

# A CASE OF “FEAR OF DEATH”: MANAGED BY HYPNOSIS

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## Abstract

Death is the greatest fear any man can encounter though it is the most certain event in life and people are ill prepared for it. They shudder and often will be paralyzed in front of this inevitable fact caused by disease. Here is a man who lost blood and felt he would be dead within a few months and he was successfully treated by the therapeutic intervention through hypnosis. The process enabled the patient to encounter his unwarranted fear. Puja Shah, a promising psychologist and clinical hypnotherapist describes the process she had conducted on him successfully to treat the patient.

Key Words: fulfillment, punishment, guilt, trauma, anxiety, self actualizing, trance, psychotherapy, hypnotherapy.

A Male, 68 years old, a retired bank manager, living in a nuclear family, came for taking hypnotherapy for fear of death. He lost 3 liters of blood in stool; after which he lost hope, strength and started thinking about death more and more. Now, all the time, he got those negative feelings and thoughts of death. Along with that, he had some frustrations of past and anxiety in certain situations. But the chief

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complaint identified was as fear of death. Treatment included medical treatment, along with hypnosis. A total of 8 hypnosis sessions were taken: which included sessions of relaxation, imagery, ego strengthening, inner strength and self-hypnosis, all of which were focused on gaining positivity, courage, facing obstacles and feeling happy. Follow up was done after a month and then two months, which revealed that the client was fine.

Fear of death is a persistent fear of one's own mortality. It is a feeling of dread, apprehension or solicitude (anxiety) when one thinks of the process of dying (Kaur and Banerjee, 2015).

- Hoelter&Hoelter (1978) has given 8 dimensions of fear of death:
  - a. Fear of dying process
  - b. Fear of pre-mature death
  - c. Fear for significant others
  - d. Phobic fear of death
  - e. Fear of being destroyed
  - f. Fear of the body after death
  - g. Fear of the unknown
  - h. Fear of the dead
  
- Incidences or reasons for fear of death according to Moore and Williamson (2003) are:
  - i) Loss of fulfilment of personal goals
  - ii) Fears of here-after and punishment post death
  - iii) Religious reasons
  - iv) Trauma
  - v) Abuse
  - vi) Guilty of the things done in past
  - vii) Witness of a death incident
  - viii) Sickness
  - ix) Injury
  - x) Experience of being lonely due to old age or loss
  - xi) Loss of a loved one like spouse or child etc
  - xii) Loss of income/health/prestige
  - xiii) Rejecting the developmental stage like 'I don't want to grow up'.

Ishu (1986) describes the use of Japanese Morita Psychotherapy that aims toward clients' acceptance of the self-actualizing and existential meaning of anxiety (i.e., the fear of death), instead of trying to resist or control anxiety symptoms. Similarly, Schneck and Jerome (1959) describes hypnotherapy (including free association, imagery and dream induction) to manage anxiety, depression (including fear of death, old age and marital issues). Jakubovits (2011) describes hypnosis to give short term relief to cancer tumour patients in terms of side effects, fear of death and motivation. Jacobs (1996) describes the use of family therapy (psychotherapy) to treat the client's fear of death and severe sickness aroused due to her multiple sclerosis and dysfunctional family structures.

Since, there are few studies, for the use of hypnotherapy to treat fear of death; I had the concern for treating fear of death and associated negativity of the client. But since the client who was referred by the physician, reported to me, that it is no more associated with medical reasons and he needs motivation, I accepted the case for hypnotherapy.

### **Case History**

A Male, 68 years old, a retired bank manager, with an education of Bsc, LLB, CAIIB, came for taking hypnotherapy for some of his specific problems. He lives in a nuclear family with his wife and 1 son who is adopted. His wife is a housewife and son is searching for a job, after finishing his MCA. His childhood was pleasant with no issues. He faced no trauma or harassment in his life. His family medical history includes lung problem of his father. His personal medical history includes: 1 kidney since birth, insertion of catheter in the kidney as it has not been working properly for 10 years, insertion of an artificial valve in the heart since 1991, weak lungs (heredity), and bleeding in stool which happened twice: once in January 2014, and second time in October 2014 (he lost 3 litres of blood in that). He takes medicine for good functioning of the valve of the heart and some vitamins for gaining strength. His diet and sleep is normal. His social life (not many friends) and sexual life (as the son was adopted) is not sound. Because of the loss of blood, he developed fear of death and negativity.

Moreover, after the incident of bleeding in stool, post 1 month, he lost hope, strength and started thinking about death more and

more. He has some frustrations and guilt in his mind, especially for the past events, that: 1. he was an unsuccessful bank manager because he was too liberal on the staff and they didn't listen to him, while the other bank managers were strict, 2. when he got married, his mother tortured his wife. He couldn't support his wife that time, as he was young and was afraid of his mother, and now he thinks that she suffered, because of him. He should have supported her. 3. When he was 20 years old, he asked money from his father to go to Dubai and earn, but his father told no. Now, he thinks, that, if he would have forced his father to give money and gone, he would have been richer now. He gets little tensed when he faces any challenge like talking something new to the son or reaching somewhere on time or finishing some house work on time etc.

He suffered from weakness, loss of interest, apprehension, over-reacting, frustration, getting angry, crying, negative thoughts, loss of hope, feeling anxious. He couldn't focus on daily routine, work and felt sad.

According to the client, fear of death is: apprehension of death-as in uncertainty, effect of death on interpersonal relationships, anxiety for family after his death (emotionally, financially).

The medical report after the loss of blood phase, revealed that the client was fine. The negative thoughts aroused fear and anxiety.

### **Therapeutic Intervention**

All the 8 sessions involved trance induction by breathing awareness & progressive muscular relaxation; deepening by counting from 5 to 1 and speaking the word deeper; and termination of trance by counting from 1 to 10. In all sessions: post hypnotic suggestions of "the suggestions will have its effect even after your trance is over in your daily life; and whenever you practice your trance next time, you will go in a deeper state easily and naturally" were given. Feedback for his progress and if he faced any problems; was taken before beginning of each session.

The first two sessions were orientation with hypnosis and relaxation sessions with imagery for sea and Hartland's ego strengthening suggestions for calm, cool relaxed state of mind respectively.

The third session was imagery of a river with flowers and stones, with a focus on concentrating on positive experiences and removing negative experiences; and ego strengthening of facing challenges with positive mind. Post hypnotic suggestions of "Good feelings from good times actually come from inside you, and therefore will be there again very soon, and you will be in present moment" were given. Till here, the client complained of not being able to relax and not understanding relaxation; so he was explained again.

The fourth session involved imagery of a theatre hall; in which the client is watching a movie; in which he is the hero; who crosses a difficult path through forest and reaches the mountain with confidence: was given along with ego strengthening for courage. By here, the client was feeling much better.

The fifth session was focused on reducing negative thoughts even more. He was given an imagery of writing thoughts on a paper; sitting by a river bank; tearing and throwing the pieces of paper in water; and feeling happy and refreshed. Post hypnotic suggestions of "you will feel happier and courageous as each day passes" were given. The client felt completely thoughtless and relaxed. He reported that his anxiety, negative thoughts reduced after these sessions, and he was feeling far better.

In the sixth session, client reported that he was almost fine. So, an inner strength session was given which involved imagery of "himself going deep down in his subconscious mind, deeper and deeper. There he would meet the infinite source of positive energy- be it in the form of some pleasant: image or thought or sensation. And whenever he would meet that energy, he should indicate by some movements of any finger of the right hand. After the indication of the finger, he was told that now, this energy is spreading all throughout your body, in each and every part, tissue and cell. Ego strengthening was done by the suggestion of: "You are feeling full of positive energy, and hence, extremely calm and cool. Post hypnotic suggestions were given by: I) "whenever, you need any energy, be it physical or mental strength, in your daily life, you will be able to retrieve it at any place- whether at your home or market or on road etc. You just need to take a deep breath in, and with that deep breath in, you will be in contact with that energy, and as you take deep breath out, you will feel more

relaxed. II) With this energy, you will be able to face the challenges and obstacles of your life, with each passing day”.

The seventh session involved reporting by the client that he was totally fine. He has no anxiety for aftermath of his death on family; and his thoughts of death and past were totally gone now. So, self-hypnosis was taught and review of his progress was done. The eighth session was involved in how to frame positive suggestions for some goals and practising self-hypnosis in front of the therapist. (As the client had requested to teach him; he wanted to practise self-hypnosis, in therapist’s presence and therapist wanted to review him after being totally fine.) The client reported that he was positive for life, and could concentrate in his work and routine. Thus, termination happened as he was absolutely fine.

The follow up was done after a month, and then two months, on phone, and the client reported that he was fine, confident and positive.

Medical treatment included medicines for gaining strength and immunity.

## **Discussion**

In relation to previous studies, as positive reinterpretation of death by Japanese morita psychotherapy attempts to mobilize one’s energy to productive action-taking (Ishu; 1986); and hypnosis increasing motivation (Jakubovits; 2011), the client was also mobilized towards positivity and courage by positive direct and indirect suggestions.

The sessions which included ego strengthening, imagery, direct and indirect suggestions, and inner strength session, all of which were focused on increasing courage to face challenges and happiness; instead of directly attacking on the idea of fear of death and removing those thoughts; thereby dealing indirectly, helped the client to gain motivation, much faster. (This was because, the client felt anxious in trivial matters, so directly attacking on the fear of death and removing those thoughts, would make him think more negative; and thus, indirect approach was useful). Also, explaining the client about role of hypnotherapy in treating ailments and giving successful examples; along with his improvement post each session helped him to trust the process and continue till termination.

Hypnotherapy played a major role in speeding up the process, as what the conscious mind couldn't do by people's advice and one's own understanding, subconscious mind helped to understand faster. It facilitated the therapy to increase the motivation and remove the negative thoughts of "him dying because of the past incident of loss of blood" and thus not being able to work properly. Indirect suggestions of river (removing negative experiences and focusing on positive experiences); inner strength session played a major role in his progress, as this helped him to feel more happy and confident.

Therapist's re-assuring post hypnotic suggestions like: "Good feelings from good times actually come from inside you, and therefore will be there again very soon, and you will be in present moment"; "you will feel happier and courageous as each day passes"; "with this energy, you will be able to face the challenges and obstacles of your life, with each passing day"; and ego strengthening suggestions helped the client to feel better, easily.

There is no set-rule for the minimum number of sessions for such fear. But since the client progressed well through the sessions, and he showed completely positive thoughts and outlook towards life instead of negative thoughts and fear of death; the therapy was terminated. May be, some other client can take less or more number of sessions than eight sessions.

Thus, if any other client feels such fear of death; then after review of his/her situation and the cause, hypnosis with ego strengthening can be used, with caution; as such fear and its therapy is very critical in its effect on mind and body. How fear of death arising from such cause can be handled with other techniques of hypnotherapy, can be explored and reviewed.

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