

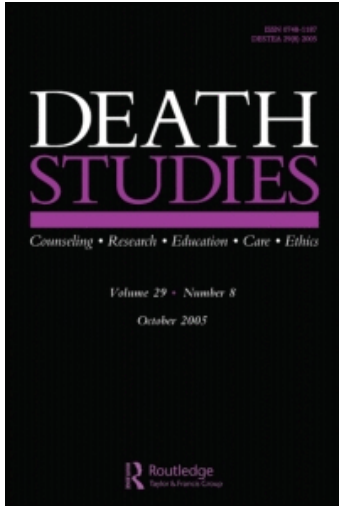
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## Death Studies

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### Understanding Death Attitudes: The Integration of Movies, Positive Psychology, and Meaning Management

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## **UNDERSTANDING DEATH ATTITUDES: THE INTEGRATION OF MOVIES, POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY, AND MEANING MANAGEMENT**

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*The portrayal of death is one of the most common themes in movies and is often unrealistic, promoting misconceptions to the public. However, there are also many films that portray death acceptance in an instructive way. Such films depict the development of character strengths useful in embracing life and lessening death anxiety, namely zest, curiosity, self-regulation, and humor. Moreover, the role of meaning in films is pivotal for understanding death attitudes. The authors discussed key elements in a number of popular, independent, and international films and emphasized the use of films as an important adjunct for both teachers and clinicians addressing death attitudes with students and clients. A program of death education using movies is briefly discussed.*

I realize what they say about the nobility of misfortune is true. Because misfortune teaches us the truth. Your cancer has opened your eyes to your own life. We humans are so careless. We only realize how beautiful life is when we chance upon death.

—Ikiru (*To Live*, 1952, Japan)

The inevitability, irreversibility, and permanence of death create anxiety in all individuals at some time in life. To some degree such anxiety is normal. However, in excess, it can be functionally debilitating and inhibiting of personal growth. *Death anxiety* is a

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multidimensional construct with two main components, unknown/existential death anxiety (i.e., the fear of annihilation) and known/tangible death anxiety (i.e., the fate of the body, anxiety about the body as it is dying; Benton, Christopher, & Walter, 2007; Cicirelli, 2002). Avoidance of death is one of the most common ways of dealing with the fears of death (Furer & Walker, 2008). The healthy route is death acceptance. It is important to note that death anxiety does not mean a life has not been well-lived or that the individual does not love life; research has indicated that love of life and death distress are two separate factors that are not necessarily associated (Abdel-Khalek, 2007).

Movies provide a medium for facing death as the viewer identifies with characters and follows a story and, at the same time, can provide an avenue for escaping death because the viewer knows these are just actors on a screen (Gibson, 2001). Movies play an important role in reinforcing and perpetrating misconceptions. In terms of death anxiety, movies often feed unnecessary fears and support unhealthy death attitudes. At the same time, they provide an opportunity to challenge personal attitudes toward death and teach the viewer a healthy perspective.

Death is extraordinarily common as a topic in popular movies. Schultz and Huet (2000) noted in their examination of 65 popular, American films that death is one of the most common elements, finding 857 death-related scenes, wherein the average film (100 min) a death-related scene emerged every 7 to 8 min. Sensational and unrealistic portrayal of death was the norm. The high frequency of death scenes, words, and references—particularly those of an outlandish and unrealistic nature—sets the context for a public denial of death, repression of emotion, and avoidance of authentic death concerns (Schultz & Huet, 2000).

### **Death Attitudes: Research and Perspectives**

The inevitability of death is both a threat to meaning and existence as well as an opportunity (Tomer, Eliason, & Wong, 2008); individuals consciously or unconsciously choose from a variety of forms of coping via death avoidance or death acceptance. Death avoidance is a result of death anxiety and takes a variety of forms in films. Individuals on death row face an inevitable death; the expression of painful anxiety that emerges from a tough, avoidant

exterior can be seen in death row characters in *Capote* (2005) and *Dead Man Walking* (1995). The repression of death anxiety emerges in Max, the protagonist in *Fearless* (1993). After surviving a near-death experience, Max begins to directly defy death, initiating risky behaviors such as forcing a motor vehicle accident and standing at the edge of a skyscraper. His belief that he cannot die is a denial covering an underlying death anxiety. The film *Numb* (2007) reveals a character with several anxiety disorders, one of which is a deep form of death anxiety. A therapist in the film—while patently unethical—does perform exposure therapy for anxiety with her client by taking him to a graveyard while encouraging coping skills. *The Fountain* (2006) is a fascinating take on the refusal to accept death and the going to extreme lengths to reverse death. While the main character's wife overcomes the fear of her own death, her husband believes that death is a disease and that he must find the cure.

On the other hand, death acceptance—knowing one is dying and embracing or at least acknowledging it—is a common theme in films. Death acceptance can be neutral (stoic recognition of the inevitability of death), approach (positive event, such as a path to a better existence), or escape (release from life hardship; Bassett, McCann, & Cate, 2008; Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994). Neutral acceptance is frequently evidenced in war films in which soldiers stand firm and persist in the fight despite an often inevitable death. Classic examples of this can be found in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *From Here to Eternity* (1953). Other portrayals of neutral acceptance can be found in the Japanese author Yukio Mishima in *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985, Japan); Lou Gehrig in *The Pride of the Yankees* (1942); and the lion character, Aslan, in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (2005). Approach acceptance, in which beliefs in the afterlife are pivotal, can be seen in *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (1999). It is also evident in *Monsieur Ibrahim* (2003, France), in which a wise, elderly storeowner, Ibrahim, mentors Momo, an impressionable adolescent of a broken home and absent father. Ibrahim teaches and models for the boy numerous lessons on living fully, tolerance, engaging life, kindness, and the universality of dance, prayer, death, and “inner religion.” These lay the groundwork for his approach to death; as he nears his end, he explains to Momo, “I’m not dying. I’m going to join the immensity.” Escape

acceptance is well-exhibited in many films that portray suicide and suicide attempts in which protagonists desire and take action to escape the pain of their lives, whether it be escape from the pain of being without a romantic partner in *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) and *New Moon* (2009), financial hardship in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), inability to peacefully reconcile the past in *The Reader* (2008) and *Seven Pounds* (2008), or physical and psychological pain in *Kurt Cobain: About a Son* (2006).

Death acceptance is perhaps most clear when an individual with terminal illness decides to make significant changes in his or her life. Such an approach can be seen in all ages—a young boy in *The Blue Butterfly* (2004), an adolescent in *One Last Thing* (2005), an adult man in *Eternity and a Day* (1998, Greece), and two older men in *The Bucket List* (2007). While any of these characters could wallow in their diseases or diagnoses, they instead face death head on by living life fully and evoking inner transformation.

Some theories and psychotherapeutic approaches have attempted to directly address death acceptance. Viktor Frankl's logotherapy espouses finding meaning, hope, and a positive outlook at the most unbearable of times (Frankl, 1959/2006; Guttman, 2008). Posttraumatic growth theory suggests that life crises that bring individuals to face their mortality can result in positive intrinsic changes (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The use of exposure is a critical element in the treatment of death anxiety from a cognitive-behavior therapy approach (Furer & Walker, 2008). Another perspective is Paul Wong's meaning-management theory, a comprehensive psychological theory delineating meaning-related processes, in which there are three basic processes needed to facilitate a healthy perspective of death acceptance: meaning-seeking, meaning-making, and meaning-reconstruction (Wong, 2008). An underlying component of each is the embracing of life as a means of death acceptance. *Meaning-seeking* involves the questing and discovery of meaning that involves tapping into creative, experiential, and attitudinal values along the journey. *Meaning-making* involves the construction of meaning through language, culture, story, goal-striving, and personal development. *Meaning-reconstruction* involves the integration of unpleasant and challenging events into a coherent, transformed worldview.

## Positive Psychology and Managing Death Anxiety

Positive psychology is the science of the good life, the engaged life, and the meaningful life (Seligman, 2002). A major contribution of the field of positive psychology is the systematic delineation of character strengths and virtues, universal across cultures, nations, and belief systems (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). See the Appendix for a layout of this classification of six virtues and 24 character strengths. Several of the 24 character strengths from this typology are useful in the exploration of and coping with death anxiety. While the use of virtually any strength has potential for helping in death anxiety coping, some are particularly well-suited, namely the strengths of zest, self-regulation, curiosity, gratitude, and spirituality/meaning.

The character strength of zest (under the virtue of courage) is viewed as living life to the fullest, and maintaining a sense of energy, enthusiasm, and vitality. Luke, in *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), is one of the best examples in film history of this type of courage, as he displayed courage to face the rigors of chain-gang prison life with energy and enthusiasm. Luke did not seem to have a hint of death anxiety, never faltering from his strengths, even up to the moment of his death when he is surrounded in a house by prison and police officers. Another character that exemplifies the character strength of zest is Anthony Hopkins' role as an elderly New Zealander who defies death with tremendous vibrancy and enthusiasm as he races a 1920 Indian motorcycle in *The World's Fastest Indian* (2005). Other films that portray the character strength of zest include *Cinema Paradiso* (1988, Italy), *Pelle the Conqueror* (1987, Denmark), *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975).

The character strength of self-regulation (under the virtue of temperance) is an important mechanism in lessening and managing death anxiety. Self-regulation/self-control involves overriding thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Gailliot, Schmeichel, and Baumeister (2006) conducted nine studies and found that individuals low in self-control had higher death anxiety and thoughts about death than those high in self-control. Moreover, repeatedly having to cope with thoughts of mortality led to fatigue in the self-regulation strength. In *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985, Japan), Japan's celebrated author, Mishima, displays an exquisite

level of self-control as displayed in his work ethic and the crafting of his body. At the height of his body's strength, Mishima committed a ritualistic suicide in front of his military subordinates and others. He was preoccupied with concerns about the decay of his body and the belief that "[n]o matter how he tries he will die of decay. He must train himself to live." Paralleling the research on self-regulation, Mishima's high self-regulation strength aided him in suppressing death anxiety, leading him to cultivate a particular attitude of death acceptance; however, perhaps it was a deeper fear of self-annihilation that led him to take his life early. Other films that portray the character strength of self-regulation include *Breaking Away* (1979); *The Chorus* (2004, France); *Forrest Gump* (1994); *Mad Hot Ballroom* (2005); and *Maria, Full of Grace* (2004).

Curiosity is a character strength (under the virtue of wisdom) that means to take an interest in ongoing experience in a way that both seeks novelty and encompasses a desire to increase one's knowledge. Curiosity leads individuals to investigate and explore new pathways rather than to do what anxiety typically leads people to do—avoid the feared situation, event, or person. In this way, the practice of a healthy curiosity toward death can counter the individual's tendency toward death avoidance. One character in *American Beauty* (1999), Ricky Fitts, takes this approach; he uses his curiosity to find beauty in the mundane and the dead. For example, Ricky carefully films a dead bird and a homeless woman who has frozen to death. Curiosity is very strong in the character, Daniel, in the classic, *Wings of Desire* (1987, West Germany). Daniel is an angel who will live forever; however, his curiosity for love and living a life is so strong that he "falls," giving up his wings to be human. In this way, he is directly facing—and, moreover, choosing death, as this will ultimately come to him as a human. *City of Angels* (1998) is a modern version of this story about mortality but is less significant in the portrayal of curiosity. Other films that exhibit the character strength of curiosity include *Last Images of the Shipwreck* (1989, Argentina), *Mongolian Ping-Pong* (2005, China), *Rear Window* (1954), and *Secrets of the Heart* (1997, Spain).

The character strength of gratitude (under the virtue of transcendence) is significant in *The Pride of the Yankees* (1942). Despite the fact that he was dying of a terminal illness later to be named after him, Lou Gehrig faced his death head-on with gratitude,

delivering what is considered to be one of the most influential lines in film (and in the general public) history: "Today, I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the Earth." In *Fearless* (1993), Max (Jeff Bridges) survives a terrifying airplane accident and emerges from the wreckage with a newfound sense of invincibility and immortality that he puts to the test. This denial, or repressed death anxiety, that Max experiences does not cease until he has a cathartic moment of gratitude. The practice of gratitude as a character strength has not been studied scientifically in terms of whether it would aid in the management of death anxiety. Krause (2006) examined gratitude toward God in 1,500 older adults (minimum age of 66). He found that the elderly, particularly women, who had higher levels of gratitude also had lower levels of stress. While it would be a leap to conclude that gratitude lowers death anxiety as this was not addressed in this article, it will lead some readers to wonder about this as an area worthy of further investigation. Other films that portray characters displaying the character strength of gratitude include *Amélie* (2001, France), *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), *The Ultimate Gift* (2006), *The New World* (2005), and *God Grew Tired of Us* (2006).

The value of the character strength of perspective (under the virtue of wisdom) in understanding death and comforting death anxiety is evident in the following quote in *Antonia's Line* (1995, The Netherlands): "Nothing dies forever. Something always remains, from which something new grows. So life begins, without knowing where it came from or why it exists." In this quote, the matriarch, Antonia, explains death to her granddaughter in a way similar to the philosophy of interconnection proliferated by the humble Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh (2002). In *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999, France/Iran) the village doctor addresses the paradoxical connection between death and the character strength appreciation of beauty (under the virtue of transcendence): "Death is the worst. When you close your eyes on this world, this beauty, the wonders of nature, and the generosity of God, it means you'll never be coming back." The young Pollyanna uses her character strength of hope in the Disney classic story, *Pollyanna* (1960), to spread healthy, realistic optimism to a small town; one particularly crotchety, angry, and isolated old woman who ruminates on death, illness, and suffering is transformed by Pollyanna's ability to find something beautiful and striking in the moment. Another character



strength used to face death is that of forgiveness (under the virtue of temperance) as seen in *The Straight Story* (1999). The protagonist, Alvin Straight, rides his lawnmower at 5 miles-per-hour across two states in order to make amends with his brother who has just suffered a stroke. Alvin's goal is to take this extensive journey as an approach of taking action before his own and his brother's death.

The character strength of spirituality can be conceptualized as a quest for existential meaning (Pargament & Mahoney, 2002) and as having coherent beliefs about the meaning of the universe and one's place in it (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Due to the ubiquity and scope of this particular character strength and its interconnection with meaning, purpose, and death attitudes, we denote the next section to this character strength, using the words *spirituality* and *meaning* interchangeably.

### **The Strength of Spirituality and Death Attitudes**

Logotherapy, a meaning-focused philosophy and form of psychotherapy, is a useful method of analyzing movies. Tragic optimism is a particularly important logotherapeutic concept pertaining to life and death attitudes (Frankl, 1959/2006; Schneider, 2004). Suffering is an inevitable part of life. For example, in the case of illness and impending death, suffering may serve as a touchstone for growth if one can find meaning in one's circumstances (Frankl, 1959/2006; Guttman, 2008; Nye, 2008; Tomer & Eliason, 2008). Suffering may serve to galvanize one toward the discovery of meaning, intensify life, and empower an individual toward positive thought and action (Frankl, 1959/2006; Nye, 2008; Schneider, 2004; Tomer & Eliason, 2008). The discovery of meaning, that is, having something to live and die for, helps a person to deal with the adversity that comes with inevitable suffering (Frankl, 1959/2006; Nye, 2008). As noted by Schneider (2004), "Tragic optimists become more sensitized to life, more present to their pain, and with equal fervor, more present to their joys. For tragic optimists, pain and joy fructify each other; frailty highlights life's preciousness, and vice versa" (p. 129). Schneider further referred to tragic optimists as having less fear and depression and as being more engaged, absorbed, joyful, and loving than those who are unable to retain such optimism. Tragic optimists are people who access their character strengths of hope and meaning when confronted

with dire circumstances. For such reasons, tragic optimism, as conceptualized in Viktor Frankl's (1959/2006) logotherapy, is one useful means of thinking about death attitudes and creating opportunities to embrace life in each moment. Movies are one means of communicating the central importance of tragic optimism to the human condition.

Characters' attitudes toward life and death are central aspects of the following films: *Ikiru* (1952, Japan), *Wild Strawberries* (1957, Sweden), and *The Bucket List* (2007). Each of these important films meets the criteria for a positive psychology film (Niemić, 2007), portrays salient character strengths and virtues (Niemić & Wedding, 2008), and may be viewed from the logotherapeutic perspective.

*Ikiru* (*To Live*, 1952, Japan), a Japanese film directed by Akira Kurosawa, is perhaps one of the most significant films regarding death and life meaning ever made. The protagonist, Watanabe (Takashi Shimura), is a bureaucrat who realizes that he has squandered most of his life when he learns that he is dying of stomach cancer. He laments that he has not really lived his life, having been devoted to a thankless job for many years. When confronted with his own mortality, Watanabe is transformed. He begins to make decisions that benefit others, challenging the bureaucracy in order to build a park before he dies. This is a creative and dramatic act of self-transcendence (Frankl, 1959/2006), which signifies his intent to move beyond his own interests for the sake of the welfare of others. Watanabe wants his life to be about something, and in his final days, through his unselfishness, he truly becomes "Somebody"—a person in life with a worthwhile cause, and one who becomes important to other people (Crumbaugh, 1973/1988). Watanabe's mental health improves as he discovers a purpose. Even though he faces an impending death, he finds meaning through the practice of beginner's mind (experiencing dimensions of life as if for the first time; Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Examples include Watanabe's appreciation of a sunset for the first time in 30 years, and a timeless scene in which he swings on a swing in the snow, casually singing a "life is brief" song. This latter scene strikes us as particularly salient in the portrayal of an active, healthy death acceptance.

*Wild Strawberries* (1957, Sweden), directed by Ingmar Bergman, also confronts the question of meaning as it relates to

death attitudes. Specifically, the film depicts a 78-year-old doctor (Victor Sjøstrøm) who, on the way to receiving an award for his life achievements in Lund, is confronted with a dream whereby he begins to feel that death is close and, plagued by uncertainty, questions the value of his existence (Mast & Kawin, 2008). Through an examination of memories and dreams the doctor comes to realize that he has lived a life detached from others, a life where there is little meaning, despite his lifetime occupational success. That the protagonist begins to work to change his ways and connect with others seems to imply that there is time to change one's attitude toward one's circumstances. Indeed, such an interpretation is consistent with a variety of existential modes of thought, such as logotherapy. In commenting on Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, whereby a 60-year-old man learns he has a few days to live, with "the insight he gains from this knowledge and from the realization that he has wasted his life, that his life has been virtually meaningless, he grows beyond himself and finally becomes capable—retroactively—of flooding his life with infinite meaning" (Frankl, 1997, p. 129). Thus, death may serve as a call that awakens individuals to meaning-potentials, such as meaning-seeking, meaning-making, and meaning-reconstruction (Wong, 2008), that may have gone unrecognized previously.

In both *Ikiru* and *Wild Strawberries*, individuals faced with life-threatening circumstances learn to take a defiant attitude toward death, and to embrace life, moving beyond themselves for other people or causes. Logotherapy posits that there are three primary values related to the discovery of meaning: creative (what we give to life), experiential (what we receive from life), and attitudinal (the stance we take toward unavoidable suffering; Dobson & Wong, 2008; Frankl, 1959/2006; Schulenberg, Hutzell, Nassif, & Rogina, 2008). In *Ikiru* the protagonist not only discovers meaning through the creation of the park, but the park is something that can be experienced as well. Finally, the act of creating and experiencing in this fashion is an attitudinal choice the character makes when confronted with his mortality.

*The Bucket List*, directed by Rob Reiner, is another fine example of the importance of meaning, self-transcendence, and values when confronted by death. The two main characters in the film, Edward (Jack Nicholson) and Carter (Morgan Freeman), meet in a hospital. Both are diagnosed with cancer and both have

approximately a year to live. As an unlikely friendship begins to develop, they collaborate on a “bucket list”—a list of the things they have avoided, yearned to do, or wished to accomplish in their life before they “kick the bucket.” The friendship and the list are something that they create, and also experience, and further represent an attitudinal stance toward their mutual predicament. Each man self-transcends his own interests for the sake of the other, becoming better human beings who recognize the value of relationships and the capacity to cultivate them. While their approach is not practical or prudent for all individuals in a similar situation, it is, nevertheless, a good metaphor for death acceptance. The movie is further noteworthy for both characters retaining their sense of humor, despite the seriousness of their health problems. Humor is highly regarded in both logotherapy and positive psychology for its positive emotional valence and its power as a character strength (Dobson & Wong, 2008; Frankl, 1959/2006; Guttman, 1996, 2008; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The movies described thus far have either focused on specific medical conditions, or on the later years of life. Meaning may also be found under extreme circumstances where suffering is unavoidable, and when death may be encountered at any moment. *Life Is Beautiful* (1997, Italy) and *Cast Away* (2000) are two such examples. *Life Is Beautiful* is the story of one man’s (Guido) love for his wife, Dora, and son, Joshua, and his passion for life, while imprisoned in a concentration camp during World War II (Melton et al., 2005). While imprisoned Guido uses his humor, creativity, and optimism to protect his son from the horrors of the camp, and he also serves as a source of love and inspiration for Dora (Melton et al., 2005; Niemiec & Wedding, 2008). These are attitudinal stances that are chosen by Guido, despite his circumstances, and his choices allow him to self-transcend. He moves beyond concern for his own well-being to protect his wife and son. The family faces death each moment, yet Guido’s uncanny ability to use his character strengths of humor, creativity, and love to maintain a hopeful attitude under the most horrifying circumstances imaginable sustains them.

*Cast Away* (2000), directed by Robert Zemeckis, exemplifies a positive and proactive attitude under extreme circumstances. The basic premise is that Chuck (Tom Hanks) is a FedEx executive who survives a plane crash in the open ocean, only to find himself stranded on a deserted island for 4 years. The movie addresses the

choices he makes to keep himself going so that one day he may see the love of his life, Kelly (Helen Hunt), again. The importance of the portrayal of Hanks' character is that he chooses to fight, and even in a moment of abject desperation, learns the most important lesson of all, and one that illustrates the discovery of meaning in unavoidable suffering: "And I know what I've got to do, no matter how bad it gets. I've got to keep breathing. Just keep breathing. Because tomorrow—the sun is going to rise, and who knows what the tide could bring?" (Broyles, 2000, p. 90, as cited in Schulenberg, 2005). *Cast Away* is particularly instructive on the subject of life and death attitudes because it chronicles the existential frustration of the main character as he vacillates between despair and feelings of love for Kelly. It is a prime example of how one may always choose one's attitude, even when facing death at seemingly every juncture, even when there seems to be no other option available. Both *Cast Away* and *Life Is Beautiful* are consistent with the tenets of logotherapy and typify what Frankl termed the *defiant power of the human spirit* (Frankl, 1959/2006; Guttman, 2008).

For additional film examples and corresponding descriptions of positive psychology character strengths, virtues, and movies of meaning, the reader is referred to Niemiec and Wedding (2008), Hesley and Hesley (2001), and Solomon (1995, 2001).

### **Clinical and Teaching Implications**

The significance of movies extends far beyond their entertainment value (Niemiec & Wedding, 2006, 2008; Schulenberg, 2003; Wedding & Niemiec, 2003). Movies are one of the most powerful yet underutilized resources at the hands of teachers and clinicians. A primary thesis of the current article is that movies, and in this case those that portray individuals who make adaptive choices in the face of death, may have a positive impact on those who watch them. This thesis is largely conceptual and, given that there is very limited research in this area, focused research is warranted. To what degree would movies such as *Ikiru* and *The Bucket List* alter the attitudes of the viewer with respect to life and death? Would such films enhance meaning and alleviate death anxiety? Under what contexts and conditions would the incorporation of films be useful to educators, as well as medical and/or mental health

professionals? These and related questions have seldom been investigated empirically.

In a more general sense, movies are a valuable resource for teachers, therapists, health professionals, and coaches and enjoy a wide array of anecdotal and case report data. The use of movies to educate students—cinemeducation—is used to supplement concepts and ideas in the classroom to enhance learning (Alexander, Hall, & Pettice, 1994; Fleming, Piedmont, & Hiam, 1990; Nelson, 2002; Niemiec & Wedding, 2008; Wedding, Boyd, & Niemiec, 2005). Because of the frequency and variety of death portrayals and death reactions on screen, teachers have numerous healthy and unhealthy portrayals to choose from to educate students on the complexities and dynamics of dying and death attitudes.

One means of examining the effect of such films on life and death attitudes would be in courses on the subject of death. It is not uncommon for literature to be used in such courses. For instance, Masters (2003) noted the utility of *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Albom, 1997) in educating college students about death and dying. With respect to films specifically, Heuser (1995) described their use in a college-level death education course focusing on death attitudes and experiences. The course relied substantially on input from both student and instructor (active-participatory learning). The author provided details on course background, content, and format, course requirements and assessment, and student evaluation, further noting the use of films in the educational process. The films are generally documentaries, but given the interactive approach with student input, commercial films are sometimes chosen, with students applying what they have learned in the course to the particular film selected (L. Heuser, personal communication, September 15, 2008). While films were only a small part of the overall course, student evaluation indicated that there was a sense among the students of being better prepared for dealing with the process of death and bereavement. Heuser (personal communication, September 15, 2008) has found films to be useful in student education, as well as in facilitating discussion of related issues, such as death, dying, and the grieving process, providing them with information and experiences they may use to relate to their own lives. Her article is useful because it notes the potential contribution of films to the understanding of death attitudes. However, research on how films may change attitudes toward life

and death remains sparse. Thus, one cannot help but wonder to what extent would a substantive, thought-provoking, and meaning-centered film such as *Ikiru* solicit discussion and attitudinal change in the educational/training context?

In a rare study of film and death attitudes and death-related anxiety, Lu and Heming (1987) reported on the positive influence of *Ikiru* with a sample of participants recruited from the 14th Annual Conference of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology ( $N=71$ ). The study implemented a highly selective sample drawn from a professional conference. The sample was further limited in terms of generalizability, given the participants were predominantly Caucasian and well-educated. Despite its limitations, the study is noteworthy due to the subject matter, the use of a control group, and questionnaires to measure the constructs of interest. In another rare examination of films and the subject of death, Cox, Garrett, and Graham (2005) analyzed 10 popular, full-length Disney films. Specifically, 23 death scenes were analyzed, and although some death misconceptions were perpetrated within the films, the films appeared to have some good potential as effective tools for teaching children about death (Cox et al., 2005). In a pilot study of nursing students, a death education program in which participants viewed a film of death experience was assessed to determine effects on death anxiety (Johansson & Lally, 1990). While nicely conceptualized, the study suffered from a small sample size ( $N=22$ ) and limited results (death anxiety decreased in senior students and increased in juniors). Despite these few examples, empirical studies of movies and death attitudes are few and far between.

Cinematherapy, the use of movies in a clinical setting, has been shown to facilitate therapeutic growth, build optimism and coping, improve communication, and foster insight (Berg-Cross, Jennings, & Baruch, 1990; Hesley & Hesley, 2001; Schulenberg, 2003; Wedding & Niemiec, 2003). Under the guidance of a sensitive therapist, a client can learn to confront death anxiety through various death images while exploring character avoidance and acceptance behavior. Some clients will be directed to view specific positive psychology movies in order to directly enhance character strengths to meet their therapeutic goals, including those related to managing unhealthy death attitudes (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008).

## Cinematic Programming for Teachers and Clinicians

The content and structure of death education programs will vary by the institution. Moreover, the use of films as part of the programming is infrequent, particularly in the clinical and educational setting. Because time is a valuable commodity for both teachers and clinicians, we suggest the interested teacher or clinician consider a simple protocol for educating students and assisting clients. Such a protocol would involve teaching core concepts, showing (or recommending as a homework exercise) a film to exemplify each area, and reviewing discussion questions for further exploration and growth.

Wong (2008) emphasized the two fundamental, interconnected psychological tasks of living well and dying well as managing death anxiety (i.e., protecting against the terrors of loss and death) and managing death acceptance (i.e., pursuing a life of meaning). To provide a jump-start for the interested teacher or clinician, we recommend taking three important films that elicit these two themes (one for the former and two for the latter). For example, a teacher wishing to explore core concepts and death anxiety attitudes could show the film, *Fearless*, and then lead discussion on the death anxiety and death avoidance issues elicited in the film. To address death acceptance, two films could be shown alongside input and discussion—one that portrays transformation and acceptance upon receiving a terminal illness diagnosis (e.g., *Ikiru*) and one that involves character strength development to directly change death attitudes (e.g., *Wings of Desire*) for the portrayal of curiosity in facing death. Similarly, a clinician working with a client with death anxiety may adapt this format into a three-session protocol in which corresponding core concepts and individualized applications are reviewed at each session, and homework exercises are given to the client to watch the films and consider therapeutic reflective questions.

### Directions for Research

In addition to examination and implementation of the protocol described above, we have a number of suggestions to advance the research in the use of movies in working with death attitudes. The data on the use of films that focus on death and dying with



patients who are diagnosed with terminal illnesses or the elderly is less sparse than that found in the educational context. Systematic intervention studies that use films such as those described above is a line of research important to investigate. These films have the potential to educate patients in terms of the options that they may have, and characters portrayed may be a means of observational learning with respect to self-transcendence and discovery of meaning through creative, experiential, and attitudinal values. Studies may also inform clinicians and medical professionals on when it is appropriate to introduce a movie or movies as a form of treatment. In what context is it best to recommend films that are specific toward a patient's illness, such as cancer, versus films that are more general and that may still be quite uplifting (e.g., *Cast Away*, *Life Is Beautiful*)? Is it more helpful whether films are viewed within the context of individual therapy versus group or family therapy? Research is important to conduct with these questions in mind because findings may inform clinical/medical interventions with the potential for improving the quality of life of not only clients/patients but their families as well.

Based on the studies conducted and considering the questions raised thus far, research may be designed to address three primary areas. First and foremost, studies should be conducted in the academic environment and with community samples to better delineate the nature and extent that films positively influence death attitudes and death-related anxiety. Secondly, similar research is needed to document the utility of movies in the training of medical and mental health professionals who work in contexts where death is frequently encountered (e.g., palliative care). Specific focus should be placed on whether such movies influence the attitudes of professionals in training, and therefore the quality of the treatment provided to clients and patients. Finally, it is important to systematically study movies with a focus on death attitudes and death-related anxiety on the lives of clients and patients. In other words, there are currently no controlled studies on the treatment of death anxiety in the clinical context (Furer & Walker, 2008). As such trials emerge, we would like to see movies as an element not only as an exposure treatment for anxiety, but also included as part of the educational repertoire of managing death anxiety.

Systematic studies are also needed to examine which character strengths are highest in those individuals with high levels of

death acceptance. Another methodology would be to target the enhancement of particular character strengths (e.g., curiosity) in individuals high in death anxiety; inevitably, some strengths will be shown to buffer anxiety and increase acceptance while others will have minimal effect. Clinicians can then specifically target these strength areas within the therapeutic context.

## Conclusion

Throughout this article we have presented the argument that movies are one means of positively influencing death attitudes, with the potential to increase death acceptance and lessen death anxiety. This argument is largely conceptual in nature, but is grounded in the literature of positive psychology, meaning management theory, and logotherapy. A number of examples of movies with themes related to death attitudes were provided, with implications for both the educational and clinical context. Finally, considering there is limited research available in this area at the current time, we advocate for specific lines of empirical inquiry to be pursued to better inform both educational and clinical protocols.

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## **Appendix: The VIA Classification—24 Character Strengths Nested Under Six Virtues**

**Wisdom and Knowledge**—cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge

- Creativity
- Curiosity
- Judgment/Open-Mindedness
- Love of Learning
- Perspective

**Courage**—emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal

- Bravery
- Perseverance
- Honesty
- Zest

**Humanity**—interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others

- Love
- Kindness
- Social Intelligence

**Justice**—civic strengths that underlie healthy community life

- Teamwork
- Fairness
- Leadership

**Temperance**—strengths that protect against excess

- Forgiveness/Mercy
- Modesty/Humility
- Prudence
- Self-Regulation

**Transcendence**—strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning

- Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence
- Gratitude
- Hope/Optimism
- Humor
- Religiousness/Spirituality

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