



How does the fear of death affect our emotions and actions? TARNYA DAVIS writes.

I SPENT some time in a body bag the other week. It wasn't my first time, and certainly won't be the last. I meditated on my body decomposing and also watched a video of bodies that had been given to science decaying in the bush (so those who need to, can learn how long a person's body might have been left in the elements when discovered). It was not my usual way to spend a Friday, but I was confronting what some psychologists believe is the cause of much of our psychological distress - our unacknowledged fear of death.

There is a long history in art and literature exploring our fear of death, and some may say that perhaps religion is a construction to help us soften the pain of the inevitability of the end.

While we may prefer to live than die, a dread of death can underpin suffering for some people with anxiety and depression and also drives us towards behaviour that keeps us denying our mortality.

Research has shown that inadvertently being reminded of our own death results in significantly more cruel behaviour as measured by willingness to impose harsher punishment upon others. It also can increase anxiety and the checking behaviours of OCD, while some evidence has shown that treatment encouraging people to accept and to be able to sit with the fact they will die resulted in reductions in these behaviours over the longer term.

In the word of the stoics, *"Life cannot be free from worry for any man who thinks too much about extending it..Make your life joyful by putting aside all your anxiety about keeping it."* - Seneca, Epistle, 4.3-9