

Buffering Power of Spirituality against Death Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

Spirituality, being a virtuous approach against dark materialistic world has an ability to transcend any phase of life. As a matter of fact during old age the fear of death generally overpowers elderly. They overcome this anxiety successfully by moving and focusing towards spirituality, which is considered a path leading to piousness and inner peace. Experience of spirituality helps them to think beyond this materialistic world, where old age is not considered as an end to life, but a preparation for the welcome of a new life. Thus with these ideas in mind, the present study was an attempt to explore the relation between spirituality and death anxiety among geriatrics. A purposive sample of 200 elderly both male and female with the age range of 60-80 years was drawn from Rohtak city, Haryana. The descriptive statistics indicated the high level of spirituality and average level of death anxiety among elderly. Further, correlational analysis showed that there existed a negative correlation between spirituality and death anxiety which indicates the healing power of spirituality among elderly.

Keywords: *Buffering, Power, Spirituality, Death Anxiety*

Aging is a natural and universal phenomenon. It is the ultimate stage of human development where development comes to a halt. In fact, it is supposed to be a period of decline and degeneration. Though aging is a continuous process, it becomes more pronounced during late adulthood. In spite of the societal stereotype views about old age as a time of inactivity, physical and mental decline, gerontologists, who study aging, are beginning to present quite a different picture of elderly. Age, and especially “old age” is partly a matter of subjective perception. The boundary between middle and old age is not clearly marked by any physical or intellectual transformation. Traditionally, the age of retirement is viewed as the beginning of old age. Now that the life expectancy has increased. According to estimates made by the technical growth on population projections, the likely number of old people in India will be around 323 million by 2050 (Census of India, 2011). The recent census of India (2011) reported the percentage of elderly people to total population 8.6 percent.

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Old people generally overpower with negative feelings. Death anxiety is the most prevalent fear griping old people. Death anxiety refers to the fear and apprehension of one's own death. It is the neurotic fear of loss of the self which has an intense state of parallel feelings of learned helplessness and depression. Man's awareness of his own death produces anxiety that can only be dealt with by recognizing one's individuality. According to existential analysts, man's awareness of death gives him the responsibility for finding meaning in life. Death is a biological, personal, socio-cultural and existential phenomenon. The biological death is useful to distinguish between the process of aging and the ending called death. Yet when the actual time comes, and the individual faces death alone, the psychological reactions appear to be remarkably similar. Kubler(1969) had found that in the majority of persons, almost regardless of age, the personal reactions to imminent death pass through five phases such as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance(although not every individual achieves the final phase). Numerous studies revealed that the effect of age (Suhail & Akram, 2002); negative attitudes (Depaola, Griffin, Young & Neimeyer 2003)); physical appearance concern and fear of losses (Benton, Christopher and Walter, Ghufran and Ansari, 2008); living circumstances (Madwant, Singh and Singh,(2007); low self-esteem, little purpose in life, and poor mental well-being (Missler, Stroebe, Geurtsen, Mastenbroek, Chmoun, and Houwen, 2012); spouse death(Momtaz, Haron, Ibrahim & Hamid, 2015) all affect the magnitude of death anxiety.

Spirituality is regarded as an inner strength through which the individual may move beyond self-interest and make meaning of both lived experiences and transcendent (Staton, Shoy & Byock, 2001) provides the aging adult with another resource for finding meaning in the stage of emotional and physical distress that often accompany the aging process and dying process. In the stage of the challenging existential experiences of aging, loss disability and dying that can work to isolate and aging adult from resource of support, spirituality can operate as a self-transcendent resource with which the individual can grow, find meaning, and achieve sense of completion (Wong, 2008), Furthermore, spirituality has been shown to be related to greater physical, psychological and mental health (Chibnall , Viddeen, Duckro & Miller, 2002, Meisnhelder and Chandler's, 2002) and subjective well being(Micozz,2006; Fry,2000); generativity and wisdom(wink, 2008), satisfaction with life (Wills,2009) and lower level of depression(Han and Richardson,2010, Rykkje; Eriksson & Rahol2013). In numerous studies spirituality has found negative correlated with death anxiety in geriatrics (Thorson, and Powell 2000; Suhail & Akram, 2002; Harding, Flannelly, Weaver, & Costa, 2005; Jong, Bluemke & Halberstadt, 2013, Henrie& Patrick, 2014).

Spirituality plays a pivotal role in decreasing depression by fostering positive beliefs and behaviors while lessening the impact of negative situation. With such vast acknowledging of literature the following problem was selected for the present research work.

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Problem

To explore the relation between spirituality and death anxiety among geriatrics.

Objectives of the study

The present study was carried out with the following objectives:

1. To assess the level of spirituality and death anxiety of geriatrics.
2. To examine the relationship between spirituality and death anxiety among geriatrics.

Research Design

A correlational design was used in the present study

METHOD

Participants

A purposive sample of 200 old people of both sex (male and female) aged 60-80 years was selected from the urban area of Rohtak city of Haryana.

Tools

1. **Spirituality Scale.** (Biswas and Biswas, 2006).

It consists of 21 statements, which included centrality of god, ethical and moral values, the cyclical nature of pain and pleasure in one's life and power of meditation. All items are to be rated on 4 point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The possible score range on the scale can be 21 to 84. The cronbach alpha for the measure has .84.

2. **Death Anxiety scale.** (Templer, 1970).

It consists of 15 questions and answers which are based on yes or no option while each question score of 1 or 0. The total score is between maximum 15 and minimum zero. Some of the questions directly measures death anxiety and its related issues such as disease, world war, speed of time passing etc. the test- retest reliability is .83 and internal consistency is.76. Hindi version of the scale was prepared by investigator by using back to back translation technique in which first of all Hindi was done by the experts of Hindi language and then final format of Hindi was prepared and that was translated into English language by the two experts of English language and further final format of English was prepared. Then translated Hindi as well translated English and original English versions of the same scale were administered on sixty adult participants aged 40-60 years. After the gap of one week each, while taking the consideration of counterbalancing. The test–retest reliability was found to be .79 and the cronbach alpha was.83. It is highly valid scale for adult population.

Procedure

First of all English version of death anxiety scale was translated into Hindi language by using back translation technique. Then, the old people were contacted at banks, parks, colonies and religious places of the Rohtak city and the rapport was established with them. After seeking their

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permission, the relevant instructions related to each questionnaire/scales were given to them. While filling the proformas in a single seating, the adequate time gap between questionnaire/scales was given. Further scoring was done as per norms and data were subjected to suitable statistical analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Obtained scores on spirituality and death anxiety were analyzed by using descriptive statistics with the help of SPSS 16 (statistical package for the social sciences) and have been shown in below in Table 1.

Table1: Descriptive statistics of the scores obtained on test of spirituality and death anxiety of geriatrics.

| Variable | Mean | Standard deviation (SD) | Interpretation | Range of scores |
|---------------|-------|-------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Spirituality | 72.12 | 8.77 | High | 21-84 |
| Death Anxiety | 5.98 | 3.54 | Average | 0-15 |

From Table 1 it is apparent that old people have high levels of spirituality and average level of death anxiety as per norms of the scales. A number of earlier studies support that elderly people have high level of spirituality and low level of death anxiety (Thorson, and Powell ,2000; Suhail & Akram , 2002 Harding, et al., 2005; Jong, et al., 2013; Henrie & Patrick, 2014). Whereas in the current research work, though the level of spirituality appears to be high yet moderate level of death anxiety is found. High level of spirituality indicates their level of piousness, love, faith, a state of transcendence, mysticism, a sense of interconnectedness, awareness about the purpose and meaning of life etc. In other words through practical knowledge they appeared to have developed a power of intuition i.e. the power to sense of invisible world around them.

The moderate level of death anxiety reveals that they have accepted death as natural process, not much bothered about the end of life. It appears that they are mentally prepare to face inevitable death. As according to Freud's theory of than at ophobia, it is not actually death that people feared, because nobody believes in his/her death; as no one has experience death. Here old people who are expressing death-related fears (to some extent) are actually trying to deal with unresolved childhood conflicts, which they were unable to cope up (Freud). Further according to Erikson theory of psycho social development, the average level of death anxiety among old people may be attributed to their level of wisdom which they have gained through experiences of life and appear to be developed a state of "ego integrity" which helped them to accept the life as it is. They are not fully found to be depressive. As per terror management theory old people have been found to have an average level of death anxiety may be due to their attempts to deny death

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which unconsciously leads to collection of death anxiety, where the level of spirituality helps them to release the anxiety gradually.

Further in order to find out the correlation of spirituality and death anxiety of geriatrics. The Pearson's r was computed and has been shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlation of spirituality and death anxiety of geriatrics.

| Variables | Spirituality | Death Anxiety |
|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| Spirituality | 1.00 | -.182* |
| Death anxiety | | 1.00 |

*p<0.01

The perusal of Table 2 shows that spirituality is significantly negatively correlated with death anxiety ($r = -.182, p < 0.01$). However, the magnitude of correlation appears to very low. But somehow it may be stated that spirituality acts as a buffer against death. Spirituality act as an ointment to heal the wounds of life successfully. It enhances their physical, mental, psychological and social health, thus inculcating the feelings of hope and optimism in them. Such feelings help them to overcome a state of “learned helplessness” and further replace it with “learned optimism”. In other words there is rich empirical evidences to support that spiritual experiences help people to have excellent health, understand the meaning of life, happy, cheerful (Krishna Mohan, 1999); effective well-being, full involvement of daily tasks life (Wink et al., 2008), satisfaction with life (Wills, 2009) and rarely downhearted or depressed (Baetz et al., 2004). Spirituality plays an adaptive role in aging which helps them to lead a better quality of life resulting in longevity.

The current findings endorse some suggestions that though spirituality prepares the elderly to overcome death anxiety yet it appears to be have a weak correlation. So the other powerful moderators of reducing death anxiety such as enhancing the level of hope and optimism should be explored.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, it may be stated that elderly of contemporary society are found to be highly spiritual with average level of death anxiety. Spirituality has been found to be significantly negatively correlated with death anxiety.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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