



thoughts of death

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How thoughts of death can lead to a more vital life.

How can thinking of death make life better? Having worked for several decades with people facing life-threatening illness, particularly cancer, many people have told me the only reason they gave consideration to death was due to the fact of their cancer diagnosis. That was because before the diagnosis they were in denial. On one level, denial makes good sense. By denying death, we can pretend we will live forever or at least die at some convenient time way off in the future when we are ready. By denying death we can avoid dwelling on the immediate pain of the losses death may well bring.

But denial comes with a cost. With denial of death comes the optimistic hope that 'I will have time to do all the things that are important in life. Later.' So with denial there is often a willingness to postpone, to procrastinate, to compromise. And there is also a tendency to take life for granted; to function on automatic and to just allow life to drift along.

A cancer diagnosis can cut right through that. That is its power. That is its positive potential. If life may end sooner rather than later, what is the priority? What is really important? Of course many consider it is the cancer that provokes these thoughts. While this is often the truth of how life unfolds, everyone who is alive will die one day and no-one knows when.

Back in the mid-seventies, nearly everyone who knew me thought I would be dead in a few weeks. Decades later, I have been to quite a few of those people's funerals and I remain alive and well. The point is, if you are alive, you will die one day and you do not know when that day will be. If you take that fact into account, it will enhance your life.

When we live a life informed by death, we really appreciate how precious life is, as well as how fragile it can be. So we value life; we value each moment. Once we overcome the immediate fear of death and the shock that can often result, when for the first time we do contemplate it deeply, then life becomes more vivid and more focused. There comes a freshness, a vitality that seeks to get the most out of life.

Almost paradoxically, by considering death, we become truly alive.

Dr Ian Gawler is the author of many books including **You Can Conquer Cancer**. Ian is one of Australia's most experienced and respected authorities on Mind-Body Medicine and meditation. A long-term cancer survivor, he began one of the world's first lifestyle based cancer groups in 1981 and has written a number of best-selling books. Recently he branched out and produced an on-line meditation-based, mind training program - www.mindbodymastery.org and he blogs regularly - www.gawlerblog.com. Ian is passionate about helping people with their own health, healing and wellbeing.