

Factors Influencing Death Anxiety: A Systematic Review: A Systematic Literature Review

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Keywords:

death anxiety factors, systematic review, anxiety

Abstract

Death anxiety is a feeling of fear and worry that arises when individuals contemplate their own death or the death of others. This systematic review aims to identify factors associated with death anxiety based on current scientific literature. Through a rigorous selection process following PRISMA guidelines, 11 international journal articles published during 2019–2025 were selected for analysis. The results demonstrate that internal psychological factors, particularly meaning in life and self-esteem, are the primary determinants in mitigating death anxiety. Social factors such as loneliness and low family emotional attachment emerge as significant risk factors. Furthermore, spiritual health, mindfulness coping strategies, and demographic characteristics also influence the level of death anxiety. The analysis reveals that self-esteem functions as a "psychological buffer" that suppresses anxiety when individuals perceive their lives as meaningful, consistent with Terror Management Theory. The findings emphasize the dynamic interaction between internal, social, and spiritual dimensions in shaping death anxiety experiences. These findings underscore the importance of holistic interventions that focus on strengthening the meaning of life, enhancing spiritual well-being, and improving the quality of social relationships. Such comprehensive approaches aim to help individuals achieve greater self-acceptance and face mortality with increased calmness and dignity.

INTRODUCTION

Death is the final phase of life that cannot be avoided by every human being. Although it is universal, death often provokes an emotional response in the form of anxiety (Letzner, 2024; Menzies & Whittle, 2022; Shneidman, 2023). Death anxiety is a feeling of anxiety, fear, or worry that arises when individuals think about the death of themselves or others (Hamid et al., 2019; Irwan et al., 2022). These feelings can be triggered by uncertainty about the process of death, life after death, as well as fears of separation from those closest to them (Bryant, 2003). Some individuals view death as one of the stages in life that every human being will go through, while others see death as the end of everything because dying is the end of the life process, which is marked by the cessation of all biological functions that support life (Sheykhi et al., 2020).

Anxiety about death can be experienced by anyone, but its intensity tends to increase in individuals entering old age. The elderly are at a stage of development that is biologically and socially getting closer to the reality of death. Awareness of physical limitations, increasing chronic illnesses, and the experience of losing a spouse or peers make death a more real issue in the daily lives of the elderly (Hendrasti et al., 2021). This aligns with the view of Saputro (2018), who states that the elderly tend to have a deeper understanding of the concept of symbolic immortality compared to adolescents and adults.

This vulnerability cannot be separated from the mental health conditions of the elderly in general. Data from the Indonesian Ministry of Health in 2018 shows that around 32% of the elderly experience mild to severe depression (Kusuma et al., 2021). One of the factors suspected to contribute to this condition is anxiety about death. Research by Lok et al. (2023) found a positive relationship between death anxiety and hopelessness. Ergin et al. (2023) also noted that high death anxiety can worsen psychological balance, increase stress, and give rise to feelings of emptiness and disappointment with life. These findings suggest that anxiety about death is not just a normal emotional response, but can have a significant impact on the psychological well-being of the elderly.

The level of anxiety about death in the elderly is influenced by various factors. Internal factors include age, gender, marital status, education level, health condition, and history of chronic illness. Meanwhile, external factors include culture, social environment, elderly community systems, and family support (Abbas et al., 2023). Anxiety can arise in the form of worries about the uncertainty of life after death, fear of leaving the family, feelings of loneliness (isolating experience), and anxiety about illness and the process leading up to death (Bryant, 2003; Prihatiningsih, 2018). Research by Ningrum et al. (2018) showed that 51.9% of the elderly in Ciparay, Bandung Regency experienced death anxiety, which indicates that this phenomenon is quite prevalent in the context of Indonesian society.

Although various studies have identified factors related to death anxiety in the elderly, the results of these studies remain scattered and have not been systematically summarized to provide a comprehensive picture. Some studies have focused on the relationship between death anxiety and certain variables, but few have thoroughly mapped the characteristics and determinants of anxiety across various research contexts. Therefore, a systematic literature review is needed to integrate empirical findings on death anxiety in the elderly. Through a systematic literature review approach, this study aims to identify and synthesize the factors that affect the level of death anxiety based on available literature. The results of this systematic review are expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the determinants of death anxiety in the elderly and serve as the basis for the development of more targeted psychological interventions.

METHOD

This systematic review uses the systematic literature review method, which aims to identify, evaluate, and comprehensively synthesize the results of previous research on the factors that affect death anxiety. The review was conducted in a structured manner to obtain a comprehensive picture of the characteristics of the studies and the psychosocial variables related to the phenomenon. The literature review process begins with the formulation of research questions using the PCC (Population, Concept, Context) approach. The population

includes adults and the elderly, the main concept studied is death anxiety, and the research context includes psychological, mental health, and social aspects. The research question focused on "What are the characteristics and factors related to death anxiety in different research contexts?"

Literature searches were carried out systematically through the electronic databases Publish or Perish and Google Scholar with a focus on reputable journals (SINTA and international journals). The keywords used included "death anxiety," "fear of death," and "death anxiety scale." All articles were managed using the Rayyan app to identify and eliminate duplicate articles. Articles were selected based on predetermined inclusion criteria: (1) empirical research articles; (2) discussing death anxiety as the main variable; (3) using adult or elderly subjects; (4) published within the last ten years; and (5) available in full text.

Articles in the form of a literature review, meta-analysis, or that do not clearly explain the research method were excluded from the review process. The selection process was carried out in stages, referring to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. From the initial identification results, screening was conducted through titles and abstracts, followed by reading of the full text. Through a rigorous selection process, 11 articles were selected that met the criteria for further analysis. Data from selected articles were systematically extracted, including author information, year, purpose, subject characteristics, methods, instruments, and key findings. Data analysis used a narrative synthesis approach by grouping research results based on emerging themes and patterns, so as to gain a deep understanding of the determinants of death anxiety.

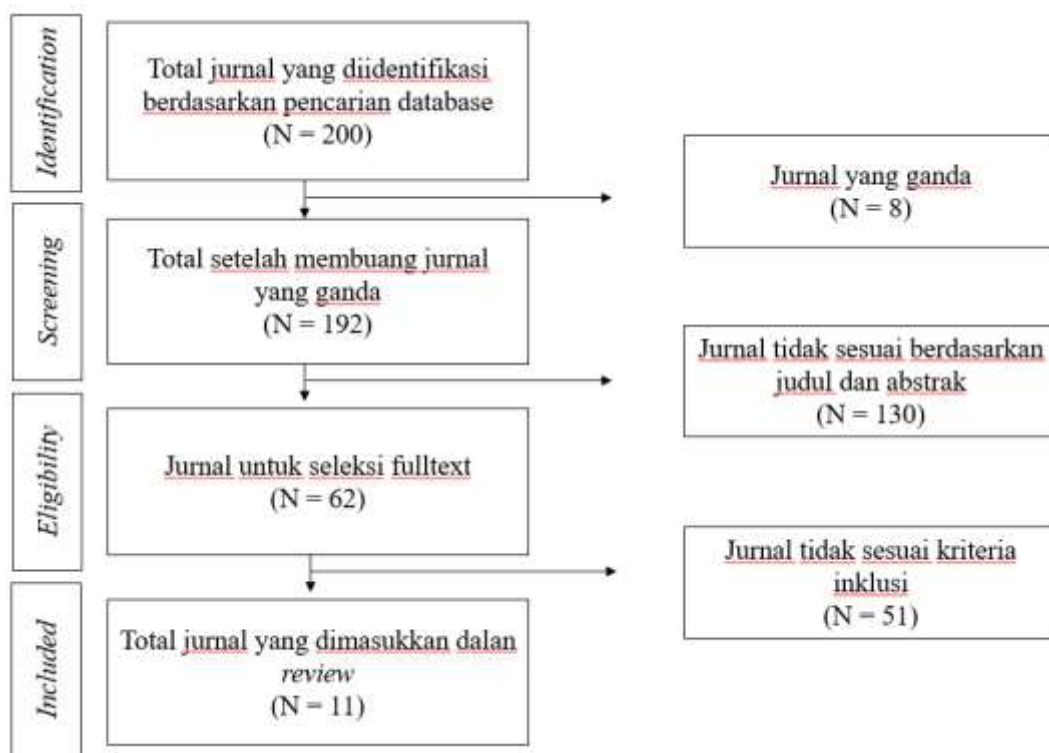


Figure 1
PRISMA Graph for Journal Selection Flow

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. *List of factors that can affect death anxiety*

No.	Author	Subject	Death anxiety factors
1.	Jumaa (2021)	180 elderly people aged ≥ 65 years old	<i>Loneliness</i> , social helplessness, loss of attachment/affection, and feelings of rejection
2.	Zhang et al. (2019)	283 elderly people aged 65–73 years	Presence <i>and search of meaning</i> and <i>self-esteem</i>
3.	Pei et al., (2020).	1,362 elderly people aged ≥ 60 years old	Child financial support, emotional closeness to the child, female gender, functional limitations, widow/widower status and religiosity
4.	Yurliani et al., (2020).	150 elderly	Age and <i>Mindfulness Factors</i>
5.	Jiaxi Zhang, et al. (2019)	283 elderly	<i>Meaning in life</i> and <i>self-esteem</i>
6.	Xiao, et al. (2022)	504 participants	Group identity, self-esteem and quality of close relationships
7.	Solaimanizadeh, et al. (2020)	180 seniors aged 65+	Spiritual health and <i>religious coping</i>
8.	Adelirad, et al. (2021)	500 elderly	Differences in gender, age, education level, and social support
9.	Jinhui Yu, et al. (2025)	1,054 young adults in China (ages 18–35)	Self-esteem, security, and social support
10.	Greenblatt-Kimron, et al. (2021)	321 elderly people in Israel (aged 60-95 years)	Loneliness and parental self-efficacy (feelings of success as parents)
11.	Abu Jaoude, et al. (2024)	763 adults in Lebanon	Climate change anxiety and religiosity

Anxiety about death is an emotional response in the form of anxiety or worry that individuals feel when facing the reality of mortality. These feelings arise from an overestimation of real threats and imagination related to life after death. This phenomenon is often triggered by negative emotional reactions to thoughts about physical damage, which causes feelings of fear, loneliness, and despair over situations that cannot be controlled. Death

anxiety encompasses various complex aspects, including fear of physical suffering, reflective thoughts about death, and awareness of the shortness of life (Dumitru et al., 2025).

Several reviews discuss the factors that influence this anxiety. Sunarya & Sadiah (2022) explain that internal factors such as age, gender, and disease history, as well as external factors such as culture, community systems, and family support, shape an individual's perception of death. Theoretically, according to Yu et al. (2025), this dynamic can be understood through the Dual-Process Model of Terror Management Theory (TMT). This model explains that humans have defense mechanisms to manage awareness of death, one of which is through the development of self-esteem as a "psychological buffer" that suppresses anxiety when individuals feel that their lives are meaningful. Zhang et al. (2019) specifically synthesize how internal psychological variables such as self-esteem and meaning of life interact with social factors that influence death anxiety.

Based on the analysis of the 11 selected articles, the most dominant and consistent factor influencing death anxiety is internal psychological defense mechanisms, especially the interaction between self-esteem and meaning in life. In line with Terror Management Theory (TMT), individuals use self-esteem as a buffer to neutralize anxiety about mortality. Zhang et al. (2019) specifically demonstrate that meaning of life, in both dimensions of meaning presence and search for meaning, is negatively correlated with death anxiety, where self-esteem mediates the influence of life meaning on death anxiety. Yu et al. (2025) further show that individuals with high self-esteem and security profiles have the lowest levels of anxiety compared to other groups. Xiao et al. (2022) add that strong group identities can increase self-esteem to provide a sense of existential sustainability for individuals.

Social support and interpersonal relationships represent the second most discussed factors affecting death anxiety. Social support has a very significant influence, especially regarding feelings of isolation. Loneliness emerged as the main risk predictor. Jumaa (2021) found a very strong positive relationship between psychological loneliness and death anxiety. Individuals who feel lonely tend to view death as a daunting process because it must be faced without emotional support. This is closely related to feelings of rejection or low-quality intimacy. Yu et al. (2025) identified that individuals with low security profiles, including feelings of being unsupported and rejected, showed the most extreme levels of death anxiety.

The aspect of loss of attachment and affection, along with social helplessness, presents additional dimensions. Pei et al. (2020) found that although financial support lowers anxiety, emotional closeness that is too deep with children actually increases death anxiety due to fears of painful separation. Feelings of social helplessness, which often manifest in dependence on others, contribute significantly to increased anxiety (Adelirad et al., 2021). Greenblatt-Kimron et al. (2021) note that self-efficacy in social roles such as parental roles can be a moderating factor that mitigates the negative impact of loneliness and helplessness.

The fourth crucial factor is the role of spirituality, cognition, and modern coping strategies. Solaimanizadeh et al. (2020) affirm that spiritual health and religious coping provide a framework of hope that helps individuals accept death as part of life transitions. From a cognitive perspective, mindfulness strategies have proven effective in helping the elderly manage negative thoughts. Mindful elderly individuals tend to be less anxious about facing death because they are better able to accept the current reality without judgment (Yurliani et al., 2020). Abou Jaoude et al. (2024) reveal that climate change anxiety is now a new external

factor that triggers death anxiety, wherein a person's level of religiosity plays a moderating role in this relationship.

Demographic factors such as gender and education exert significant influence on the manifestation of this anxiety. Consistently, it has been found that women have higher levels of anxiety than men. Older women experience more death anxiety than men (Pei et al., 2020), which is likely influenced by emotional sensitivity and social roles (Adelirad et al., 2021). The level of education also plays a role in providing cognitive resources to process information about death more objectively. The findings from these 11 journals provide an important foundation for psychology practitioners to design holistic interventions. These interventions should focus on strengthening the meaning of life to build self-esteem, increasing death literacy through self-reflection (Zhang et al., 2024), and the use of mindfulness techniques to help individuals achieve a more peaceful and calm stage of self-acceptance at the end of life.

CONCLUSION

A systematic review of these 11 articles provides a comprehensive picture that death anxiety is not a stand-alone phenomenon, but rather the result of a dynamic interaction between internal, social, and spiritual factors. Based on the results of the synthesis, it can be concluded that the meaning of life and self-esteem are the most dominant protective factors. Individuals who are able to find meaning in their lives tend to have stronger psychological defense mechanisms in the face of existential fear of death. On the other hand, the social dimension plays a critical role as both a risk factor and a protector. Psychological loneliness, feelings of rejection, and social helplessness have been shown to significantly increase the intensity of death anxiety. Interestingly, emotional attachment to family shows complex dynamics; closeness that is too intimate without psychological independence can actually be a source of anxiety due to fears of separation. Therefore, quality social support and self-efficacy in social roles are key in maintaining individual emotional stability.

The review also confirms the importance of modern coping strategies such as mindfulness and spiritual health reinforcement in helping individuals reach a peaceful stage of self-acceptance. In practical terms, these findings recommend that psychology practitioners design holistic interventions that not only focus on cognitive anxiety management, but also address aspects of meaning-finding and improving the quality of social relationships. Thus, individuals are expected to view death not as a crippling threat, but rather as a natural part of life's journey that can be faced calmly and with dignity.

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