



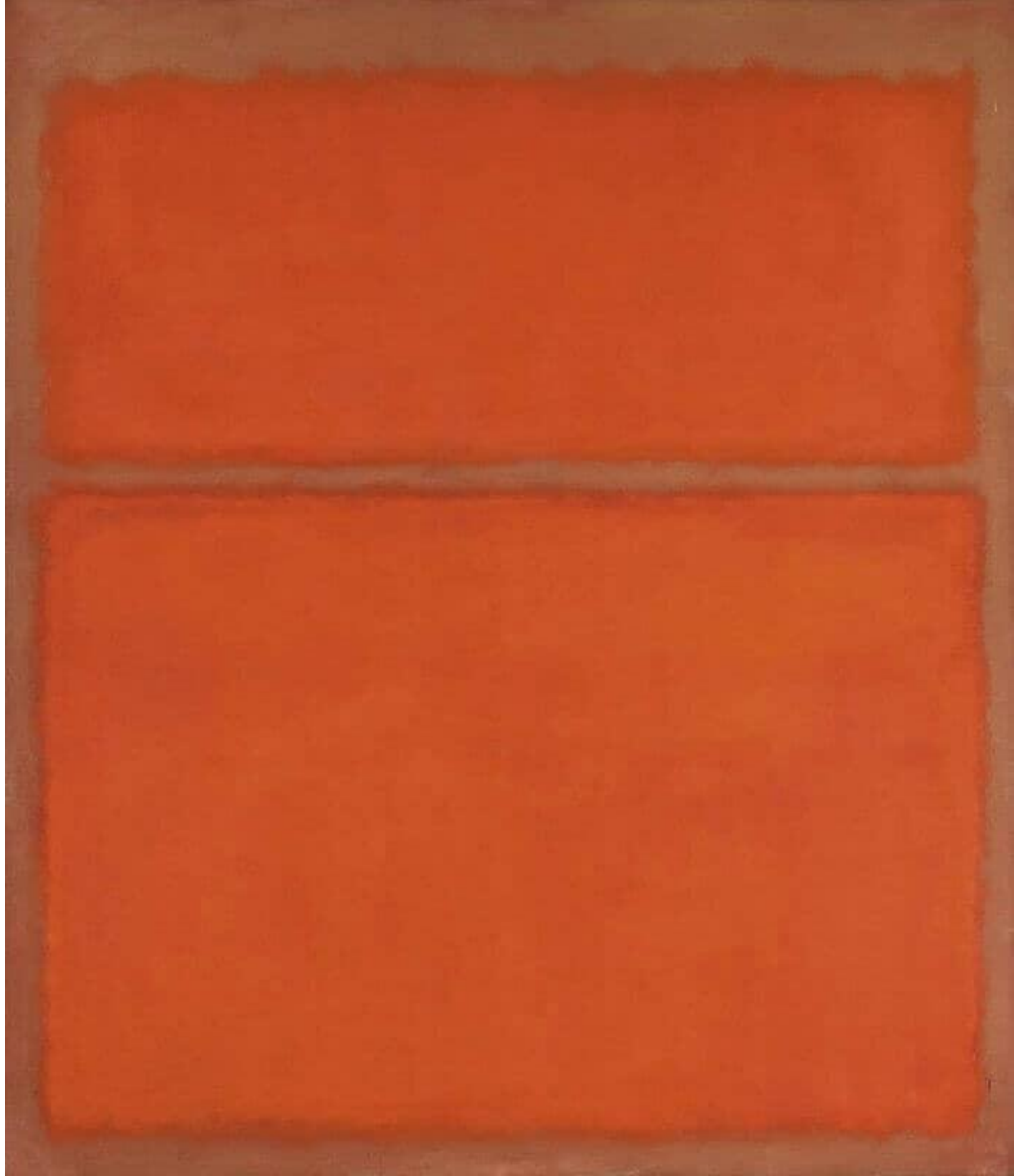
Spiritual Care at the End of Life

for Atheists and Agnostics

Dr Robert Brodrick

21st November 2024

All is subjective



“I’m interested only in expressing
basic human emotions:

tragedy,

ecstasy,

doom,

and so on....”

Mark Rothko





Atheists

believe there is no God

Agnostics

are uncertain about the
existence of God



Atheists

Agnostics

Both live as if there is

- ❖ no God
- ❖ no universal Truth
- ❖ no life after death

“Atheism is not a philosophy;

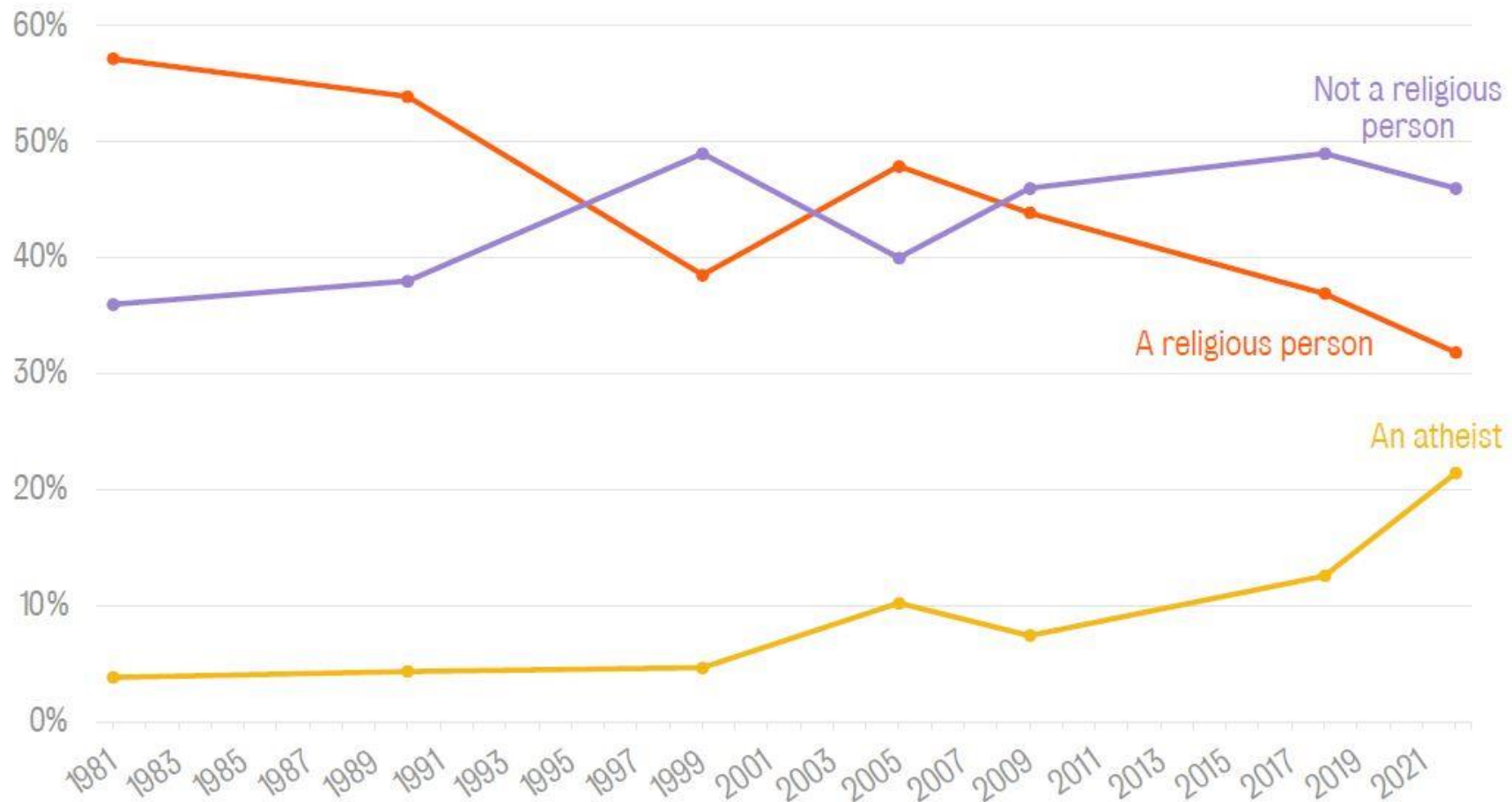
it is not even a view of the world;

it is simply an admission of the obvious.

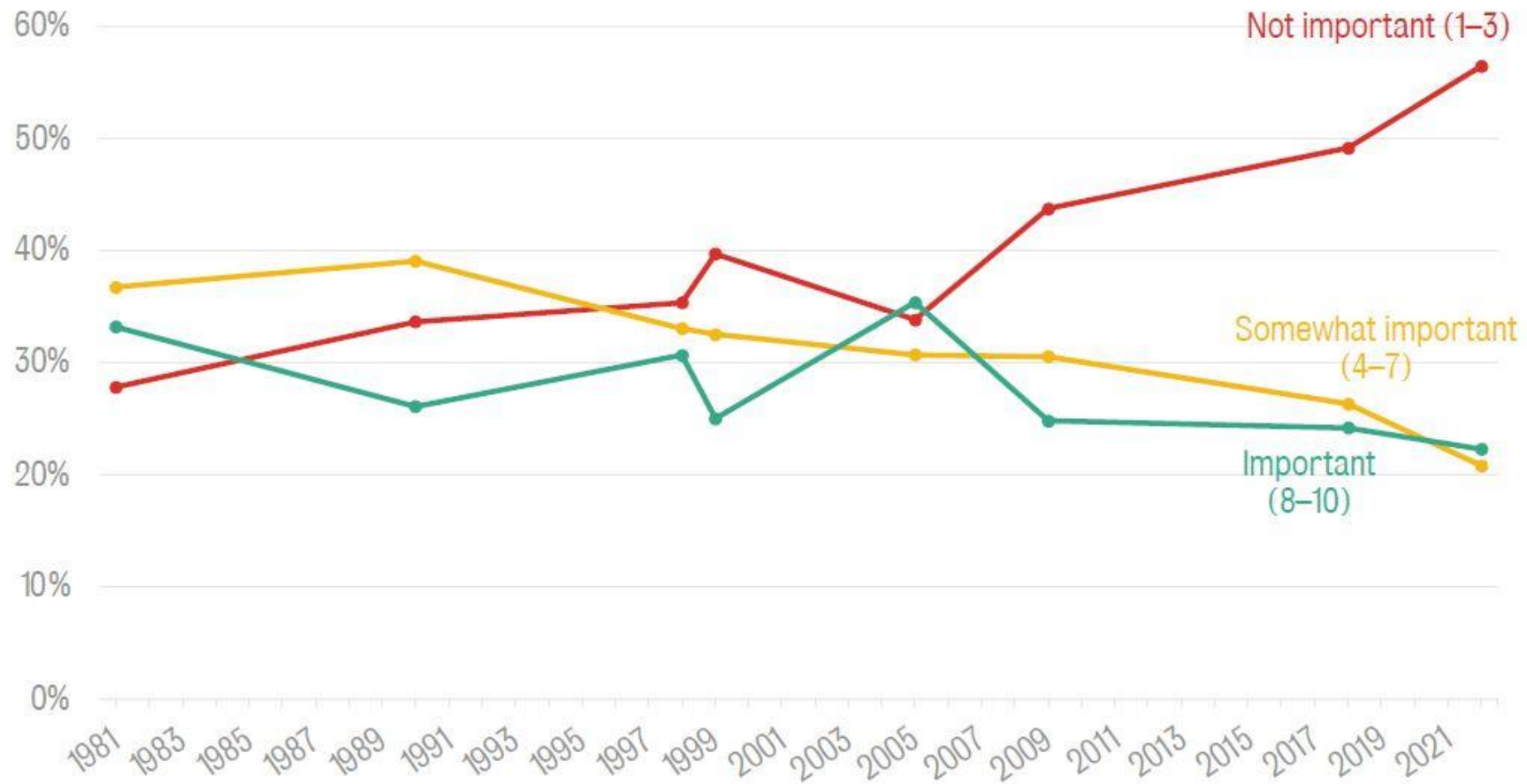
In fact, 'atheism' is a term that should not even exist...

We do not have words for people who doubt that Elvis is still alive or that aliens have traversed the galaxy only to molest ranchers and cattle.”

Independently of whether you attend religious services or not, would you say you are...?
(responses in Britain)



How important is God in your life? Please use this scale to indicate. 10 means “very important” and 1 means “not at all important” (responses in Britain)



Atheist Spirituality

- An oxymoron?
- Just psychological care?
- Existential care?
- Better delivered by psychotherapists?
- Any business of healthcare at all?

The profound and mysterious defy definition

“The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them.”

Mark Rothko



The Human Condition

A vertical tear in a dark background, revealing a lighter, textured surface behind it. The tear is jagged and runs from the top to the bottom of the image. The background is a dark, almost black color, and the surface behind the tear is a lighter, brownish-grey color with a grainy texture.

Death

Freedom

Isolation

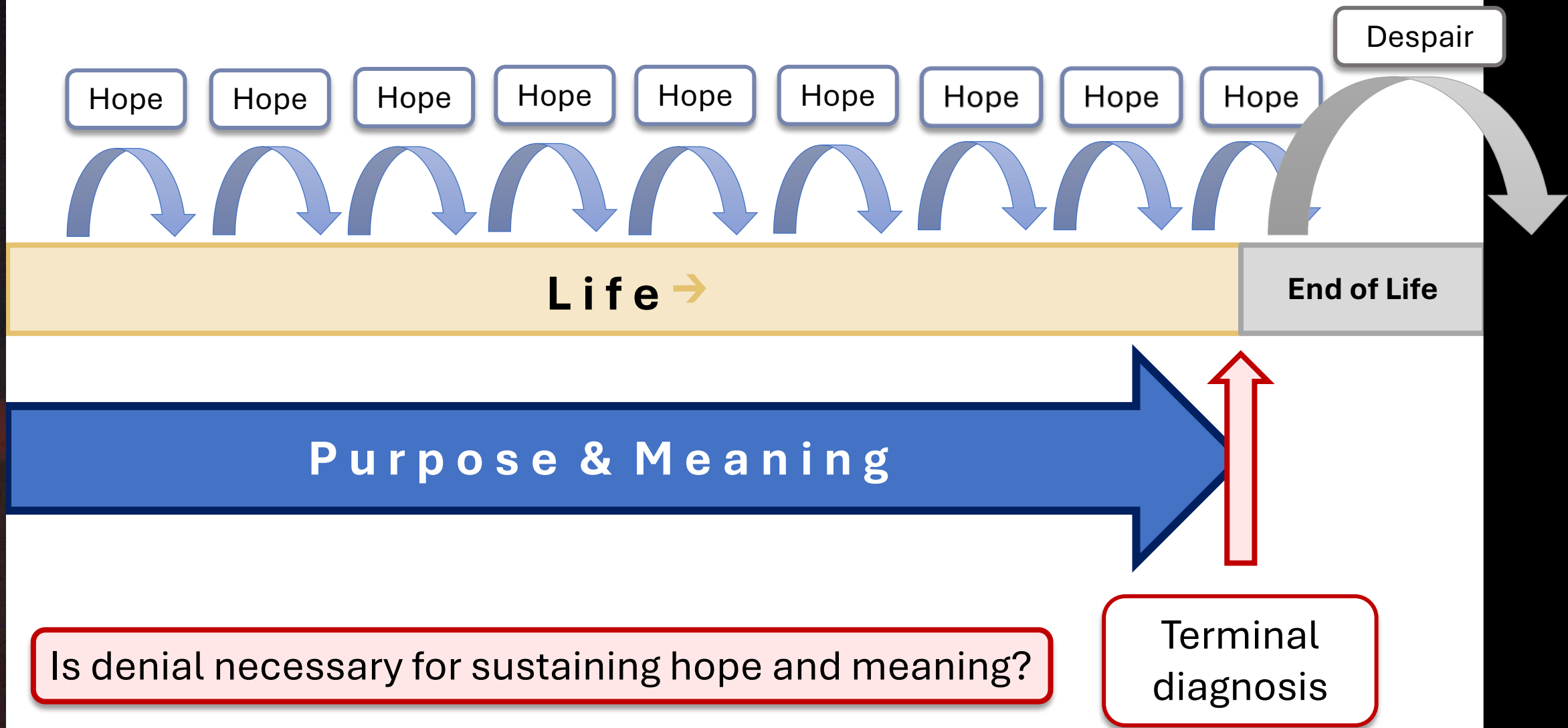
Meaninglessness



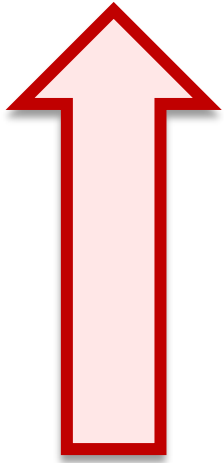
“The cradle rocks above an abyss,
and common sense tells us that our existence
is but a brief crack of light
between two eternities of darkness”

Denial

- ✓ The most popular strategy during healthy years
- ✓ Keeping busy takes the mind off the inevitable
- Not so useful for patients at the end of life



Managing the Terror

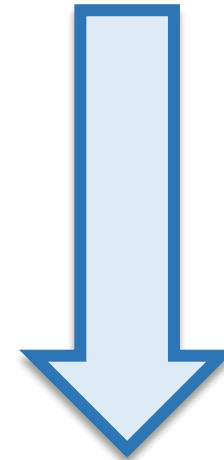


Building Up the Self

- World is meaningful and controllable
- Sense of personal significance

Transcending the Self

- Connected to 'something greater'
- Experiential transcendence

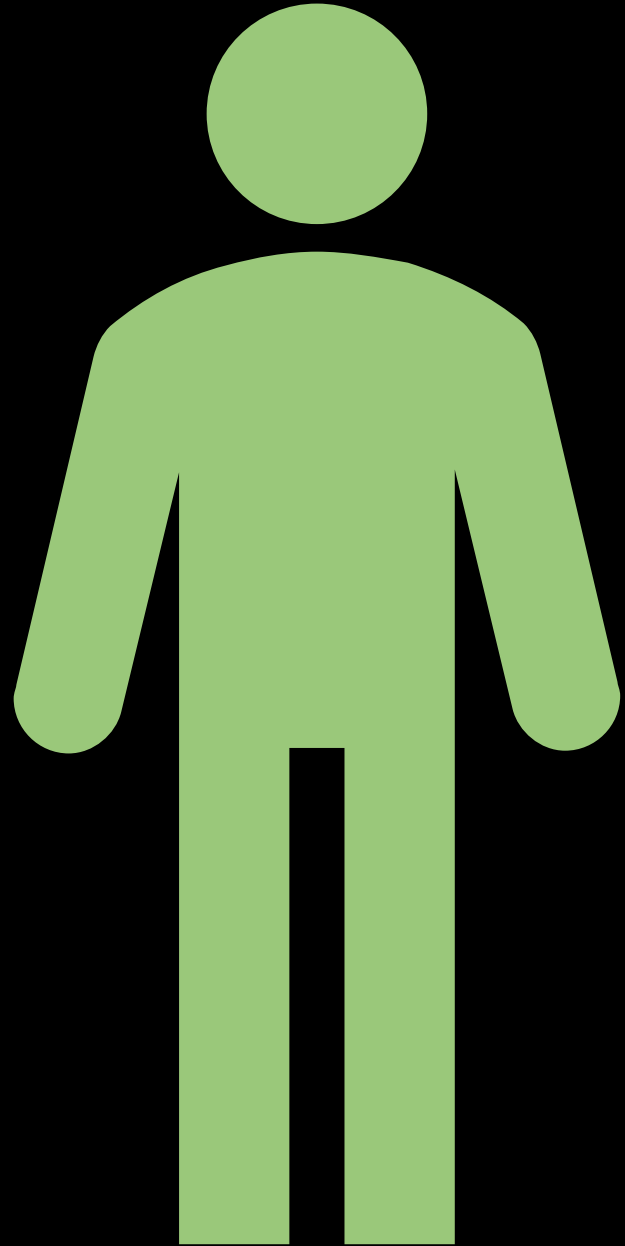


Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg & Tom Pyszczynski. *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*. 2015.

Piotrowski, J.P., Żemojtel-Piotrowska, M. & Clinton, A. Spiritual transcendence as a buffer against death anxiety. *Current Psychology*. 2018. 39, 994–1000







Building Up the Self





Transcending the Self

Atheism

Religion

Death

✓ Immortality

Building Up

Freedom

✓ Duty & structure

Building Up

Isolation

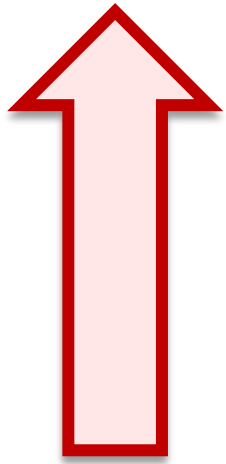
✓ Divine Connection

Transcending

Meaninglessness

✓ Meaning & Purpose

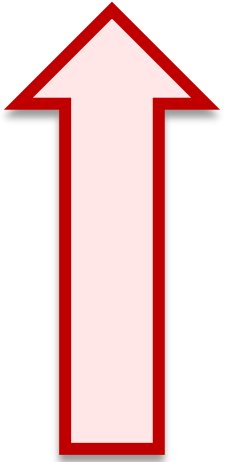
Building Up



Big Self Projects

- ✓ Money
- ✓ Power
- ✓ Status
- ✓ Attractiveness & Sex
- ✓ Safety & comfort

Immortality Projects



- ✓ Health / Wellness
- ✓ Symbolic immortality
 - ✓ Having children
 - ✓ Fame
 - ✓ Work & creation
 - ✓ Memorials

Terminal Illness Destroys Self Building



Rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic

Loss of Hope

Loss of Purpose

Loss of Meaning



Existential Distress

Loneliness

Anxiety

Remorse

Assisted Dying

Most patients that ask for hastened death are
atheists with low spiritual wellbeing

Mathieu Bernard, et al. Relationship Between Spirituality, Meaning in Life, Psychological Distress, Wish for Hastened Death, and Their Influence on Quality of Life in Palliative Care Patients. *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*. 2017. 54 (4). 514-522

Helen Dempsey-Henofer. Death without God: Nonreligious Perspectives on End-Of-Life Care. *Diversity and Equality in Health and Care*. 2019. 16(3): 74-79

Our Challenge

How can healthcare professionals support spiritual wellbeing when self-building is no longer available?

Ethics & Humility

- Patients at the end of life are vulnerable
- Avoid solution giving & inserting our values

- People tend to die as they have lived
- Sit with the feelings of impotence

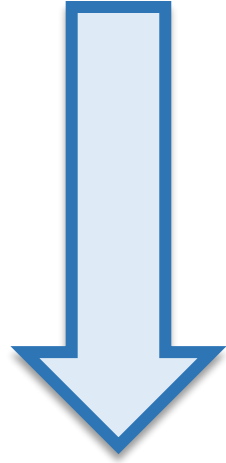
Stocktaking

What has my life meant as a whole?

What do I need to do to feel my life is complete?

Psychotherapy

- ✓ Dignity therapy
- ✓ Existential therapy
- ✓ Meaning-centred therapy



Transcending the Self

A more useful approach
at the end of life?

Love









Love

Nature

Generosity

Art

Music

Poetry

**Present
centredness**

**Contemplative
practices**

Mystery

Nimali

43 years old

Lives alone, parents abroad.

No children: 'never found the right person'

Computer game software developer

Metastatic bowel cancer. Progressed through all lines of chemo.

At home with multi-level bowel obstruction

Existential concerns:

- ❖ Have I wasted my life?
- ❖ Did I spend too much time on screens?
- ❖ Should I have had children?
- ❖ What's been the point of my life?
- ❖ What's the point of being alive now?





Your Challenge

In your current role, how could you support the spiritual welfare of Nimali?

Love

Nature

Generosity

Art

Music

Poetry

**Present
centredness**

**Contemplative
practices**

Mystery

**The Future of
Spiritual Care at
the End of Life**



Bleak?

Epidemic of loneliness & spiritual poverty

+

Worsening healthcare services

=

Increase in wish for hastened death

Psilocybin

🍄 Active ingredient in magic mushrooms

🍄 Schedule 1 Controlled Drug

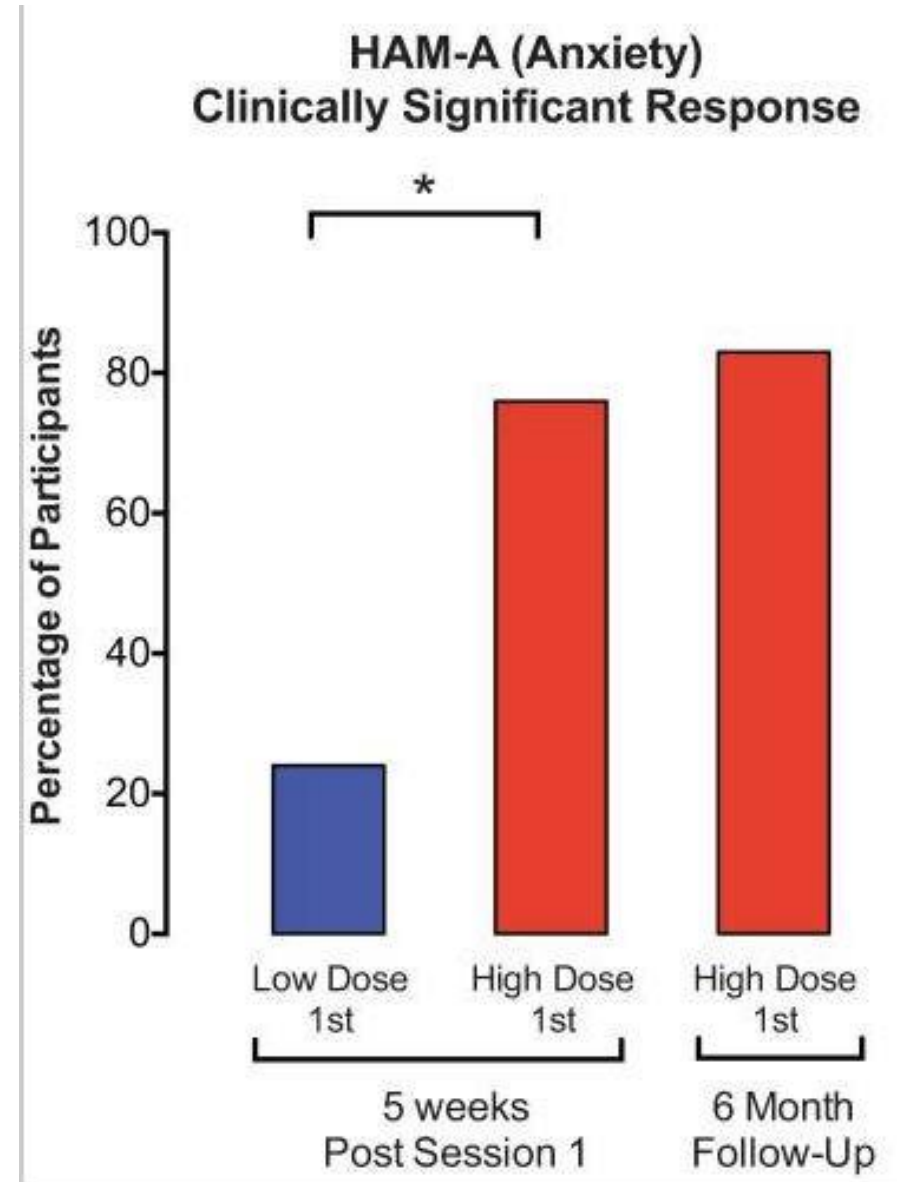
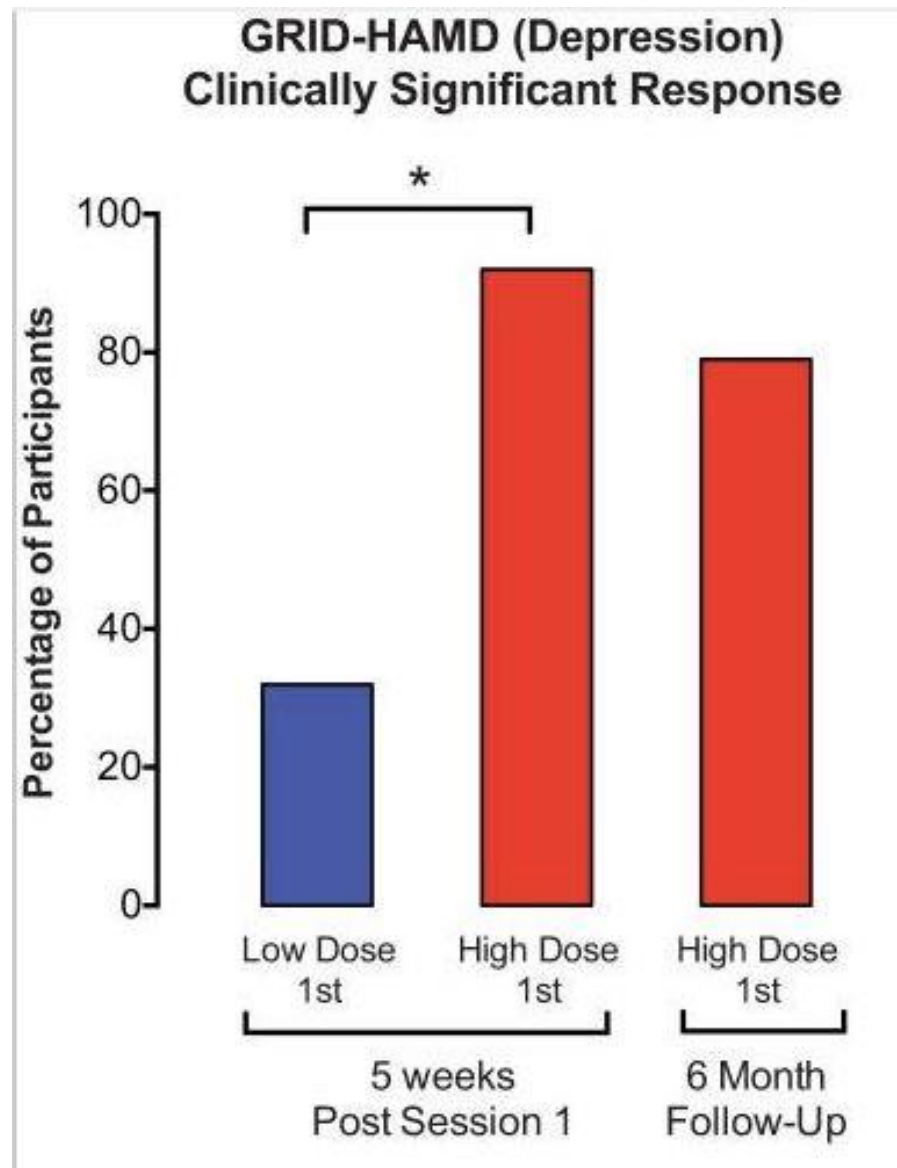
🍄 Psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy for existential distress

🍄 = chemically-assisted mystical experience

Transcendence
of time & space

Oceanic
Boundlessness

Visionary
restructuralization



Griffiths RR, et al. Psilocybin produces substantial and sustained decreases in depression and anxiety in patients with life-threatening cancer: A randomized double-blind trial. *Journal of Psychopharmacology*. 2016 Dec;30(12):1181-1197

Psilocybin in Hospices

An alternative to assisted dying?

Should we actively campaign for
compassionate access?



Further Reading

Death Awareness During Life

Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg & Tom Pyszczynski. *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*. 2015.

The Human Condition

Irvin Yalom. *Existential Psychotherapy*. 1980.

Nature Connection

Michael Kearney. *The Nest in the Stream*. 2018

Psilocybin

<https://www.drugscience.org.uk/psilocybin-for-existential-distress>