



## Anxieties in the Elderly: They are Falling like Flies

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**Abstract:** As people age, some live longer than others, some work longer and harder than others and some are more productive into their 70s, 80s and even 90s. On the other hand, many die for whatever reason and others opt for early retirement. This article delves into an anxiety provoking realm- the anxieties that befall certain individuals who experience their friends, relatives and colleagues either dying before them, retiring before them, or leaving for a retirement ranch or assisted living facility.

**Keywords:** Anxiety, death, geriatric anxiety.

## INTRODUCTION

As individuals age, they perceive others around them die of cancer, accidents or heart issues. These observations are somewhat anxiety provoking and bring about a certain amount of death anxiety. This paper discusses this phenomenon.

Across the life span, adults encounter many challenges as they move from infancy, childhood, adolescence and on to adulthood and to the golden years of retirement and death.

For whatever reason, some of us live longer than others and must cope with the death of friends, colleagues, relatives and even children. To experience the death of others, some much younger than oneself is anxiety provoking. This paper will explore and examine a few different realms that raise feelings of anxiety and in some cases loneliness.

Still working after all these years- to paraphrase a song by Paul Simon- in some instances, a person will continue to work- but they are perplexed by the fact that co-workers seem to all be retiring- for whatever reason. Their support system that they have relied upon for several years is gone, and they arrive at work -seeking out friends that they may have worked with for years or even decades. There is some pending retirement anxiety and some even death anxiety and anxiety about the fact that even some of the fellow workers may leave at any time for greener pastures-so to speak.

The Coffee Klatch is a staple of most small towns and even large cities. There always seems to be a place where retired folk get together for coffee and camaraderie. There always seems to be something to discuss, debate and argue about -until one member does not show up for coffee and their obituary is in the local paper- or one hears about it via text or phone. There is one less individual who will agree or politely disagree. One less person to toss a few dollars around for the server, and a pervasive feeling of doom and gloom sets over the revered coffee klatch.

At the university, one colleague is "holding down the fort" as they say, keeping office hours- but his co-authors have left, or retired or moved on to other things. The elder statesperson is perplexed as his former co-authors have retired, died, or relocated or have been

admitted to an assisted living facility. There is a feeling of dread as one approaches the next graduation, but those colleagues are no longer around to celebrate this coming graduation.

Living long presents a unique set of challenges. There are medical visits and surgeries and medications to be taken. And there seems to be a diminished circle of friends to support one as he or she moves into the golden years.

One of the most difficult issues for anyone to address is mourning a son or daughter. Car accidents, cancer, natural causes can result in the loss of a child. This upsets the natural order of things.

For some individuals who live longer than their peers, their lives revolve around attending funerals and seeing some acquaintances that have aged. There is anxiety about interacting with those people have lost contact with and there are new issues that arise.

The subtitle of this paper "falling like flies" is to refer to the feelings that one engenders as one observes friends, relatives, colleagues, and even movie stars seem to be dying. One is taken aback by the longevity of some and the very rapid demise of others. One begins to wonder how much time one has left- and ponder as to the mysteriousness of life- why some people get cancer, have heart troubles, and die early- even though they seem to have been in the best of health.

Some individuals belong to some "service "or community organizations-like the Lions or Rotarians, or some similar group. Here again, if one misses a few meetings and then returns to see the group has dwindled. One becomes aware that the once large robust group has become smaller, and some leaders have vanished. Some anxiety may set in as one fears for the organization that they have invested much time and effort into.

And then there is the high school reunion. And it seems that with each meeting- 30 years, 40 years, 50 years- there seem to be fewer and fewer former classmates coming to these meetings and the "falling like flies" phenomenon is apparent here also. And sadness also arises when one hears of the class President or valedictorian having died of cancer or overdose or car accident.

Many individuals are fortunate to live long, healthy lives with their cognitive processes intact. However, others are not so lucky. As one interacts with those friends who may still be alive- they notice certain things- difficulty remembering information, disorganization, some confusion, word retrieval and one does not have to be a medical student to grasp the fact that senility is setting in, or even worse- Alzheimer's. Thus begins a chain of concern and self- questioning:

- 1) Will this happen to me?
- 2) Can this be avoided?
- 3) What if I become like that?
- 4) Who will care for me?
- 5) Is a nursing home on the horizon?

For some individuals, the thought of being a burden to their kids is abhorrent. For some individuals, the thought of being in an "assisted living facility" is equally abhorrent.

And of course, these ruminations keep one awake at night.

These instances reflect a gradual separation from the world of the individual-friendly, recognizable acquaintances are no longer there- or have moved away. Those caring individuals who provided emotional support and care have died or been institutionalized or have moved away or retired- no longer to be seen. And in many cases depression sets in and in some cases suicide.

And then of course, one opens their e-mail and hears about another passing or death. Some of these go into great depth and detail- they want donations to go to such and such and there will be a gravesite ceremony, and visitation will be at such and such a funeral home from the hours of such and such and coffee and pastries may be served.

Edberg and colleagues (2023) have investigated this issue of "existential loneliness" which encompasses a lack of meaning and purpose in life as well as the issues that confront the elderly. The term "elderly" is relative in that the people and cases discussed in this paper are not necessarily 80 and above years old- but they are encountering death among friends and colleagues which are much younger and surprising, almost shocking in some instances.

Edberg (2023) and co-workers explored the idea of health care workers who encounter many older or elderly individuals who are experiencing this sense of "existential aloneness" and many of these individuals were in nursing homes. This population is different than discussed in this paper- a decidedly different

population. However, even in a nursing home there are feelings of loss when a roommate passes, or a familiar face is no longer there.

Death anxiety has been written about cursorily, but some individuals really do have some anxiety about death, and they spend a good deal of time preparing for that eventuality. They spend time doing their last will and testament, preparing an obituary, emptying out their bank account, and distributing their wealth to avoid probate court and the grief and aggravation that would impose on survivors.

## Two Issues

There seem to be two offsetting realms to the existential loneliness and the impact of many deaths, retirements, and institutionalization of friends and colleagues- and that is- family and religion. For some their family is the sole anchor which is consistent and if the person is continually involved in a church, that may serve as a foundation upon which to build the edifice for the future for some individuals.

## Summary and Conclusions

This paper has addressed an issue of importance for the elderly and for those providing counseling and mental health support for them. As we age, survivors increasingly meet with peers and younger significant others dying before them. This paper has addressed this issue of existential anxiety about death and some of the relevant issues regarding this topic.

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