The Best Way to Handle Your Decline Is to Confront It Head On

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As a kid, I was sure that all old people must be afraid of death.

As I have gotten older, however, it turns out that this is mostly wrong. There are, certainly, people my age (56) who are morbidly afraid of dying—there's even a diagnosable psychiatric condition for this fear, called *thanatophobia*, and a whole movement, called *transhumanism,* dedicated to attempting to postpone death or avoid it altogether. But most older adults I know aren't really terrified of death per se, but rather of being destroyed as sentient beings. No surprise, then, that what they—we—fear much more is a gradual, de factodeath from decline.

In a famous 2014 *Atlantic* article about why he wanted to die at 75, the physician and bioethicist Ezekiel J. Emanuel summed up the fear of decline very neatly: "[Old age] renders many of us, if not disabled, then faltering and declining … It robs us of our creativity and ability to contribute to work, society, the world. It transforms how people experience us, relate to us, and, most important, remember us."

Fear is a primal negative emotion, processed in the brain's limbic system involuntarily as a means of self-defense against mortal threats. It was very useful half a million years ago, but it is generally a maladaptation to much of modern life and work. A bad tweet is enough to set off many people's fight-or-flight response. The prospect of a minor career setback can create the same sensation as a threat of physical harm. And full-scale professional or social decline can feel, to some, as threatening as death itself. According to the Cambridge University philosopher Stephen Cave, the fear of death is an innate fear of nonexistence. For many of us who organize our lives around professional and social competence—who talk about our "life's work"—life is synonymous with achievement and abilities. When those abilities decline, it can feel like you are in the process of ceasing to exist, of being destroyed.

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Western research has tested the idea of death desensitization. In 2017, a team of researchers recruited volunteers to imagine that they were terminally ill or on death row, and then to write about the feelings they imagined they would have. The researchers then compared these thoughts with writings by those who were actually terminally ill or facing execution. The results, published in *Psychological Science* under the title "Dying Is Unexpectedly Positive," were astounding: People imagining their deaths were three times as negative as those actually facing it. Death, it seems, is scarier when it is theoretical than when it is real.

Contemplating death can also inspire courage. There is an ancient Japanese story about a band of lawless samurai warriors notorious for terrorizing the local people. Every place they went, they brought destruction. One day they come to a Zen Buddhist monastery, intent on violence and plunder. The monks ran away in fear for their lives–all except the abbot, a man who had completely mastered the fear of his own death. He sat quietly in the lotus position as the warriors burst in. Approaching the abbot with

his sword drawn, the samurai leader said, “Don’t you see that I am the sort of man who could run you through without batting an eye?” Calmly, the master answered, “Don’t you see that I am a man who could be run through without batting an eye?”

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