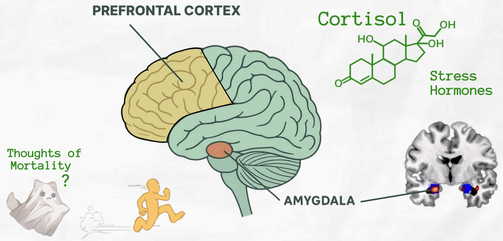
• Hirano, K., Oba, K., Saito, T., Yamazaki, S., Kawashima, R., & Sugiura, M. (2021). Brain Activation during Thoughts of One's Own Death and Its Linear and Curvilinear Correlations with Fear of Death in Elderly Individuals: An fMRI Study. Cerebral cortex communications, 2(1), tgab003. https://doi.org/10.1093/texcom/tgab003

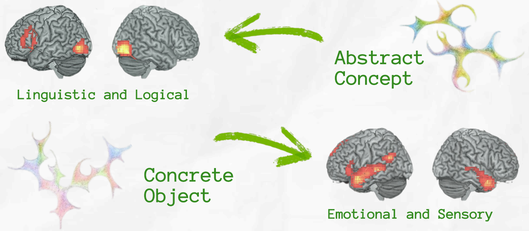
Thanatophobia

In neuroscience, thanatophobia originates from the brain's survival system. When faced with thoughts of mortality, the amygdala becomes activated and triggers the body's fight-or-flight response, releasing stress hormones such as cortisol. This reaction shows that even imagining death activates the same neural pathways as confronting physical danger.

When people are reminded of their own mortality, the prefrontal cortex works to suppress emotional responses and redirect attention. This automatic defense helps preserve psychological stability but also prevents genuine emotional processing of death.



Most people understand mortality intellectually, yet it is difficult to evoke emotional resonance. Making death more concrete through visual or narrative forms reactivates sensory networks, enabling individuals to process it with acceptance and meaning.



Confronting Mortality

To confront mortality is not merely to accept the end, but to reconsider the architecture of meaning itself. Awareness of death dissolves illusions of permanence and forces a confrontation with what is authentic, such as values, connections, and purpose.

One irony of death is that it often feels most frightening when it is distant. In its remoteness, mortality becomes vague and fuels unresolved anxiety. Yet when the prospect of dying becomes concrete and imminent, its meaning can shift entirely. Through acceptance, many people find clarity and strength, transforming the inevitability of death into a reminder to cherish the present and live fully in each moment.

Memento Mori Exercises

Different cultures have developed rituals that keep the awareness of death alive in daily life, in this way, death becomes a philosophical lens through which mortality is not only an end but also a reminder of impermanence, gratitude, and the continuity of life, urging us to live not longer, but truer.

Remember,
you are dust,
and to dust,
you shall return.

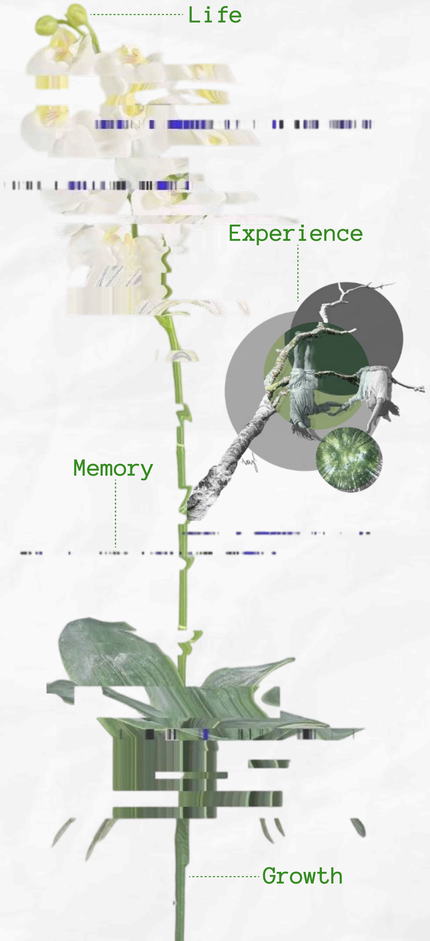
--Ash Wednesday

This body, too,
such is its nature,
such is its future,
such its unavoidable fate.

--Maranasati

The life of the dead,
is placed in,
the memory of the living.

--Cicero



Reference

Picture Books

Duck, Death and the Tulip: A tender and philosophical picture book where a duck befriends Death, helping children face mortality with calm and curiosity.

My Granddad is a Ghost: A boy discovers his grandfather has returned as a ghost, turning grief into a tender story of love, memory, and letting go.

On Death and Dying: A foundational work in modern death education, introducing the "five stages of grief" and encouraging empathy of end-of-life care can bring peace.

The Great Blue Yonder: Where memory and love bridge the living and the dead. A young adult novel narrated by a boy after his death, reflecting on the meaning of moving on.

Literature

Films

The Bucket List: Two terminally ill men travel the world to fulfill their final wishes, turning the imminence of death into a reason to embrace life more fully.

COCO: Through music, remembering those who have passed keeps them alive in our hearts. It celebrates death not as loss, but as a continuation of love through remembrance.