

THE EXISTENTIAL DIMENSION OF THE PANDEMIC

Linking Death Attitudes and Worldview Orientation to Coronavirus Anxiety

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Background

Previous research has suggested that death anxiety (see box 1) acts as a transdiagnostic factor in the development and maintenance of a wide spectrum of mental disorders, including anxiety disorders, depression, and somatic symptom disorders [1, 2, 3]. A stable worldview orientation—either religious or not—is regarded as a potential buffer against death anxiety [4, 5] as well as a positive predictor for mental health [6, 7]. Due to daily reports of new COVID-19 cases and fatalities, and through diverse forms of infection control, individuals are supposedly much more confronted with their mortality since the pandemic broke out than before. This ubiquitous mortality salience might cause severe (existential) distress in individuals high in death anxiety [8]. The present study thus sought to explore multidimensional relationships between worldview orientation, death attitudes, and coronavirus anxiety (as a measure of mental health; see box 2).

What is ... death anxiety?

Box 1

= general fearfulness related to the topic of death. Death anxiety is considered as an individual disposition (trait) that is relatively stable over different settings and time. In this understanding, it is distinct from acute emotional or cognitive reactions (states) to a life-threatening or—in any death-related sense—frightening situation [9, 10].

Method

An online survey was conducted among 202 German-speaking adults between May and June 2020.

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire as well as the following psychometric measures:

- The *Coronavirus Anxiety Scale* (CAS) [11] as a mental health screening instrument (see box)
- The *Death Attitude Profile-Revised* [10, 12], assessing death anxiety, death avoidance, and three forms of death acceptance: neutral (death as a natural and integral part of life), escape (death as a relief from pain and suffering), and approach acceptance (belief in a happy afterlife)
- The subscales on religiosity and spirituality of the *Sources of Meaning and Meaning in Life Questionnaire* [13, 14]
- Two subscales of the *Dimensions of Secularity Inventory* [15], measuring atheism and agnosticism

Statistical analyses included bivariate correlations, quadratic regression models, and a hierarchical multiple regression model (3 steps).

What is ... coronavirus anxiety?

Box 2

= dysfunctional anxiety associated with the COVID-19 crisis. Symptoms, aroused by coronavirus related information and thoughts, are: dizziness, sleep disturbances, tonic immobility, appetite loss, and nausea or abdominal distress [11].

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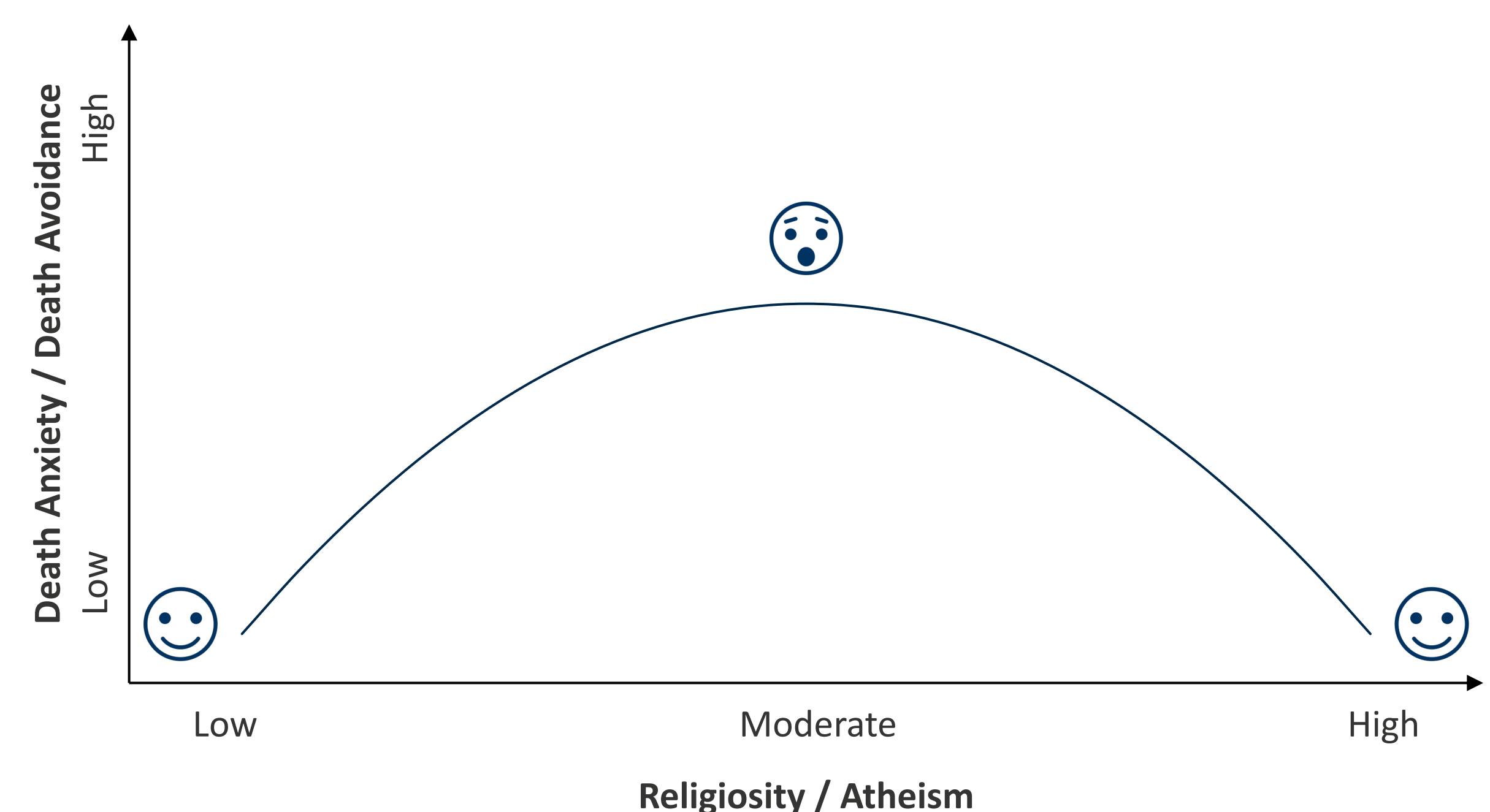
Results

- From the four dimensions of worldview orientation, only agnosticism exhibited a small but significant, bivariate relationship with coronavirus anxiety ($r = .16^*$). No quadratic relationships could be observed between worldview variables and participants' CAS scores.
- Death anxiety and death avoidance positively related to coronavirus anxiety ($r = .31^{**}$ and $.14^*$, respectively), whereas neutral acceptance related negatively to it ($r = -.21^{**}$). Neither approach acceptance nor escape acceptance correlated significantly with coronavirus anxiety.
- Religiosity as well as atheism exhibited curvilinear (inverted U-shaped) relationships to death anxiety as well as death avoidance (see box 3). Agnosticism was linearly and positively related ($r = .23^{**}$ and $.14^*$, respectively), spirituality was unrelated to death anxiety and death avoidance.
- As the hierarchical multiple regression analysis showed, death anxiety predicts coronavirus anxiety beyond sociodemographic and worldview variables ($\Delta R^2 = .07^{**}$). Agnosticism did not predict coronavirus anxiety when sociodemographic variables were accounted for.

What is ... a curvilinear relationship?

Box 3

As illustrated below, the moderately religious were more anxious and avoidant regarding their death than both the highly religious and the *non*-religious. The same pattern emerged for atheism.



Conclusions

- Against our expectations, we found that coronavirus anxiety is hardly related to an individual's worldview orientation (operationalized as individual degrees of religiosity, spirituality, atheism, and agnosticism)
- Death anxiety positively predicts coronavirus anxiety. This finding fits well with a growing body of research on death anxiety as a transdiagnostic factor in psychopathology
- Our study provides further evidence of a curvilinear, inverted U-shaped relationship between religiosity and death anxiety. In addition, we were able to expand this finding to death avoidance as well as to atheism, measured independently of religiosity (see box 3)



For more detailed information on our study, see:

Spitzenstätter, D., & Schnell, T. (2022). The existential dimension of the pandemic: Death attitudes, personal worldview, and coronavirus anxiety. *Death Studies*, 46(5), 1031–1041.



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