FEAR OF DEATH AMONG MILITARY PERSONNEL

Cătălin Bucurel BAIU

"Henri Coandă" Air Force Academy, Braşov, Romania (catalin.baiu@afahc.ro)

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Abstract: *Fear of death is a complex and subjective concept, with specific manifestations that vary from one individual to another. It naturally emerges as a survival instinct at the level of living beings. In the case of human beings, however, things are far more complex, one reason being the development of consciousness and rationality specific to humans. Various studies show that several variables can influence the intensity of fear of death. These may include gender differences, age, health status, and others. Probably because this fear can sometimes reach very high levels of intensity, human beings have developed certain coping mechanisms, which at times help restore inner balance, especially after a life experience that has activated the fear of death. Another frequently debated factor regarding fear of death is religion. Over time, researchers have attempted to determine whether there are differences in fear of death between religious and non-religious individuals, yet the results do not seem to be very conclusive. Although many of us confront fear of death, it is experienced more frequently and recurrently among military personnel, particularly those who have participated in missions in combat operations.*

Keywords: *fear of death, coping mechanism, religious beliefs, combat operations.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Fear of death is one of the deepest and most universal human fears. It may arise as a fear of the unknown, of losing control, or of being separated from loved ones. For some, it manifests through persistent thoughts, anxiety, or the avoidance of situations associated with danger, illness, or aging. For others, it remains a subtle concern that nevertheless influences life choices. Psychologically, fear of death can be linked to the need for meaning, security, and continuity. When it becomes intense, it may affect quality of life, however, when explored in therapy, it can lead to a clarification of personal values and to a more conscious experience of the present moment.

An important aspect of this article is that the voluntary participants who responded to the questionnaires are active military personnel employed on a contractual basis. Some of these service members have personally participated in missions, or belong to subunits that have carried out operations in theaters outside the territory of Romania, performing combat missions or supporting combat units in which they were confronted with the death or injury of fellow soldiers.

Furthermore, during the mandatory testing required for entry into the military system, candidates are not assessed through eliminatory psychological tests designed to identify levels of anxiety or aggression that may influence fear in the face of death and that, in conflict situations, could incapacitate a soldier. Although anxiety and aggression are states that military personnel may experience in peacetime, fear of death most frequently arises when they operate in conflict zones.

In such circumstances, it is extremely important—sometimes even vital—how they react and how they manage and control their emotions.

2. FEAR OF DEATH – PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS

One of the main sources of stress and anxiety for humans is considered to be the fear of death [1]. This can be seen as the price human beings pay for the development of the brain throughout the evolutionary process, alongside the emergence of human reason and the capacity for self-awareness. All these advantages have enabled humans to become aware of their own end and of life's transience. From the moment this awareness emerged, people began to seek various alternative solutions that would allow for a continuation of life and a more comfortable existence. From a psychological perspective, these aspects suggest that human beings have developed various coping mechanisms in relation to the fear of death.

Fear of death manifests in various ways and with different intensities depending on the context. Thus, females report higher levels of fear of death than males; higher levels of education and socio-economic status are moderately associated with lower fear of death; older individuals do not report greater fear of death compared to younger individuals; religious individuals are not necessarily associated with lower fear of death; good physical health is associated with lower fear of death; and a greater number of psychological problems are associated with higher levels of fear of death [2].

Psychoanalysis postulates that a death instinct generates an unconscious desire to die, while a life instinct is related to survival; when internalized, the death instinct may produce aggression directed toward the self and self-destructive behaviors [3]. Becker suggests that death is one of the main sources of concern for human beings and that this concern may be reduced through proper education, which would lead to a positive attitude toward death. From this perspective, a positive attitude toward death is imperative for the development of a healthy psychological balance in the individual [4].

The existential perspective provides a comprehensive overview, suggesting that death should be confronted rather than avoided, and by doing so, the individual becomes capable of constructing an authentic and meaningful life [5]. Wong's meaning-making theory states that understanding and accepting death as inevitable leads to an increase in the significance of the individual's life [6]. Therefore, it can be argued that psychological balance is necessary, and this can be achieved by bringing attention to the concept of death, which is usually avoided because it produces anxiety. By bringing this concept into the open, a better sense and meaning of life can be attained.

3. COPING MECHANISMS

While some individuals manage the fear of death in an adaptive and positive way (e.g., by living in the present and pursuing a meaningful existence), others may show an actual inability to relate to the imminence of their own death, which can lead to an intense, almost paralyzing fear and the use of unhealthy coping mechanisms.

The reactions manifested in response to the fear of death are characterized by two different mechanisms. One mechanism refers to the fact that the inevitability and awareness of one's own mortality are placed under denial, even by individuals who normally use other coping mechanisms to deal with sources of stress and anxiety in everyday life [7].

Another mechanism of reacting to this fear involves individuals choosing to manage their fear of death by intensifying whatever defense mechanism and coping strategy they typically use when dealing with less extreme forms of stress and anxiety.

Regarding these two mechanisms, the dominant theme in theories and research on this topic appears to be the denial of one's own mortality. However, denial does not seem to represent a solution because, aside from a few studies, most empirical investigations have shown that there are more extreme reactions to death at lower levels of awareness than at higher levels [1].

4. RELIGIOUS VERSUS NON-RELIGIOUS

In addition to representing the prevalent characterization of the defensive nature of attitudes/responses in the face of death at low levels of awareness, denial has also been used to explain the function of religious beliefs. Schulz uses the construct of death denial to explain the differences in how religious and non-religious individuals relate to the fear of death [1].

In line with Freud's psychodynamic view of religious belief [8], Schulz argues that religious individuals often report a lower fear of their own death than non-religious individuals because their belief in immortality encourages them to deny their fear of death. However, Schulz's investigations have been questioned, as Feifel and Branscomb [9] failed to find clear evidence of differences between religious and non-religious individuals regarding fear of death at low levels of awareness. In fact, Pollack (1979–1980) maintains that research findings concerning the relationship between religious beliefs and fear of death are too inconsistent to allow for a rational analysis [10].

Similarly, Kastenbaum and Costa (1977) attribute the inconsistency in this line of research to a lack of conceptual clarity regarding the expected relationship between religious belief and fear of death [11]. They note, "it is unclear whether religious individuals have a greater fear of death (which may have intensified their belief) or a lower fear (as a result of their belief)" (p. 234).

After examining several defense mechanisms and coping strategies, Kellerman (1980) suggests that these can be categorized from relatively simple mechanisms such as denial or repression to relatively sophisticated ones such as rationalization [12]. This suggestion may form the basis of the following implications: if denial and repression represent the response to awareness of one's own mortality [7], then religious individuals should display a lower fear of death at high levels of awareness. Conversely, at low levels of awareness, they should react with greater fear.

5. FEAR OF DEATH AMONG MILITARY PERSONNEL

By the nature of their profession, military personnel represent a distinct category of individuals who must confront the fear that arises in the face of death. Sigmund Freud argued in his theories that people do not truly experience the fear of death, given that it is not part of their lived experience. In the case of military personnel, this theory may be contradicted, as by operating in theaters of operations they are automatically and abruptly confronted with the imminence of death and its explicit manifestations.

What may previously have been denied or avoided suddenly becomes a real and constant threat that can materialize at any moment [13].

The complexity of military actions and the various uncertainties of external threats can lead soldiers to experience an imminent death that ultimately does not occur.

This type of experience may generate fear of death in military personnel, but in a somewhat delayed manner.

This delay usually appears at certain intervals after the threat has passed, when soldiers exit "combat mode" (in the heat of the moment) and enter the post-incident reflection phase (after the fact). It is at this point that they become aware of the high level of danger they went through and the real possibility of losing their lives.

This delayed fear may arise both in situations where the soldier has control (e.g., a parachutist who releases the main parachute and deploys the reserve) and in situations where control is absent, such as when a military vehicle runs over a hidden improvised explosive device without the soldier being aware of the danger.

Control within the situation is extremely important because it determines whether fear sets in or not. Thus, in situations where the soldier maintains control, fear does not usually arise—this being facilitated by the fact that they are trained to act in extreme circumstances. However, in the absence of control, fear does emerge and may be intensified by the feeling of helplessness when facing a life-threatening situation [13].

The fear of death experienced by military personnel operating in conflict zones is only one facet of the broader construct of death; another is the fear of killing. This aspect has been taken very seriously by those responsible for combat training, who have developed programs designed to reduce the soldier's focus on the fear associated with killing the enemy.

In this regard, training programs tend to concentrate primarily on mission accomplishment, placing less emphasis on the moral dimensions of the act, and instead targeting the soldier's prompt response during action by fostering automatic reactions. For example, they may use human silhouette targets or even photographic targets that fall when hit by a bullet, rather than traditional circular scoring targets.

The feeling of not belonging is defined as an unmet need to belong, which involves a lack of positive and frequent social interactions and the sense that one does not matter to others [15]. Although some individuals may attempt to meet the conditions necessary for belonging, certain barriers prevent them from doing so successfully. The feeling of not belonging typically manifests in individuals who lack social support networks or who, despite having social ties with family and friends, do not perceive these relationships as authentic. Research data indicate that the feeling of not belonging is strongly correlated with suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and completed suicide, while a higher number of connections with others correlates with decreases in suicidal behavior.

The second construct underlying the desire to die is the feeling of being a burden. This refers to the individual's perception that they are a burden to those around them and, moreover, that they fail to contribute to society while negatively affecting the lives of others. Because of these feelings, the individual may come to believe that their death would be worth more to others than their life. It is important to note that what matters most is how the individual perceives themselves as a burden, even if reality indicates otherwise. The feeling of being a burden has been correlated with suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and completed suicide.

CONCLUSIONS

The fear of death has a strong potential to profoundly influence the human psyche. Research conducted on both clinical and non-clinical populations has provided solid evidence that fear of death represents a significant issue at the human level.

In support of Yalom's (1980) existential perspective, fear of death appears to be a fundamental fear from which a range of mental disorders may arise, such as hypochondria, panic attacks, separation anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. Fear of death remains a unique human dilemma that, even at an unconscious level, can have a significant impact on daily functioning and life.

The fear of death is and will remain one of the deepest and most universal human fears. It arises from the awareness of the limits of one's own existence and from the uncertainty surrounding what follows the end of life. For some people, this fear manifests through anxiety, hypervigilance, or avoidance of situations perceived as risky; for others, it becomes a driver of meaning, motivating them to live more intensely and authentically. At its core, the fear of death reflects attachment to life, relationships, and identity.

For military personnel who have participated in missions in theaters of operations, the fear of death acquires concrete and repeated dimensions. Exposure to real danger, the loss of comrades, and direct confrontation with violence can intensify existential anxiety. Sometimes, this fear is managed through discipline, group cohesion, and rigorous training. At other times, it may persist in the form of post-traumatic stress, insomnia, or hypervigilant reactions, requiring specialized psychological support.

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