathered photographs, shot film, and edited a documentary. When the film was complete, Rachel held a screening for Helen's family and friends, and everyone was moved by Rachel's tribute.

Over the next weeks, Rachel seemed somewhat distant to her friends, and one day Rachel's roommate came home to find that Rachel had moved out of their apartment. No one knew where Rachel had gone. They called and e-mailed her, but received no answer. One month later her roommate received an e-mail from Rachel. She had driven across the country to be with her old boyfriend. Her roommate was shocked. She responded by expressing her concern that Rachel had returned to an abusive relationship, but she never heard back from Rachel. A year later she heard that Rachel had married her boyfriend. Rachel's friends and family were mystified by her behavior; what had happened to their friend?

Even though there are some people who, like the man in the first example, have a life-affirming response in relation to a confrontation with death, our experience is that most people respond more like Rachel. When their death anxiety is aroused, they tend to become increasingly defensive in ways that are harmful to themselves and often to others as well. Even when they respond positively at first and embrace life more fully, more often than not, people gradually return to their defended posture. They protect themselves and live as though they will never die and can afford to squander their most valuable experiences.

This regression to a state of denial tends to be demoralizing and takes on many forms: some people increase their drinking or turn to drugs;

others adopt compulsive work habits or routines that are distractions and give an illusion of permanence. Many people embrace a religious dogma that offers them the hope or promise of an afterlife. Others preoccupy themselves with trivial matters and obsess over pseudo-problems that act as diversions from realistic concerns about life and death. Some people over-intellectualize about death, taking a kind of philosophical position that keeps them one step removed from experiencing any feeling about their own mortality. Others repress their thoughts about death altogether, denying they ever think about it.

On a deeper, more unconscious level, some people imagine that death happens only to other people, never to them; their sense of specialness makes them feel immune to the fate that awaits the masses. Others find a different solution; they believe that someone will ultimately save them—a relationship partner, a charismatic leader, or a celebrity—or at the very least they believe that they will live on through their children. Tragically, many individuals seem to lose their spirit altogether. They become rigid and controlling, diminishing their range of experiences to such a degree that it could be said they are no longer invested in living. They become cynical and self-hating, give up interests that once excited them, engage in behaviors that are harmful to their physical and mental health, and become increasingly depressed and futile about life.

Some people become overly dependent on a mate, while others give up meaningful relationships, avoid commitments, or never become involved in a relationship at all. They retreat from intimacy and closeness because they are afraid of losing their loved one through rejection or death. The fear of object loss is akin to the fear of losing oneself and can also trigger a pattern of withholding that limits loving responses and personal involvement. In distancing themselves to protect against the fear of loss, men and women gradually relinquish the real substance of their life together and retain only the form, a fantasy bond or imaginary connection (R. Firestone, 1984, 1985). This illusion of fused identity imbues them with a sense of immortality.

THE CORE CONFLICT

Acceptance of the inevitability of death, which when faced can give dignity to life ... ennobles the whole face rather than furrowing the forehead with the little anxious wrinkles of worry. Worry in an empty context means that men die daily little deaths. (Mead, 1956/1960, p. 177)

How can one establish a nondefensive lifestyle that incorporates an awareness of death while maintaining a rich and meaningful investment in self and others? In other words, how can one embrace life in the face of death? Why should a person invest in loving relationships, search for truth and meaning, and devote oneself to humane pursuits and transcendent goals of creativity, spirituality, and service to others when all will be lost in the end? Is it really better to love and lose than never to love at all? How can human beings live with existential pain and anxiety? Wouldn't it be more expedient to be concerned only with pleasure and the pursuit of happiness? Wouldn't it make more sense to put these disturbing matters out of mind, deaden oneself to the obvious facts of sickness, aging, and death, the awesome reality of the unknown, and the ongoing holocaust of human brutality? Why not take the drug, cut off these unpleasantries, and submit to the predicament? Why not surrender to the obvious defense mechanisms of denial, fantasy, and addiction and lead an inward, self-protective existence?

The question of commitment to one's feelings, one's freedom, and the valuing of one's life implies a concomitant intensification of death awareness. Kathy illustrates this concept when, in the course of her free associations, she realizes why she refuses to commit to a loving, sexual, and romantic relationship.

I was thinking about my anger toward my husband, just saying anything I thought as it came up and it got pretty ugly. The more I thought about my relationship, the angrier I got. I had this interesting feeling come up in me about why I'm not committed to my feelings. If I'm committed to my feelings toward someone, that means there's an end, because if I'm committed, I know what I feel, I know where I stand, and there's an end in sight, whereas if I'm not committed, I'm safe.

I don't know what I want, I don't know where I want to live, I might not even choose to live with my husband. I might not be with him in 10 or 20 years, who knows? I might want to meet somebody else. I might want to be with somebody else. Who knows? I realized that if I did know what I wanted, if I knew what my feelings were, then I would know what my life was. There would be an end in sight. The other way it's all over the place. I don't even have an end in sight. My life seems way longer. Death seems not even an issue, really. I've got a long life to live. I can just meander around for the rest of my life and for eternity. Whereas if I don't just wander around, I have things to face, meaningful things that could happen in my life, painful things that will happen to me in my own existence. What I'm really avoiding is committing to living my life in the face of all of these painful issues.

This has been an important realization, because it made me feel something. Now that I am aware of this, I can hang in there and go through the anxiety. I'm sick of not knowing what I feel because of the fear of facing painful issues.

Dr. Firestone: To you, commitment means that you actually will die. That's what makes you so angry at your husband at the time. If you are not committed to your life, you are not committed to your death, that's a very important defense.

Kathy: In that situation when anger comes up, if I fight through it, I feel really sad. The feelings that come up are just really, really sad feelings.

Dr. Firestone [later in the conversation]: What you said about sex was interesting, too. Sex doesn't scare you if it's with a stranger.

Kathy: If I'm attracted to someone that I know casually, I can picture being in a sexual situation with that person, and I picture that it would be very nice, actually, like it would be a physical enjoyment. But when it comes to a close intimate sexual situation, that same anger comes up of not wanting to deal with whatever those feelings would be. I feel like something is wanted from me, and then I'm going to have to be committed to that situation again and again. In the other situation, there's no strings attached. I'm just cut off from feelings. I feel like I've had this defense forever. When I was a teenager I was drunk a lot and doing a lot of strange things and the thing I was proudest of was not being afraid to die. Now I tell myself, 'Remember how it was when you weren't afraid to die? You could always go back to that lifestyle because you wouldn't be afraid anymore.' I always felt that I had that 'out' if I got too afraid. I really appreciate talking about this with you a lot. It gives me real insight. I really do want to struggle with my life.

The core conflict within each individual centers on the choice between contending with emotional pain, both interpersonal and existential, or avoiding these painful realities. The universal dilemma is whether to live with the pain of awareness or to disengage from the self (R. Firestone et al., 2003). The majority chooses some degree of denial and escape and suffers the consequences in a loss of personal identity, freedom, and autonomy. Unfortunately, one cannot circumvent emotional pain and suffering, repress the existential dilemma, and lead a *happy* life without losing real feeling and individuality. Thus, the defensive choice dehumanizes the individual.

We do not consciously decide to defend ourselves; we do not weigh the issue of whether or not to adopt psychological defenses on a rational

scale. Children utilize defenses as a survival mechanism when faced with overwhelming emotional pain and the threat of ego-disintegration. Psychological defenses are a reaction to the stress induced by insecurity and faulty parenting practices in early life. These defenses congeal when children become aware of their mortality, and these patterns come to constitute a lifestyle. In the case of the neuroses and the psychoses, abnormal defensive processes evolve into so-called mental illness.

THE DILEMMA OF DEFENSES

For the individual, psychological defenses malfunction in a manner that is analogous to the body's physical reaction in the case of pneumonia. In this situation the body's defensive reaction to a dangerous bacteria or virus is what causes the damage. Similarly, defenses that originally alleviated the pain and frustration children experienced in their first interpersonal relationships are the principle cause of emotional suffering in later life (R. Firestone, 1985).

We are all faced with an essential dilemma, a no-win situation: if we give up our customary defenses and fully invest in our lives, we are struck by the magnitude of the loss we face through death; if, on the other hand, we retreat from life and fail to develop our unique potentialities, we are plagued with regret for a life not truly lived. The process of disengaging leads to a fundamental existential guilt for denying life and forgoing the project of becoming an authentic self. There is a sense of having betrayed oneself in choosing defended ways of living and being (R. Firestone, 1987b; M. Stern, 1968).

The need to rationalize or deny reality fosters a division or split in the psyche that is largely unconscious, but all the same, its crippling effects are felt throughout the whole spectrum of our personal and professional lives. Because defensive patterns spread and eventually become habitual, they ultimately manifest the same properties as an addiction. This generalized defensive reaction leads to progressive debilitation in broad areas of functioning, such as sexuality and other life-affirming activities.

An inward, self-deceptive, protective approach to life predisposes psychological and psychosomatic symptom formation. For example, when anger (the normal response to frustration) is obscured, angry feelings are either internalized or projected. The former leads to self-denigration and self-attack; the latter to a counter-aggressive, paranoid focus toward others. On a physiological level, repression of ideation and

affect elevates anxiety and tension, consuming energy that could be directed toward more optimal functioning and positive, goal-directed pursuits. When the truth is obscured, there is a build-up of internal pressure. A person not only loses initiative and develops symptoms of distress but also is unclear as to the reason for the malfunctioning. Since defenses are often activated before there is an awareness of feeling threatened, the person finds it difficult to explain disturbing changes in mood or behavior.

In contrast, an undefended life leads to an increased potential for feeling and experiencing all of our emotions. The less defended individual feels integrated, experiences more fulfillment, retains the capacity to find happiness and joy in life, is better able to tolerate intimacy, and tends to be more humane toward others. Tension is minimized in an honest, open approach to life.

By definition, a defended individual lacks integrity and therefore cannot communicate honestly. For example, if people deny their real wants and priorities, they deceive themselves as well as others about their true intentions. If, on the other hand, they fail to pursue the goals and experiences they claim to want, their behavior directly contradicts their words. This internal discrepancy accounts for the prevalence of mixed messages in personal communication that have a devastating effect on people's sense of reality. These mixed messages become an internal part of the social matrix and add support to the defensive process that mitigates against individuation. When these defenses are acted out on a mass scale, the result is social pathology. As noted, defensive machinations threaten to destroy civilization as people find it impossible to live with others who differ along racial, class, and religious lines. Groups whose mores contrast with our own are perceived as a threat. We are willing to both kill and die for our defenses in order to ward off existential anxiety (R. Firestone, 1996).

It would seem that defenses are essential when faced with our inhumanity to ourselves and to others. Yet cruelty and injustice are an outgrowth of personal deception and reliance on illusions that preclude our living with feeling and compassion for humankind. Because our defenses inevitably hurt others, maintaining emotional integrity and avoiding self-deception become ethical issues as well as sound mental health principles. Considering the alternative between defensive and nondefensive living, there is no real contest. Remaining vulnerable and undefended not only allows us to avoid neuroses and live fuller lives, but also becomes a positive human value.

CONCLUSION

The tragedy of the human condition is the fact that the capacity for reason and logic makes human beings acutely aware of their eventual demise. The ability to conceptualize and imagine has negative as well as positive consequences because it predisposes anxiety states that culminate in a defensive form of denial.

There is no defense or protection against death, but there is a way to live that is life-affirming rather than life-denying. In an essay, "Life Fear and Death Fear," Otto Rank (1936/1972) asserted that not all anxiety could be overcome therapeutically. It was death anxiety that Rank was referring to in his declaration that it is impossible to face the truth of human existence without anxiety (R. Firestone & Catlett, 1989).

Although despair is endemic to the human condition, there are ways to ameliorate the anxiety and dread that emerge when one contemplates one's mortality. People can share their feelings about death and dying with close friends and associates and find essential meaning in existence. Rather than searching outside for the essence or purpose of life, people can shape their lives and give their world form and color according to their own feelings and inclinations. They can maintain a strong sense of self and invest in goals that transcend the narrow focus of their own priorities. It is the nature of *Homo sapiens* to develop a personal project or transcendent goal and maintain a unique identity. Men and women can approach their fellows with compassion and a feeling of empathy, for people everywhere face the same existential crisis.

With enlightenment on the subject, people could choose to embrace life and live with an awareness of death, rather than deaden themselves prematurely. Coming to terms with death as a reality appears to be the only viable alternative to a life of tedium, conformity, and alienation from oneself and others. In choosing to live full and honest lives with a minimum of defense, people can move away from the morbid contemplation of death or its denial toward a life of adventure characterized by freedom of choice, enthusiasm, and optimism. (R. Firestone et al., 2003, p. 208)

NOTES

1. Tomer and Eliason (1996) provided a *working definition* of the concept of death anxiety in their paper "Toward a Comprehensive Model of Death Anxiety." They wrote: "The concept of death anxiety, as used here, is that of a negative emotional reaction provoked by the anticipation of a state in which the self does not exist" (p. 345).

Although a number of theorists (Becker, Rank, Choron, and Zilboorg) contend that the fear of death and the cessation of consciousness affect human beings more than any other existential “given,” others cite different conditions that they claim give rise to an even more profound terror. For example, David Loy (1992) in “Avoiding the Void: The Lack of Self in Psychotherapy and Buddhism” argued that the most powerful defenses are those formed against a perception of our groundlessness or the void.