

# Relationship between Purpose in Life and Death Anxiety among Elderly Home Residents

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**Abstract:** Death anxiety is a concept used to indicate concern about death awareness. The loss of purpose in life can lead to an existential vacuum that can lead to death anxiety. **Aim:** to determine relationship between purpose in life and death anxiety among elderly home residents. **Design:** A descriptive correlational research design was used. **Subjects:** 66 out of 99 elderly persons residents in governmental elderly home in Dakahlia governorate, in Tanta city and in Ras El-Bar city were included in the study. **Tools:** Mini Mental State Examination, Purpose in Life test, Death anxiety scale, Socio-demographic & clinical data structured interview schedule were used to collect the data. **Results:** Sixty percent of the elderly home residents had a definite purpose in life and 72.7% had low death anxiety. Also there was negative significant correlation between purpose in life and death anxiety among residents of elderly homes  $r = -0.48$ . **Conclusion:** purpose in life was inversely correlated with death anxiety among elderly home residents. **Recommendations:** Encouraging elderly people to participate in social activity that foster purpose in life.

**Keywords:** Death Anxiety, Purpose in Life, Elderly, Home Residents.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Anxiety of death is not only real, but it is also one of the most significant elements that affect the mental health of individual's value, and purpose and meaning in life (Vafai et al., 2011).

Aging is a process associated with changes in physiological, psychological and sociological dimensions. In addition to quantitative and qualitative increasing of stress related to aging, facing with inevitable death and its' anxiety. (Alipour & Esmaili, 2013). Elders who were living in elderly home experienced undesirable emotions and feelings such as insecurity, abandonment, loneliness, lack of privacy, which leads to experience more death anxiety (MY Tse, 2007).

Anxiety of death is a natural part of a reliable existence. However, death is a threat of absence, the person who has no purpose in his life is threatened by death anxiety (Hoelterhoff, 2010). The purpose in life is the "ego integrity" which achieved when elderly find meaning and purpose in life and have low level of death anxiety (Rasquinha & Acharya, 2012).

The purpose in life is negatively correlated with death anxiety, which means that people who report their life to be purposeful are less fearful of death. A purpose in life may help people to cope with the finiteness of life, and cause a reduction in death anxiety (Meima & Chmoun, 2010).

### Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to determine relationship between purpose in life and death anxiety among elderly home residents.

## Research question

What is the relationship between purpose in life and death anxiety among elderly home residents?

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHOD

### Materials

#### 1. Study design:

A descriptive correlational research design was used in the study.

#### 2. Setting:

The study was conducted in all governmental elderly homes in Dakahlia governorate, namely (Dar El-Aml, Dar El-Malak Mikhael in Mansoura city and Dar El-Walaa in Met-Ghamr city), also Dar El-Saada in Tanta city and Dar kebar Elsen in Ras El-Bar city were used.

#### 3. Subjects:

The study subject was including all elders resident at the previously mentioned settings during the time of data collection and fulfilling the following criteria:

- ❖ Aged 60 years and above.
- ❖ Able to communicate and have normal cognitive function.
- ❖ Willing to participate in the study.

#### Distribution of elders selected from elderly:

Name of elderly home	Total number of residents	Selected sample N (%)
Dar El-Saada	40	22 (55%)
Dar El-Aml	20	15 (75%)
Dar El-Walaa	12	11 (91%)
Dar El-Malak Mikhael	15	9 (60%)
Dar kebar Elsen	12	9 (75%)
Total	99	66 (67%)

\* 20 elders refused to participate in the study, 9 elders had a cognitive impairment and 4 elders were in a holiday outside the home during time of data collection.

#### 4. Tools of data collection :

The following tools were used for data collection:

##### Tool I: Mini Mental State Examination (MMS):

It was used to assess the elder's cognitive function and for selection of elderly in the study sample. This scale was developed by Folstein M 1975 (Folstein, 1999). It was translated into Arabic language by Elolki, 2008, validated and tested for its reliability ( $r = .093$ ) by Abd El Moniem, 2012. This tool is used to assess the elder's cognitive function. It contains 10 items that cover, orientation to time orientation to place, registration, attention, calculation, recall, language, repetition, complex commands that may include drawing or copying figure shown. The total score of MMSE scale is 30 points, classified as: Score 24-30 no cognitive impairment, mild (18-23 points), severe (0-17 points) cognitive impairment.

##### Tool II: Purpose in Life test (PIL)

This tool was developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick 1969 and modified at 1981 (Crumbaugh and Maholick, 1981). It was used to assess perceived meaning and life purpose. This scale consists of 20 items, each rated on a 7-point scale, the

score ranging from 20 to 140, it classified as: a definite purpose in life score ranging from 113-140, indecision of purpose in life score ranging from 92-112 and lack of purpose in life score ranging from 91 -20. The tool was translated into Arabic language and tested for its reliability by the researcher test – retest measurement was used ( $r=0.83$ ).

### **Tool III: Death anxiety scale (DAS):**

This scale was developed by Donald Templer in 1970 (**Templer, 1970**). It was used to measure an elder's score of death anxiety. It includes 15-item scale rated as true or false. The classification for questions 1, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14 is that :for choosing true giving number 1 and 0 for the false. While questions 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 and 15 giving 0 for choosing the true and 1 for the false. This scale was classified as follows: The score (0) indicate absence of death anxiety, the score (1-6) indicate low death anxiety and the score (7-15) show high death anxiety. It was translated into Arabic language and tested for its reliability by the researcher test – retest measurement was used ( $r=0.78$ ).

### **Tool VI: (Socio-demographic and clinical data sheet):**

This tool was developed by the researcher based on review of relevant literature. It divided into two parts: part I: the socio-demographic data elicited data about age, sex, religion, educational level, marital status, occupation before retirement and income.

Part II: the clinical data, which elicited data about health history of the study subject, data related to admission to elderly home as reasons of admission to elderly home, decision of admission, and data related to spiritual status as going to worship, do religious rituals, participate in voluntary work,...etc.

### **Method**

1. An official letter was obtained from the faculty of nursing and the directors of elderly homes get their approval for conducting the study.
2. Tool I Mini Mental State Examination (MMS) was used to assess the elder's cognitive function and for selection of elderly in the study sample.
3. Tool IV (Socio-demographic data structured interview schedule) was developed by the researcher after the reviewing of relevant literature.
4. Tool II Purpose in Life test (PIL) and tool III Death anxiety scale (DAS) was translated into Arabic language by the researcher and tested for its reliability test – retest measurement was used ( $r=0.83$ ,  $r=0.78$ ) respectively.
5. Study tools were revised by 9 experts in the related fields of gerontological and psychiatric nursing Alexandria University to test its content validity, feasibility and necessary modifications was done.
6. A pilot study was carried out on 10 elderly persons attending at El-aml elderly club - Mansoura city before starting the data collection to test clarity and feasibility of the tools and the approximate time needed for the interview, accordingly the necessary modifications was done.
7. Each director of the elderly homes was informed about the purpose of the study, the date and time of data collection.
8. Each elderly was interviewed individually by the researcher to collect the necessary data using study tools, after inform him the purpose of the study, and ensure confidentiality.
9. Data was collected during a period of 3 months beginning at April 2017 and end at June 2017.

### **Ethical consideration:**

Ethical approval was obtained from the research ethics committee of the Faculty of Nursing- Mansoura University. Verbal consent to participate in the study was obtained from each elderly after explanation of the purpose of the study. Privacy and confidentiality of the collected data was maintained.

### **Data analysis**

Data was analyzed using SPSS program version 21. A descriptive statistical analysis was carried out. Qualitative variables were presented as number and percent. Quantitative variables were presented as mean and standard deviation (SD). They were tested with chi-square and Monte Carlo-tests. Pearson correlation coefficient was used to calculate correlation between variables.  $P < 0.01$  and  $P < 0.05$  were considered statistically significant.

### 3. RESULTS

**Table (1)** Distribution of elderly home residents according to their Socio-demographic characteristics. This table shows that the age of the studied subjects ranged from 60 up to 75 years old with a mean of  $68.41 \pm 5.76$  year and Fifty Three of the studied elders were males. Regarding to marital status, 48.5% were Widow, 31.8 % were married and 19.7% were divorced. Concerning education level, about 54.5% had basic education and secondary education, while 16.7% had a university education. Regarding to occupation before retirement, 57.6% were Employee, 25.8% were house wives, While 16.6% were manual and business workers. In relation to monthly income about 65.2 % of the studied elders reported enough income.

**Table 1: Distribution of elderly home residents according to their Socio-demographic characteristics:**

Socio-demographic data	Elderly home residents ( n = 66 )	
	No	%
<b>Age in years :</b>		
60-	53	80.3%
75-	13	19.7%
Mean (SD)	68.41 $\pm$ 5.76	
<b>Sex:</b>		
• Male	35	53.0
• Female	31	47.0
<b>Marital status:</b>		
• Widow	32	48.5
• Married	21	31.8
• Divorced	13	19.7
<b>Education level:</b>		
• Illiterate	13	19.7
• Read and write	6	9.1
• Basic education	8	12.1
• Secondary education	28	42.4
• University education	11	16.7
<b>occupation before retirement:</b>		
• Employee	38	57.6
• House wife	17	25.8
• Manual and business worker	11	16.6
<b>Monthly income :</b>		
• Enough	43	65.2
• Not enough	23	34.8

**Table (2)** Distribution of elderly home residents according to their clinical data. It was shown from the table that diabetes mellitus, hypertension and cardiovascular are the most common prevalent diseases reported by the study subjects in the rate of 39.4 %, 36.4% and 30.3 % respectively, while 25.8% of elders suffer from osteoarthritis and the rest suffer from respiratory diseases and GIT diseases reported by 10.6%.

**Table 2: Distribution of elderly home residents according to their clinical data:**

Item	Elderly home residents ( n = 66 )	
	No	%
<b>Type of disease :*</b>		
• Diabetes	26	39.4
• Hypertension	24	36.4
• Cardiovascular diseases	20	30.3
• Osteoarthritis diseases	17	25.8
• Respiratory diseases& GIT diseases	7	10.6
<b>No disease</b>	13	19.7

\* more than one response

**Table (3)** Distribution of elderly home residents according to their purpose in Life test (PIL). It is was noticed from the table that 60.6 % of elders reported that they have definite purpose in life , while 21.2% of them rated indecision about purpose in life and 18.2% of the study subjects reported lack of purpose in life.

**Table 3: Distribution of elderly home residents according to their Purpose in Life test (PIL):**

Purpose in Life test (PIL)	Elderly home residents ( n = 66 )	
	No	%
• A definite purpose in life	40	60.6
• Indecision about purpose in life	14	21.2
• Lack of purpose in life	12	18.2

**Table (4)** Distribution of elderly home residents according to their death anxiety scale (DAS).This table demonstrates that, 72.7% of elderly home residents had low death anxiety, while 27.3 % reported high death anxiety.

**Table 4: Distribution of elderly home residents according to their death anxiety scale (DAS):**

Death anxiety scale (DAS)	Elderly home residents ( n = 66 )	
	No	%
• Absence of death anxiety	0	0
• Low death anxiety	48	72.7
• High death anxiety	18	27.3

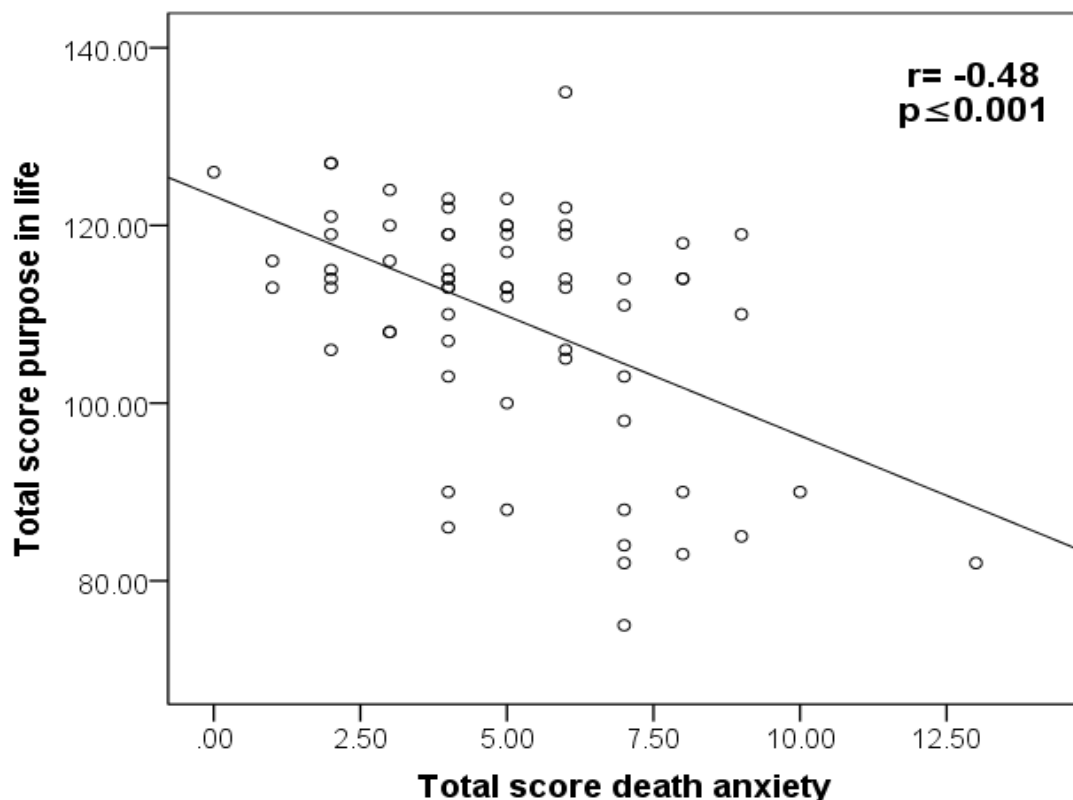


Figure 1: Correlations between purpose in life and death anxiety:

\* There is inverse moderate significant correlation between purpose in life and death anxiety among residents of elderly homes.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Death is very close to aging. Thus the logical belief is that death anxiety is high among the elderly (**Rasquinha & Acharya, 2012**). Ageing can lead to reduced physical function, cognitive impairments, and loss of purpose in life (**Hedberg, 2010**). An elderly person, who has no purpose in his life, will be preoccupied with the threat of the absence of being called fear of death (**Karimi, 2012**). Therefore, the present study was conducted to determine relationship between purpose in life and death anxiety among elderly home residents.

In the present study, the majority of elders were males at the age of 60 years to less than 74 years, with a mean age of  $68.41 \pm 5.76$  years. The same finding was reported by a study done in Iran by **Taghiabadi et al., (2017)** who revealed that the mean age of participants was  $68.18 \pm 7.8$  years. This finding is agrees with study conducted in Gonabad by **Mohammadpour et al., (2018)**, and study conducted in Egypt by **Ahmed (2015)**. Another study was conducted in Iran by **Dadfar et al., (2014)** showed that the mean age of their participants was  $65.72 \pm 5.60$  years and more than one half of their studied subjects of older adults were male. Also a study in Egypt by **Fadila et al., (2018)** found that the mean age of their participant was  $68.95 \pm 6.3$  years, and majority of studied elderly sample were males. Also a study conducted in Turkey by **Ozturk et al (2011)** to examine death anxiety in elderly cases reported that all subjects included in the study were male. In contrast, both study done in Israel by **Azaiza et al., (2010)** and study in India by **Cicirelli (2002)** which revealed that the majority of elders of the study sample were female.

The purpose of life may be a positive sign of high participation in life and may be a measure of the essential incentive to care for the individual and a strategy to attain higher life goals (**Hooker&Masters, 2016**). The present study results reported that the majority of elderly home residents had a definite purpose in life (table 3). This is in agreement with a study conducted in the United States by **Baernholdt et al., (2011)** who report that the representative sample of people 65

years and older reported high purpose in life in all dimensions. Also another studies was conducted in Washington by **Musich et al., (2017)** and study conducted in Chicago by **Boyle et al., (2009)** in the same line of this study which revealed that the majority of the study sample had high a purpose in life. In contrast with the finding a study was conducted in Sweden by **Hedberg et al., (2010)** who found that the majority of their participants indicating that they felt indecision about the purpose in their lives. Also another study was conducted in Finland by **Sarvimäki & Stenbock-Hult, (2000)** who report that only one-third of the elderly people sample had a clear sense of purpose in life. This contraindication can be attributed to the fact that the Egyptian people are capable of adapting to changes and dealing with the challenges of life. In addition to social support among them is of great importance which makes the assistance and respect of the elderly a high priority in Egyptian society.

Various studies suggest that Death anxiety tends to be greater among older adults (**Cicirelli, 2006**). Although concern about death is a natural experience, mild level of death anxiety is necessary throughout life to involve us in positive activities, but severe anxiety about death can lead to maladaptation (**Mohammadpour et al., 2018**). The present study results reported that the majority of elderly home residents had low death anxiety (Table 4). This is in agreement with a study conducted in Spain by **Moreno et al., (2008)** who reflect that institutionalized elderly have lower death anxiety. Another study conducted in India by **John et al., (2016)** revealed that the majority of study subjects have moderate death anxiety and mild death anxiety score. In addition a Study in Saudi Arabia conducted by **Almostadi (2012)** who report that the level of death anxiety was actually low among Saudi patients. In contradiction to the present study results a study conducted in Iran by **Ziapour et al., (2014)** and a study conducted by **Masoudzadeh et al., (2008)** revealed that the majority of a study sample suffers from high death anxiety. Also another study conducted in Israel by **Azaiza et al., (2010)** who revealed that elderly nursing home residents had higher death anxiety. This contraindication may be attributed to the fact that the religiosity helps the elderly to cope with material and social losses, leading to a lower death anxiety.

In one aspect of development, **Erikson's theory** states that the anxiety of death has a negative relationship with life satisfaction, purpose and meaning of life in middle age and aging. The present study findings demonstrated that there is inverse moderate significant correlation between purpose in life and death anxiety among residents of elderly homes (Figure 1). This finding was supported by study conducted in India by **Latha et al., (2013)** who demonstrated a negative correlation emerged between presence of meaning in life and death anxiety. In the same line a study conducted in Iran by **Golzar & Toozandehjani, (2014)** reported that there exists a significant inverse relationship between purpose in life and death anxiety. Also a Study conducted in Iran by **Soleimani et al., (2016)** found inverse relationships between death anxiety and purpose of life in Iranian patients. Also another study conducted in India by **Roshani, (2012)** reported that a significant negative correlation was found between Purpose in life and death anxiety. This is consistent with other studies done by **Abdel-Khalek and Al-Sabwah (2006)**, **Yüksel et al., (2017)** and **Taghiabadi et al., (2017)**.

Furthermore, **Sigrist, (2015)**, **Routledge and Juhl, (2010)**, **Nakagi and Tada, (2014)** showed that, as the death anxiety levels increased, the meaning in life levels decreased. In contrast **Meima & Chmoun, (2010)** found that the amount of purpose in life that was reported did not influence death anxiety. Another study in Florida by **Ardelt, (2008)** stated that in Contrary to Hypothesis purpose in life are unrelated to acceptance of death. Purpose in life is not effect on death anxiety.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It was concluded that the majority of the study sample had a definite purpose in life and low death anxiety. Also there was inverse moderate significant correlation between purpose in life and death anxiety among residents of elderly homes.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Encouraging elderly people to participate in social activity that foster a sense of a support and is important in increasing purpose in life .
2. Periodic psychological counseling by expert psychologists and skilled social workers is recommended in order to consult elders for increasing purpose in life and decreasing death anxiety.



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