Death Anxiety and Spirituality Across The Lifespan: Factors and Relationships Amidst COVID-19

Researcher: Regan Thompson

Supervisor: Dr. Lesley Jessiman

University of the Fraser Valley

INTRODUCTION

- Death is inevitable, and although dying is a natural part of life, being aware and accepting of death can be very difficult.
- **Death anxiety:** one's fear of death or the process of dying, which can lead to a preoccupation with death (Greene, 2019).
- Death anxiety can lead to negative psychological and physical effects such as general anxiety, depression, insomnia, low self-confidence, loneliness, physical discomfort, and pain (Rasmussen & Johnson, 1994; Taghipour et al., 2017).
- **Spirituality:** an individual practice involving belief in an afterlife and living a meaningful life without following or belonging to a specific religion (Rasmussen & Johnson, 1994) .
- Research has suggested that there is a negative relationship between death anxiety and spirituality (Rasmussen & Johnson, 1994), a negative relationship between death anxiety and age (Russac et al., 2007), and a positive relationship between spirituality and age (Wink & Dillon, 2002).
- There is, however, a gap in the literature as to how these constructs change across the lifespan.
- The aim of this study was therefore to examine the relationships between death anxiety, spirituality, and age amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

- The sample consisted of 308 participants recruited from the UFV SONA system, social media, and local community groups.
- The sample consisted of 124 young adults (aged 19-40), 59 middle-aged adults (aged 41-59), and 76 older adults (aged 60+).

Materials & Procedure

The Collett-Lester Fear of Death Scale 3.0 (CLFD; Lester & Abdel-Khalek, 2003) is a measure of death anxiety.

- The CLFD provides an overall death anxiety score and four subscale scores (Fear of Death of Self, Fear of Death of Others, Fear of Dying of Self, and Fear of Dying of Others).

The Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS; Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982) is a measure of spirituality.

- The SWBS provides an overall spirituality score and two subscale scores (Religious Well-Being and Existential Well-Being).

The Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS; Sheikh & Yesavage, 1986) is a measure of depression in older adults. Some items were revised for the younger adult participants. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic some items were also revised.

The UCLA Loneliness Scale Version 3 (UCLA-3; Russell, 1996) is a measure of loneliness. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic some items were also revised.

Open-ended questions were created for the current study, and asked participants about their spiritual upbringing, if their careers involved death, if they have experienced a recent loss, and the impacts of COVID-19 on their death anxiety and spirituality.

RESULTS

Correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age in Years	—										
2. Total Death Anxiety	-.49**	—									
3. Fear of Own Death	-.45**	.87**	—								
4. Fear of Own Dying	-.31**	.87**	.73**	—							
5. Fear of Others' Death	-.59**	.86**	.64**	.65**	—						
6. Fear of Others' Dying	-.40**	.87**	.65**	.67**	.78**	—					
7. Total Spirituality	.84	-.24**	-.19**	-.26**	-.22**	-.20**	—				
8. Religious Well-Being	-.08	-.06	-.04	-.10	-.04	-.04	.86**	—			
9. Existential Well-Being	.27**	-.41**	-.33**	-.36**	-.40**	-.35**	.62**	.20**	—		
10. Depression	-.49**	.46**	.37**	.35**	.50**	.40**	-.37**	-.07	-.69**	—	
11. Loneliness	-.24**	.36**	.28**	.31**	.38**	.31**	-.34**	-.07	-.64**	.64**	—

Note. $N = 308$, $^{**}p < 0.01$.

Figure 1: Interitem Pearson's correlations for Death Anxiety, Spirituality, Depression, and Loneliness.

Significant Person's correlations were found between death anxiety, spirituality, age, depression, and loneliness.

Death anxiety was found to decrease with increasing age, in addition to one's fear of their own death and own dying, as well as one's fear of the death and dying of others. It was also found that depression and loneliness, decreased with age. Existential well-being also increased with age while religious well-being did not.

Death anxiety, depression, and loneliness were also found to decrease with increasing spirituality. Spirituality decreased one's fear of their own death and own dying, and one's fear of the death and dying of others. Death anxiety and its subscales were also found to decrease with increasing existential well-being, although not religious well-being.

Analyses of Variance (ANOVA)

One-way ANOVAs were performed to examine the effects of age and religious affiliation on death anxiety, spirituality, depression, and loneliness.

Mean total death anxiety scores for each age group are shown in Figure 2. Analyses revealed a main effect of age on total death anxiety, each death anxiety subscale, existential well being, depression, and loneliness ($p<.01$). Tukey HSD tests were performed and found the following significant differences ($p<.01$):

- Mean total death anxiety was greater in young adults compared to middle-aged and older adults, and was greater in middle-aged adults compared to older adults.
- Young adults were more fearful of their own death, others' death, and others' dying compared to both middle-aged adults and older adults, and middle-aged adults were more fearful of their own death, their own dying, others' death, and others' dying than older adults. Young adults were also more fearful of their own dying compared to older adults.
- Mean existential well-being was higher in older adults than young adults.
- Mean depression was higher in young adults compared to the middle-aged adults and older adults. Middle-aged adults had higher mean depression scores than older adults.
- Mean loneliness was higher in young adults in comparison to older adults.

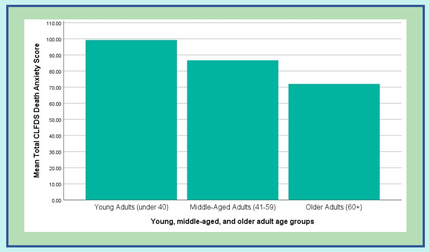


Figure 2: Mean total death anxiety scores for young adults, middle-aged adults, and older adults.

Mean fear of others' death scores for religions that celebrate death (Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, Indigenous Spirituality) or fear death (Catholic, Christian, Muslim, Atheist, No Religion) are shown in Figure 3. Analyses revealed main effects on the fear of others' death and existential well-being subscales ($p<.05$). Tukey HSD tests found ($p<.05$):

- Religions that celebrate death had significantly higher fear of others' death scores
- Religions that fear death has significantly higher existential well-being scores

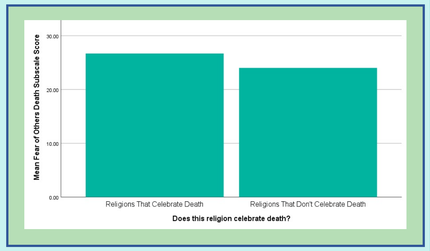


Figure 3: Mean scores on the fear of others' death subscale for religions that celebrate and fear death.

Mean total death anxiety scores for No Religion/Atheists, Sikhs/Hindus, Catholics, and Christians are shown in Figure 4. Analyses revealed main effects on each dependent variable ($p<.05$). Tukey HSD tests found the following significant differences ($p<.05$):

- Mean total death anxiety was greater in Sikhs/Hindus compared to No Religion/Atheists and Christians. Catholics also had higher total death anxiety scores compared to Christians.
- Sikhs/Hindus and Catholics were more fearful of their own death in comparison to No Religion/Atheists and Christians.
- Catholics were more fearful of their own dying compared to Christians.
- Sikhs/Hindus were more fearful of others' death compared to No Religion/Atheists and Christians.
- Catholics and Sikhs/Hindus more fearful of others' dying in comparison to Christians.
- Mean spirituality was higher in Sikhs/Hindus, Catholics, and Christians compared to No Religion/Atheists. Mean spirituality was higher in Christians in comparison to Sikhs/Hindus.
- Mean religious well-being was higher in Sikhs/Hindus, Catholics, and Christians in comparison to No Religion/Atheists.
- Mean existential well-being was higher in No Religion/Atheists and Christians compared to Sikhs/Hindus.
- Mean depression was higher in Sikhs/Hindus in comparison to Christians.

Figure 4: Mean total death anxiety scores for Religion/Atheists, Sikhs/Hindus, Catholics, and Christians.

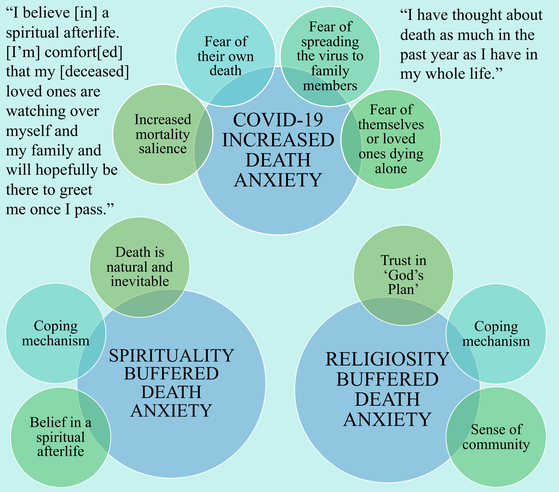
Note: Although Catholicism is recognized as a branch of Christianity, the two groups were analyzed as separate categories due to their significant differences in scores on death anxiety and existential well-being.

Qualitative: Thematic Analysis

Three themes emerged as to how COVID-19 impacted participants' death anxiety and spirituality.

"I believe [in] a spiritual afterlife. [I'm] comfort[ed] that my [deceased] loved ones are watching over myself and my family and will hopefully be there to greet me once I pass."

"I have thought about death as much in the past year as I have in my whole life."



"[The] pandemic has strengthened my faith and although death is very much a real thing, it does not scare me. If I die from COVID, then that's what God planned, and if not, then let it be so."

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

- Death anxiety decreased with increasing spirituality and age, and spirituality and religiosity helped to buffer heightened death anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Death anxiety, spirituality, and religiosity was higher in Sikhs/Hindus and Catholics in comparison to Christians and No Religion/Atheists. Existential well-being was higher in Christians and No Religion/Atheists, however, suggesting that spirituality is a more effective buffer for death anxiety compared to religiosity.
- The results of this study indicate that spirituality may help buffer death anxiety and its effects. Thus, healthcare workers and the bereaved may benefit from workshops and courses designed to increase one's spirituality.
- The findings of the current study can contribute to research on COVID-19 by showing how the pandemic has affected participants' death anxiety and spirituality.

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