

College students perceptions of death and dying



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Introduction

College students experience death just as all people do, however collegiates deal with bereavement and grief in different ways. There is a lack in research in how college students view and cope with death and dying. College students have classes, work, studying, extracurricular activities, and organizations that consume much of their time and energy and most of these things cause stress. With all of these piled up on one person, grieving the loss of or coping with the dying process of an important figure in one's life can dramatically impact a student's mental and/or physical health. Most, if not all, universities in the United States provide free health services to students such as counseling and medical services. Seeking out counseling or medical help for those grieving can significantly benefit the general health of college students. This paper will examine how college students view death and dying from previous research and will provide information discovered from the authors' own research on how collegiates feel about certain aspects of death and dying.

Literature Review

In Leming and Dickinson (2016), when comparing adolescents (12-19 years of age) to young adults (20-44 years of age), young adults look towards the future and accept that death is inevitable and could happen at any time unlike adolescents who are focused on more immediate goals and not worried about death because that is seen to happen in the distant future. The authors also iterate that the definition of an adult is dependent on an individual's maturity. In other words, someone who has experienced death,

knows the grieving process, and understands what death is, that person would be more “mature” than individuals who may not have experienced the death of someone. For adolescents, the death of a peer makes the individuals more aware of their own death and how uncertain when it will happen is. Adolescents are focused on their goals and dreams because they believe that they have a long time to live before they must worry about dying. One thing that adolescents are concerned with during this phase is identify, “finding the meaning of life”, and what their purpose is. Along with this is death anxiety, which is a way of fighting an inevitable death and finding one’s purpose. In Lyke (2013), the author states that there is a negative correlation between purpose of life and fear of death in high school and college students. Death anxiety can include the fear of one’s own death, the death of others, and the fear of being dead. According to research, death anxiety decreases with age, but the peak of death anxiety is in younger adults and high school to college aged students.

In a study done by Lyke (2013), a sample of 168 community members answered an anonymous and confidential demographic questionnaire and two self-reports. The sample consisted on thirty eight percent male and sixty two percent female, between the ages of 18 and 35. The average age of the sample was 21, which is college age. Races identified in the sample were white (92%), African-American (3%), Hispanic (3%), Asian (1%), and other (1%). Some other factors that were included are marital status and religion. The questionnaire was based on a scale of fear of death from 1 being no to little fear and 5 being a lot of fear. The results showed that someone who is searching for a meaning in life is highly correlated with one’s fear of their

own death and fear of dying, and someone with less desire to find meaning had the lowest levels of fear in death and dying (474-478).

In an article by Nienaber and Goedereis (2015), death anxiety varies by personal factors, age, gender, and choice of major in college students. Compared to other majors, nursing students had the least amount of fear in death and dying and compared to different classes, freshman students had the highest level of fear of death and dying than sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Medical students and students of other disciplines who were enrolled in or have already taken a course on death and dying or aging were found to have lower levels of fear, and medical students had said that they were less concerned about working with dying patients

Methods

Using a twenty-five-question anonymous online survey (see attached at end of article), the researchers collected the data and personal opinions of 50 college students across the Slippery Rock University campus. It was emailed to various students, either those taking the Death and Dying course or randomly selected students. The survey consisted of 24 multiple choice questions regarding the age, gender, age at which you first experienced death, and personal opinions on death and dying. The last question of the survey asked the college student to provide their additional view of death and dying, giving the students the opportunity to elaborate on any other feelings that the multiple-choice questions did not cover.

Along with the survey questionnaire, two researchers collected data by approaching 10 students at Slippery Rock University about the topic of death
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and dying. Prior to being interviewed, each student was asked to sign consent to be audio recorded. In conjunction with the consent form, the students were advised that because this was an “ emotional subject” they did not have to answer if they felt uncomfortable or they could end the interview. Attached at the end of the article is a few examples of the consent form.

Results

Upon conclusion of the survey, the results and research had surprised the researchers. Most of our sample of 50 college students were found to be either 20 or 21 years of age, and 92% classified as female. This is a limitation in our study because it is disproportionate in gender and it leaves out younger students (18-19) and older, perhaps non-traditional students. Some of the results were shocking, as the researchers had hypothesized that the results would have been the opposite. When asked at what age the college student had first experienced death, 26% answered that they were between 0-5, 60% between the ages of 6 and 10, and 14% between the ages of 11-15. This shows that all students in our sample have experienced the death of someone prior to their college career. The next questions asked about general fear of death, fear of one’s own death, and fear of the death of a loved one. Eight percent of people had said that they feared the death of their loved ones, however 40% stated that they fear their own death and 38% stated that they were neutral. In terms of general feelings, 56% had said that they fear death, but understand that it is a natural phenomenon.

Next, students were asked about the quality and meaning of life and which one they favored. Drawing from the results of both questions, college students valued the quality of life over the sanctity of life. The next question asked if you believe in the afterlife and if religious or spiritual beliefs played a factor. Forty six percent of participants said that they have religious/spiritual beliefs and they believe in the afterlife, twenty four percent responded that they did not have religious/spiritual beliefs but do believe in the afterlife, fourteen percent had neutral feelings, and the remaining sixteen percent either did or did not have religious/spiritual beliefs but did not believe in the afterlife.

When asked about the importance of having a will, living will, or the power of attorney, 66-86% of students responded that it is very important to have a will, living will, or power of attorney before one is actively dying, while one is actively dying, and after someone has died. No one has answered that it was not important at all to have a will, living will, or power of attorney before someone is actively dying and while someone is actively dying; however, some students have answered that it is not important at all to have any of the listed documents after someone has passed.

The next section of questions asked about people's' rights and the legality of certain concepts. Eighty six percent of our sample said that they believe that people have the right to die, and only four percent had said that they did not believe people have the right to die. Though the topics of active euthanasia, physician assisted suicide, and capital punishment are controversial, the response rate either in support or opposition was higher than what the researchers has expected. Eighty six percent of students voted for active

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euthanasia and physician assisted suicide to be legal in the United States, and sixty six percent voted that capital punishment should be legal.

The researchers asked which death the collegiate participants viewed as the most traumatic. The results are as follows: 29. 2% for death of a parent, 27. 1% for death of a young child, 14. 6% for death of a sibling, and 8. 3% for death of an infant or fetus. The other options which received very few votes were death of a spouse, death of a pet, death of an adult child, and remaining chose not to answer. One option that received no response was for the death of a grandparent. Death in the 21st century is a more acceptable topic to discuss than it was in the 20th century, in which 82% of college students agreed that it has become more acceptable. The last of the multiple-choice questions asked the students if they felt death and dying courses should be required for medical students and 94% said it should be. They were also asked if death and dying courses should be a requirement for Slippery Rock University health majors, 82% said yes and 16% said no.

After the conclusion of the 10 faces to face interviews, the findings showed that students had felt uncomfortable and hesitant to answer questions, even though they had consented and were made aware that participation was not required. What was discovered is that the students interviewed were uncomfortable and found it strange or awkward to talk about this subject in a library even though they consented, and all agreed that the topic of death and dying is more acceptable in the 21st century. Of this sample, 9 were females and 1 was male. When asked about whether capital punishment should be legal, all 10 students had answered that they believe in the use of the death penalty. When asked about rite of passage and active euthanasia, <https://assignbuster.com/college-students-perceptions-of-death-and-dying/>

some students did not know what these things were, so the researchers explained the concept and then some of the students proceeded to opt out of answering because of unfamiliarity. Overall, the results from the face to face interviews did not differ very much or at all from the results of the online survey.

Conclusions

To conclude, previous studies found high levels of fear of death and death anxiety, while the current study has proved that college students today have varying degrees of fear and anxiety about death. Decades ago, death was not able to be talked about as easily as it is now. Though death is inevitable, it is natural, can occur at any time and place, and students should be aware that regardless of other responsibilities and obligations. Campus safety plays a huge role in death fear because when students are surrounded by thousands of other students every day, anything is possible. How students cope with death is also crucial, and college campuses providing resources to those who need assistance can not only improve a student's health but decrease death anxiety. Death education can play an important part in reducing the fear of death and death anxiety, learning how to cope, and how to help others experiencing death.

References

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