

Meaning-in-Life Orientations in Individuals With Different Levels of Fear of Death

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Abstract

Introduction. This paper examines meaning-in-life orientations in individuals with different levels of fear of death and provides a theoretical overview of the phenomenon of death in the context of studies of meaning-in-life orientations. Attitudes towards death and their associations with the value and meaning sphere are insufficiently developed in Russian psychological studies. The phenomenon of death should be studied in the context of meaningfulness of life and the formation of a conscious attitude towards life. This study is first to examine associations among the meaningfulness of life, life satisfaction, and attitudes towards death in individuals for whom the issues of death and dying are not relevant in their current life situation.

Methods. These were psychodiagnostic techniques, including the Life Satisfaction questionnaire, the Meaning-in-Life Orientations test, MLO (Russian-language version of the Purpose-in-Life Test modified by D. A. Leont'ev), and the Death Attitude Profile-Revised (a modified version by T. A. Gavrilova) and methods of mathematical statistics for data processing (descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation coefficient, and Mann–Whitney test).

Results. This section contains data from an empirical study involving 148 individual participants aged 18–50 years. The findings indicate that respondents with a high level of fear of death are characterized by a lower level of vital involvement and meaningfulness of life.

Discussion. The results suggest that there are associations between the level of fear of death and meaning-in-life orientations. Significant differences in the levels of vital involvement, meaningfulness of life, and attitudes towards death were found among individuals with different levels of fear of death. Attitudes towards death are directly related to the meaningfulness of life and life satisfaction.

Keywords

meaning-in-life orientations, fear of death, neutral acceptance, approach acceptance, death avoidance, escape acceptance, thanatic anxiety, suicidology, life satisfaction, meaningfulness of life

Highlights

- Attitudes towards death are associated with the level of meaningfulness of life and life satisfaction.
- Compared to individuals with a low level of fear of death, those with a high level of fear of death are characterized by a lower level of meaningfulness of life and life satisfaction.

► Individuals with a high level of fear of death are characterized by approach acceptance of death – belief in an afterlife. Neutral acceptance of death as an inevitable step in human development is the dominant attitude towards death in those with a low level of fear of death.

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Introduction

In recent decades, the existential approach to psychological research has been actively developing. The findings obtained in this field are not only of great scientific relevance, but also of great importance for psychotherapeutic practice. Studies of attitudes towards life, definitions of meaning-in-life strategies and orientations, metaphorical representation of the image of the world and self-image are widespread (Abul'khanova-Slavskaya, 1991; Leont'ev, 2003; Abdulgaliimova, 2011; Abakumova, Ermakov, & Rudakova, 2014; Koromyslov, 2019; etc.). However, the concept of life is inextricably linked to the concept of death. We should note that most studies represent the issues of death in the framework of palliative medicine, grief theory, and suicidology (Kyubler-Ross, 2001; Gnezdilov, 2002; Lipetskii, 2013; Chistopol'skaya et al., 2014; Bakanova, 2015; Kukina, 2015; Pinegina, 2017; etc.). Nevertheless, death is an event that every person faces, and not only in the case of a serious illness or difficult life situations. Thus, there is an obvious discrepancy between a too narrow specialization of the study of the phenomenon of death within certain groups of population, for whom the issues of death are relevant in current life situations (serious illness, attempted suicide, loss of loved ones, aging, situations that threaten life, etc.) and the objective breadth of this phenomenon that covers all the categories of the population, regardless of age, health status, level of well-being, and any other factors.

Issues of death are the most important existential issues that individuals face not only during difficult life situations and that may affect all the spheres of human life, in particular the value-meaning sphere. For the most part, the study of these issues is presented in the areas related to psychology (anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies) and is not sufficiently developed in Russian psychology in the context of attitudes towards death among individuals staying outside difficult life situations. Nevertheless, an analysis of previous research provides the basis for studying the phenomenon of death in the context of meaning-in-life orientations.

According to a number of researchers – psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, culturologists (Aries, 1992; Grof, 2002; Wong, 2013; Gor'kovaya & Bakanova, 2014; Klenina & Peskov, 2015; Mokhov, 2016; Soldatova & Zhukova, 2018), the attitude towards death is a marker of the maturity of an individual and a society, which accepts certain types of attitudes towards death and their symbolic representation in the form of rituals, ceremonies, monuments, and symbols. Consequently, the attitude towards death in the form of its acceptance is an indicator of psychological maturity and health.

At the same time, the theory of managing fear of death that have been put forward by Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon (1986) assumes the presence and maintenance of fear of death in society

through its ignoring and denial, which determines individuals' awareness of the value of life and makes death an instrument for regulating social life. Thus, avoiding thoughts about death is an acceptable type of attitude towards death for healthy individuals. Current studies address this idea (Kornev & Smirnov, 2018; Andrievskaya, 2017).

The psychoanalytic approach asserts that healthy individuals may have fear of death, which, however, can underlie most neuroses and neurotic states.

Frankl (1990), Aries (1992), Feifel (2001), Fromm (2006) and other researchers argue that modern society denies death, while the awareness of death is the strongest stimulus for life. Thus, suppressing thoughts about death, individuals deprive themselves of "the catalyst, without which joy and enthusiasm lose intensity and depth" (Fromm, 2006, p. 250).

Thus, the question arises: what type of attitude towards death is more 'healthy' and corresponds to a more mature state of personality, a higher level of comprehension and awareness? This study examines characteristics of the attitude towards death in individuals for whom the issues of death and dying are not relevant in their current life situation.

In all these works fear is considered as a prevailing emotion towards death. Hence, another question arises: is fear of death and its acceptance associated with the level of life satisfaction, awareness, and meaningfulness?

Therefore, the hypothesis is formulated that fear of death is associated with the level of meaningfulness of life and life satisfaction.

This study *aims* (a) to identify the presence or absence of associations between fear of death and the level of meaningfulness of life and life satisfaction and (b) to determine the type of attitude towards death corresponding to a higher level of meaningfulness of life and life satisfaction.

Methods

In our study we used the following psychodiagnostic techniques: (a) the Life Satisfaction questionnaire, (b) the Meaning-in-Life Orientations test, MLO (Russian-language version of the Purpose-in-Life Test modified by D. A. Leont'ev), and (c) the Death Attitude Profile-Revised (a modified version by T. A. Gavrilova), as well as methods of mathematical statistics for data processing (descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation coefficient, and Mann–Whitney test).

The study involved 148 individual participants aged 18–50 years (89 girls (61 %), 57 boys (39 %), mean age 25.9 years, standard deviation 6.8), citizens of the Russian Federation, residents of Rostov-on-Don and the Rostov region. Using the Mann–Whitney test we compared male and female respondents by the scales of the Death Attitude Profile-Revised. We found no significant differences, which indicated that there were no gender differences in attitudes towards death among respondents. We found no correlations with age and no significant differences between age groups. Therefore, we combined all the respondents into a single group.

Results

Using the Pearson correlation coefficient we identified significant direct and inverse associations (at 0.01 significance level) of the 'death fear' scale with the scales of 'vital involvement' ($R = -0.259$), 'worry about the future' ($R = -0.381$), 'general satisfaction with life' ($R = -0.330$), 'purpose' ($R = -0.272$), 'process' ($R = -0.224$), 'result' ($R = -0.234$), 'life internally determined' ($R = -0.372$), 'life externally determined' ($R = -0.280$), 'meaningfulness of life' ($R = -0.309$), 'death avoidance' ($R = 0.550$), 'neutral acceptance' ($R = -0.266$), 'approach acceptance' ($R = 0.469$), 'escape acceptance'

($R = 0.300$), and significant association (0.05 significance level) with the 'disillusionment with life' scale ($R = -0.211$). Compared to all other types of attitudes towards death presented in the Death Attitude Profile-Revised, fear of death showed the greatest number of associations with other scales in terms of strength and the level of significance.

Further, according to the results on the 'death fear' scale (the Death Attitude Profile-Revised) we divided the sample into three groups as follows: (a) group with a low level of fear of death ($n = 37$), (b) group with a high level of fear of death ($n = 32$), and (c) group with an average level of fear of death ($n = 79$).

These groups were compared in pairs using the Mann–Whitney test.

The groups with low and average levels of fear of death showed significant differences in the scales of 'worry about the future' (at 0.01 significance level), 'life internally determined' (at 0.05 significance level), 'death avoidance', 'neutral acceptance', and 'approach acceptance' (at 0.01 significance level).

The groups with average and high levels of fear of death showed significant differences in the scales of 'vital involvement', 'worry about the future', 'general satisfaction with life' (at 0.05 significance level), 'purpose', 'life internally determined', 'general meaningfulness', 'death avoidance', and 'approach acceptance' (at 0.01 significance level).

The groups with low and high levels of fear of death showed significant differences in the majority of scales – 'vital involvement' (at 0.01 significance level), 'disillusionment with life' (at 0.05 significance level), 'worry about the future', 'general satisfaction with life', 'purpose', 'process', 'result', 'life internally determined', 'life externally determined', 'meaningfulness of life', 'death avoidance', 'neutral acceptance', 'approach acceptance', 'escape acceptance' (at 0.01 significance level).

Scale	Value	High – low level	Average – low level	High – average level
Vital involvement	Mann–Whitney U test, asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	380.000 0.010	1357.000 0.532	881.000 0.012
Disillusionment with life	Mann–Whitney U test, asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	409.500 0.026	1181.500 0.093	1122.000 0.351
Tiredness of life	Mann–Whitney U test, asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	437.500 0.056	1330.000 0.423	1029.500 0.120

Table 1

Pairwise comparison of values in the groups with different levels of fear of death (Mann–Whitney U test)

<u>Scale</u>	<u>Value</u>	<u>High – low level</u>	<u>Average – low level</u>	<u>High – average level</u>
Worry about the future	Mann–Whitney U test, asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	281.500 0.000	1010.000 0.007	910.000 0.019
General satisfaction	Mann–Whitney U test, asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	316.500 0.001	1196.000 0.112	882.500 0.012
Purpose	Mann–Whitney U test, asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	327.500 0.001	1176.500 0.091	832.500 0.005
Process	Mann–Whitney U test, asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	377.000 0.010	1229.500 0.169	972.000 0.057
Result	Mann–Whitney U test, asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	357.000 0.005	1182.000 0.097	992.500 0.076
Life internally determined	Mann–Whitney U test, asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	253.500 0.000	1073.000 0.021	758.000 0.001

Table 1

Pairwise comparison of values in the groups with different levels of fear of death (Mann–Whitney U test)

<u>Scale</u>	<u>Value</u>	<u>High – low level</u>	<u>Average – low level</u>	<u>High – average level</u>
Life externally determined	Mann–Whitney U test, asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	321.500 0.001	1144.000 0.060	966.500 0.052
General meaningfulness	Mann–Whitney U test, asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	309.500 0.001	1184.500 0.101	858.500 0.008
Death avoidance	Mann–Whitney U test, asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	175.000 0.000	770.500 0.000	788.000 0.002
Neutral acceptance	Mann–Whitney U test, asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	296.500 0.000	863.000 0.000	1187.500 0.617
Approach acceptance	Mann–Whitney U test, asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	181.500 0.000	802.000 0.000	798.500 0.002
Escape acceptance	Mann–Whitney U test, asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	378.000 0.010	1029.000 0.010	1110.500 0.317

Note: significant differences between groups are shown in bold.

We compared mean values of the scales for each questionnaire and presented our findings in histograms (Fig. 1–3).

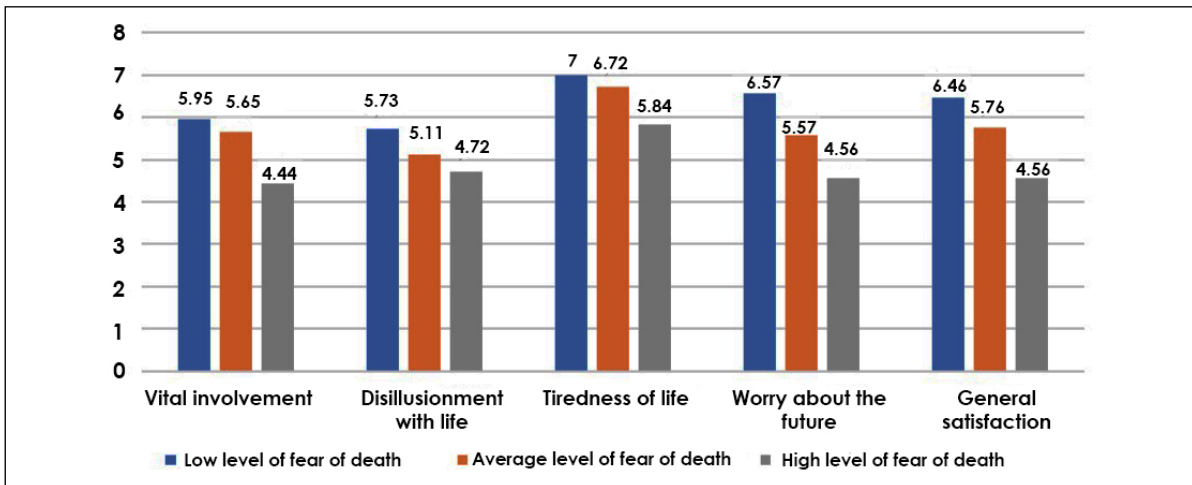


Figure 1. Histogram for the scales of the Life Satisfaction questionnaire

Note: significant differences were found for the following scales: 'vital involvement', 'general satisfaction' (groups with low and average levels of fear of death significantly differ from the group with a high level of fear of death, $p = 0.01$), 'disillusionment in life' (group with a low level of fear of death significantly differs from the group with a high level of fear of death, $p = 0.26$), 'worry about the future' (all the groups differ significantly from each other, $p = 0.01$); no significant differences were found for the 'tiredness of life' scale.

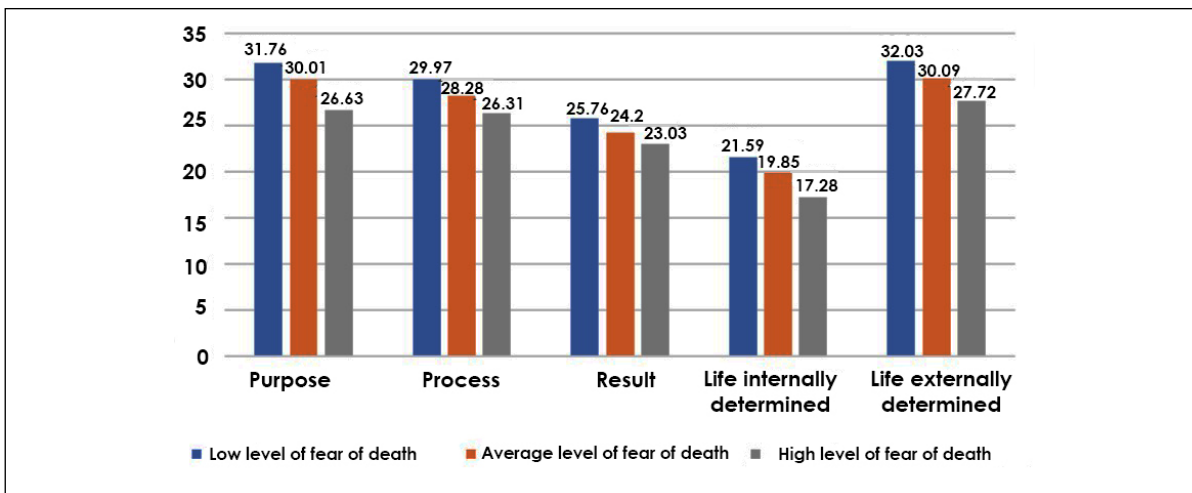


Figure 2. Histogram for the scales of the Meaning-in-Life Orientations test

Note: significant differences were found for the following scales: 'purpose' (groups with low and average levels of fear of death significantly differ from the group with a high level of fear of death, $p = 0.001$), 'process', 'result', 'life externally determined' (group with a low level of fear of death significantly differs from the group with a high level of fear of death, $p = 0.01$), and 'life internally determined' (all the groups differ significantly from each other, $p = 0.001$).

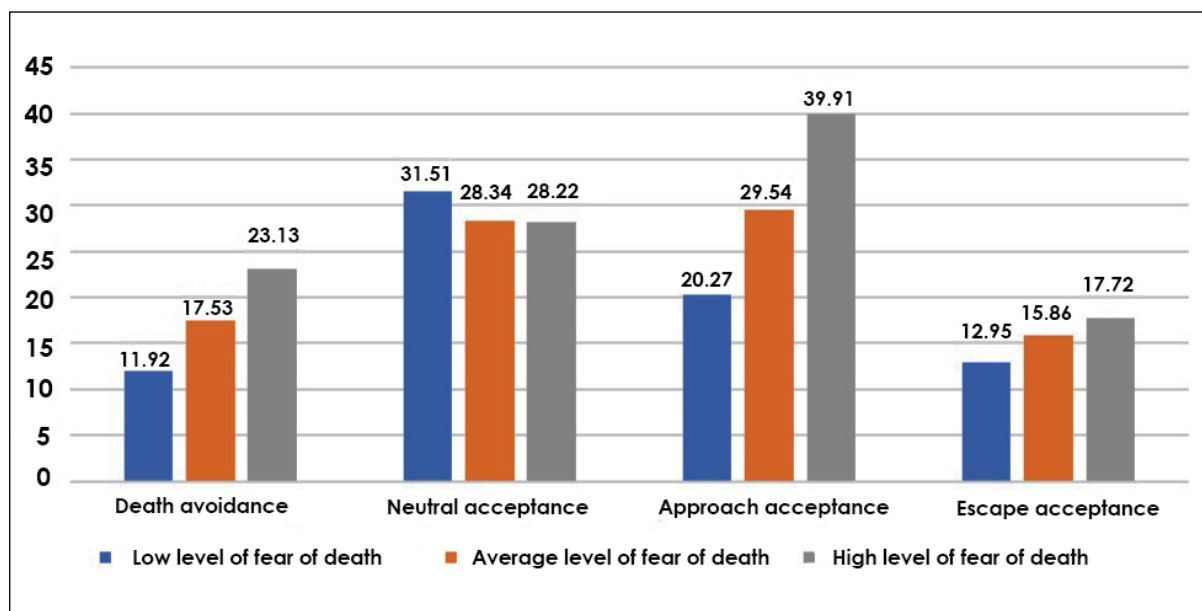


Figure 3. Histogram for the scales of the Death Attitude Profile-Revised

Note: significant differences were found for the following scales: 'neutral acceptance', 'escape acceptance' (groups with high and average levels of fear of death significantly differ from the group with a low level of fear of death, $p = 0.001$), 'death avoidance' ($p = 0.01$), 'approach acceptance' (all the groups differ significantly from each other, $p = 0.001$).

Our findings indicate that respondents with a high level of fear of death are characterized by the lowest level of vital involvement as a feeling of fullness of life, activity, and the presence of positive emotional states. In addition, respondents with a high level of fear of death are less disappointed with life and less anxious in response to the future as anxious expectations of unfavorable events. This may be explained by a low level of vital involvement and meaningfulness of life, which entails attitudes of approach and escape acceptance of death. According to the authors of the technique, escape acceptance of death is associated with a tendency towards suicidal and auto-aggressive behaviors.

A study by Hayes, Ward, & McGregor (2016) provided similar findings indicating the presence of associations among life dissatisfaction, decrease in orientations towards future, pessimistic attitudes towards life, and thanatic anxiety. Compared to respondents from other groups, those from the group with a high level of fear of death demonstrated significantly lower results for all the scales the Meaning-in-Life Orientations test. This indicates a general decrease in the meaningfulness of life in the subjective experience of its purpose, process, result, and abilities to control and manage life. In addition to fear, the leading type of attitudes towards death is its approach acceptance, which is characterized by P. T. P. Wong and colleagues as a belief in a pleasant 'life after death'; that is, death is perceived as a transition to another life (Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994). This confirms the idea of Feifel & Branscomb (1973) and Zhelatelev (2016) that belief in an afterlife contributes to neurotization and increases the level of fear of death as an event leading to suffering.

The results obtained in this study are of particular interest. Thus, according to the studies of Kornev & Smirnov (2018), and Andrievskaya (2017), belief in an afterlife is one of the most powerful

strategies of dealing with fear of death and corresponds to a neutral acceptance of death. Harding, Flannelly, Weaver, & Costa (2005) and Nazarzadeh, Sarokhani, & Sayehmiri (2015) argue that belief in the existence of God and afterlife negatively correlates with the level of fear of death. Figure 4 presents the 'approach acceptance' scale (Fig. 4).

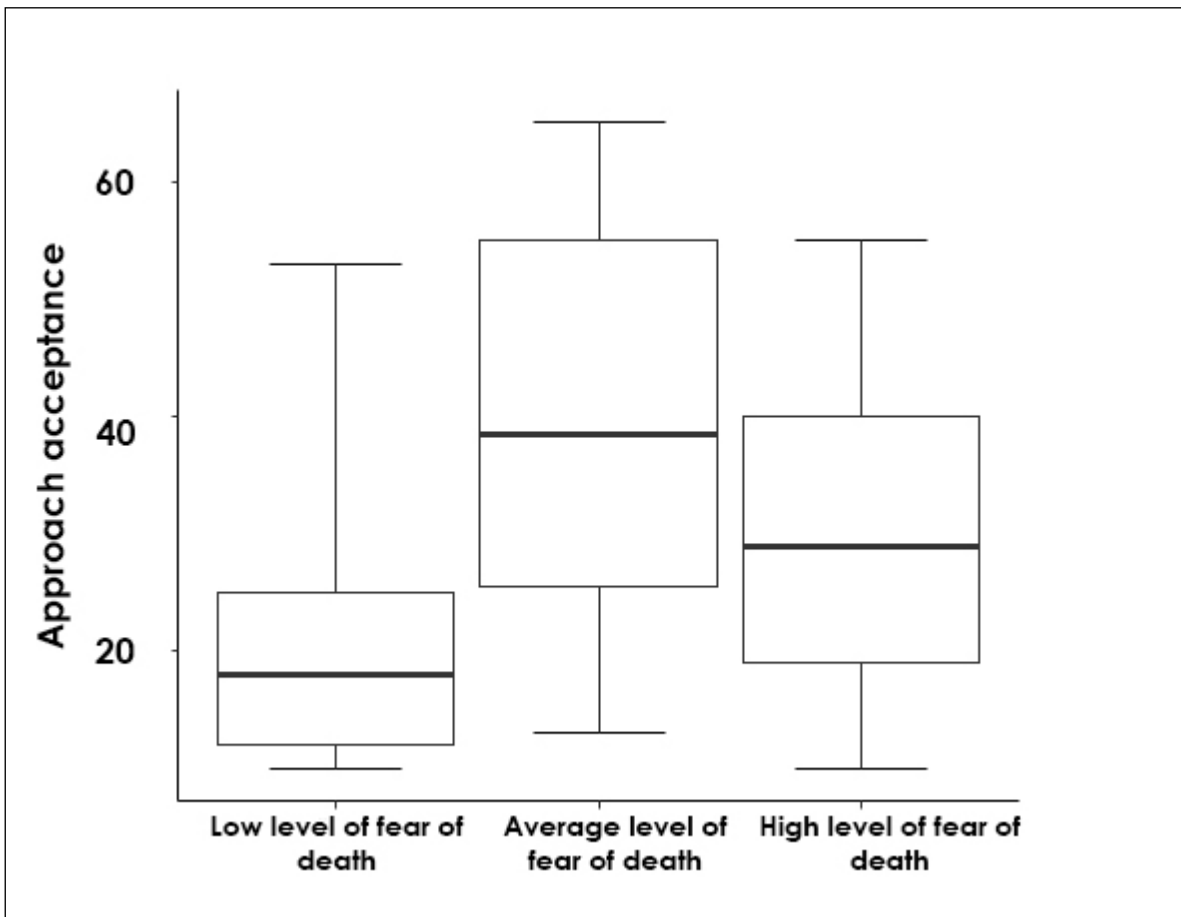


Figure 4. Diagram of the range of results for the 'approach acceptance' scale in groups with different levels of fear of death

Legend: ———— – median; □ – 25–75%; | – minimum and maximum values.

Our findings indicate that respondents with an average level of fear of death are the most similar to those with low levels of fear. We observed significant differences in lower indices for the scales of 'worry about the future' and 'life internally determined', as well as for all the scales characterizing attitudes towards death, where the values for the scales of 'death avoidance', 'approach acceptance' and 'death avoidance' increased and those for the 'neutral acceptance' scale – decreased.

Respondents with a low level of fear of death are characterized by significantly higher values of the level of vital involvement and meaningfulness of life. Table 2 shows the median, mean, and standard deviation for these and other scales.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics for the groups with different levels of fear of death

Scale	Low level of fear of death			Average level of fear of death			High level of fear of death		
	\bar{M}	σ	Me	\bar{M}	σ	Me	\bar{M}	σ	Me
	Vital involvement	5.95	2.25	6	5.65	2.32	6	4.44	2.18
Disillusionment with life	5.73	1.74	6	5.11	2.12	5	4.72	2.30	4.5
Tiredness of life	7	2.38	8	6.72	2.37	8	5.84	2.55	5
Worry about the future	6.57	1.77	6	<u>5.57</u>	1.87	5	4.56	2.11	4.5
General satisfaction	6.46	1.98	7	5.76	2.20	6	4.56	2.30	4
Purpose	31.76	7.54	32	30.01	6.17	30	26.63	5.26	27
Process	29.97	6.75	31	28.28	6.22	29	26.31	5.24	25.5
Result	25.76	5.41	26	24.2	4.70	24	23.03	3.75	23
Life internally determined	21.59	4.00	22	<u>19.85</u>	3.84	20	17.28	3.41	17
Life externally determined	32.03	5.86	33	30.09	5.72	31	27.72	4.87	28
General meaningfulness	103.32	19.27	104	97.96	15.85	96	89.50	13.63	85
Death fear	13.49	2.78	14	25.87	4.41	27	38.78	4.14	38
Death avoidance	11.92	7.35	10	<u>17.53</u>	7.39	17	23.13	8.23	24.5

Table 2

Descriptive statistics for the groups with different levels of fear of death

Scale	Low level of fear of death			Average level of fear of death			High level of fear of death		
	\bar{M}	σ	Me	\bar{M}	σ	Me	\bar{M}	σ	Me
Neutral acceptance	31.51	3.88	32	<u>28.34</u>	4.94	29	<i>28.22</i>	4.20	29
Approach acceptance	20.27	10.38	18	<u>29.54</u>	12.14	29	<i>39.91</i>	16.17	38.5
Escape acceptance	12.95	7.48	10	<u>15.86</u>	5.83	16	<i>17.72</i>	8.15	17.5

Note: different font types indicate significant differences between the groups – bold font indicates significant differences with the group with a low level of fear of death; underlined font indicates significant differences with the group with an average level of fear of death; italic font indicates significant differences with the group with a high level of fear of death.

Discussion

The data obtained in our study indicate a statistically significant relationship between fear of death and meaningfulness of life and life satisfaction. A low level of fear of death corresponds to a greater vital involvement, purposefulness, satisfaction with the process and the result, and confidence in the ability to manage life events. In this case, neutral acceptance as individuals' acceptance of the finiteness of the human being represents the leading type of attitudes towards death.

On the contrary, a high level of fear of death is associated with less satisfaction with life, less involvement and meaningfulness, with a reduced level of anxiety towards the future, which can be interpreted as a lack of meaning and, accordingly, anxiety towards its realization. These findings are consistent with the results of a study by Bolt (1978), who found a negative correlation between thanatic anxiety and the pursuit of meaning in life. We find similar data in P. T. P. Wong's study, who argues that the presence of a subjective meaning in life reduces the level of fear of death (Wong, 2013). Besides fear, approach acceptance as a belief in life after death is the leading type of attitudes towards death in this group. This fact confirms the opinion of Feifel & Branscomb (1973) and Zhelatelev (2016) that belief in an afterlife contributes to neurotization, and, on the contrary, contradicts the position of Kornev & Smirnov (2018) that belief in life after death is one of the most powerful strategies of dealing with fear death. The findings of our study indicate that belief in an afterlife does not help overcome fear and does not contribute to life satisfaction and meaningfulness of life.

Thus, attitudes towards death are directly related to life satisfaction and meaningfulness of life. This fact can be of great practical importance in psycho-correctional work. Therefore, further studies of attitudes towards death are important.

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No conflict of interest