



Death Anxiety and Resilience in Elderly

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Abstract

Old age is characterized by a gradual decline in both the physical and mental capacities of an individual, which are also accompanied by significant developmental transitions such as loss of autonomy, retirement and death of family and friends. These changes are also thought to contribute to their death anxiety and resilience levels, in addition. The levels of death anxiety and resilience among old age people has been studied. 60 samples were taken from the age group of 65-75 years (30 males and 30 females) from the urban areas of Delhi. Fear of Personal Death Scale by Dr. M. Rajamanickam (1999) and Resilience Scale by Dr Vijaya Lakshmi and Dr Shruti Narain (2017) were used to evaluate death anxiety and resilience respectively among the elderly. Results indicate low fear or absence of fear of personal death in old age (Mean=101.72, SD=15.77), with average levels of resilience (Mean=107.12, SD=8.56). The levels of death anxiety have been found to have a negative correlation with the fear of personal death thus indicating that these variables are inversely correlated in old age persons. No significant gender difference has been found among old age males and females. The findings of the study may be extended to developing greater acceptance in old age related to the concept of death and building a more supportive environment for the aged.

Keywords: old age, death, death anxiety, resilience, development, ageing

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Introduction

Death is defined as the irreversible and permanent cessation of all vital functions in an organism [1]. It is generally considered as the end of life that eventually takes place in all living organisms [2]. Having some anxiety about death is considered as a normal phenomenon, common to most people. For some people, however, thinking about their own death or the process of dying can cause intense anxiety and fear, commonly referred to as thanatophobia [3]. Death anxiety is a conscious or unconscious psychological state resulting from a defense mechanism that can be triggered when people feel threatened by death [4]. Death anxiety is a common phenomenon among most people, although older adults may be more prone to anxiety and fear when encountering death-related events compared to their younger counterparts [5].

According to American Psychological Association (APA), resilience refers to both the

process and outcome of successfully adapting to challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioural flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands [6]. Resilience may be simply described as the ability to withstand adversity and bounce back from difficult life events [7]. People with resilience do not experience less distress or grief as compared to other people, rather, they use healthy coping skills to handle such stressors in ways that foster strength and growth, often emerging stronger than they were before [8]. Signs of resilience include the ability to regulate their emotions, a sense of confidence and control, healthy and effective coping skills, and effectively relying on social support when required [8]. Research indicates that although some people may be naturally resilient in the face of challenges, resilience tends to be the result of a complex series of internal and external characteristics, which includes genetics, physical and mental fitness, and the individual's environment and social support

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systems [8,9]. It is also believed that skills related to higher resilience can be learnt and acquired [6]. Studies have shown that resilience does not change through the process of ageing and that older adults are considered to be as resilient as their younger counterparts [10].

Although few, there are notable studies focusing on death anxiety among elderly. Research conducted by Sinoff, G. (2017) found that death anxiety tends to be usually absent among the elderly [11]. Similar findings were reported by Iverach, L. et al (2014) who found that older people do not report higher death anxiety than younger people [12]. Fortner, V. et al (1999) also reported that death anxiety tends to decline as age progresses and stabilizes during the final decades of life [13].

People belonging to the old age group have been found to exhibit high resilience levels, as outlined in the study by Silva Junior, E.G. et al (2019) [14]. Similar findings were reported by Lamond, A.J. et al (2008), Hardy, S.E. et al (2004), and Rodrigues, F. R., & Tavares, D. M. D. S. (2021) who reported that older adults demonstrated high levels of resilience [15, 16, 17].

In order to understand the relationship between death anxiety and resilience among old age people, Moetamedi, A. (2015), Bitarafan, L. (2018) and Gazo, A. M., & ABood, M. H. (2020) conducted respective studies in which they found a negative significant correlation between resilience and death anxiety among elderly people [18, 19, 20].

So, the purpose of the present study is to assess death anxiety and resilience in elderly.

Method

Objectives

- To assess the level of death anxiety among old age people
- To evaluate the resilience among elderly
- To assess the relationship between death anxiety and resilience among old age persons

Hypotheses

- There will be low level of death anxiety among old age people
- There will be high resilience among elderly

- There will be a significant relationship between death anxiety and resilience among old age persons

Sample

- The total sample size for the current study was 60 (N=60), belonging to the old age group (65-75 years).
- Equal number of male and female subjects were chosen.
- Sampling design was purposive sampling.

- Inclusion Criteria -

- o Persons belonging to old age (65-75 years)
- o Both males and females
- o Persons who can read and write

- Exclusion Criteria -

- o Persons younger than 65 years
- o Persons older than 75 years
- o Persons who are unwilling to participate
- o Persons who are unable to read and write
- o Persons having debilitating physical and mental illness

Tools

- Fear of Personal Death Scale developed by Dr. M. Rajamanickam (1999) was used to measure the strength of fear of their own death among old age people. The scale consists of 40 items, requiring a response on a 5-point scale. These items measure the fear of personal death across 7 dimensions.
- The resilience among old age subjects was measured using Resilience Scale by Dr Vijaya Lakshmi and Dr Shruti Narain (2017). The scale consists of 30 items which require responses on a 5-point scale. These items measure resilience across 4 dimensions.

Procedure -

The subjects were made to feel comfortable and rapport formation was done with each participant before the questionnaire was given out to them. They were explained about the procedure and confidentiality was ensured. A consent for participation was also sought by the subjects. The questionnaires were then handed out to them to respond to them.

Statistical Tools

- Mean
- Standard Deviation
- Correlation



- t-test

Results and Discussion

Table 1 – Tabular representation of Mean and Standard Deviation of Males and Females on Death Anxiety

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Males	101.03	16.66
Females	102.4	15.10
Overall	101.72	15.77

Table 2 – Tabular representation of Mean and Standard Deviation of Males and Females on Resilience

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Males	109.17	7.43
Females	105.07	9.23
Overall	107.12	8.56

Table 3 – Tabular representation of correlation between Death Anxiety and Resilience

	Males	Females	Overall
Correlation	-0.052	-0.137	-0.103

Table 4 – Tabular representation of comparison between Means in Males and Females on Death Anxiety and Resilience

	Death Anxiety	Resilience
p-value	0.75	0.064
Significance	Not significant	Not Significant

$\alpha = 0.05$

Discussion

The results show the absence of death anxiety in 51.67% respondents belonging to old age group (Mean=101.72, SD=15.77). Marginally higher levels of death anxiety have been reported in old age females (Mean=102.4), in comparison to old age males (Mean=101.03). Elderly females have been found to exhibit more stable patterns related to death anxiety (SD=15.10) in comparison to old age males (SD=16.66). The difference in mean values of death anxiety between old age males and females has not been found to be statistically significant ($p=0.75$), and hence it may be said that the difference in mean values is due to a chance factor.

Previous findings by Iverach, L. et al (2014) and Sinoff, G. (2017) that old age persons do not report significant death anxiety are confirmed through the present study, wherein, 51% of respondents reported experiencing no death anxiety [11,12]. Iverach, L. et al, in addition, also reported that older people do not report

typically higher death anxiety than their younger counterparts. The finding that there does not exist significant gender difference with respect to death anxiety in elderly persons is also confirmatory of previous findings by Xie, Y. & Liu, B. (2022), Lockhart, L.K. et al (2001) and Azeem, F. & Naz, M.A. (2015) who reported that both elderly men and women exhibit equal levels of death anxiety [21,22,23]. Assari, S. & Lankarani, M.M. (2016) reported that although gender did not have any direct significant effects on death anxiety, it could influence other correlates of death anxiety, which could be explanatory of high variability among the sample population [24]. The respondents in the current study reported absence of or low levels of death anxiety, which may be contributed to by other psychosocial factors as well. Also, the levels of death anxiety were found to be similar in both males and females.

The current findings report the presence of average levels of resilience among old age people 95%) (Mean=107.12, SD=8.56). Old age males obtained a higher mean score in resilience levels (Mean=109.17) as compared to old age females (Mean=105.07). Elderly males have also been found to exhibit more stable patterns with respect to resilience (SD=7.43) in comparison to elderly females (SD=9.23). The difference in mean values of resilience between elderly males and females has not been found statistically significant ($p=0.064$) and it may be concluded that the difference in mean scores may be due to a chance factor.

The finding of average levels of resilience contradicts the findings of previous studies by Silva Junior, E.G. et al (2019) Lamond, A.J. et al (2008), Hardy, S.E. et al (2004), and Rodrigues, F. R., & Tavares, D. M. D. S. (2021) who reported that older adults demonstrated high levels of resilience [14,15,16,17]. The contradictions may be attributed to the presence, or absence of, other psychosocial factors among the sample population including their physical and cognitive health status, family environment and social support, among others. Although the study is in agreement with the findings by Izadi-Avanji, F. S. (2017) who also reported moderate levels of resilience among older adults [25]. The current research finding that gender does not have any significant influence over resilience levels among the elderly confirms previous



findings by Azeem, F. & Naz, M.A. (2015), which stated that gender does not have a major influence over resilience levels in old age [23]. Gupta, S. & Singh, A. (2020) also reported that gender did not have a significant relationship with resilience [26].

The results of the present study suggested a weak negative correlation between the levels of death anxiety and resilience ($r_{\text{overall}} = -0.103$, $r_{\text{males}} = -0.052$, $r_{\text{females}} = -0.137$), thus indicating that these variables are inversely correlated with each other. The current findings are in agreement with previous findings by Moeta-medi, A. (2015), Bitarafan, L. (2018) and Gazo, A. M., & ABood, M. H. (2020), with respect to an inverse relationship between death anxiety and resilience, although it contradicts their findings that there exists a significant negative correlation between the variables [18,19,20]. The contradiction may be attributed to other psychosocial factors in the respondents' environment.

The overall findings suggest that old age people experience absence of, or low levels of, death anxiety and average levels of resilience, and that these two variables have a weak negative correlation with one another. It has also been found that gender does not significantly affect death anxiety and resilience among older adults.

Conclusion

The objective of the present study was to assess the death anxiety and resilience among old age people. From the analysis it has been found that the hypotheses that there will be low level of death anxiety among old age people has been found to be true as 51.67% of the sample population has been found to exhibit no death anxiety whereas 49.33% has been found to be indifferent to the concept of death. Hence the alternate hypothesis has been accepted.

The second hypothesis that there will be high resilience among elderly has been found to be untrue as elderly in the sample population were found to exhibit average levels of resilience, which may be attributed to a change in psychosocial factors experienced by the sample population. Hence, the alternate hypothesis has been rejected and the null hypothesis has been accepted in this case.

In case of the third hypothesis that there will be a significant relationship between death anxiety and resilience among old age persons, it has not been found to be true since the present study reported a weak negative correlation between the variables as opposed to a significant negative correlation as outlined in previous studies. Hence, the alternate hypothesis has been rejected and the null hypothesis has been accepted in this case.

From the overall discussion, it can be concluded that although there exists a negative relationship between death anxiety and resilience among older adults, the relationship was not significant enough in the respondent population, and that the relationship is similar for all elderly irrespective of their gender in the present study. So, the title of the present study is apt and justified.

Suggestions:

- This study helps in developing a specific profile for old age persons that would assist in better understanding of geriatric population.
- The findings of the study may aid in creating effective intervention programs for the aged.
- The findings of the present study may be utilized to improve the mental health and thereby enhance the life span of the elderly at the very onset of old age.

Limitations:

- This study may be conducted with a larger and geographically spread-out sample for a more comprehensive understanding of the elderly population.
- Other correlates of death anxiety and resilience may be included in future studies.

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