

THE BEGINNING AND THE END TOUCH: THE EXPERIENCE OF DEATH IN CHILDREN AND THE ELDERLY

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This article starts from the hypothesis of the author: children and the elderly, despite appearances, share something in common in their approach to life. One might think, regarding the experience of death, that these two periods mark the boundaries of adulthood. They “might be” less burdened from the fear of death, which is typical of adulthood with its attachments. In this context, starting from the hypothesis that the fear of death may be linked to the consciousness of individuality (as suggested by Morin)⁽¹⁾, we can observe that young children have not yet completed the process of

individuation, and elderly people, in their final years of life, might be undergoing a process of detachment from the bonds that “defined” them during adulthood. These conditions of lesser attachment to their individuality/self-assertion would lead children and the elderly to experience death with less fear.

In this article, the author will delve into the concept of death in children and how it changes over time. Then, she will explore attitudes, pathways, and educational approaches (Death Education) useful in maintaining and/or recovering a state of mental fluidity that would allow one to reach old age with a conception of death more integrated into the life course.

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The Fear of Death

Various perspectives on the concept of death and the fear of it have developed over the centuries.

According to the vision supported by Morin, the obsession with one's survival manifests in the concern to save one's individuality beyond death.⁽²⁾

The horror of death would thus be the emotion, the consciousness of losing one's individuality and the possibility of asserting it, tied to a deep sense of emptiness!

In children, the consciousness of death, as described by many authors, manifests from the moment they become aware of themselves as individuals. Until then, they do not perceive the trauma of death as adults do. It is only with the emergence of self-awareness that the *need* for self-assertion appears. Even when death approaches, due to old age or the presence of diseases, destroying the individual and the attachment to what previously *defined* their individuality, the fear of death tends to disappear.

Some people, at the moment of their death, exhibit profound calm. This can also begin to surface during the aging process when the individual has lost motivation for self-assertion (probably also because it has been sufficiently satisfied) and shifts their interest towards a



process of spiritual search, identifying with something broader than themselves and their personality; first with their belonging group, with humanity in general, and finally with God.

In our culture, death tends to be sensationalized, discussed in terms of catastrophes, accidents, seeking the *why* it happened, and rarely talked about as a natural fact within life itself. The death of a loved one, consequently, throws people into despair and unbearable pain.

The idea of death, in the Western world, is continuously pushed away, removed, and exorcized with thoughts and actions. People are always busy and worried about avoiding pain and suffering.

However, by denying death, a fundamental aspect of life is denied. An experience without the acceptance of death becomes a unilateral experience, lacking depth and intensity. But we know well that what is repressed does not cease to exist, and the fear of death returns as an anxiety that pervades life.

As Seneca indicates in the Letters to Lucilius, *being always ready for death means facing it as a choice*.

Not fearing it is a fundamental goal to which one must devote the same attention as living: knowing how to live well must correspond to *knowing how to die well*. From this, it follows that in addition to trying to live well, one should consciously pay attention to death as an inevitable event.

The Concept of Death in Children

By nature, children possess certain traits to a greater extent, such as suggestibility and hypersensitivity. They are more exposed than adults to the process of latent influence. From this, it can be deduced that children's thoughts about life and death, while differing significantly from those of adults, are influenced by what their emotional environment thinks and *says* about these topics. Indeed, *one of the characteristics of children's thinking is concreteness*. For a child, words have concrete meanings, just like objects. And so, the words used by adults when referring to death feed children's creation of phantasmic images with a concrete character. Various authors have dealt with children's ability to

understand death, and they all seem to agree that only around the age of 7 can children perceive death as an absolutely irreversible and universal event⁽²⁾.

When children begin to ask questions, it means they have reached the emotional and cognitive maturity to receive an answer, obviously linguistically appropriate to their age and their understanding abilities. Often, the anxiety felt by adults leads them to avoid the topic, diverting it, with the conviction of protecting the child from fear. In reality, the child who does not receive answers to their questions is left *alone* with their fantasies and explanations, which possibly cause even more anxiety.

Children, when facing the death of a loved one, can have different emotional reactions and manifestations, depending on their age and their understanding of the concept of death, but also on personal characteristics and, as mentioned, on how death is experienced in their emotional environment.

The different reactions are also linked to the relationship the child had with the deceased person and the experience of loss/abandonment/separation, which, for a child, is even more intense than for an adult, as their state of dependence makes them perceive the risk to their own survival.

In any case, each child needs to be accompanied and supported through the various stages of processing their loss, from the moment it occurs until a long time after. They should be accompanied while going through all the different phases of grief. They should be allowed to express their pain, anger, fear, loneliness, and guilt through crying, talking, symbolic play, but also in other different forms.

Each child should be guided towards accepting the loss and internalizing the positive qualities of the person they have lost. Only in this way can the relationship remain alive and nurturing, fostering positive changes, instead of the *crystallizations* of thoughts and emotions that would prevent the child from fully resuming their life.

However, *death* is a difficult subject for adults to address because they have to deal with their own sense of powerlessness and the inability to protect their children from pain and suffering.



On the other hand, it is important for all children that the first *education* about death takes place within the family because it is from emotionally significant people that they *learn* the importance and meaning of their experiences. Thus, if parents feel anguish in the face of the death of a loved one and tend to hide it to protect their children, the unconscious message that reaches the child is that the experience is distressing and should not be talked about because it would cause the parent to suffer. Conversely, if a parent, despite the pain of the loss, can communicate the experience and their feelings to the child, they demonstrate that life, by its nature, also includes painful moments but that these moments can be lived without being overwhelmed by anxiety. This is communicated not so much through outward behavior, but through an unconscious attitude and, therefore, especially through the adult's inner transformation.

Both for children and adults, the experience of *death* is connected to the experience of *loss*, especially when facing the death of someone or something (social role, relationship, etc.) to which they were very attached. Often, relationships are based on the fulfillment of needs. For an adult, becoming aware of the needs underlying their relationships and attachment to certain people rather than others helps them take responsibility

for their own need and, in case of loss, seek new ways to care for it. Pain becomes more bearable if the loss does not destroy one's sense of identity.

Even in the case of one's own death, one must face the loss of everything they must leave in the physical world to which they are more or less *attached*.

A good attitude, then, to avoid being unprepared in the face of death/loss, would be to consciously experience, accept, and embrace the many losses that life presents. Always being ready for death means the knowing how to deal with it as a choice.

Starting from when one is young (loss of a pacifier, favorite toy, loss of friends and teachers in preschool, etc.) throughout the entire developmental arc of a human being. Initially, as always, this attitude must be mediated by parents/adults until it becomes a personal way of facing losses. Embracing the sadness for what has been lost, crying, bidding it farewell with a sense of gratitude for what it taught/donated. Believing to be stronger and richer after this experience and opening up to new encounters and possibilities. Without demonizing moments of sadness and anger that might arise during the process. It is like constant training through small experiences, to arrive without feeling overwhelmed in the face of significant losses.

Educational Pathways

Death Education emerged around the 1960s in the Anglo-Saxon world. It was promoted by the ideas of Herman Feifel (1959), and his students, who emphasized that *only the integration of the concept of death into life makes a conscious existence possible*.

Death Education (DeEd) involves three levels of prevention: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary prevention focuses on understanding death and how to confront the concept of finitude (*memento mori*). Secondary prevention concerns dying with awareness and accompanying those who are dying (*ars moriendi*). Tertiary prevention addresses the ability to process grief by those who experience a loss, so that it does not

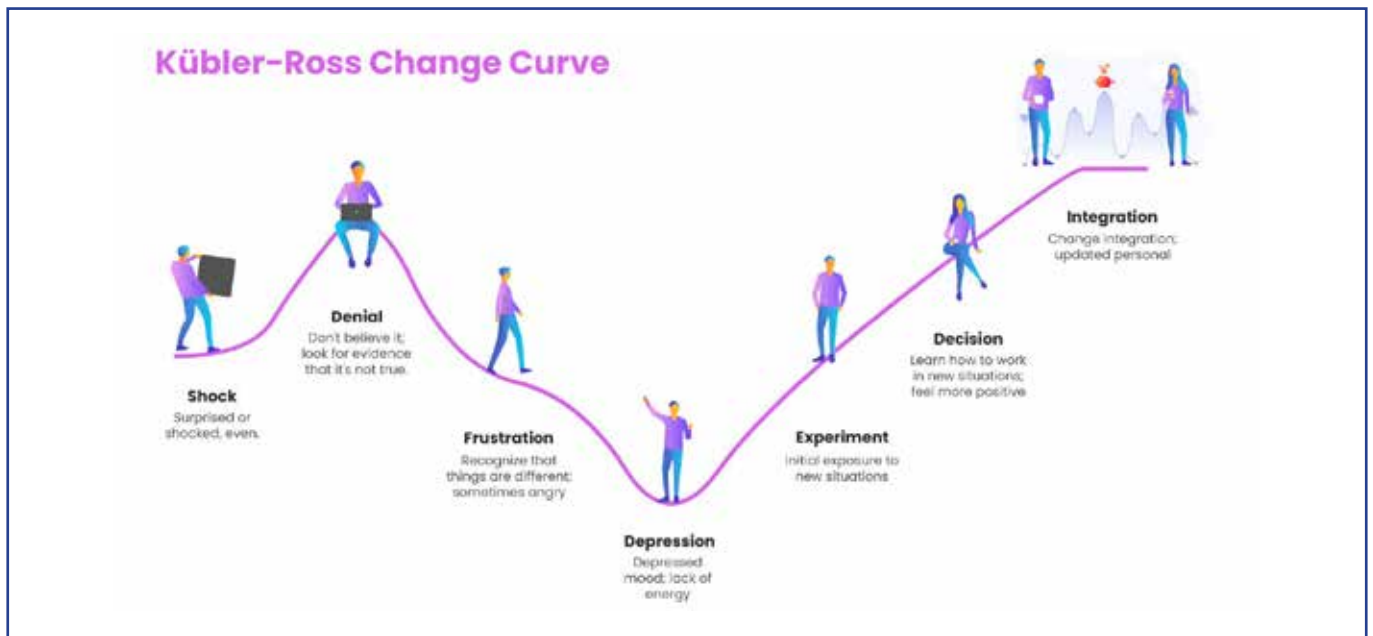
become pathological.

Research supporting primary prevention has confirmed that the intensity of fear is greater when the understanding of the concept of death is low. Conversely, the more mature this idea is, the less anxiety is present. Based on the above, and from my perspective, it would be important to create *support* situations for adults as well. Their experience of death significantly influences how they convey an attitude of acceptance and understanding to children. Adults need to have processed their own fears about death to avoid passing them on to children, and they must consider the child's cognitive and emotional developmental stage.

Regarding tertiary prevention, Ostaseski suggests that the process of grief can be considered complete when the loss is accepted as a fact rather than being denied or seen as irreparable. The loss can then be integrated into our reality. Although the pain remains, it is colored by new emotions: love, nostalgia for the lost person, and the sweetness of these emotions. We find a renewed sense of life and can turn towards new projects, goals, and passions⁽³⁾.

Death as a Part of Life

As discussed in the previous paragraph, secondary prevention in Death Education involves dying with awareness and accompanying the dying person (*ars moriendi*). It concerns the process where the person, in their final moments, has the opportunity to transform their concept of death, review their life with a new perspective, and give it a new meaning and direction. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross identified five psychological stages that a person goes through upon learning they are dying. These stages are not necessarily experienced all at once, but generally form a pathway: denial of death, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.



they remain attached to old identities, blocking growth and transformation. In this process, what should remain constant is the bond of the identified Self with its higher part, beyond personality, to keep the direction of one's path *alive*.

The most correct attitude, as suggested by Assagioli, is to learn to cooperate with the inevitable. This doesn't mean resigning to endure what we cannot change but rather seeking what is useful in experiences that transcend our will, *choosing* to experience what we cannot avoid.

When we encounter an unpleasant event, we can choose to accept it as it is, without complaint, because life doesn't always adapt to our desires. Adopting an attitude of acceptance helps us understand what is happening, learn from circumstances, and give a new *meaning* and direction to our lives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, revisiting the initial hypothesis, we might say that the fear of death is inherent in humans as it evokes the unknown and the mystery, the process of separation from everything to which one is *attached*, but also due to conditioning and teachings about death. Children who grow up with a strong sense of self and

Similar experiences can occur in all cases of loss. Every change is a loss, every beginning an end⁽⁴⁾.

Human life, as supported by Dethlefsen and Dahlke⁽⁵⁾, unfolds between two poles: letting in and abandoning. The first is what we also call love, the second, in its final form, is death. Throughout life, we rhythmically exercise these two poles, experiencing occasions when we need to welcome and *let in* the new, and others when we must abandon something or someone that has accompanied us for a time. Through this, including through illness and death, we integrate the shadow, or the pole that had been rejected.

In a bipolar existence, life manifests as movement and change. Any attempt to cling to one pole leads to stagnation and suffering.

By clarifying our relationship with death, we can transform not only our way of dying but also our way of living, as Ostaseski⁽³⁾ suggests. Recognizing the precariousness of life makes us aware of its preciousness, encouraging us to live fully. Paradoxically, this changes our attachment to things and people, making it easier to let go. Dying is a moment of surrender and transformation.

Throughout life, every individual should be able to *let die* (let go of) the old to open up to the new. Otherwise,

their attachments exhibit less anxiety in the face of separation, which for them represents the danger of death, given their lack of self-sufficiency in ensuring their security and safety. To help children through this process, much depends on the adult's attitude and their ability to create an environment of acceptance and security. In their natural development, a personal identity forms that needs to manifest and express itself in the social world. If this could happen while maintaining the fundamental security of early childhood, one could become an adult, synthesizing the positive qualities of various ages.⁽⁶⁾

This would allow *healthy, whole* adults to raise equally whole children and face the end of life *full of life*. If learning to live *in the present* is involved, children are our teachers: just observe them while they play. The ability to remain present in the moment should always be maintained or reclaimed to experience the sensation of *being alive*, fullness, and satisfaction within our experiences. This translates into the consciousness of *fulfillment*, which means *deceased/complete*. This process of integration and acceptance of all our aspects occurs more easily in those who nurture their spirituality. Indeed, the inner experience of openness to something greater than our limited personality, the experience of being ready to transcend this personality, and the experience of identification with something that transcends our finitude, also allows us to *go beyond* our fears and open ourselves to hope.

Note

1. Morin Edgar, *L'uomo e la morte*, Erickson, Trento, 2014
2. Bonfantini Marinella; Motta Marilena, *Dalla crisalide alla farfalla. Come superare la sofferenza del lutto*, San Paolo Edizioni, Edizione del Kindle
3. Ostaseski Frank, *Saper accompagnare*, Oscar Saggi Mondatori, Trento 2006
4. Goleman Daniel, *Stiamo rompendo il silenzio sulla morte*, su *Psicologia contemporanea* n. 56 – marzo/aprile 1983
5. Dethlefsen Thorwald – Dahlke Rüdiger, *Malattia e destino – il valore del messaggio della malattia*, Edizioni Mediterranee, Roma 2003
6. Assagioli Roberto, *Il conflitto tra le generazioni e la psicosintesi delle età*, a cura dell'Istituto di Psicosintesi di Firenze