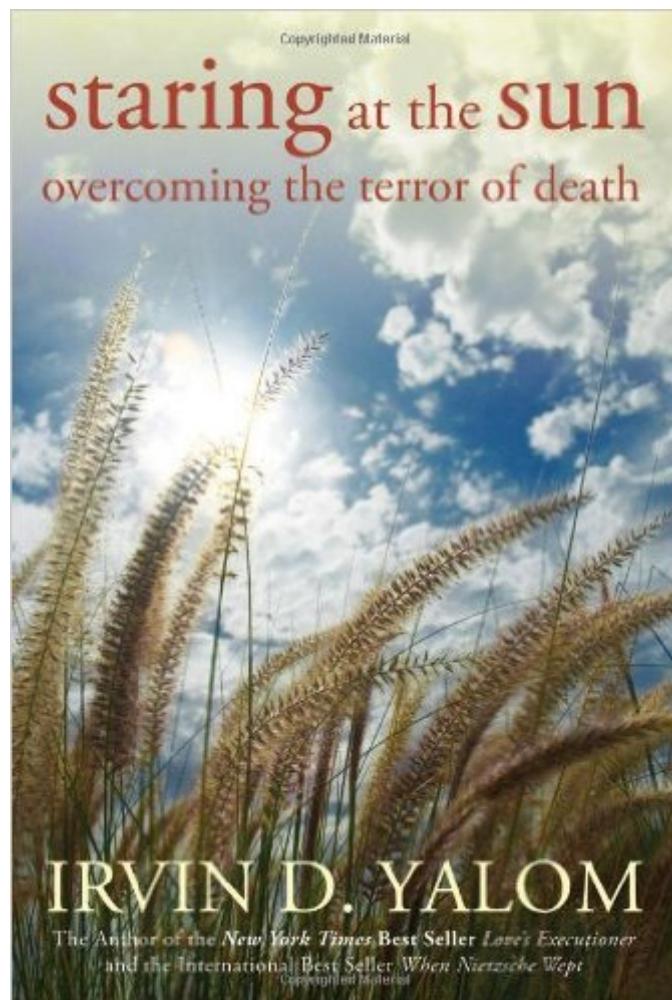


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# Staring At The Sun: Overcoming The Terror Of Death



## **Synopsis**

Written in Irv Yalom's inimitable story-telling style, *Staring at the Sun* is a profoundly encouraging approach to the universal issue of mortality. In this magisterial opus, capping a lifetime of work and personal experience, Dr. Yalom helps us recognize that the fear of death is at the heart of much of our anxiety. Such recognition is often catalyzed by an "awakening experience"—a dream, or loss (the death of a loved one, divorce, loss of a job or home), illness, trauma, or aging. Once we confront our own mortality, Dr. Yalom writes, we are inspired to rearrange our priorities, communicate more deeply with those we love, appreciate more keenly the beauty of life, and increase our willingness to take the risks necessary for personal fulfillment.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

In "Staring at the Sun," psychiatrist and Stanford University professor Irvin D. Yalom confronts one of humanity's greatest fears: the terror of death. Yalom, who is in his seventies, admits that he has pondered the psychological and philosophical implications of his own mortality. In addition, he discusses his patients, many of whom have been shaken by the loss of a loved one, professional failures, or romantic disappointments. Their frustrations sometimes translate into a fear of death, because as we age, we may worry that time will run out before we have an opportunity to accomplish our goals. If we were to think constantly about death, it would be like "trying to stare at the sun in the face: You can stand only so much of it." Therefore, as a form of self-protection, many of us avoid the subject entirely. After all, we are busy enough attending to life's routines. Work, marriage, raising a family, making friends, cultivating hobbies, and participating in communal and

charitable endeavors can take up a great deal of time. Why contemplate an unpleasant subject that can lead to unhappiness and depression? No matter how we may try to ignore it, however, certain life events bring death to the fore, such as a milestone birthday, a serious illness, divorce, retirement, or grown children leaving home. Any such transition can traumatize a vulnerable individual. The author is a non-observant Jew who turns to philosophers such as Epicurus, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer for guidance. Those who worship a deity may be put off by Yalom's staunch secularism. Still, this book does offer an approach that anyone can implement, no matter what his beliefs.

According to Irvin D. Yalom, people can be so consumed with their own mortality that they become crippled by "unmanageable death anxiety." This disorder manifests in ways that include anxiety attacks, bad dreams, and depression. Dr. Yalom believes that this is a key psychological problem, one that goes even deeper than Freud's emphasis on sexual repression. Therefore, he's based his practice on helping people overcome this issue and enjoy life to the fullest. I found "Staring at the Sun" to be an intriguing and readable book, not to mention helpful for my own battles with this issue. It should be noted up front that the author is not religious. If his patient follows a certain faith, Dr. Yalom encourages his or her belief if it is helpful to the healing process. But he is a rationalist who is more in line with evolutionary thought and secular philosophy than with spiritual leanings. His treatment methods include guided dream interpretation, and encouraging awakening experiences as a form of existential shock therapy. Along those lines, Dr. Yalom advocates some of the philosophical teachings of Epicurus, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer to help his patients come to terms with their mortality and cultivate the ability to "create the fate that [they] can love." There is much to like about this book. I admired the author's candor about his own fears of impending death at the age of 76, and how his struggles have enabled him to help others in the same boat. In addition, I appreciated the personal touch he brings to his practice, including appropriate self-revelation and a commitment to help his patients even at inconvenient times. I got the sense that he truly cares about them, but still manages to maintain appropriate boundaries without being rigid or condescending.

**STARING AT THE SUN: OVERCOMING THE TERROR OF DEATH** by Irvin D Yalom  
February 9, 2008  
Rating 4/5 stars  
Having been told I have anxiety disorder and learning that this equated to a fear of death, I jumped at the opportunity to read **STARING AT THE SUN**. This is my first book by Irvin D Yalom, and I was very impressed with the contents and writing style of a topic that can be

pretty heavy duty. Yalom discusses anxiety and the fear of death by throwing in examples from the patients he's known, each of them having diverse symptoms and traits, but all of them having a fear of death. A lot of what he went over I already knew from therapy, and it was good to see it all in print. He also talks of methods to use to help overcome this fear, helping many of us to cope with daily anxiety and to learn to relax and live life as if THERE IS A TOMORROW. Case studies include a woman who fears death by stating that she had so many things to do before she died. It's a classic case, in which I can relate to, where one cannot relax until one's ever growing to-do lists are completed. It's the unlivable life that many fear, the fear of not accomplishing everything one had meant to do throughout a life time, but for some they feel this life may end too soon, thus the anxiety to finish things before it's too late. Others begin to have anxiety after the death of someone close, possibly a husband or a close friend. Often times any life-changing event can set off anxiety. In each case, Yalom gives explicit details of a particular patient, using a very reader-friendly voice that most readers will feel comfortable with. The only chapter that I felt was not as reader-friendly was the last, in which he warns the reader that this particular chapter is aimed at therapists.

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