
We're all afraid to die, even the young and faithful

Fears of death and dying, sometimes called “death anxiety,” “thanatophobia,” or “mortality salience,” have long been studied in psychology and other fields. The topic is important and interesting because prior studies have shown death anxiety to be linked to many human behaviors, ranging from more obvious and positive reactions (e.g., seeking safety, precaution, and healthy habits) to some surprising and less helpful reactions (e.g., violence, hoarding, and prejudice). While you might assume that end-of-life concerns are only relevant for the terminally ill or geriatric folks, evidence abounds that death anxiety is nearly universal. In fact, one popular approach in our field today, called *Terror Management Theory*, argues that the majority of our pursuits in life are specifically designed to keep death anxiety out of mind by building up self-esteem and burying morbid thoughts deep within the subconscious.

In this study, we chose to investigate death anxiety in a group called “emerging adults” (i.e., those between ages 18 and 29 who have not yet fully launched into the independence of adulthood by societal standards), because, although death is likely far off for these individuals, they often lack the stability and life-structure to mentally defend against mortality concerns. To collect information, we anonymously surveyed over 700 emerging adults using established psychological instruments which measure demographics, religiosity, spirituality, mental health, and death anxiety. The last of those was specifically assessed using a test called the *Revised Livingston-Zimet Death Anxiety Scale* (RLZDAS). Our project aimed to find out the following:

- 1) Are emerging adults anxious about dying, and if so, to what degree?
- 2) Is death anxiety predictable using other factors like gender, age, or income?
- 3) How is the RLZDAS structured; does death anxiety have numerous parts?
- 4) Will religious faith or spirituality protect against death anxiety?
- 5) Does death anxiety relate to mental health concerns?

Our findings were fascinating and somewhat contradictory to prior studies. First, we found that yes—emerging adults do indeed have significant fears about death and dying, in that they scored on average at least half of the points possible on the death anxiety test. Secondly, we found that death anxiety did not differ based on age, sex, income, race, or other demographic variables in our sample, thus indicating that this issue is relatively universal across emerging adults. Third, we used an advanced statistical procedure to examine sub-parts of death anxiety on the RLZDAS, and found that three main themes arose: “cognitive” death anxiety which dealt with worrisome morbid thoughts, “affective” death anxiety which dealt with negative morbid emotions, and “repression” which dealt with attempts to deny/avoid the topic. Fourth, and perhaps most interestingly, we found that neither strength of religious faith nor sense of spirituality seemed to lessen death anxiety. Fifth and finally, we found that mental health problems (i.e., various symptoms of distress and mental disorder) were strongly associated with death anxiety scores, which lends evidence to the popular theory that beneath most of our specific troubles is a core fear of death.

Ultimately, the findings from our study tell us that fears of death and dying are relatively universal in young adults; that those fears are not meaningfully linked to demographic, religious, or spiritual variability from person to person; and that those fears are indeed linked to mental health problems. Given these observations, we argue that mental health clinicians should infuse existential components into their treatments (i.e., be sure to address the ways that death anxiety may inform clients' mental health struggles). Many people, even the young and faithful, struggle with the idea of being temporary—but death needs to be reframed as a normal part of life, not a disturbing source of mental suffering.

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