

## Clinical Study

# Spiritual Beliefs and Health Anxiety as Predictors of Fear of Death among Young Adults

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### ABSTRACT

*Excessive concern about health and subsequent fear of death play an important role in one's mental health. Spirituality is an essential aspect of human life and is considered to be an important determinant of how successfully people may overcome a variety of problems including fear of death. The present study aimed at exploring the spiritual Beliefs and health anxiety as predictors of fear of death among Young Adults in India. A sample of 395 participants (235 males and 160 females) aged between 18-30 years was collected using convenience and snowball sampling techniques. The informed consent was taken from the participants and data was collected using various measures including Whiteley Index scale, Spirituality Well-being scale and Death Anxiety Scale. The results indicated that health anxiety and spirituality significantly predict fear of death. Furthermore, Health anxiety and spirituality was found to have significant negative correlation. Spirituality and fear of death was also found to have significant negative correlation.*

**KEYWORDS:** Spirituality, Health anxiety, Fear of death, Young adults

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### INTRODUCTION

Emotional suffering and insecurity brought on by the awareness of one's own health including fears, memories and thoughts of death in general population is a major public health concern. Death anxiety is a complex

psychological concept with many facets that can be influenced by several contributing and moderating factors which play a crucial role in the maintenance of this fear and thoughts<sup>1,2</sup>. Spirituality is among one of these factors which is a sense of significance or direction that comes from a

higher power. Spirituality is a component of human existence that is connected to significant structures that give a person's life meaning and direction and assist them in coping with life's ups and downs<sup>3</sup>. The main forces influencing how organisms behave in order to survive are life and death. The basic survival mechanism for humans is "fight or flight," the primary premise of evolutionary theory, as this stress response aids in determining the intensity of danger<sup>4,5</sup>. This conscious awareness of danger increases the likelihood of survival by connecting harmful risks to the risk of dying. This level of self-awareness goes well beyond just survival and exposure to these cues associated with death might result in fear of death<sup>6</sup>. According to existential perspective, the fear of death is viewed as an essential component of human existence and also that humans are unique in their awareness of their own mortality, which can cause worry and fear<sup>7</sup>. The central concept of this perspective is that people must face the truth of their own mortality and the realization that life is temporary<sup>8,9,10</sup>. People may experience existential dread as a result of coming to terms with the truth that they will eventually cease to exist. According to Yalom (2008), if fear of death is a crucial step in the developmental process, teenagers may engage in risk-taking behaviour to deal with death anxiety that has not been appropriately handled<sup>11</sup>. This tendency of avoiding fear of death persists throughout one's entire life since it starts in childhood and continues through adolescence and maturity. According to Sigmund Freud, fear of dying is a natural aspect of human nature and it's a type of defense mechanism to deal with the unconscious conflicts<sup>12,13</sup>. The urge for self-preservation and the acceptance of death's inevitability, in his opinion, are at odds when we are conscious of our own mortality. Death anxiety is a symptom of unconscious struggle rather than a sign of psychopathology<sup>14</sup>. Clinically speaking, concern over dying is a sign that an underlying conflict has arisen. The cognitive viewpoint concentrates on successful death coping, including controlling the emotions associated with fear of dying<sup>15</sup>. According to the cognitive viewpoint, anxiety over dying can be treated therapeutically as a subtype of generalized health anxiety. Our fear of dying is not a basic part of who we are, but rather a factor in health issues<sup>16,17</sup>. Spirituality and the fear of death are closely intertwined, as many people turn to spirituality as a way to cope with their fear of death. Moreno-Montoya (2017) studied relationship

between spiritual beliefs, beliefs about death and health among Romani people, a cultural minority in Spain<sup>18</sup>. Findings indicated that supernatural beliefs offer protection from illness. Schuttee et.al, (2016) examined about health anxiety, acceptance of death, and coping mechanism of patients with health anxiety<sup>19</sup>. Result showed that patients with health are more anxious about health and have less acceptance of death than patients with depression. Another study done by Birgit et.al (2018) also showed positive association between Fear of death and Health anxiety<sup>20</sup>. It was a systematic review of literature, but all studies were cross-sectional. Tabei SZ (2016) through non-systematic review examined the effect of spirituality on people's health and discussed about the relation between spirituality and health<sup>21</sup>. In the southern part of Iran, during the COVID-19 outbreak, Khyali et al. (2023) conducted research on health anxiety and spiritual health in cancer patients receiving chemotherapy<sup>22</sup>. The study's findings led to the conclusion that improving patients' spiritual wellbeing and resilience should be a key component of their care because these traits are effective tools for battling cancer and easing patients' worry, particularly during the COVID-19 epidemic.

#### METHODOLOGY

A two-group design based on gender i.e., females and males were used in the present study. This study followed a correlational design using online surveys as a method of data collection. In this study fear of death was the dependent variable and Spiritual Beliefs and Health Anxiety were the independent variables. The sample consisted of 429 young adults out of which only 395 participants were included with the age group ranging from 18-30 years. The sampling technique used for the study was convenience and snowball sampling. The Whiteley Index<sup>23</sup>, Spirituality Well-being scale<sup>24</sup>, and Death Anxiety Scale<sup>25</sup> were the three tests used in the study.

#### RESULT

The statistical analysis encapsulated the various constructs of the study in a nutshell. A total of 429 replies were gathered, but 34 were eliminated during screening. Version 2.0 of IBM SPSS software was used for the analysis.

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics (N=395)

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Range
Health Anxiety	38.39	8.59	26	58	14-70
Spirituality	42.30	9.39	16	60	12-60
Fear of Death	43.17	7.39	15	63	15-75

**Table 2:** Group Statistics (Female=235 & Male=160)

Variable	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation
Health Anxiety	Female	38.96	8.68
	Male	37.56	8.42
Fear of Death	Female	43.18	7.60
	Male	43.16	7.10
Spirituality	Female	42.20	9.28
	Male	42.44	9.58

**Table 3:** Bivariate Correlation Table

Variable	1	2	3
Health Anxiety	—		
Spirituality	-.176**	—	
Fear of Death	.181**	.321**	—

\*\*significant at 0.01 level

**Table 4:** Result of Regression Coefficient

Predictor	RSquare	Adjusted RSquare	F	...	Sig.
Health Anxiety	.119	.114	26.396	.128	0.000
Spirituality				-298	0.000

## DISCUSSION

Spirituality is a crucial component of human life and an essential component that enables people to successfully navigate a wide range of difficulties. Health anxiety is a psychological health condition characterized by persistent and excessive fear about having a serious illness, despite medical reassurances that there is no medical evidence of any such illness<sup>26,27,28</sup>.

The results of regression analysis that the independent variables significantly predicted fear of death, ( $r = -.176$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, the  $R^2$  value of .119 suggests that the model accounts for 11.9% of variance in fear of death. The study found out that Health anxiety and Fear of Death has significantly weak positive correlation ( $r = .181$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and Spirituality and Fear of Death has significant weak negative correlation ( $r = -.321$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These findings are consistent with previous research which studied the significant relationship between spiritual beliefs, beliefs about death and health among Romani people<sup>18</sup>. Findings indicated that high spiritual belief causes low health anxiety which results in lower fear of death. According to this study, health anxiety and spirituality were among the most significant predictors of fear of death. The study further reveals that the excessive concern for one's health can heighten one's awareness of mortality and enhance one's fear of dying.

Table 4 shows that health anxiety and spirituality have a significantly weak negative correlation ( $r = -.176$ ,  $p < .001$ ) which suggests that people who are high on spirituality may have lower levels of health anxiety. These results are in line with earlier research by Tabei and his colleagues (2016), who looked at the relationship between health and spirituality<sup>21</sup>. Table 4 further shows that health anxiety and fear of death has significantly weak positive correlation ( $r = .181$ ,  $p < .001$ ) which means that higher the level of health anxiety higher will be fear of death. These findings are similar to previous research that has found significant relationship between health anxiety and fear of death<sup>29,30,31,32</sup>. Another study done by Lebeland his colleagues (2020) found that a common mistrust of how a body functions predisposes to irrational fear of death in health anxiety<sup>33</sup>. They also found strong positive correlation between fear of death and health anxiety. The present study also showed that spirituality and fear of death has a weak negative correlation ( $r = -.321$ ,  $p < .001$ ) which means people who have higher levels of spirituality will have less fear of death. This result is consistent with previous study done by Greyson (2006) who studied relation between fear of death and spirituality<sup>34</sup>. His research revealed that having a close encounter with death deepened spiritual consciousness. Many experiencers express the opinions that love is more essential than worldly possessions, that life continues after death, and that everything happens for a reason as they become more empathic and spiritually oriented<sup>35</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

Spirituality is said to be one of humans' inherent abilities that has favorable impact on health of people<sup>36,37,38</sup>. Spirituality can be a powerful tool for coping with the fear of death by providing a sense of connection, comfort, and acceptance. It can help people come to terms with their mortality and live more fully in the present moment<sup>39</sup>. The present study aimed at studying the effect of spiritual beliefs and health anxiety on fear of death among young adults in India. The study was conducted on a sample of 395 young adults, and data was collected using standardized measures of spiritual beliefs, health anxiety and fear of death. The results of the study indicated that health anxiety and spiritual belief significantly predict fear of death. These results are in line with earlier studies<sup>20,27</sup>. Furthermore, the study found that there was no significant gender difference in all the three variables. Overall, the result of the present study suggests that health anxiety and spirituality are important predictors for fear of death.

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