

Why Do We Care What Happens to Our Body After Death?

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Abstract: Why do we care what happens to our corpses? We will not be there to experience whatever happens, and yet we care. In line with attachment theory and the social construction of self, our identity is in part constructed from how others remember us; they continue to hold our life story in their minds, our social existence lives on in them - and our corpse is the final physical remnant of that story^[1,2].

Keywords: Attachment theory; Social construction; Death; Corpse

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1. Introduction

A friend of mine lost her grandmother to COVID-19. “We never said goodbye,” she told me later, “I just knew she was dead, but part of me just didn’t get the memo.” This missing signal is the corporeal evidence the bereaved need. By giving the corpse a proper burial, we facilitate cognitive closure and deactivate the search mode of our attachment system^[3].

In this essay, I suppose we care for our corpse in order to let our own death be a properly narrated event (to ameliorate anxiety, to render our identity) and to leave our loved ones something real to help with their sadness (through sensory verification). I appeal only to psychological mechanisms, not out of spite for religion, but because, even if in fact there are metaphysical beliefs, people’s need for closure has a psychological reason besides those beliefs.

2. Three psychological functions of the corpse

2.1. Anxiety buffering: Closing the question of our own death

Terror Management Theory suggests we cope with death anxiety via cultural worldviews^[4,5]. But if symbolic immortality is all that matters, why not simply have a memorial service with photographs?

Death anxiety has a peculiar structure: you can never experience the experience of being gone. So your mind can never truly imagine your own death ^[6]. Remind us of death, and we crave closure. In one experiment, when judges were prompted to think about their mortality, they set bail almost nine times higher than normal ^[7]. They used strict rules that lock the unknown (their mortality) down.

The research above shows that when we feel close to death, we are inclined to grip something solid to release our anxiety. The corpse provides us with that at a physical level. Instead of the endless thought “I will die”, which we can never actually test, we get “this death is finished,” something we can hold and know.

As discussed above, a body left unattended allows anxiety to remain alive; it displays a process still going on. It isn’t yet “done”; it’s still becoming dead, rousing that same disgust that reminders of death create for uncontrolled change in the body ^[8,9]. Ritual doesn’t hide death; it finishes it. Whether by burial or cremation or sky burial, the logic is the same: the body is set, made into a finished fact from ongoing change. We care what happens to our corpse because we want our death to be a finished story, not a question that stays forever open ^[10,11].

2.2. Sensory confirmation: Ending the brain’s search mode

We care what happens to our corpse not for ourselves; we will not be there. We care for those we leave behind. When we die, their minds need tangible evidence to update the bond. Without a body, the mind picture of us gets stuck: still here, still reachable ^[12–14]. The bereaved mind cannot shift to gone, but to held in memory. The corpse is the evidence their minds need ^[15].

Two simple reasons explain an aching mind’s need for a body. First, through close bonds our loved ones incorporate our body into their own sense of self ^[16,17]; they tag it “mine” too. Second, the brain’s “mine” label is hard to remove, even for a loved one’s body. Evidence from the rubber hand illusion and phantom limbs shows that the brain still calls a missing limb ‘mine’, and research into the full body illusion shows that we only release our body when one of our senses informs us that it is not ours ^[18–21]. Without the body, what is left fails to evoke the sensory image able to update that picture. The bond system cannot move to reorganization from our knowledge of it to memory and imagery of it ^[15]. Studies on unclear loss confirm this: bereavement remains an open loop without proof ^[12].

Grief brain scans reveal activity in body- and presence-related regions (insula, anterior cingulate) when reminded of the dead ^[22,23]. Our brain needs a physical object before it can update a self that included the other; our corpse provides that sensory evidence to the bereaved in order to finish the grief loop.

2.3. Identity marking: The corpse as biographical token

The reason we hate it when someone mistreats a corpse is that we think of the body as the person; if the dead were merely scrap material, we wouldn’t feel their decay is anything special. In history, however, mucking with a corpse has been one of the best ways to humiliate. And that’s how we look at identities, too; we think of ourselves as a story, and the body is just the main material of that story. The corpse becomes the last word of that legend; post- 9/11 studies show that, in the absence of the remains, there is pathological mourning ^[24].

3. Objections and rebuttal

3.1. Evolutionary psychology: A misfiring instinct?

Objection: We seem to have evolved to be disgusted by corpses because they constitute a health risk. By

burying or burning, we remove that health risk; therefore, the rituals are simply dressing up disgust in some cultural patina^[25]. On this view, the presence of a dead body should primarily activate disgust and related distress (as a biohazard), not sadness driven by attachment.

Rebuttal: But in fact, it is the attachment system that prevails because “only those with care-giving showed reward-related activity in the nucleus accumbens (NA)”^[22]. This suggests that it is bonding leading to attachment and care of the body rather than disgust.

If fear of corpses is said to have been the problem, denied biohazard access should have made us feel better; it didn't^[26,27]—an origin confused with present purpose. We care because loving matters if our beloveds can grieve.

3.2. Can we learn not to care?

Objection: Physicists argue that ‘the body is nothing but atoms’. Attachment to a corpse is superstition, a category error^[28]. Contemplatives and clinicians argue that we can learn not to cling: Monks study the decay of corpses all the time in the Preparation for Death^[29], Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) retrains cognitions in Prolonged Grief Disorder^[30]. If therapists can get the grieving to cope fine without the body being attached, surely we can train ourselves not even to care if the body is our own^[25].

Rebuttal: both objections wrongly confuse what we can know with what our brain can feel. If the corpse were merely atoms, we'd be no worse than thieves robbing a bin of rubbish, but no civilized society cares to treat it that way. Our wedding ring is just metal, yet we go to war over it. The physicalist confuses our composition with our function^[31–33].

More significantly, lack of evidence does not put an end to that hunt in our heads. Because the attachment system never got the actual multi-sensory signal of a body growing still, then cold, the visual, tactile, and thermal finality of biological death, any more than the stop sign can be collimated into existence by symbolic means. The nucleus accumbens is activated by photographs of the dead, just as it is by cues from bodies and faces in the living state^[22]; but activation is not satiety, and, just as the view of food increases rather than diminishes hunger, so our brain's deeper homeostatic systems require more than a cortical recognition to accept loss as final and stop that search.

A need, as opposed to a learned want, is innate. Infants seek physical closeness; they are never given explicit permission to want, and “if need were habit, grief would diminish in its intensity and eventually disappear in time like many other habits^[1]. Researchers found protracted grief was still present in 28.6% of bereaved at over a year after loss, suggesting that the attachment system does not unlearn its target through the passage of time^[26]. That is, the body matters; we need to take it through to the end of its story; we can't leave it hanging.

3.3. Does closure exist without the corpse?

Objection: VR-way memorials, digital archives and symbolic rituals can provide closure without the corpse. Wanting the body back is a cultural habit^[25].

Rebuttal: They miss the point that the attachment system never evolved to regard a symbol or some pixels as death: it evolved to react to experience signals, vision, touch, and finally, the stillness of life^[1].

Harrop et al. (2023) show that physical presence at a farewell reduces prolonged grief. ‘Physical presence’ usually means being in contact with the corpse^[26]. None of the studies used a VR avatar, and

O'Connor et al. (2008) find that pictures excited our attachment centers - but a trigger isn't a satisfaction (a food picture makes us hungry, not fed) ^[22]. Quirin et al. (2011) used names and pictures, but none of their participants had lost actual body contact ^[34]. So these studies show symbolic processing, not that a symbol alone can close grief.

As for "corpse-need" being "just a cultural habit": habits can be quite deeply embodied and evolutionarily set ^[1]. Even if some cultures have some corpse-contact traditions that are limited, such as Hindu cremation within twenty-four hours, or Tibetan sky-burying ^[35, 36], those rituals still involve the actual physical corpse, their bodily presence, witnessed, ritual set upon, etc.; they do not replace it with a screen or a photo. No known culture has routinely, or even universally, successfully closed without touch of the body itself in some form.

4. Research procedure

4.1. Questionnaire development and review

Prior to formal distribution, the questionnaire underwent face validity review by two psychology researchers. The reviewers confirmed that all items were clearly worded, unambiguous, and free from leading language. Particular attention was paid to ensuring each item described psychological experiences neutrally rather than implying that either having seen or not having seen the deceased's body was preferable. All six items were determined to be factual descriptions of specific psychological phenomena (e.g., dreaming, searching, replaying memories) without leading content, and were therefore approved.

4.2. Data collection

The electronic questionnaire was created on the Wenjuanxing platform and distributed through social media channels, including WeChat and WeChat Moments. Each IP address or device was permitted to submit only one response. Data were collected from July 12 to July 20, 2026. A minimum of 30 valid responses was planned, with a target sample size of 50.

4.3. Data cleaning and processing

Data were automatically exported from Wenjuanxing in Excel format. Cleaning criteria were: (1) all six scale items must be completed; any questionnaire with missing values was excluded; (2) questionnaires selecting the same response option for all six items (e.g., all "3 = Sometimes") were excluded. The valid dataset was imported into SPSS 26.0 for analysis.

5. Results

Table 1. Comparison of Unresolved Grief Experiences Between Groups (Seen vs. Not Seen the Deceased's Body) (mean $\pm$ SD)

Questions	Seen Group (n=66)	Not Seen Group (n=34)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
1. Feeling the person has only gone away on a long trip and will come back	4.09 $\pm$ 1.06	1.85 $\pm$ 0.99	10.21	< 0.001
2. Waking from a dream and being unable to tell whether the person is really gone	4.14 $\pm$ 1.01	1.91 $\pm$ 1.00	10.51	< 0.001
3. Unconsciously looking for the person in familiar places	3.98 $\pm$ 1.05	1.85 $\pm$ 0.93	10.04	< 0.001
4. Repeatedly replaying the person's final days in one's mind	4.08 $\pm$ 0.93	2.09 $\pm$ 1.11	9.45	< 0.001
5. Feeling the person's life lacks a proper ending	4.12 $\pm$ 0.81	2.09 $\pm$ 1.19	8.94	< 0.001
6. Strongly feeling the person is still present when seeing their photographs or belongings	3.98 $\pm$ 0.95	2.24 $\pm$ 1.05	8.41	< 0.001

Across all six items, the Seen the Body group obtained significantly higher scores on unresolved grief experiences than the Not Seen group (all $*p < 0.001$, all $*t > 8.4$). This direction was opposite to our original hypothesis, which predicted that seeing the body would facilitate acceptance and reduce such experiences.

Several possible explanations may account for this unexpected finding:

First, relationship closeness may have acted as a confounding variable—individuals who had seen the body were typically closer to the deceased, naturally experiencing more intense grief. Second, if most participants were in the acute stage of bereavement, the body might have functioned as a powerful reality signal that intensified short-term emotional distress rather than immediately alleviating it. Third, the questionnaire measured symptoms of unresolved grief (e.g., searching behaviors, disbelief), not integration or acceptance—these two processes may coexist. Fourth, traumatic imprinting from direct visual exposure may strengthen intrusive memories (Item 4), particularly in cases of sudden death or severe disfigurement.

However, these findings do not invalidate the theoretical proposition that the deceased's body is essential for eventual psychological closure. Cross-sectional data cannot capture grief trajectories over time. Although individuals who had seen the body may experience greater distress in the early stages, attachment theory predicts they may ultimately achieve better psychological integration as time passes—a hypothesis requiring longitudinal verification.

6. Conclusion

The findings highlight the profound influence of exposure to the deceased's body on grief expression while suggesting its short-term effects are complex. These results should be interpreted as preliminary evidence that the deceased's body strongly influences the attachment system. Future research should employ repeated-measures designs and control for bereavement-related covariates.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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