

Ancient Egyptian Literature, Death and Dying, and Early Forms of Exposure Therapy

Victoria Pobok

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ABSTRACT

The Ancient Egyptians used expressive literature, magical papyri, and religious rituals as a means of acclimating societal affiliates with the idea of an inevitable death. Specific texts offered a variety of different therapeutic elements serving to alleviate the stresses of preparation for death or for the entrance into the afterlife, so that they seem to be comprehensible as a primitive mode of exposure therapy, akin to those practices utilized by modern psychologists today. The artistic poem “The Man Who Was Weary of Life” discusses the allure and temptation to prematurely enter the afterlife via suicide (Simpson 2003, 178). I draw upon specific passages from the text to demonstrate the literary persona’s attraction to entering the afterlife. Different passages from the same text nevertheless justify the necessity for the persona introduced in the text to still remain an earthly body. The second text, the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, is often understood as a biblical analogy as it provided the rituals and lifestyle regulations necessary for Egyptians to successfully pass into the afterlife (Lichtheim 2006, 125). The final text, The London-Leiden Magical Papyrus will additionally be cited, as it contains therapeutically similar magical rituals to address and even outdo physical, medicinal treatments that usually provided little to “no rational benefit other than to increase the expectation of a cure” (Nunn 1996, 97). Using these samples of ancient Egyptian literature, I will research the cultural forms and conceptions of death and dying implicit within them, in order to understand how their society exploited these as forms of controlled coping and disciplinary mechanisms.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND THESIS

The Ancient Egyptians were second to none in creating some of the most remarkable and magnificent works of art, architecture, and literature known to humanity. Against all odds, an overwhelming proportion of these works are still extant thousands of years later for contemporary humans to marvel at; however, one most always ponders their respective purposes and functionality. The pyramids in their vast majesty have been labelled by most as a royal burial monument, although to date, no human remains have been extracted from it. Mummies of both animals and humans alike offer gruesome, yet fascinating insight on the importance of the dead as well as the care with which bodies were prepared, preserved, and adorned. Though all of the

aforementioned served prescribed, base functions, I hypothesize that they collectively serve a larger, unintended therapeutic purpose that I will expound upon in later sections. I will work mainly with content-relevant texts to assess possible reasons as to why the Ancient Egyptians as a society demonstrated so profound a preoccupation with death and dying. In this study, I will delineate how the Ancient Egyptians used expressive literature, magical papyri, and religious rituals to gradually acclimate to the idea of an inevitable death as a societal whole.

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Section I: Exposure Therapy

Exposure therapy is a form of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) aimed at “reducing fear and anxiety responses” in patients that have pre-diagnosed anxiety or are experiencing related symptoms (“Cognitive Behavioral Therapy,” 1). The end goal of exposure therapy is to habituate¹ patients to feelings of distress that are associated with a feared entity while training them to break the cycle of avoidance² into which they may be unconsciously ingrained (“PTSD Clinical Practice Guidelines”). Rather than allowing patients to harbor an irrationally disproportionate fear of something, exposure therapy demands that patients directly face their fear with the hope that they will eventually be able to make self-guided progress towards the ultimate goal of conquering the phobia and its accompanying functional impairments. Fear is a natural, innate, and biologically imperative defense mechanism; however, a serious functional

¹ As defined by the American Psychological Association, habituation is the noticeable decrease in the intensity of reactions as a result of controlled exposure to a feared object.

² This involves systematic ways that feared entities are avoided. This avoidance is shown only to worsen symptoms, as patients are conditioned to flee from fear rather than face it head on.

impairment can act as a restraint from completing everyday tasks, regardless of their perceived simplicity or criticality to survival. These can range in seriousness from a seemingly benign displeasure at the sight of the feared object, to a complete inability to leave one's house out of fear of encountering this entity. Though it can be difficult to convince people to begin treatment using exposure therapy, research suggests that efficacy rates for this form of treatment are extremely high. One study in particular boasted that 90% of patients had a statistically significant reduction in fear, and 65% had fully conquered their phobia four years post-treatment (Kaplan and Tonlin). Because of these impressive results, exposure therapy is used to treat a wide variety of anxiety related disorders such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Social Anxiety Disorder, Panic Disorder, and most notably, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Specific Phobia, and Generalized Anxiety Disorder ("PTSD Clinical Practice Guidelines").

Exposure therapy systematically exposes patients to stimuli that gradually increase in intensity of the fear response that they are predicted to invoke. In modern therapy, a psychologist will work with the patient to identify the fear, pinpoint the possible sources of it, and finally, create a fear hierarchy to loosen its grasp on afflicted individual. Fear hierarchies are the bones of the systemic exposure: they embody the manifestations that the fears will take in therapy, and in turn, they structure the very course of treatment that a patient will undertake. For example, if someone had a crippling fear of spiders, the first level of their fear hierarchy might consist of imagining spiders, followed by viewing pictures of them. The apex, or most intense form of exposure in this case, may consist of holding a spider in one's hand.

Though exposure therapy and the development of fear hierarchies was conceptualized by behaviorist Joseph Wolpe in 1958, it's relatively uncomplicated mechanism of "systematic

desensitization” permits it to have possibly been used, in a more rudimentary and unintentional manner, by earlier civilizations with little to no developed concepts of human psychology (“PTSD Clinical Practice Guidelines”). In the case of the Ancient Egyptians, the most widely feared stimulus was certainly a death experience. Though this fear is natural, expected, and a crucial element of the human condition, I believe that the Ancient Egyptians present a case of a somewhat elevated fear of death and demand a unique form of some type of psychological treatment. The average Ancient Egyptian lived to be an age of about 29, with very few making it as far as age 60 (Freeman 1996, 85). There were also high mortality rates at ages 3 and 19 due to solid food transitioning and infection, respectively (Freeman 1996, 85). Some of the most important medical papyri from this time such as the Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus and the Brooklyn Papyrus indicate that people typically died from snake or scorpion bites, being mauled by hippos, crocodiles, lions, or dogs, from war trauma, drowning, parasites, tuberculosis, and lung related illnesses that were common at the time (Freeman 1996, 85). At the age of 20, the Ancient Egyptians were also expected to begin planning their own familial tombs that they would eventually be interred within (Freeman 1996, 91). Keeping all of these details in mind, it can be asserted that death was more than just a common fact to face for the Ancient Egyptians.

Section II: Current Study

In this study, I will use three specific texts, “The Man Who Was Weary of Life,” *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, and *The London Leiden Magical Papyrus*, to create a functioning fear hierarchy aimed at alleviating a fear of death. The first text, that which is most likely to induce the strongest fear response, is “The Man Who Was Weary of Life.” This poem discusses

contemplating suicide and encourages the reader to reflect their own life and death, their purpose on Earth, and the tasks of life that still need completion. The second text, *The London Leiden Magical Papyrus*, encourages readers to acknowledge an afterlife, communicate with the gods, spirits, and other entities of this realm and realize that they will one day be a part of it. The final text, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* outlines the rituals that will one day be posthumously performed on the individual, as well as explaining in detail how one can prepare their spirit for entrance into the Duat (an alternate name for the Egyptian Underworld) preceding death. This text is accordingly expected to invoke the least intense fear response after reading. However, I note that this form of exposure therapy would not only work to combat a fear of death, but also the experience surrounding death. More specific fear hierarchies could be constructed to account for confrontations with certain phobias, such as a fear of death by snake, and more appropriate texts (for this example, perhaps the Brooklyn Medical Papyrus) could be added to the hierarchy to increase its therapeutic efficiency. For this study, the fear hierarchy I have constructed focuses generally on fear of death without a specified cause.

Section III: Important Notes

There are also some additional points that I would like to make concerning the feasibility of this work. As mentioned previously, it is strictly theoretical. This was not likely to have been used in the structured, deliberate manner in which I have described it; rather, it would have been unintentionally enacted through marked exposure to these texts or by viewing art, rituals, or other events that were intentionally preserved within the texts mentioned.

Also a point of concern is the literacy rates of the time, as these are uncertain and most likely characteristically low. If the Egyptians were illiterate and largely incapable of written language, it can be argued that texts are void of applicability to this study. However, it is known that the content of these texts was orally transmitted from person to person or through attending large scale rituals and festivals that were widely celebrated, especially in reverence to the patron deity of a particular cult center. Lay members who were knowledgeable on ritual topics, such as lector priests, were also regarded as physicians and medical practitioners by the Egyptians. These individuals were relatively high ranking in society and had “considerable community standing among both sexes [and were] consulted frequently on situations involving illness and poison” (Lang 2012, 215). Hence, the contents of important papyri were most certainly dispersed regionally through common medical visitations and the accompanying verbal exchanges between community members. Though other adequate forms of exposure can be garnered without the direct use of texts, such as through art or music, texts were exclusively used for this study as they were the most available and accessible media for supporting my hypothesis.

Finally, texts were not the only means by which this therapy could have been administered. Ancient Egyptians may have been limited in terms of text, but they had several other, more widely accessible media through which the same concepts could have been conveyed, such as through mural and tomb art, folklore, music, pottery, and several others. Because of the difficulty of access to artwork, these elements were purposefully not included though they have equal importance and value.

FIRST “APEX” TEXT: “The Man Who Was Weary of Life”

Preserved on the Papyrus Berlin 3024, “The Man Who Was Weary of Life” is a text dating from the Egyptian Middle Kingdom³ that depicts the plight of a man debating suicide. The desperate nature of this poetic work demands that one *contemplate* their life as a whole, their eventual entrance into the afterlife, and the possible outcome of their judgement by the forty-two deities of the Underworld. The poetic persona is plagued by a disagreement of the body and soul: his entirety as a human entity is “unable to be integrated and at peace,” therefore, he wishes to take his own life as a means of resolution (Simpson 2003, 178). Detailing the argument between his body and his *ba*, this piece paints a “psychological picture of a man depressed by the evil of life to the point of feeling unable to arrive at any acceptance of the innate goodness of existence” (Simpson 2003, 178). Though this work is concerned mainly with the duality of the human as both a bodily and spiritual being, it also showcases an early awareness of psychology, offering interesting insights into the labyrinthine human mind before it was understood in a scientific light (Simpson 2003, 178). In the following sections, I will consult specific sections of the text to demonstrate its potential therapeutic relevance within the Egyptian societal microcosm.

The Division of the Human Spirit

A notable and rather interesting feature of this text lies within the spiritual division of the persona. Upon first reading “The Man Who Was Weary of Life,” it is easy to think the speaker is

³ Period of Egyptian history from 2050-1710 BCE lasting from the Eleventh through the Twelfth Dynasty (Quirke 2000, 2)

afflicted with auditory delusions or other positive symptoms⁴, possibly from schizophrenia or Dissociative Identity Disorder, as he details a conversation between his conscious body and another entity, referred to as his *ba*. However, this is not so; rather, the man is remarkably embracing the concept known as the Binary Soul Doctrine. In many pre-modern religions, the concept of two souls is relatively widespread. Though arguably foreign by modern standards, the binary soul is remarkably similar to our current concepts of the conscious and subconscious (Novak 2002, 143). In Ancient Egyptian religion, the soul was divided into two distinct parts: the *ba* and *ka*. The *ka* is what is most similar to the Christian idea of a soul, with the entity physically resembling its bodily counterpart. The *ka* was considered the life force of a person that departed from the body upon death (Novak 2002, 145). The most abstract element of the soul, and the one that is primarily mentioned in “The Man Who Was Weary of Life,” is the *ba*. Depicted as a bird with the head of a human, it was believed that this portion of the soul floated over the deceased and maintained the ability to travel between the realm of the living and the dead. It is this part of the man’s soul with which the man argues with over committing suicide. In Egyptian culture, it was believed that in order for one to be integrated and at peace, certain burial rituals must take place to bind the bipartite souls. Further reflecting the culturally important concept of wholeness, the deceased must become an embodiment of the creation of Osiris through reuniting one’s souls (Novak 2002, 145). By understanding this concept of the multifaceted soul, it is easier to follow the text not only as a poem, but also as a dialogue or “psychological picture” of another human being. It follows that the text must necessarily be analyzed also as a product of the Binary Soul, with the text proceeding dialogically under the

⁴ Sensory perceptions that are present in one that is known to have a mental illness but not in the normal population, such as visual and auditory hallucinations

same divided conditions. There are several points within this piece that reveal the distinct culture of the Egyptians, as well as the overall therapeutic value of the poem itself. They also demonstrate the divisive nature of the conscious-unconscious soul, as well as how such pressures to achieve a divine unity also showcase a desperate need of psychotherapy. These elements of the text will be discussed in the following sections.

The Therapeutic Value of Repetition

A major component of “The Man Who Was Weary of Life” are the repetitive mantras that are used throughout the bulk of the poetic work. In psychotherapy, positive repetitions do the work of enforcing a confident and capable attitude while also deconstructing negative cognitive distortions⁵ that may occupy one’s mind. Though similar in structure and purpose to those positive mantras used in modern therapies, the phrases repeated in this specific text are exclusively negative. This may seem counterintuitive from a psychotherapeutic perspective; however, they function as a mode of introducing one to negativity and the harsh emotions associated with it. These maxims would induce, theoretically, the most intense reactions of fear and emotional distress from readers.

Referring to these darker elements of the text, the author systematically repeats a negative mantra followed by a gloomy descriptor that sheds light onto his perceived regretful existence and earthly injustices, like so:

Death is before me today
/ Like the fragrance of the lotus,

⁵ Unrealistic and untrue thoughts about oneself that can contribute to an overall negative self image and lowered self confidence

Like tottering on the very edge of drunkenness

Death is before me today
Like the course of the Nile,
As when men return home from a campaign.

Death is before me today
Like the clearing of the sky,
As when a man understands / what had been unknown to him.
(Simpson 2003, 186)

In addition to “death is before me today,” the man also makes frequent use of “whom can I trust today?” and “behold, my very being is loathsome” (Simpson 2003, 184-186).

Employing this repetitive parallel structure, the man introduces a poetic element to his work that functions to condition him into a stiffly negative, death-oriented mindset. Convinced of his dastardly existence, the man reinforces his preconceived notion that suicide is his only way out of misery. Because of this, he places an immense weight on the promises and mystical paradise of the afterlife in an attempt to justify his desire for death, which will be discussed in the next section.

The Overvaluation of the Afterlife

A theme that is continually encountered within “The Man Who Was Weary of Life” is the overvaluation of the afterlife. In Chapter 109: “Knowing the Souls of the East” in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, there is even a vivid description of the gates through which Re passes through on his sun boat, which goes so far as to provide quantitative measurements indicating the heights of crops in the Field of Rushes⁶ (Lichtheim 2006, 131). With this notable level of detail, it is easy to understand why some people, such as the persona in the poem, had an

⁶ Area of the Underworld controlled by Osiris

immense trust in the forthcoming promises of the afterlife. Thoroughly convinced of the ubiquitous luxury and peace in the afterlife, the man writes that “the beyond is the place of rest, the desire of the heart; The West is the (final) landing place” (Simpson 2003, 180-181). Further describing the copious promises of West, he states:

But surely, he who is yonder will be a living god,
Having purged away the evil which had afflicted him.

Surely, he who is yonder will be one who stands in the sun barque,
Having made the necessary offerings / to the temples.

Surely, he who is yonder will be one who knows all things,
Who will not be prevented from standing in the presence
of Re when he speaks. (Simpson 2003, 186)

Giving readers final insight on his desire to die, he reveals “the West will be pleasant for me, for there is no sorrow there.” (Simpson 2003, 180).

However, the man is warned by his dubious *ba* that he is unhealthily “obsessed with burial” (Simpson 2003, 181). Enraptured in the possibilities of a mystical, intangible, and endless afterlife, the man has wholly devoted his attention to pondering topics that “will only cause sadness of the heart” (Simpson 2003, 181). In this argument of the body and soul, the persona is desperately prone to fantastical abstraction and deathly daydreaming as a means of escape from his woes. But, proving to be the decidedly more pragmatic of the two entities, the *ba* pierces the man’s veil of conscious ignorance and exposes the sobering realities of death. Providing a gruesome yet necessary image, it chastises the man and cautions that if he continues to brood over death, it will “bear [him] away (untimely) from his home / And bring him to a tomb in the desert” (Simpson 2003, 181). Adding to his grotesque imagery, the *ba* warns of the lasting consequences of death: “Never again will it be possible for you to go up and see / the sunlight”

(Simpson 2003, 181). The poignant use of language within these sections demonstrates the frightening extent to which they are plagued by this spiritual disagreement. In some interpretations of the text, the persona is even hypothesized to have experienced a severe degree of depressive paranoia. One author even believes the persona could have experienced the positive symptom of a foul, “evil” smell emitting from his own physical body (Thomas 1980, 285). Using the same foreboding tone, the *ba* reminds his counterpart that even the esteemed builders of the pyramids died just the same as those who passed tragically at the hands of the Nile. Death is unavoidable for all, regardless of rank or social status (Simpson 2003, 182).

The Distinction of Preparation and Pursuit

In his state of desperation, the speaker in “The Man Who Was Weary of Life” reminds readers that despite thousands of years and social shifts, the human condition is still largely unchanged. Humans still experience a desire to escape the travesties of daily life. The solidified views of the afterlife can adversely drive some, such as the man in the text, to pursue a premature death as a means of relief of earthly stresses, or perhaps from other earthly afflictions such as poverty, death, disease, or oppression. Mental illness could have also been a considerable factor for the persona in this work, as some consider this piece to be the first historical record of a suicide note (Thomas 1980, 284). Though Egyptologists generally agreed that the writer chose to continue living, his mental health was still markedly compromised, as expressed in the self-deprecating and depressive poems (Thomas 1980, 285).

In another foreboding message, the *ba* reminds the man of this fact by revealing that his “journey has not yet reached its end” and that if he is “[compelled] to death in this way, / [He]

will not find a place whereupon to rest in the West (Simpson 2003, 181). Another way in which this predicament is avoided is through traditional customs of religious and familial duty. Having not yet had a son, the man is bound to earth by the threat of losing his name and honor in the depths of history. Along with no place to be buried and no son, the persona could also not rely on others to come to his resting place, as others would not “wish to make offerings to such a wretched person” (Thomas 1980, 284). With no one to “make offerings and officiate at [his] tomb / On the day of burial and complete [his] resting place / in the necropolis⁷,” he could not be sure of his admittance into the realm of Osiris (Simpson 2003, 181). Therefore, the man necessarily required himself to live on, though he may not have desired so. Overall, societal taboo and religious duty negate the issue that arises when suicide is further persuaded by the fantastical prognostications of the afterlife. It is known that this was effective in the case of the man in the poem, as it is generally assumed by Egyptologists that he chose to continue living after the completion of this piece.

To perfectly culminate the main message of the “Man Who Was Weary of Life,” the *ba* also works to reassert the man’s value of life by showing genuine empathy. Abandoning its stern tone used in previous stanzas, the *ba* uses affection rather than force to dissuade the man from suicide. Mirroring a technique typically used by modern psychologists in substance abuse cases, the *ba* softens his argumentative stance to more naturally garner the man’s interest in heeding his advice. Contrasting the generally dark nature of this piece, the *ba* affectionately addresses his counterpart:

“Lay your complaining aside, my companion and my brother.
Make offerings on the altar / and struggle for your life,

⁷ A cemetery or place of burial which frequently implies close proximity to an ancient city, such as Giza

Just as you have declared.
 Love me here (and now), and forget about the West.
 Continue indeed in your search for the West,
 But only when your body is buried in the earth.
 I shall alight after you have become weary,
 And we shall make our dwelling place together” (Simpson 2003, 187)

The *ba* gently stresses that the man should prepare for his death, but not seek to bring it upon himself before his time is due. This is the conceptual hallmark that permits this work to reside at the top of the fear hierarchy for this research, as the *ba* makes a clear distinction between how one should prepare for the afterlife, but not actively pursue it. The man is instructed to make offerings, construct his tomb, and foster a desire for passage into the realm of blessed spirits; however, “only when his body is buried in the earth” should he actually pursue entrance into it (Simpson 2003, 17). In a final powerful message, the man’s spirit alludes to a more poignant journey of self-love that he must yet embark upon, to discover the value of his gift of life. He invites the man to “love him here (and now)” in the hopes that they will one day “make their dwelling place together” with body and spirit in harmonious accord (Simpson 2003, 187).

SECOND TEXT: The Egyptian Book of the Dead

This text is a comprehensive collection of mortuary rituals, hymns, invocations, and prayers that was commonly buried with wealthier Egyptians when they died. It was believed to have acted as a manual for passage into the Duat and was often personalized to include the deceased’s name and image within the workings of the text. This text provided the guidelines one must follow to gain entrance to the afterlife (as well as not to offend the deities judging them on behalf of each rule). The Egyptian Book of the Dead serves as the second *preparation* step of

the fear hierarchy I have crafted for this study. It serves to acquaint readers with the rituals that would one day be performed on them and also to introduce them to the duties that they must fulfill on earth for successful passage.

One ritual featured in the text that I believe would create the most intense fear response is The Weighing of the Heart of the Dead. Gruesome in nature, this text depicts the use of the heart, the only visceral organ left in the body after embalming, as it is weighted against the feather of Truth during the judgement of an individual's character. If the deceased's heart balanced with the feather, it was deemed a good soul and worthy of the afterlife, as recorded by Thoth⁸ in the following excerpt:

Thoth, the judge of Right and Truth of the great company of the gods who are in the presence of Osiris⁹ saith: "Hear ye this judgement. The heart of Osiris has in very truth been weighed, and his soul hath stood as witness for him; it hath been found true in the Great Balance. There hath not been found any wickedness in him; he hath not wasted the offerings in the temples; he hath not done harm by his deeds; and he hath uttered no evil reports while he was upon earth. (Budge 2008, 26)

However, if one's heart was weighted with evil enough to tip the scale, his soul was fed to Ammut, "The Eater of the Dead." If left to the crocodile-lion-hippo hybrid demoness, one's soul was "devoured straightaway... and ceased to exist" (Budge 2008, 21).

⁸ The ibis or baboon headed god of scribes and wisdom, this deity recorded the outcome of the Weighing of the Heart ritual.

⁹ Egyptian god of the dead and ruler of the Underworld, often used as an image of the deceased as they underwent certain funerary rituals.

These final moments of judgement, whether good or bad, are the most provoking elements of the text in reference to the fear hierarchy of this study. While the text outlines the path of good behavior, it also graphically depicts the consequences of failing to do such good. The idea that one could be wiped from existence, even granted unworthy of eternal suffering, would most definitely cause some form of distress or anxiety for readers, especially if consciously treading down a path of evil. Upon reading this piece, one is given an indirect, foreboding warning about the choices they make in life. However, they are also directly instructed on how to prepare and live a lifestyle that is esteemed by the gods, as briefly seen in the latter lines of the above excerpt. In the next selected text, this is taken one step further as the piece requires that one not only prepare herself for death, but also contemplate it as an experience.

THIRD “BASE” TEXT: The London-Leiden Magical Papyrus

As the final text in the fear hierarchy, *The London-Leiden Magical Papyrus* serves as the most basic form of exposure and is consequently predicted to induce the least significant fear response among all of the texts. This text will mainly focus on acknowledging an extant spirit realm that will one day be entered by each and every individual in society. This text also features specific instructions for summoning the gods and spirits of the dead, as written in the excerpt below:

Prescription for bringing the gods in by force: you put the bile of a crocodile with pounded frankincense on the brazier. If you wish to make them come in quickly again, you put stalks of anise on the brazier together with the egg-shell as above,

then the charm works at once. If you wish to bring in a living man, you put sulphate of copper on the brazier, then he comes in. If you wish to bring in a spirit, you put sn-wv stone with stone of iZhh on the brazier, then the spirit comes in. (Griffith 1921, 37)

Also included within this diverse text are love potion and poison recipes, divorce spells, medical treatments, divination techniques and erotica. Upon reading the text in its entirety, however, it is easy to question its applicability to this project. Since only certain portions of the London-Leiden directly relate to death and dying, it can be argued that it, like the hodgepodge of spells it contains, is largely irrelevant to this topic of discussion. On the contrary, I argue that this actually increases the value of the text as it is an embedded diversion from death related discussion. The impallatable idea of death-talk is, essentially, sugar-coated with something more benign for the sake of making it easier to grapple with. Implanting the death-related sections among those that are considerably less troubling allows for the reader to have less deliberate exposure, thereby provoking a lessened adverse response.

CONCLUSION

As outlined in the bulk of this paper, I hypothesize that the Egyptians surrounded themselves with death-oriented artwork, literature, and media for the purpose of therapeutic exposure and self-acquaintance with ideas of imminent death. I believe that this could possibly explain the reason as to why the society expressed such a remarkable preoccupation with death and dying. Having demonstrated a need for therapy for a variety of reasons including a short life expectancy, a high prevalence of danger, and a lack of treatment for rampant illnesses, death was

a daily distress (and possibly a cause of functional impairment) that desperately needed a coping strategy or therapeutic treatment. By surrounding themselves with commonplace depictions of death and dying, I believe that the Ancient Egyptians unknowingly treated themselves for a society wide fear of death, thereby allowing them to minimize the burdens of functional impairment and undertake unprecedented feats in areas such as medicine and architecture.

When completing this study, I was able to make several observations about the nature of this theoretical work. I believe that the structure of the fear hierarchy and the underlying principles of exposure therapy allow for there to be many possible variations in the content and applicability of this work. One of the more exciting aspects of this work, I believe, is that it exhibits a potential to be used cross-civilizationally, meaning that the therapeutic topics I discuss in this paper could possibly be applied to other ancient civilizations and not exclusively to the Ancient Egyptians. Additionally, the fear hierarchy can be specifically altered to include more specific death experiences by featuring more content-tailored texts. If one feared dying specifically by snakebite for instance, the accompanying fear hierarchy would most logically include the Brooklyn Papyrus¹⁰ as it primarily discusses the treatment of snakebites, many of which have a fatal prognosis. For this study, focus was primarily placed on a general fear of death, as this was likely to be the most widespread and commonplace fear encountered. In addition to case specification, there are also a multitude of different media that could replace textual steps of the fear hierarchy, including murals, tomb art, folktales, music, pottery, and buildings and monuments, to name a few. These steps could also be added to the fear hierarchies

¹⁰ Written during the Ptolemaic era in 300 BCE, this text is one of the twelve most important medical papyri as determined by Egyptologists due to its discussion of herpetological content, snakebites, and respective treatments.

without replacing a text, as the hierarchy could include varying numbers of steps to gradually increase exposure. Again I note that, for ease of accessibility and availability, texts were the only media used in this study, but the fear hierarchy outlined is certainly not limited only to texts. I believe that there is a large pool of textual, artistic, ritualistic, and religious evidence that could be applied to support the claims I make in this study.

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