

# Religiosity and Death Anxiety among Outpatients with Chronic Diseases: Sense of Humor as Mediation Variable

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**Abstract.** The purpose of the research was to explore the correlation between religiosity and death anxiety using a sense of humor to play a role as mediation variable. The participants were 126 outpatients (female =72%) with chronic diseases from different hospitals and community medical centers in Lombok Timur Province, Indonesia. The instruments were the revised intrinsic / extrinsic religious orientation scale, death anxiety scale, and multidimensional sense of humor scale. Data were analyzed using Moderate Regression analysis. The results showed that there was a correlation between religiosity and death anxiety, in which sense of humor was the mediation variable of religiosity and death anxiety relation.

**Keyword:** sense of humor, religiosity, death anxiety, outpatient

## INTRODUCTION

Individual's perception of death varies; some persons consider it as an ordinary event in life, some see it as unexpected occurrence, and some others regard it as a process of purification and the search of happiness here after [2]. In various traditions and religions, prayers are considered to lengthen the age and to avoid any sufferings during and after the process of death. On the contrary, expecting to die is not considered as a wise way of life as it is regarded to be contradicted with religious spirits.

The death itself may cause anxiety feeling in some people, and also makes the surrounding people panic. There are some individuals who tend to imagine that death is negative since they have to feel some pains or some frightening events such as to be separated from the loved ones and the family member's bad future after their dead. Therefore, death anxiety not only involves some frightening conditions to be separated from the loved ones, but also results in some changes and their consequences. One's negative feeling of the death may bring about excessive anxieties and frights [16].

Death anxiety often triggers some disturbances of emotional functions among human beings. Even among the sufferers of such emotional disturbances, they confine and isolate themselves. Even worse, they show their less

ability to control themselves well. Some individuals camouflage their anxieties by showing some behaviors demonstrating their excessive authorities [17]. Negative emotions experienced by individuals cause a lot of energy to be released in vain and may make one's health condition weaken. According to Lehto & Stein [16], a more mature individual has higher risk to have anxiety disturbance when facing his death.

In some phenomena, it may also be understood that the older a individual is, the more willingness the individual to accept any condition regarding his death. It is normally accompanied with some improvements in his religiosity. From various studies, it was found out that death anxiety was related to religiosity. Religiosity has some abilities to form one's attitudes and beliefs in the death anxiety [16]. Religiosity is belief and values based on spiritual teachings. It is related to belief and religion that one believes. Religion is seen to have three main functions in the society [9]. First, religion unites people due to common belief, values and norms. Second, it helps one resolve problems in life and face death. Third, in critical or frightening condition, it serves as emotional and psychological supports to an individual. Therefore, the religiosity is seen to play key roles in reducing any death anxiety [9].

Some researchers have different conclusions dealing with the relationship between spirituality and death anxiety. Wen's [25] and Abdel-Khalek and Lester's [1] found that religiosity and death anxiety were not related to one another. Any individuals with high and low religiosities had some anxieties in facing death. Another research suggested that low death anxiety was experienced by individuals with high religiosity. This happened to the subject of university students, instead of senior high school students [15].

Chuin [8] reinforces the importance of religiosity as the predictor of low death anxiety. Religiosity gives some reinforcement to an individual to prepare himself to face a death. In a society with a very strong religious tradition, any preparation to face death is an important element of education and culture to be implemented among its community members. This is to anticipate any consequences from death psycho-spiritual either for the left family or those facing the death. Implanting religiosity in the form of improving obedience to religious values is expected to give some positive effects

on individuals' emotion and behaviors. Religiosity is believed to give some strength to individuals in their lives, especially to reduce some negative feeling of anxieties in facing death. Thus, they become calmer and determined in facing death, where no one knows when it happens [13].

Religiosity might not be direct single variable in predicting death anxiety. Humor is an important variable for the development of one's mental health. Allport [3] states that one of the personal health characteristics is that the individual is able to accept a humor, especially the humor that deals with himself. Bennet [6] asserts that humor may produce some reflexes of laughing as a mechanism to fight any anxieties and stresses.

In order to be able to observe, feel and express a humor, an individual needs a sense of humor. When an individual has a high sense of humor, his anxiety towards stressful experiences will be low. Humor may release one from stressful feeling and make his facial muscles relaxed and his mind more refreshed [6]. In other words, a sense of humor may serve to mediate the relation between religiosity and death anxiety.

Some researches [4, 18] supported Bennet's idea [6] that a sense of humor might reduce some anxieties and provide positive effects on mental health and was adaptive to cope with stressful situation faced by someone. The research results were reinforced by other researches [7, 14], found that any positive or educating types of humors may reduce any anxieties. One with positive thinking and emotion may behave more positively and adaptively in facing any stress, including death [17]. Based on the explanations above, the objective of this research is to understand the roles of sense of humor to mediate the relationship between religiosity and death anxiety. The hypothesis of this research is that a sense of humor plays an important role to bridge the relationship between religiosity and death anxiety.

## METHOD

### Subject

The subject was 126 outpatients (female 72%) with chronic diseases from different hospital and community medical centers in Lombok Timur Province, Indonesia. Their ages were 40-50 years ( $M = 47.6$ ,  $SD = 3.6$ ), most of whom (72%) suffered from diseases and were treated from 1 year to 10 years ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 2.8$ ). Their diseases were heart (17%), diabetes mellitus (47%), cancer (12%), tumor (17%), and complication (7%). There were 126 outpatients chosen as the subjects based on their medical records in the hospital and community medical centers and their willingness to participate in this research.

### Instrument

The revised intrinsic/extrinsic Religious orientation scale (I/E ROS-R), Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989) was employed to reveal subjects' religiosity. The I/E ROS-R consists of 14 items of statements with 6 items and 8 items for extrinsic and extrinsic orientation respectively. They were made in the five-point Likert scale type, from

very disagree (1) to very agree (5). The total score of the instrument ranges from 14-70, the higher the I/E ROS-R scores, the more intrinsic religiosity individuals have. The lower the I/E ROS-R scores is, the more extrinsic the individuals become. The intrinsic aspect of the I/R ROS-R has the reliability coefficient ( $\alpha$ ) of .86, while the extrinsic aspect possesses the reliability coefficient ( $\alpha$ ) of .66 [24].

Death anxiety scale (DAS) was used to measure death anxiety [21]. This DAS consists of 15 items of questions with two choices of an answer: correct and wrong. The correct answer gains 1 point, and the wrong one has 0 point. Each question includes some anxieties and frights dealing with death. The total scores of DAS range from 0-15. The higher the total score a subject obtains, the higher the anxiety he has in facing death. This instrument has an internal consistency ( $\alpha$ ) of .83 [21].

Multidimensional sense of humor scale (MSHS) was used to measure a sense of humor [23]. The scale of the MSHS consists of 24 items, made in the format of a five-point Likert scale type (very disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, very agree) with the scores from 1 – 5 respectively. The MSHS scale includes four important factors in the concept of sense of humor. They are creativity and implementing humors in social situations (items 1 – 11 and 19), implementing humor to cope with problems (items 21-24); attitudes towards funny persons (items 12, 13, 15, 16, 20 and 22), and attitudes towards humor (items 14, 17, and 18). The ranges of the MSHS scores are 24 -21. The scale has an internal consistency ( $\alpha$ ) of 0.88.

## Data Analysis

To test the hypothesis, as proposed by Baron and Kenny [5], some steps were taken in the statistical testing, testing the relationship between the religiosity as the predicting variable and the death anxiety as the dependent variable. Then we tested the relation between the religiosity variable using the sense of humor as the potential moderating variable and the death anxiety as the dependent variable. To understand clearly whether the religiosity as the predicting variable has some effects on the death anxiety through the role of the sense of humor as the moderating variable, a Sobel test was implemented. To test the hypothesis a Process Macro SPSS developed by Hayes was applied [12].

## RESULTS

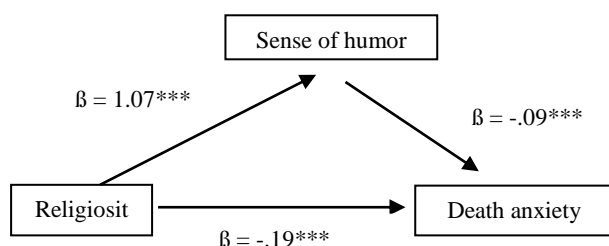
### Description of the Data

From the descriptive analysis of the data, it was known that the scores of the religiosity ranged from 22 to 34 ( $M = 28.21$ ,  $SD = 2.64$ ) and the scores of *sense of humor* were from 28 to 65 ( $M = 52.20$ ,  $SD = 6.31$ ). Furthermore, death anxiety scores ranged from 0 to 6 ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ). Based on the correlation test for the research variables, it showed that the three variables investigated had significant relations. The results of the correlation analysis showed that there was a significant and positive

correlation between religiosity and the sense of humor ( $r = .23$ ,  $p < .05$ ), significant and negative correlation between religiosity and death anxiety ( $r = -.65$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

### Hypothesis Testing

From the result of the statistical testing using the Macro Process (Hayes, 2003), it was revealed that religiosity may become a significant and negative predictor to the death anxiety ( $\beta = -.20$ ,  $p = .00$ ). The second testing to the relationship between the religiosity and the sense of humor showed that religiosity may become a significant and positive predictor to the sense of humor ( $\beta = 1.07$ ,  $p = .00$ ). From the result of the next testing, it may be stated that the sense of humor as the predictor for the death anxiety is significant and negative ( $\beta = -.09$ ,  $p = .00$ ). The Results of the Process Micro testing are presented at Figure 1.



Picture 2. Relation between religiosity and death anxiety through instrument of sense of humor.

As the continuation of the path analysis, to know the roles of sense of humor as the mediating variable to the relation between religiosity and death anxiety, the Sobel Test was conducted. The result of the Sobel Test showed that sense of humor significantly played its role as the mediating variable to the relation between religiosity and death anxiety ( $Z = -4.42$ ,  $p = .000$ ). The indirect effect of religiosity on the death anxiety (estimate = 0.9) was significant as shown by the bootstrapped 95% CI = .14 to .05.

### Discussion

These research results show that there is a significant effect of religiosity on the death anxiety among patients with chronic diseases. It is in line with the results of previous researches [1] that an individual with intrinsic religiosity is calmer and more determined in facing death, since he has some capabilities to control his mind and behaviors so that he becomes more positive and rational. This shows that subjects with intrinsic religiosity may be able to control stressful situation, especially when thinking about death, better than those with extrinsic religiosity.

There is a significant effect of religiosity on the sense of humor. Subjects with intrinsic religiosity show high sense of humor. However, this sense of humor is considered to reflect less control over ones' mind and behavior, so it is necessary to have a stronger control in order to be able to control a critical situation. The control is named religion [22]. Thorson & Powell [23] state that

sense of humor has a specific style and point of view as a form of self-protection in interacting with others.

Sense of humor has significant effects of the death anxiety. Moreover, the sense of humor may become a positive way to cope with anxious and stressful situation of an individual. It is in line with the previous research that humor has long been used as a coping mechanism in any difficult situations in daily life. Individuals with sense of humor tend to be able to stay in and fight any less conducive situations [23].

An indirect effect of religiosity on the death anxiety mediated by the sense of humor has significant and higher positive impact than the direct effect of religiosity on the death anxieties. In other words, the sense of humor contributes a significant and higher positive effect on the death anxiety. The research conducted by Armstrong et al. [4] concludes that an individual with a sense of humor may be able to change his point of view so that he can feel the distance between he himself and a threat that may attack him. This may reduce any anxiety and give positive effects on the mental health, and an adaptive coping when one is facing a critical situation.

Based on the research by Florian & Kravet [10], it is stated that excessive death anxieties show an individual's powerlessness. The powerlessness turns out to be able to reduced and changed by religiosity. The religiosity is able to give a new point of view of the life at present or hereafter.

Subjects with positive opinions in themselves and their environments have positive views on any events that have been or will be faced, including deaths. Sense of humor may provide individuals with positive emotional responses [6]. This result is reinforced by Pande's research outcome [18] stating that the sense of humor may reduce some anxieties and give positive effects on the mental health, and an adaptive solution when one is facing stressful condition.

The outcomes of this research imply that the sense of humor is essential for individuals, especially those with the death anxiety. In the context of the counseling process to a patient with a death anxiety, appropriate techniques are needed, including humor as a strategy to provide some aids to the clients. Hopefully a more effective aid may be given to the client who faces a such kind of problems.

### CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, we conclude that there is a direct correlation between religiosity and the death anxiety. Religiosity also has an indirect correlation with the death anxiety, which can be mediated through sense of humor.

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