**Abstract**

**Death anxiety during the Covid-19 pandemic, its mental consequences on assisted living tenants, and the moderating role of loneliness**

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The Covid-19 pandemic is a global crisis which impacts not only physical health, but mental health as well. A unique population which has not, to date, been examined with regard to the pandemic, despite being a high-risk sector, are adults residing in assisted living facilities in Israel. The present study examined the relationship between death anxiety during the Covid-19 pandemic among elderly assisted living tenants, as well as their psychological distress, anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders. In addition, the study looked at the ways in which loneliness influences the relationship between these variables and death anxiety during the pandemic. The aim of the study was to deepen our understanding of the mental states of those at high-risk for the physical or mental effects of the pandemic, and to determine the extent to which loneliness impacts on their coping. This study is based on both Terror Management Theory and the Social Support Stress Buffering model, to better assess the mental consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on the subjects of this study.

The study’s first four hypotheses (1-4) concerned the connections between the variables. We posited that death anxiety during the pandemic would be positively correlated with psychological distress, anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders. This means that a higher level of death anxiety during the pandemic would be correlated with greater levels of psychological distress, anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders. The other four hypotheses (5-8) examined the sense of loneliness as a variable which could moderate the connection between death anxiety during the pandemic and psychological distress, anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders. This means that subjects who experience higher levels of loneliness will exhibit a stronger positive correlation between death anxiety during the pandemic and psychological distress, anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders.

As hypothesized, the results of the present study yielded a significant positive relationship between death anxiety during the corona pandemic and three of the four examined variables: psychological distress, anxiety, and depression. As opposed to the hypotheses, no significant correlation was found with sleep disorders. As such, the results of the present study support the extant literature regarding the first three hypotheses, while broadening its implications for the unique population of this study, residents of assisted living facilities. The results also call for further examination of the fourth hypothesis, given the lack of connection to sleep disorders within this population.

Regarding the moderating effect hypothesis within all the models examined, death anxiety and loneliness yielded prominent effects on the dependent variables. Namely, greater levels of death anxiety and higher levels of experienced loneliness both predicted elevated levels of psychological distress, anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders. The results also demonstrated significant effects of the interactions between death anxiety and loneliness on psychological distress, anxiety, and depression, but not on sleep disorders. In addition, the research results showed demonstrated no significant effect of death anxiety on psychological distress, anxiety, or depression for subjects with low levels of loneliness. Subjects with average levels of loneliness demonstrated a significant effect of death anxiety on psychological distress and anxiety, but not on depression. At high levels of loneliness, death anxiety significantly impacted each of the three variables: psychological distress, anxiety, and depression.

This study helps clarify and deepens our understanding of the relationships between different types of mental distress in general, and between psychological distress, anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders and death anxiety during the corona pandemic in particular. In addition, this study shows that loneliness may be a central factor which leads to consequences different from those examined in this study. This is largely due to its inverse relationship with the social support which may moderate both negative life experiences and mental and psychological disorders, as well as the fear which accompanies the sense of uncertainty that characterizes life during the corona pandemic.

This leads to the conclusion that despite the negative impact which minimizing loneliness may have on the health of the elderly during a medical crisis, social distancing may exact a price which may be just as high. Therefore, despite the importance of quarantine and distancing to help protect the health of the elderly, it is no less important to provide them with suitable social and professional support, which may moderate the negative experiences that can be attributed to quarantining. This, in addition to finding creative ways to maintain maximal levels of social interactions during crises. Furthermore, decision makers need to be more aware of the mental consequences that quarantining and social distancing have on the elderly in assisted living facilities, especially during a crisis, in order to create a healthier balance between all the possible implications of the policies effected.