

## A Study on Death Anxiety and Its Impact on the Mental Health of Students

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### ABSTRACT

Competitive exams are a gateway to prestigious careers but often impose immense psychological pressure on students. This study examines the impact of death anxiety on mental health among students preparing for competitive exams. Using a sample of 120 college students from Parbhani, Maharashtra (60 males and 60 females; age range: 20-24), the study employed the Death Anxiety Scale (DAS) and Mental Health Inventory (MHI) to assess the relationship between death anxiety and various mental health dimensions, including emotional stability, overall adjustment, autonomy, security-insecurity, self-concept, and intelligence. Results revealed that students with high death anxiety scored significantly lower on emotional stability ( $M = 8.09$ ), overall adjustment ( $M = 27.46$ ), autonomy ( $M = 7.09$ ), self-concept ( $M = 8.07$ ), and intelligence ( $M = 20.37$ ) compared to their low-death-anxiety counterparts. Conversely, students with high death anxiety reported greater insecurity ( $M = 12.74$ ). The findings indicate that heightened death anxiety exacerbates emotional distress, impairs cognitive functioning, and undermines self-esteem, leading to reduced overall mental health. This highlights the need for tailored interventions, such as mindfulness and cognitive-behavioral therapy, to help students manage existential concerns and improve mental health outcomes.

**Keywords:** *Death anxiety, mental health, competitive exams, emotional stability, autonomy, self-concept, cognitive functioning, psychological distress, academic stress, existential concerns*

Competitive exams are considered gateways to prestigious careers, but they often bring immense pressure on students. This pressure, coupled with existential concerns such as fear of failure or uncertainty about the future, can give rise to death anxiety. Death anxiety, defined as the apprehension and fear surrounding one's mortality (Abdel-Khalek, 2005), has been linked to various psychological challenges, including anxiety, depression, and stress. The psychological toll of death anxiety can be particularly acute for students preparing for competitive exams, as they often navigate high expectations, social pressures, and self-imposed standards of excellence (Sharma & Kaur, 2020).

In the Indian context, competitive exams such as the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) Civil Services Examination, Joint Entrance Examination (JEE), and National

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## **A Study on Death Anxiety and Its Impact on the Mental Health of Students**

Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) are known for their rigor and the intense preparation they demand. For students preparing for these exams, death anxiety can compound the psychological burden, potentially undermining their mental health and academic performance (Bhatia & Mohan, 2019). This study seeks to explore the relationship between death anxiety and mental health in this unique population, shedding light on the underlying mechanisms that exacerbate mental health challenges in such high-stress environments.

### **Death Anxiety: Conceptual Overview**

Death anxiety is a multidimensional construct encompassing fear of dying, fear of the unknown, and existential dread (Tomer & Eliason, 1996). Scholars have argued that death anxiety is an innate human experience, shaped by cultural, social, and individual factors (Becker, 1973). Individuals experiencing high levels of death anxiety often report intrusive thoughts, heightened emotional distress, and an impaired ability to cope with daily stressors (Iverach et al., 2014).

### **Death Anxiety in Academic Contexts**

Research suggests that death anxiety can affect students in academic settings, particularly those engaged in high-stakes preparation. According to Solomon et al. (1991), Terror Management Theory (TMT) posits that individuals manage death anxiety by pursuing symbolic achievements, such as academic success, to gain a sense of immortality. However, when these goals become unattainable, death anxiety may intensify, leading to negative mental health outcomes.

### **Mental Health Challenges among Competitive Exam Students**

Competitive exams are a significant source of stress for students, often leading to anxiety, depression, and burnout. Studies have found that students preparing for such exams report higher levels of psychological distress compared to their peers in non-competitive academic environments (Kumari et al., 2020). Factors such as time constraints, fear of failure, and societal expectations can create an environment where mental health deteriorates rapidly (Mishra & Shukla, 2018).

### **Link Between Death Anxiety and Mental Health**

Several studies have highlighted the correlation between death anxiety and mental health challenges. For instance, Abdel-Khalek (2005) found that individuals with high levels of death anxiety are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Similarly, Iverach et al. (2014) argued that death anxiety acts as a transdiagnostic factor, influencing various mental health disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder. In the context of students, death anxiety may manifest as fear of academic failure, concern for the future, or an existential crisis (Sharma et al., 2021).

### **Cultural and Social Factors in Death Anxiety**

Cultural and social contexts play a significant role in shaping death anxiety. In collectivist societies like India, where familial and societal expectations heavily influence academic decisions, the fear of disappointing others may exacerbate death anxiety (Bhatia & Mohan, 2019). Furthermore, religious and spiritual beliefs may either mitigate or amplify death anxiety, depending on individual interpretations of mortality (Routledge & Vess, 2019).

### **Coping Mechanisms and Interventions**

Students often employ coping mechanisms to manage the dual burden of death anxiety and academic stress. Common strategies include avoidance, emotional regulation, and seeking

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social support (Lykins et al., 2007). Interventions such as mindfulness, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), and existential counseling have shown promise in reducing death anxiety and improving mental health outcomes (Menzies & Dar-Nimrod, 2017). These approaches may be particularly relevant for competitive exam students, as they address both the psychological and existential dimensions of their distress.

### **Objectives**

To investigate the impact of death anxiety on mental health (Emotional Stability (ES), overall adjustment (OA), Autonomy (AY), Security-Insecurity (SI), Self-Concept (SC), and Intelligence) among students preparing for competitive exams.

### **Hypotheses**

There will be no significant difference between high and low death anxiety (Emotional Stability (ES), Over-all Adjustment (OA), Autonomy (AY), Security-Insecurity (SI), Self-Concept (SC), and Intelligence) between students preparing for competitive exam.

### **Sample**

For this research, the researcher selected 120 college students from Parbhani City in Maharashtra State. The sample consisted of 60 male students and 60 female students. The participants' age range was between 20 and 24, with a mean age of 21.30 and a standard deviation of 3.07. Non-probability purposive sampling was employed for this study.

### **Research Tools**

#### **1. Death Anxiety Scale (DAS) Thakur & Thakur, 1984**

This scale consists of 16 items. Originally developed in Hindi, it was translated into English using a forward-backward procedure. Respondents had five options to choose from for each item: "Absolutely true," "True," "Uncertain," "False," and "Absolutely false."

The minimum and maximum possible scores on the scale are 16 and 80, respectively, with higher scores indicating greater death anxiety. The internal consistency reliability coefficient, calculated using the Kuder-Richardson formula on a sample of 206 Indians of both genders, was 0.78. The test-retest reliability, measured over a 12-week interval (N = 65), was found to be 0.86.

For validation, this scale was correlated with Templer's Death Anxiety Scale ( $r = 0.75$ ) and McMordie's Scale ( $r = 0.78$ ) in a sample of 174 Indians.

#### **2. Mental Health Inventory (MHI):**

The Mental Health Inventory was developed by Dr. Jagdish and Dr. A.K. Srivastav in 1983. It consists of 56 items, each offering four response options: 1. Almost always true, 2. Sometimes true, 3. Rarely true, and 4. Almost never true. The reliability of the inventory was assessed using the split-half method with an odd-even procedure, resulting in an overall mental health reliability coefficient of .73. Additionally, the construct validity of the inventory was evaluated by calculating the coefficient of correlation between scores on the mental health inventory and the General Health Questionnaire (Goldbeig, 1978), which yielded a correlation coefficient of .54.

### **Variable**

- **Independent variable**

- 1. Level of Death Anxiety** a) High b) Low

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- **Dependent Variable**

1. **Mental Health**

- i) Emotional Stability (ES)
- ii) Over-all Adjustment (OA)
- iii) Autonomy (AY)
- iv) Security-Insecurity (SI)
- v) Self-Concept (SC)
- vi) Intelligence (G)

### *Statistical Analysis*

't' test was used for the present study.

## STATISTICAL INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSIONS

**Table No. 01 Mean, standard deviation, and 't' value among students with high and low death anxiety preparing for competitive exams on the dimension of mental health.**

MH Factors	Level of Death Anxiety				df	t value
	Low Death Anxiety		High Death Anxiety			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Emotional Stability	11.45	3.25	8.09	3.78	118	5.22**
Over-all Adjustment	34.25	4.58	27.46	4.19	118	8.47**
Autonomy	12.08	3.29	7.09	2.97	118	8.72**
Security-Insecurity	8.09	3.04	12.74	4.12	118	7.03**
Self-Concept	11.87	3.74	8.07	3.90	118	5.44**
Intelligence	23.69	3.55	20.37	4.10	118	4.74**
<b>Mental Health</b>	101.43	21.45	83.82	23.06	118	4.33**

**Significant at 0.01\*\* = 2.62, 0.05\* = 1.98**

The findings reveal a significant difference in emotional stability between students with low and high death anxiety. Students with low death anxiety reported a higher mean score (M = 11.45, SD = 3.25) compared to students with high death anxiety (M = 8.09, SD = 3.78). The computed t-value (t = 5.22, p < 0.01) indicates a statistically significant difference, suggesting that students with high death anxiety experience greater emotional instability. These results align with previous research indicating that death anxiety is positively correlated with emotional distress and psychological vulnerability (Iverach et al., 2014).

A highly significant difference was also observed in the overall adjustment scores of students. The mean adjustment score for students with low death anxiety (M = 34.25, SD = 4.58) was notably higher than that of students with high death anxiety (M = 27.46, SD = 4.19). The obtained t-value (t = 8.47, p < 0.01) suggests that students experiencing high death anxiety struggle with adjustment issues, possibly due to heightened stress, fear of failure, and existential concerns. This supports the notion that death anxiety exacerbates difficulties in adapting to academic pressures and social expectations (Tomer & Eliason, 1996).

A significant difference was found in autonomy between the two groups. Students with low death anxiety (M = 12.08, SD = 3.29) reported greater autonomy compared to those with high death anxiety (M = 7.09, SD = 2.97). The t-value (t = 8.72, p < 0.01) suggests that students with high death anxiety may have difficulty making independent decisions and may exhibit dependence on external validation. Autonomy plays a crucial role in academic

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success, and these findings suggest that fear of mortality may negatively impact self-reliance and self-direction (Menzies & Dar-Nimrod, 2017).

The mean security-insecurity score was significantly higher among students with high death anxiety ( $M = 12.74$ ,  $SD = 4.12$ ) than among those with low death anxiety ( $M = 8.09$ ,  $SD = 3.04$ ), with a  $t$ -value of 7.03 ( $p < 0.01$ ). This suggests that students with heightened death anxiety tend to experience more feelings of insecurity, possibly due to uncertainty about their future and performance in competitive exams. Research by Solomon et al. (1991) highlights that existential concerns often lead to increased insecurity and self-doubt, which can hinder academic and personal growth.

The self-concept scores also showed a significant difference between the groups. Students with low death anxiety had a higher mean self-concept score ( $M = 11.87$ ,  $SD = 3.74$ ) compared to those with high death anxiety ( $M = 8.07$ ,  $SD = 3.90$ ), with a  $t$ -value of 5.44 ( $p < 0.01$ ). These findings suggest that individuals with high death anxiety may experience lower self-esteem and self-worth, potentially due to the overwhelming fear of mortality and failure. Research by Abdel-Khalek (2005) indicates that death anxiety often correlates with negative self-perceptions and diminished self-efficacy.

A statistically significant difference was observed in intelligence scores between students with varying levels of death anxiety. Students with low death anxiety reported higher intelligence scores ( $M = 23.69$ ,  $SD = 3.55$ ) than their high death anxiety counterparts ( $M = 20.37$ ,  $SD = 4.10$ ), with a  $t$ -value of 4.74 ( $p < 0.01$ ). This finding suggests that cognitive performance and problem-solving abilities may be affected by heightened existential concerns, which could contribute to cognitive overload and decreased academic efficiency (Lykins et al., 2007).

The overall mental health scores revealed a significant difference between the two groups. Students with low death anxiety had a significantly higher mental health score ( $M = 101.43$ ,  $SD = 21.45$ ) compared to those with high death anxiety ( $M = 83.82$ ,  $SD = 23.06$ ), with a  $t$ -value of 4.33 ( $p < 0.01$ ). These findings suggest that death anxiety negatively impacts multiple aspects of mental health, including emotional regulation, cognitive abilities, self-concept, and adjustment. This is consistent with prior studies that have linked death anxiety to increased psychological distress and maladaptive coping mechanisms (Routledge & Vess, 2019).

### CONCLUSION

The results of this study highlight the profound impact of death anxiety on the mental health of students preparing for competitive exams. High death anxiety is associated with lower emotional stability, reduced autonomy, increased insecurity, diminished self-concept, and decreased cognitive functioning.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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