



## Review Article

## Attitudes Toward Death and Dying in Older Adults: A Cross-Cultural Psychological Perspective

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### Abstract

Death is a universal truth, yet people's views toward death vary widely across psychological and cultural situations. These attitudes affect older persons' mental well-being, end-of-life decisions, and overall life satisfaction. This review compiles data from 25 empirical studies that investigate the psychological, spiritual, and cultural aspects of death attitudes in later life. The paper uses cross-cultural research to investigate how religiosity, spirituality, meaning-making, and cultural worldviews influence acceptance, fear, and avoidance of death.

The findings show that spirituality and strong religious views are consistently associated with lower death anxiety and greater peaceful acceptance. Individuals who lack existential purpose or social connectedness, on the other hand, are more fearful and avoidant. Cultural context is an important moderator: Western civilisations frequently understand death through individualistic and existential frameworks, whereas Eastern traditions see dying as a natural movement along a spiritual or social continuum. Gender, physical health, and life satisfaction all have an impact on how older persons think and feel about death.

The review uses psychological theories to explain coping mechanisms and meaning reconstruction, including Gerotranscendence, Logotherapy, and Terror Management Theory. Overall, data suggest that fostering purpose, spiritual meditation, and acceptance of mortality improves resilience and psychological integration as people age. This research highlights the importance of comprehending death attitudes for end-of-life care as well as for fostering dignity, peace, and purpose in the latter phases of human development by integrating cross-cultural and psychological viewpoints.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ageing forces people to confront physical decline, social losses, and the reality of death. However, death views vary greatly amongst persons and cultures, ranging from terror and avoidance to calm and acceptance. Understanding these attitudes is critical for gerontological psychology and end-of-life care because they influence how older people deal with disease, preserve their well-being, and find meaning in their final years.

According to research in psychology and gerontology, a complex interaction between spirituality, religion, cultural worldview, and individual meaning-making shapes attitudes toward death (Wong et al., 1994; Neimeyer et al., 2015). According to Krause (2007), older persons who view death as a transcendental or natural process frequently exhibit less worry and higher psychological adaptation.

Those who see death as annihilation or loss of identity may experience terror, despair, and depression (Lonetto & Templer, 1986).

With globalisation and increased life expectancy, comparative examinations of Eastern and Western countries reveal stark differences. In Western cultures, death is frequently viewed through an individualistic lens, stressing autonomy, control, and personal closure. In contrast, Eastern faiths based on Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism see death as a change in the spiritual continuum of existence (Kim et al., 2014; Hsu et al., 2009). These viewpoints have a significant impact on how older persons achieve peace, cope with grieving, and create meaning from loss.

The purpose of this work is to conduct a systematic assessment of cross-cultural empirical studies in order to better understand the psychological and cultural roots of older adults' death perspectives. It integrates theoretical explanations with data from worldwide research, including Terror Management Theory (TMT), Logotherapy, and Gerotranscendence. By doing so, it demonstrates how meaning-making and spirituality can change death from a feared ending to an important developmental experience that fosters integrity, knowledge, and emotional calm later in life.

### Theoretical Framework: 1. Terror Management Theory

TMT, suggested by Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (1986), contends that being conscious of mortality causes existential fear, which humans handle by adhering to cultural worldviews and self-esteem-enhancing beliefs. Death anxiety in older persons is reduced by mechanisms that reinforce symbolic immortality, such as religious faith, legacy creation, and prosocial activity. According to research, people who have strong cultural or spiritual frameworks have lower levels of death salience and anxiety. Collectivist civilisations may be better able to mitigate this concern across cultures, as social and familial links create an enduring feeling of continuation after death.

### 2. Logo therapy and Meaning-Building

Viktor Frankl's (1963) logotherapy focuses on the "will to meaning" as the main human motivator. Faced with mortality, older persons frequently seek to validate the meaning of their

lives through introspection, relationships, or spiritual beliefs. According to logotherapeutic techniques, acceptance of death is dependent on an individual's ability to find meaning in the midst of loss. According to research, older persons who preserve a consistent life narrative and sense of meaning have more calm and less death dread (Schnell, 2009; Wong, 2012).

### 3. Gerotranscendent Theory

Tornstam (2005) developed the Gerotranscendence Theory, which views ageing as a developmental process that involves transitioning from materialistic concerns to spiritual and cosmic viewpoints. According to this approach, older persons eventually overcome their dread of death by expanding their sense of self beyond the physical body. According to an empirical study, transcendence is connected with peace, wisdom, and acceptance of mortality (Reed, 1991; Tornstam, 2005).

### 4. Cultural Perspectives and Death Attitudes

Death is interpreted through a cultural prism. Death is frequently viewed as a threat to individual identity in Western psychology, resulting in anxiety and avoidance (Neimeyer et al., 2015). However, death is seen in Eastern traditions as a chance for spiritual development—a cyclical return or rebirth. These diverse worldviews influence whether older persons face death with fear or spiritual preparedness (Kim et al., 2014; Hsu et al., 2009).

### 5. Integrating the Psychological and Cultural Dimensions

Together, these views demonstrate that attitudes toward death are neither universal nor static. They are the result of psychological coping mechanisms, cultural meaning systems, and spiritual beliefs that change with time. Spirituality serves as both a buffer against existential anxiety and a source of transcendence, allowing older persons to see death as a continuation rather than a cessation. Understanding these frameworks lays the groundwork for the empirical investigations discussed in the following section.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

- to evaluate how self-worth and a sense of purpose in life shield senior citizens from fear of dying;
- to investigate how relationships, health, and income influence late-life perspectives on mortality.
- to examine how anxieties related to death are influenced by social efficacy and loneliness.
- to investigate how religious uncertainty and spirituality affect emotional health and death anxiety.
- to provide a comprehensive model that connects existential, social, and psychological factors that influence death dread.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

**Zhang et al. (2019).** Meaning, self-esteem, and death anxiety (China).

The purpose of this cross-sectional study was to assess the links between meaning in life, self-esteem, and death dread in older Chinese adults. Using validated questionnaires, the authors

discovered that a greater sense of significance considerably predicted decreased death anxiety; self-esteem slightly mitigated this association. The findings suggest that therapies aimed at reducing mortality-related anxiety in later life should focus on nurturing life meaning and increasing self-esteem. To improve end-of-life emotional adjustment in elderly Chinese populations, the authors propose community initiatives and brief psychotherapy techniques that promote purpose and self-worth.

**Lei et al. (2022).** Death attitudes and the demand for death education in China. Researchers conducted a broad community survey of southwestern Chinese older persons to measure attitudes regarding death as well as demographic and health characteristics. The findings indicated that respondents' attitudes on mortality differed depending on their marital status, income, health, and whether or not they had previously discussed death. Notably, a sizable proportion reported interest in death education, indicating unmet informational and psychosocial requirements. The study emphasises that socioeconomic and relational circumstances influence preparation to deal with mortality subjects, and it encourages the establishment of culturally tailored death-education programs to promote preparedness and minimise fear.

**Greenblatt-Kimron et al. (2021)** Loneliness and death anxiety (Israel).

In this Israeli study, validated scales were used in a community sample to relate loneliness and death anxiety in older persons. Higher loneliness predicted higher death anxiety, but parental self-efficacy and perceived social roles reduced this effect. The authors see loneliness as aggravating existential worries when social positions that provide purpose deteriorate. Interventions that restore social roles, strengthen family ties, or foster community connections were indicated for reducing death anxiety. The study recommends focusing on loneliness as a controllable element in elderly mental health and emphasises the interpersonal aspect of mortality attitudes.

**Willis, Nelson, and Moreno (2019).** Religious doubt, death dread, and despair (United States). This study used data from a large U.S. sample to investigate how religious uncertainty mediated the relationship between death dread and depressive symptoms in older persons. The results show that unresolved theological uncertainties exacerbate the link between mortality anxieties and sadness, with some racial/ethnic variances. The authors urge for pastoral care and therapy interventions that address doubt and spiritual conflict, emphasising that resolving existential ambiguity can mitigate depressed outcomes in elders confronting end-of-life issues. The study emphasises the complexities of religion, arguing that belief quality, rather than affiliation, influences death views.

**Fortner & Neimeyer (1999)** conducted a quantitative review of death anxiety in older persons.

This major meta-analytic analysis analysed decades of studies on death fear across adulthood and discovered conflicting age

patterns: some data imply that death anxiety diminishes in later life, while others show no change or rises depending on measurement. The review highlighted methodological diversity (various scales, unrepresentative samples) as a barrier to drawing clear findings. The authors advocated for the use of standardised measures and longitudinal designs to clarify developmental trajectories of death views, as well as the investigation of mediators such as meaning and social support that may explain individual differences among older persons.

**Cicirelli (2001)** Personal Meanings of Death and Attachment to God (United States).

Cicirelli investigated the personal implications of death for older Americans, as well as the relationship between spiritual devotion and death anxieties. Using interview and survey techniques, she discovered that dread of the dying process (pain, loss of control) frequently trumps fear of nonexistence. Strong devotion to a benevolent deity was associated with lower death anxiety and a higher likelihood of a peaceful exit. According to the study, spiritual attachment provides emotional comfort and symbolic immortality, impacting how elders see the prospect of dying and their preferences for end-of-life care.

**Harding et al. (2014).** Religion, culture, and symptom burden (East Africa sample).

This study, which focused on the symptom burden among older East Africans, also looked at cultural and theological interpretations of sickness and death. Interviews found that religious beliefs and familial expectations had a significant impact on accepting suffering and viewing death as a meaningful transition. Spiritual frameworks offered peace, and community rituals aided coping. Implications include incorporating spiritual care into palliative care in low-resource settings and preserving culturally bound meanings when addressing prognosis and end-of-life options with older persons and their families.

**Thorson and Powell (2000)** compare cross-national levels of death anxiety.

This comparative study examined death anxiety in several nations (including the United States, Turkey, and Japan) and discovered that cultural values (individualism versus collectivism) and religious worldviews strongly influenced fear and avoidance of death among older persons. Collectivist cultures with shared rituals and larger family duties frequently demonstrated higher acceptance of other types of death concerns (for example, worried about family hardship rather than annihilation). The report emphasises that national culture influences which death-related concerns are prioritised and proposes culturally appropriate ways to end-of-life care.

**Azaiza et al. (2011).** Religion and death acceptance among Israeli Arabs and Jews.

When the authors compared senior Arab Muslims and Jewish older persons in Israel, they found that religious devotion was associated with higher acceptance of death and reduced existential anxiety. Secular participants exhibited more ambivalence and increased anxiety. Cultural narratives

regarding the afterlife, honour, and family continuity influenced attitudes in diverse ways. The study demonstrates that within a single national context, subcultural religious frameworks contribute to various death attitudes, emphasising the importance of culturally and religiously responsive care services for multiethnic elders.

**Missler et al. (2012)** Existential meaning and death anxiety (Netherlands).

This Dutch study looked at older community-dwelling persons and discovered that stronger existential meaning and spiritual well-being were associated with lower death dread and higher neutral acceptance. Qualitative elements revealed that life review, legacy work, and social roles all helped to create purpose. The authors emphasised the importance of interventions that foster narrative coherence—life review groups, legacy projects—for facilitating acceptance and reducing end-of-life pain among elders in Western contexts.

**Lockhart et al. (2001)** examined perceptions of health and end-of-life issues in the United States. This mixed-methods study investigated the relationship between older persons' views of their health and attitudes toward mortality. Those in better health were more prepared and had lower death fear, but those with chronic illness were more ambivalent—sometimes viewing death as an escape, other times as a scary loss. Concerns about autonomy and hardship on the family were evident. Improving perceived health and autonomy may indirectly reduce death dread, according to the study, which also proposed integrated care that addressed existential issues as well as symptom management.

**Catt et al. (2005)** investigated older people's perceptions of hospice and end-of-life decisions (UK).

The authors surveyed older British adults to learn about their knowledge, perceptions, and preferences for palliative care and hospice. The findings revealed a general willingness for engagement in end-of-life decisions, but low understanding of hospice programs. Misconceptions and cultural taboos around death hampered planning. The study advocated for public education and clinician-led conversations to help older persons make end-of-life decisions and normalise discussions about death and dying.

**Matsui and Braun (2009).** Japanese American elders: mourning, health, and acceptance.

This culturally focused study discovered that Japanese American elders who had prior grief experiences or had discussed death with family members had stronger acceptance of death and more specific end-of-life desires. The authors stressed the importance of intergenerational interaction and culturally particular traditions in fostering acceptance, and they advised healthcare personnel to encourage culturally sensitive family discussions about dying.

**Depaola, Neimeyer, & Lupfer (2003).** Death anxiety, ageing attitudes & demographic moderators. This study examined the relationships between death anxiety, attitudes about ageing, and

demographic moderators and discovered that negative views of ageing are associated with increased death anxiety. Gender and ethnicity altered the correlations, with women and various ethnic groups reporting different patterns of concern. In order to improve attitudes toward ageing and lessen death dread, the authors proposed anti-ageism, reframing cultural messaging about ageing, and providing focused psychosocial assistance.

**Van der Kaap-Deeder et al. (2020)** Life evaluation, reconstruction, and acceptance.

This study used a developmental perspective and found that older persons who participated in structured life review and meaning-making activities showed more neutral/approach acceptance and less death avoidance. Using mixed techniques, the authors identified cognitive processes (reframing and coherence building) that support acceptance. The findings support therapeutic life-review therapies that promote psychological integration and emotionally prepare elders for the end of life.

**Wong, Reker, and Gesser (1994).** DAP-R measurement and cross-cultural application.

This foundational measuring work introduces the Death Attitude Profile-Revised (DAP-R), a multidimensional instrument that measures fear, avoidance, neutral acceptance, approach acceptance, and escape acceptance. Cross-cultural applications found significant patterns: religiosity indicated approach acceptability, while cultural taboos suggested avoidance. The DAP-R allows sophisticated empirical study on elder death attitudes by differentiating previously confused variables, hence boosting the specificity of treatments and research.

**Krause, Pargament, and Ironson (2018).** Religious hope and death anxiety (National survey).

Using a large national dataset, the authors discovered that religious optimism and faith-based meaning dramatically lowered death fear, particularly in older age groups. Religious optimism served as a psychological barrier, encouraging acceptance despite bad health. The study recommends including spiritual support and hope-enhancing therapies into geriatric and palliative care to reduce mortality-related distress and increase elders' psychological well-being.

**Neimeyer et al. (2015) and related works.** Meaning reconstruction and narrative therapy.

Neimeyer and colleagues analysed evidence to conclude that meaning reconstruction and story therapy significantly reduce death anxiety and promote existential well-being in older persons. Trials and quasi-experimental studies have shown that guided life-review and meaning-centred approaches can help elders reframe losses, complete unfinished business, and cultivate acceptance. The study makes the case for the wider application of meaning-focused psychotherapies in clinical and community geriatric settings.

**Nilsson, Kazemi, and Drake (2016).** Spirituality and resilience among Swedish elders (qualitative).

This Swedish study discovered through qualitative interviews that spirituality—expressed as inner peace, togetherness, and ritual—helped people cope with health and relationship losses. Participants identified spiritual practices and beliefs as sources of meaning that helped them rethink mortality and preserve psychological equilibrium. The authors advocated for culturally appropriate spiritual care and areas for reflective practice in elder services.

**Liu et al. (2023)** Life review and psychospiritual consequences (systematic review).

This systematic review looked at life-review therapies for older persons with long-term illnesses and discovered consistent gains in existential well-being, reduced depressive symptoms, and increased death acceptance. Mechanisms included narrative coherence, legacy building, and social validation. The review suggests expanding life-review programs in chronic care settings and conducting more RCTs to identify active components and long-term impacts.

**Lin et al. (2024)** conducted a meta-analysis of life review treatment effects.

A revised meta-analysis of life-review therapies for older persons found moderate effect sizes for reduced depressive symptoms and small-to-moderate gains in life satisfaction and existential meaning. Subgroup studies revealed that interventions that directly targeted legacy and acceptance themes had larger benefits. The authors advocate the standardisation of intervention techniques and the inclusion of death-attitude measurements in studies.

**Sutin et al. (2023)** discuss life's purpose and cognitive trajectory.

This longitudinal study found that having a stronger baseline sense of purpose in life led to slower cognitive decline and greater resilience after cognitive impairment beginning. Although the study does not focus solely on death attitudes, it suggests that purpose and meaning buffers lessen existential discomfort and may influence how older persons see mortality and loss of self. The authors advocate incorporating purpose into cognitive health and end-of-life planning activities.

**Boyle et al. (2021)**. Purpose, dementia onset, and death. A prospective cohort study discovered that having a greater purpose in life predicted a decreased incidence of dementia and lower mortality rates among older persons. By linking purpose to tangible health outcomes, the study reinforces the case for incorporating meaning-centred interventions into public health efforts to promote healthy ageing and reduce fear of death through enhanced functioning and participation.

**Officer et al. (2024)** COVID-19-era attitudes toward death (systematic review).

This study combined studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and discovered that many older adult groups experienced higher death fear, which was reduced by social isolation and altered rituals. In contrast, several elders expressed greater acceptance as a result of increased mortality

awareness and stronger spiritual practices. The review emphasises the importance of crisis circumstances in influencing death attitudes, as well as the need for adaptive services during times of mass suffering.

**Martínez-Heredia et al. (2021)** found that Spanish senior individuals are concerned about their loved ones. In a Spanish cross-sectional survey, older persons expressed relatively favourable attitudes concerning their own death while experiencing considerable anxiety about illness and the loss of close friends. These concerns were impacted by family roles, caregiver responsibilities, and cultural expectations. The study recommends that interventions should address relational fears (bereavement preparation, family communication) as well as personal acceptance to fully assist elders' attitudes toward dying.

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 1. Cultural Differences in Attitudes Toward Death

Studies show major cultural differences in how older persons interpret death. Death is viewed as a normal, cyclical passage in eastern civilisations such as China, Japan, and India, with spiritual ideas of rebirth and continuity supporting this view. This perspective diminishes fear and promotes acceptance. In contrast, Western cultures, particularly the United States and Israel, show higher death dread due to individualistic identity and conceptions of death as final. These trends are consistent with Terror Management Theory, which contends that cultural worldviews serve as psychological shields against mortality worries.

### 2. Spirituality: A Protective Factor

Across cultures, spirituality regularly reduces death anxiety. Older persons who engage in religion, rituals, or meditation demonstrate more emotional stability and readiness for dying. Spirituality provides both solace and a broader context for contemplating life's end. Regardless of religious tradition, spiritual grounding predicts more tranquil views toward death, emphasising its universal protective role in ageing.

### 3. The Importance of Meaning Making

Meaning-making has a significant role in how older persons deal with mortality. Individuals who have a strong sense of purpose, whether based on family, values, or personal convictions, report less dread and more acceptance. Several research have found that meaning improves well-being and decreases worry. This reinforces Logotherapy's basic idea: that purpose enables people to face mortality with fortitude and clarity. Meaning-centred coping appears to be helpful in both Eastern and Western cultures.

### 4. Psychological and health-related predictors

Psychological health has a significant impact on attitudes toward dying. Loneliness, despair, and low life satisfaction all predict increased death anxiety. In contrast, strong social support lessens fear and increases acceptance. Physical health is also important: chronic disease causes worry, whereas high functional capacity promotes confidence. These findings are

consistent with Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, which proposes that emotional interactions and positive affect become increasingly significant in later life.

### 5. Education and communication on death are necessary.

Several studies have found a considerable demand for frank conversation about mortality among older persons. Cultural taboos and familial avoidance frequently prevent such discussions, exacerbating anxiety and uncertainty. Death education, whether through workshops, therapy, or community programs, has been demonstrated to reduce anxiety and enhance readiness. Encouraging open communication helps to normalise mortality and improve coping.

### 6. Gerotranscendence and Later-Life Growth

Many elderly persons naturally shift toward spiritual meditation and acceptance, as indicated by Gerotranscendence theory. According to research, elders who adopt a larger, more contemplative worldview experience better peace with death. They grow less concerned with worldly possessions and more conscious of existential relationships. This shift emphasises that age can be a time of inward progress rather than decline.

### 5. CONCLUSION

When taken as a whole, these studies provide a multifaceted perspective of death anxiety in older persons, with a focus on existential, psychological, social, and cultural factors. Evidence suggests that meaning in life and self-esteem serve as significant internal buffers, lowering fear of death and enhancing emotional resilience. Simultaneously, loneliness, health state, and sociodemographic characteristics increase vulnerability, emphasising the need for social connection and supportive surroundings. Cross-cultural research shows that death dread is influenced by values, religion, and societal conventions, and theoretical frameworks like Terror Management Theory and the Meaning-Making Model assist in explaining how people manage existential worries. Overall, the research indicates that interventions aimed at increasing meaning, encouraging discussion about death, strengthening family responsibilities, and addressing social isolation can dramatically reduce death fear and increase psychological well-being in older persons.

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