

P A C K I N G F O R
YOUR FINAL
JOURNEY

A Muslim End-of-Life Companion's Guide
to Living Purposefully and Dying Prepared

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WHY DO WE AVOID TALKING ABOUT DEATH?

Growing up, I saw that death was a natural part of life, a normal everyday event, a community event, just like childbirth. I was surrounded by birth and death every single day. We were always hearing of someone we knew giving birth or someone we knew who had died or someone we didn't know who had died or given birth.

Back then in Sénégal, we didn't have the facility of washing the body at the mosque, and so bodies used to lie at home. Even if a person died at the hospital, the body was returned home to be prepared before the funeral prayer. Our elders would attend to washing and shrouding the body while we were playing not far from them. They would warn us sternly not to enter the room.

I witnessed death ceremonies so many times and saw people crying while giving their condolences. The house was full of people, those we knew and those we didn't know. Long-lost aunties, uncles and cousins came from all over to witness the ceremony. From the far corner of the house wafted the beautiful smell of our traditional dishes cooked by a group of local women whilst they chatted about how kind or how well-mannered the deceased person had been during their life. Family-centred funerals were the norm back then; they were simply part of my life in Africa.

It was much like childbirth. Most ladies, my mum included, gave birth at home. A midwife would come to the house and deliver the baby. Birth and death were just two sides of the same coin. Both occasions came with people offering either their congratulations or

their condolences. On both occasions there was labour – labour of birth and the labour of death. On both occasions a breath was involved; at birth we take our first breath and at death we take our last breath. On both occasions, someone was bathed and wrapped up. We came into this world depending on people to give us our first bath and wrap us warm. We will leave this world depending on people to give us our last bath and to wrap us. Death was very clearly, visibly and openly part of the cycle of life.

Dying and burials in the West are not so visible. And when things are out of sight they are out of mind. We don't speak about them. In fact, it is considered rather morbid to talk about one's own death, let alone plan for it. If there is an effort to think about wills and graveyard plots, then it seems to be mostly the older generation that is more likely to be proactive. Young people nowadays appear to be living for today, with very little regard for their future in this world, let alone their future in their next life. Nobody seems to care. As a result of this cultural taboo on speaking about death and death-related planning, we are living in a death-phobic culture.

Working in a healthcare setting, I am exposed to the reality of death every day and yet I still avoid talking about it. I don't even use the word death; I always say that the patient has "passed away".

Death is a difficult topic that we collectively avoid talking about as much as possible. It is not a topic that is discussed at dinner tables with family, or during lunch break with colleagues, or in friendly gatherings. It is not even properly discussed when someone dies.

The issue is that when we don't talk about death, then we are missing a big link in the chain of our life. We spend our whole lives

in fear and avoidance. We are plunged into grief each time we lose a loved one, we constantly feel anxious about our own mortality and impending death, and all of that prevents us from living our fullest life. When we don't embrace death, we cannot embrace life. When we can bring our fears into the open, they will dissolve and we can experience death (of others and our own) with much less trauma and distress. This leaves us open to living life more fully and joyfully.

❧ WHY DO WE FEAR DEATH? ❧

The fear of death is certainly among the most universal fears and has been throughout the ages. More than nine centuries ago, the Islamic philosopher and physician, Ibn Sina, wrote *A Treatise on the Cure for the Fear of Death and the Treatment of Anxiety Caused by It*. In it, he classified the fear of death into the following five categories:

- ❧ Fear of death in those who do not know what it is in its essence
- ❧ Fear of death in one who thinks that death brings pain in addition to the pain that comes with the disease that causes it.
- ❧ Fear of death in one who does not know what will happen to him after death.
- ❧ Fear of death in one who fears the punishment that will follow after death.
- ❧ Fear of death in the one who mourns for family, children, possessions and worldly pleasures and enjoyments.¹

1 Pajević, A. et al. (2021). *Islamic Approach to the Treatment of the Fear of Death*. *Psychiatria Danubina*. 33. 882-888.

These categories are a very useful starting point in working out why we are afraid of death. When I asked myself: What is it that I personally fear about death and go through the above points, I find that I fall into all five categories to some extent! Each and every one of these things really worry me, and as a result, I appear to have developed a death phobia and have avoided talking about it altogether despite having grown up with death more openly. In fact, I think most of us will find ourselves in each of these categories, if we are completely honest with ourselves.



REFLECTION:

What do you feel when you think about your own death?

Which of the five fears listed above most closely align with what you fear?



It stands to reason that if we can begin to provide rational answers for each of our fears, then we will be better able to accept death as a real part of our lives, as part of the beautiful cycle of life that Allah created. If we can make peace with our own mortality, then we can make the best of our limited time on earth. If we cease to live in fear, then we can begin to live with joy.

Fear is an anticipation of a future threat that is unknown. Death is both a future threat and the ultimate unknown and so it is no surprise that it will elicit deep fear.

Practically, however, there are two types of fear: positive fear and negative fear. Positive fear motivates us to act, while negative fear paralyses us and prevents us from taking action. We can never totally eliminate our fear of death and we shouldn't hope to, but we can move it to a place where it propels us to act rather than paralysing us.

