Coming to terms with death

Many of us avoid thinking about death. It’s better to be prepared so that we can leave this world in peace.

Chong Siow Ann

In July this year, it was reported that Jimmy Carter – who at 98 is the oldest surviving former US president – had celebrated his 77th wedding anniversary. What made this newsworthy was not just how long his marriage and life have lasted, but also his decision a few months ago to forgo further medical treatment (other than hospice care) and spend his remaining time at home with his family.

No other reasons were given for his decision. Perhaps he has grown weary of the "overtreatment" by his doctors, who may be inclined to see any measure short of doing everything possible as abandonment of care – or as a palliative care doctor puts it more poetically: "Modern medicine’s original sin: believing that we can vanquish death."

Regardless, Mr Carter seemed reconciled with his impending death and has chosen to face it on his own terms. To some, his decision would evoke these perennial existential questions: What does it mean to die? How should one face it? Is there a good way of dying?

Modern medicine has the capability to stretch out a dying life – even from terminal cancers and advancing dementia. So, barring a sudden unexpected death, some of us would likely have that moment when we see that we are definitely dying, and are likely to die soon.

DEATH AS AN ABSTRACTION

Our human brains are organised to presuppose that there will be a future that stretches endlessly. We live by projecting a trajectory of our life on a unspecified life span (usually statistically long) during which we plan our lives and work towards achieving certain things.

And when we encounter the death of another, we may reflect briefly about the fleeting and capricious nature of life, but we soon get back to thinking that we will live on and on.

Most of us know at an intellectual level that death is inevitable and that it can come at any moment, but still we tend to think that it won’t happen to us so soon and that it happens only to other people. Death is an abstraction to most of us – technically true but unthinkable.

And then comes that life-changing moment when we see ourselves heading inexorably towards a cliff edge. It seems unfair and we are frightened.

In her book "Talking About Death Won’t Kill You", the journalist Virginia Morris made a list of fears culled from numerous interviews with people who are dying.

There is the fear of having the body dissected in a post-mortem; of being shunned and ignored when one is dying, of being abandoned by their family. Some worried about what others would think of them. Some were afraid there was no afterlife, only unimaginable nothingness and some, about not gaining entry to paradise.

There were people who worried about the loss of autonomy and dignity – which usually means losing control over one’s defecation and urination and depending on others to clean up their mess. Some worried about who would take care of them when they are no longer able to look after themselves, and of being a burden to their family. Some worried about unfinished business.

Other emotions also came into the picture. These included the debunked but still popular idea of the five-stage process (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) that was developed by the psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross way back in 1969 to explain how people come to terms with their own impending death.

Subsequent research revealed that most dying people don’t follow those sequential stages so neatly. It’s more like an ongoing process – sometimes one that never fully ends, and sometimes one that moves between denial and acceptance.

How we die may be related to how we have lived to that point. If we are among those that don’t like to think about, let alone confront, unpleasant things, including death, it’s not going to help us cope because reality will soon bite. However, some manage to arrive at a sense of resolution and acceptance. They are able to live with that duality of awareness – a knowledge of dying but still staying engaged in life for whatever time that remains.

REGRET AND GRATITUDE

The psychiatrist and existential psychotherapist Irving Yalom tells us that we can lessen our fear of dying by living a regret-free life, thinking of our effect on subsequent generations and confiding in loved ones about our anxieties over death.

“If we live a life full of regret, full of things that we haven’t done, if we’ve lived an unfulfilled life,” he says, “when death comes along, it’s a lot worse. I think it’s true for all of us.”

(When asked by an interviewer from The Atlantic magazine about whether his lifelong preoccupation with death made it easier for him to accept the prospect that he might pass away soon, he replied, “I think it probably makes things easier.”)

So, maybe we should often think of death and then get on with life; and hope that when it happens, we have the time and means to accomplish five key tasks: saying I’m sorry, saying I forgive you, saying thank you, saying I love you, saying goodbye.

Both my parents have died without saying those things to us, the children whom they loved. Perhaps, it was Asian reticence. But sometimes we just don’t get the chance to share our feelings.

My mother died of a malignant and particularly aggressive brain cancer. At first, she had some headaches that she didn’t take too seriously. By the time a brain scan was done, there was the pixelated black-and-white MRI scan a frighteningly large engulfing lesion in her frontal lobe.

It took away her awareness of what was happening to her. A normally intelligent, sensitive and caring person, she became passive and indifferent and uninquiring. In less than six months, she slipped into a coma and died.

Her dying was like a black hole – impossible to look inside it, impossible to fathom how she felt and – maybe she didn’t even know herself.

I often wonder if my mother’s utter lack of awareness about her dying was a mercy or a curse. And I also wonder how – should my consciousness be intact – I would face my own dying.

I know I will fear, but I hope it will not be the delirious fear. I often think of the essay that the neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks wrote after he knew that he was months away from death. Other than noting his fear, he expressed that his “predominant feeling is one of gratitude.”

“I have loved and been loved,” he wrote. “I have been given much, and I have given something in return... Above all, I have been a sentient being, a living animal on this beautiful planet, and in this in itself has been an enormous gratitude and adventure.”

I can only hope that when my time comes, I would have some measure of that grace and gratitude.

Professor Chong Siow Ann is a senior consultant psychiatrist at the Institute of Mental Health.