Impact of Death Anxiety on Mental Health among Students Preparing for Competitive Exam

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ABSTRACT
This study aimed to investigate the impact of death anxiety on various aspects of mental health, including Emotional Stability (ES), Overall Adjustment (OA), Autonomy (AY), Security-Insecurity (SI), Self-Concept (SC), and Intelligence (IQ), among students preparing for competitive exams. A sample of 120 college students from Beed City, Maharashtra, was selected using a non-probability purposive sampling method, with an equal representation of males (n=50) and females (n=50) within the age range of 20-24 years. The Death Anxiety Scale (DAS) developed by Thakur and Thakur (1984) and the Mental Health Inventory (MHI) by Dr. Jagdish and Dr. A.K. Srivastav (1983) were employed to measure death anxiety and mental health, respectively. Statistical analysis using the 't' test revealed that students with low death anxiety exhibited significantly higher scores in emotional stability, overall adjustment, autonomy, security-insecurity, self-concept, and intelligence compared to those with high death anxiety. The findings highlight the detrimental effects of elevated death anxiety on mental health, suggesting the need for targeted interventions to support students facing high levels of anxiety while preparing for competitive exams.

Keywords:- death anxiety mental health, emotional stability, overall adjustment, autonomy, security-insecurity, self-concept, and intelligence.

Introduction:
Death anxiety, defined as the apprehension or fear of death and the process of dying, is a profound psychological construct that has been linked to a variety of mental health issues. Students preparing for competitive exams often face immense academic pressure, which may exacerbate underlying anxieties, including fears related to mortality. Research has increasingly focused on the intersection of death anxiety and mental health, revealing complex relationships that may influence stress, anxiety, depression, and coping mechanisms in this population.

1. Understanding Death Anxiety
Death anxiety refers to the distressing thoughts, emotions, or fears about death or dying, which can stem from both existential concerns and personal vulnerabilities (Iverach et al., 2014). Competitive exam preparation, which is associated with high-stakes outcomes, may intensify feelings of uncertainty, potentially heightening awareness of one's mortality. For some students, these existential concerns could surface as a result of their academic challenges, pressures to succeed, or even their experiences with loss or illness in family members or peers.

According to research by Tomas-Sabado and Gomez-Benito (2005), death anxiety is more prevalent in individuals who experience higher levels of general anxiety and stress. Given that students preparing for competitive exams often report elevated stress levels due to performance pressure, they may be more susceptible to experiencing death anxiety. This anxiety can manifest as intrusive thoughts about the purpose of life, the meaning of failure, and the inevitability of death, further complicating their mental health status.

2. Impact on Mental Health
a. Anxiety and Stress

Students who experience death anxiety often report higher levels of generalized anxiety and stress, which can compound the existing pressures of exam preparation. According to Abdel-Khalek (2019), death anxiety is strongly correlated with trait anxiety and stress levels, particularly among younger individuals who are still navigating their identity and role in society. For competitive exam takers, the additional pressure to perform well may magnify these concerns, leading to a vicious cycle of increased death anxiety and performance-related stress. This can result in emotional exhaustion, burnout, and a decreased ability to concentrate, which further impairs academic outcomes.

b. Depression and Existential Despair

The fear of death may also contribute to depressive symptoms, particularly in students who perceive academic failure as a reflection of their self-worth or life purpose. Existential despair, defined as a lack of meaning or direction in life, is often intertwined with death anxiety (Yalom, 2008). Students who are fixated on the consequences of their exam results for their future life trajectories may experience a heightened sense of mortality, which in turn can foster feelings of hopelessness and depression.

Research by Menzies, Menzies, and Iverach (2015) indicates that individuals who struggle with death anxiety often exhibit depressive symptoms, as their fear of mortality overshadows their ability to find meaning and joy in daily activities. In competitive academic settings, this existential burden may be amplified by concerns about long-term failure and future uncertainty, further contributing to mental health challenges.

3. Coping Mechanisms and Academic Performance
a. Maladaptive Coping

Students who experience death anxiety may engage in maladaptive coping strategies, such as avoidance, denial, or rumination. Iverach, Menzies, and Menzies (2014) suggest that avoidance of death-related thoughts may provide temporary relief but often exacerbates long-term anxiety and distress. In the context of competitive exams, students may avoid studying or engage in procrastination as a way to cope with their existential fears, leading to poor academic outcomes. This avoidance not only hinders academic performance but also perpetuates feelings of failure and inadequacy, which can increase death-related fears and exacerbate mental health issues.

b. Resilience and Meaning-Making

Some students may use death anxiety as a catalyst for personal growth and meaning-making. According to Wong and Tomer (2011), confronting death anxiety can encourage individuals to reframe their perspective on life and develop a sense of purpose, which can buffer against stress and depression. Students who adopt a more resilient mindset may channel their death anxiety into a commitment to excel academically, viewing success as a means of leaving a legacy or achieving personal significance.

Death anxiety is a significant, albeit under-recognized, factor influencing the mental health of students preparing for competitive exams. The existential nature of this anxiety, coupled with academic stress, can lead to heightened anxiety, depression, and maladaptive coping mechanisms. Educators, mental health professionals, and academic institutions should consider integrating existential therapy, stress management techniques, and resilience training into student support programs to address these concerns.

Objectives:
1.   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:
1.   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 the present research, the researcher selected 120 college students for the research. Selected college students belonging to Beed City (Maharashtra State). 50 of them were student male. Also, there were 50 female students. The age range of the students selected for the research was 20-24 (Mean = 21.30, SD = 3.07). Non-probability purposive Sampling was used for the present study.

Research Tools:-
1)   Death Anxiety Scale (DAS) Thakur & Thakur, 1984
    This scale consists of 16 items. The original scale was in Hindi but it was translated into English through forward-backward procedure. The scale also consisted o f five options from which the respondents had to select one for each item i.e. "Absolutely true", "True", " Uncertain", "False", and "Absolutely false".
The minimum and maximum possible scores on the scale were 16 and 80 respectively. Higher score indicated higher death anxiety. Internal consistency reliability co-efficient on a sample of 206 Indians of both the sexes by using Kuder-Richardson formula was 0.78. Test-retest reliability with 12 weeks interval (N = 65) was 0.86. For the validation this scale was correlated with Templer's Death Anxiety Scale (r = .75), and McMordie's Scale (r =. 78) on a sample of 174 Indians. In the present sample alpha coefficient reliability was .71 among Pune sample (N = 187), and it was .70 among Imphal sample (N = 177).
1)   Mental Health Inventory (MHI):
Mental health inventory constructed by Dr. Jagdish and Dr. A K Srivastav (1983). 56 items are in the questionnaire and each of the item has four responses – 1. Almost always true, 2. Sometime true, 3. Rarely true and 4. Almost never true. The reliability of the inventory is determined by split-half method using odd-even procedure. Overall mental health reliability coefficients is .73 and Construct validity of the inventory is determined by finding coefficient of correlation between scores on mental health inventory and general health questionnaire (Gold beig, 1978) it is found to be .54.

Variable
Independent variable-
1)   **Level of Death Anxiety**   a) High   b) Low
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, S.D, 't' value among High and Low Death Anxiety students preparing for the competitive exam on dimension Mental Health

MH Factors	Level of Death Anxiety					
	Low Death Anxiety		High Death Anxiety			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	df	t value
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**
Mental Health	101.43	21.45	83.82	23.06	118	4.33**

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

Emotional Stability: Students with high death anxiety reported significantly lower levels of emotional stability compared to those with low death anxiety. Overall Adjustment: The high death anxiety group also exhibited lower levels of overall adjustment, indicating poorer psychological well-being. Autonomy: Students with high death anxiety were less autonomous, suggesting a lack of self-reliance and agency. Security-Insecurity: Interestingly, students with low death anxiety reported feeling more insecure compared to those with high death anxiety. Self-Concept: The high death anxiety group had lower self-esteem and self-worth compared to the low death anxiety group. Intelligence: While there were significant differences in intelligence scores, the effect size was relatively small. Mental Health: Overall, students with high death anxiety reported significantly lower levels of mental health compared to those with low death anxiety.

The findings of this study suggest that death anxiety can have a significant negative impact on various aspects of mental health among college students. Students with high

levels of death anxiety are more likely to experience emotional instability, poor adjustment, low autonomy, and lower self-esteem. These findings align with previous research on the relationship between death anxiety and psychological well-being (e.g., Beck & Beck, 1972; Neimeyer & Butler, 2009).

The unexpected finding that students with low death anxiety reported feeling more insecure might be attributed to the nature of the study sample. It is possible that students with low death anxiety may be more aware of their vulnerabilities and uncertainties, leading to higher levels of insecurity.

Implications

The results of this study highlight the importance of addressing death anxiety among college students. Interventions aimed at reducing death anxiety, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy or mindfulness-based stress reduction, may be beneficial in improving mental health outcomes. Additionally, providing support and counseling services can help students cope with the challenges associated with preparing for competitive exams.

Conclusion:

Low Death Anxiety Students had significantly high emotional stability, over-all adjustment, autonomy, security-insecurity, self-concept, and intelligence mental health score than the low Death Anxiety Students.

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