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A STUDY ON CORRELATES OF DEATH ANXIETY AMONG SENIOR CITIZENS

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the present study has been to assess death anxiety in the senior citizens. The theories of ageing have proved that death anxiety is a characteristic found along the age range commencing from fifties. The theories on aging have proved that death anxiety starts at late middle age. There are factors which are believed to influence on death anxiety are : socio economic status, educational level, nature of occupation and gender etc.. The sample of this study consists of 100 individuals selected from old age institutions and family dwellers. For the collection of data Death Anxiety Scale by Upinder Dhar, et al, was administered and the results were subjected to Statistical Analysis.

Results clearly revealed: (1) Educated senior citizens have higher death anxiety. (2) senior citizens staying with family members have higher death anxiety than those residing in old age home (3) There is a significant difference in the death anxiety between two age groups.

KEYWORDS: *Thanatophobia , Death anxiety, age and gender*

INTRODUCTION:

Traditionally old age has been perceived as the stage of life when decrements outweigh increments, when capacities and opportunities decline. The definition of old age depends on the characteristics of older people, who are at least as diverse in their physical and psychological attributes as their contemporaries. As one grows older, the physical changes accompanying aging, coupled with the aging and dying of family members and friends, force a person to face an event in life.

Death anxiety is present in our lives and affects each and every one of us in different ways. This phobia has been described as a feeling of dread, anxiety or fear at the thought of death, or anything to do with dying. This anxiety related to fear of death was termed thanatophobia by Sigmund Freud in 1915 in his seminal essays titled: Thoughts for the Time on War and Death. Freud believed it to be related to one's unconscious belief in one's own immortality. Jung in 1933 wrote that "Life is like a parable, starts at birth and ends at death. In other words, death

is part of the life-cycle.” So understanding the inevitability of dying is essential to our living. However, fear of death usually begins in middle age and by the time one reaches old age the process of dying is feared more than death itself.

Cross-sectional surveys of adults are fairly consistent in showing that fear of death is more common and of greater intensity during middle age than in older adulthood. (Bengston, Cuellar and Ragan, 1977; Gesser, Wong and Reker, 1988; Kalish and Reynolds, 1981). This fear, which has been identified as part of the midlife crisis is precipitated by the individual's awareness of his or her declining health and appearance coupled with unfulfilled dreams and unattained goals.

Death anxiety has been characterized as a conscious fear of death, a fear for the body after death, a fear of lost time, a fear of suffering, a fear of the unknown, and a fear of loneliness. In fact, Farley stated that it is: “A feeling of the dread, apprehension or solicitude (anxiety) when one thinks of the process of dying, or ceasing to ‘be’.” What actually affects the presence of death. Many variables have been proposed to influence death anxiety amongst them-religiosity, gender, psychological state and age. The psychological state is a known factor to cause higher death anxiety, especially in persons suffering from generalized anxiety disorder.

An event that can enhance this fear is the death of one's parents. Fear of death can be particularly strong when middle aged people, while they are living enjoyable, personally meaningful lives. become seriously ill. The death of friends and relatives, a lack of satisfying social roles, poor health, financial problems and increased dependency on others all contribute to feelings of having outlived one's usefulness and becoming resigned to the ending (Nelmeyer, 1988; Wass, 1979).

The majority of older people do not express fear of death, but some do. Butler and Lewis (1982) found, that although 55% of the elderly people whom they surveyed had realistically resolved their fear of death, 30% were overtly afraid of it, and the remaining 15% used defensive denial to cope with those fears.

Elderly people who are in poor physical or mental health, or who have a disabled spouse and dependent children or Important goals that they still expect to attain may have great concerns about death. The elderly are more likely to fear the process of dying rather than the state of death itself. Terminal illness usually increases fear of dying in the young, but it appears to have no such effect on the majority of older adults. Even though they express less fear of death, older people are certainly very aware of it. As one grows older, awareness that is prompted by the death of friends, relatives, and associates on an almost daily basis

Successful aging, from a psychological perspective refers to the maintenance of psychological adjustment and wellbeing across the full lifespan. Although older people are less satisfied than younger adults with their health are, they are more satisfied with most other aspects of their lives. Happiness is not correlated with age but appears to be a stable outcome of personality traits (Costa et. al., 1994). Therefore in the light of above theoretical framework, an attempt is made in the present study to assess/examine the extent to which death anxiety prevails in the sample of senior citizens of Bangalore city.

METHOD

Sample design:

The sample of the present study consists of 100 senior citizens of Bangalore City. The sample was selected randomly from both male and female senior citizens and from those who are living in the family and old age home and from the persons of different age groups. Attempts were made to categorize the sample based on levels of education too

Objectives:

1. To study the level of death anxiety of the elderly belonging to different educational levels.
2. To know the death anxiety in senior persons of two different age groups.
3. To study the differences in the death anxiety of sample living in old age home and in family.

Hypotheses:

1. There would be significant difference in the amount of anxiety between the age groups of the elderly.
2. There would be significant difference between the three groups of educational level.
3. Persons staying with family members have higher magnitude of anxiety than those staying in old age homes

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Death anxiety is a universal and fundamental phenomenon, which affects humans to various degrees. Klein (1948) described that actually death anxiety is one of the basic feelings of humanity and is the root to all anxiety. Humans are the only species who are aware of the limitations to life and impending death. Kübler Ross in her book *On Death and Dying* (1969) stated that the problem of death anxiety is more a fear of death and psychological adjustment with the dying process. She emphasized five different stages a person with end-of-life illness undergoes: denial that death is eminent, anger and resentment that others will live, bargaining to cope with death, depression when recognizing the inevitability of death and finally acceptance.

Table-1. Shows Mean, SD and value of level of death anxiety in senior citizens among two age group

Age group	Mean	SD	t-Value
Age group 1	11.44	8.58	2.14*
Age group 2	8.56	3.96	

*Significant at 0.05 level.

In age group-1 (60-70) the mean score is 11.44 and in age group-2 (70 and onwards) mean is 8.56. These mean values indicate that persons in age group-1 have more death anxiety in comparison with the persons in age group-2. When t test was applied, it was found that the obtained t value is significant (2.14). It indicates that there is a significant difference between the two age groups in the level of death anxiety. This may be because as one gets older, he/she experiences the decline in the body, health and appearance. This makes to think that death is near.

This awareness of death makes one to have less anxiety toward death. As the physical deterioration of the body becomes more and more apparent, annoying and debilitating the physical and psychological distance from death diminishes. This forces to confront the reality of death and thus people are better able to cope with fear of it (Kalish 1985). However, the sample in age group-2 exhibited less anxiety. This is because the age difference between two-sample group is remarkably high. Butler and Lewis (1982) in their survey found that although 55% of the elderly had realistically resolved their fear of death, 30% were overtly afraid of it, and remaining 15% used defensive denial to cope with fear.

Table -2 Shows Mean, SD and value of level of death anxiety in senior citizens who lives with family and old age home

Place of Living	Mean	SD	t- value
Family	12	4.54	5.3**
Old age home	7.84	3.04	

** Significant at 0.01 level.

Table-2 shows Mean, SD and t-value of death anxiety of senior citizens who are living family and of those who are living in old age homes. The mean value of persons living in family is 12 and in the old age homes is 7.84 respectively. The t value is significant at 0.01 level of significance. This show and there is a significant difference in death anxiety between the persons living with the family members than persons living in old age home. Because persons, play family have more attachments and co than those of old age or they have more roles to play in the family matters being older persons in the family. They have to look after and guide the young generation. Whereas the persons living in old age homes do not have all these responsibilities. They don't have any attachments. In addition, there is a need to understand whether the problem of death anxiety is anxiety about death or anxiety about the process of dying.

Table-3. Shows Mean, SD and value of level of death anxiety in senior citizens in different educational status

Educational status	Mean	SD	t- value
Educated	12.86	8.12	3.37**
Literate	8.0	2.48	0.5 (NS)
Illiterate	8.4	3.68	3.90**

**Significant at 0.01 level.

Table-3 shows Mean, SD and value of death anxiety of educated, literate and illiterate senior persons. The mean values of educated and literate senior persons is 12.86 and 8.12. The mean value of the educated persons is more than the literate, that indicates that the educated persons have more death anxiety than the literate persons do. The t-value (3.37) shows that there is a significant difference between educated and literate persons in their death anxiety. The educated persons after retirement have set many goals to attain. They have various diseases of old age and their adverse effect on health. All this knowledge made them have fear of death. Life experiences with death may also influence attitudes about death and dying and contribute to the levels of death anxiety.

The Mean value of literate and illiterate is 8.0 and 2.48 respectively. The t value indicates there is no significant difference between literate and illiterate in the level of death anxiety. The mean of educated and illiterate is 12.86 and 8.4 respectively. The t value (3.90) is significant, which reveals that there is a significant difference between educated and illiterate persons in the level of death anxiety. The mean score indicates that the educated persons more death anxiety in comparison with illiterates. Because illiterate persons don't have particular job and earn money by working in field, doing own business or serving somebody etc. They work until they have strength in their body. They don't bother much future life. This made them to have less fear of death. On the contrary an educated person plans his life, anticipates future and thus experiences stress that causes anxiety. Moreover, the educated have awareness of health hazards and risks involved and thus are more anxious about death.

CONCLUSIONS

1. There is a significant difference in the death anxiety between the two age groups.
2. There is a significant difference between elderly persons residing with family members and in old age homes.
3. The educated and illiterate senior citizens have significantly higher death anxiety than those of literate.

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