

ISLAMIC APPROACH TO THE TREATMENT OF THE FEAR OF DEATH

Ahmed Pajević, Izet Pajević & Mevludin Hasanović

Department of Psychiatry, University Clinical Center Tuzla, Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina
School of Medicine, University of Tuzla, Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina

SUMMARY

Although the question of death and the fear of it is one of the oldest questions man has dealt with, we have no discussions from ancient times about fear in an existential sense. The thematic approach to this phenomenon in Western philosophy and theology occurs in Hellenism and in the Christian religion, but it gains its full meaning only in the philosophies of existence. The famous Islamic philosopher and physician Ibn Sina, better known in the West as Avicenna (980-1037), wrote *A Treatise on the Cure for the Fear of Death and the Treatment of Anxiety Caused by It* more than nine centuries ago. Relying on Islamic teachings, Ibn Sina made a comprehensive analysis of this problem in the *Treatise*, giving precise instructions on how to deal with people who have mental impediments due to the fear of death, which in modern psychiatry are called anxiety and fear-related disorders. In this paper, a brief analysis of the *Treatise* is made in order to point out possible guidelines in the approach to the problem of fear of death, which in modern psychiatry, psychopathology and psychotherapy is obviously not given enough attention.

Key words: fear of death – anxiety - Ibn Sina – Avicenna – psychiatry - psychotherapy

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INTRODUCTION

Numerous researchers have concluded that the fear of death is certainly among the most universal fears and that religion may in one way or another have an impact on death-related anxiety (Thorson 1998). Any situation that disturbs our physical, mental, spiritual and social balance in any way and thus hints at the possibility or leads to a state of existential endangerment, is accompanied by fear, worry, angst or anxiety. Disturbance in that balance that exceeds person's tolerability levels reminds us that we are weak, fragile, transient, and mortal, and that illness and the end of (earthly) life is an inevitability that we will surely face one day. If we follow the thread with which the manifestation of fear and anxiety or the symptom of some anxiety and fear-related disorder is connected, it will eventually lead us to the very source of fear and anxiety, and that is the fear of death. It is interesting that although this is such an obvious fact, modern psychiatry does not pay enough attention to the phenomenon of the fear of death. Thus, the fear of death is mentioned only 6 times in DSM-5 and only as one of the symptoms in some mood and anxiety disorders. This focus on various symptoms and nosological entities, which are, in fact, only the ultimate manifestation of the fear of death, could indicate an unconscious negation of the fear of death by psychiatrists and psychotherapists themselves, which would be worthy of a special research.

Although the literature related to this issue is scarce, it can however be assumed that death anxiety plays a greater role within the changed thoughts and feelings of psychiatric patients, whose intensity we probably determine and assess in non-sufficient manner yet (Juckel & Mavrogorgou 2018). Some recent studies (Menzies et al. 2019) reveal a strong relationship between death

anxiety and psychopathology across numerous disorders, further supporting the transdiagnostic role of fears of death. As such, clinical implications revolve around the potential need for innovative treatments which address death fears directly, in order to produce long-term improvements in mental health. However, experimental research is needed to ascertain causal links (Menzies et al. 2019). Treatment of transdiagnostic constructs, such as death anxiety, may increase treatment efficacy across a range of disorders. Research has provided compelling evidence that death anxiety is a significant issue, both theoretically and clinically. In particular, death anxiety appears to be a basic fear at the core of a range of mental disorders, including hypochondriasis, panic disorder, and anxiety and depressive disorders. Large-scale, controlled studies to determine the efficacy of well-established psychological therapies in the treatment of death anxiety as a transdiagnostic construct are warranted (Iverach et al. 2014).

Historical context

Although the question of death and the fear of it is one of the oldest questions man has dealt with, we have no discussions from ancient times about fear in an existential sense. The thematic approach to this phenomenon in Western philosophy and theology occurs in Hellenism and in the Christian religion. Schelling and Kierkegaard thematize the phenomenon of fear as an essential definition of man. They gained their full meaning in the philosophies of existence, primarily relying on Kierkegaard, so that with Heidegger, fear became one of the central categories (Filipović 1984). On the other hand, in the East, under the wing of Arab-Islamic civilization, the philosopher and physician Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (980-1037) wrote his famous "*Treatise*

on the Cure for the Fear of Death and the Treatment of Anxiety Caused by It” which was later translated to European languages, and printed twice in Leiden in French with notes and commentaries (in 1894. and 1899.). In that discussion, Ibn Sina, relying on Islamic teaching, gave an explanation on this issue from his point of view. In this paper, we used an excellent translation from the Arabic original into Bosnian, under the title above, by the great Bosnian Islamic scholar Mehmed Handžić (1906–1944) using an edition printed in Cairo in 1917. This translation was first published in the Islamic journal *El-Hidaje*, V, Sarajevo, 1941-42, No. 4-5, p. 90-98 (Handžić 1999). In the following, we will first give a summary of this discussion from the perspective of modern psychiatry and psychotherapy.

DISCUSSION

Before considering Ibn Sina’s psychotherapeutic approach to the issue of treating the fear of death, one should keep in mind the starting premises on which it is based. In short, we can summarize this as follows:

According to teachings of Islam, man's being is made up of body and soul. The body is created from the ingredients of visible matter, the apparent world, and the soul is the spiritual, mental, conscious and speech energy in the human body and along with which it represents the personality of man. Death is the parting of the soul and the body, and in this parting there is no decay of the soul, but only the decay of the composition (i.e., the union with the body). As for the substance of the soul, which constitutes the essence of man and his core, it remains eternal, because it is not corporeal, so what happens to the body, doesn't necessarily affect it as well. Not only that, but it does not have any of the phenomena that are found in the body, such as struggle for place and space, because the soul does not need a place, nor does it strive for temporal survival, because it does not need time either. This substance has gained perfection through the body and senses. And when perfected by them, and then liberated from them, it goes to its holy world which is close to its Exalted Originator and Creator (Ibn Sina 2013, 2000, 1999).

Types of those who have a fear of death

Ibn Sina begins the *Treatise on the Cure for the Fear of Death and the Treatment of Anxiety Caused by It* by stating that the fear of death is the greatest fear that can overwhelm a person, that it is a general fear and the heaviest and strongest of all fears, and that he therefore felt obliged to explain this issue. He then classifies those who may have a fear of death into the following categories:

- The one who does not know what death is in its essence;
- The one who does not know what will happen to him after death;

- The one who thinks that death itself brings great pain in addition to the pain that comes with the disease that causes it;
- The one who fears the punishment that will follow after death;
- The one who mourns for family, children, possessions and worldly pleasures and enjoyments.

Ibn Sina finally notes that all these reasons are unfounded and unrealistic (Pajević et al. 2021a, Ibn Sina 1999).

From the standpoint of modern psychotherapeutic theory and practice, Ibn Sina's approach to solving a given problem is basically cognitive-behavioral. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is a form of psychotherapy that attempts to modify the interpretations of experiences that determine feelings and behaviors. The premise of CBT is that cognition (the process of acquiring knowledge and forming beliefs) can influence feelings and behaviors. CBT interventions help people to identify and correct thoughts and misinterpretations of experiences that are at the root of problematic behavior. Behavioral interventions (increasing rewarding activities, practicing new skills) both improve mood and provide opportunities to test the accuracy and benefit of beliefs that may contribute to psychological symptoms and impaired functioning (Sadock et al. 2017).

Fear of death in those who do not know what it is in its essence

At the very beginning, looking into the fear of death in those who do not know what it is in its essence, Ibn Sina by the power of his authority, reassuringly, with certainty that leaves no room for any doubt or uncertainty, says: “To the one who does not know death and what it is, I will explain to him...” He then gives a series of statements that aim to form appropriate cognitive patterns in the patient, i.e., basic beliefs that will help him get rid of the so-called cognitive distortions, distorted beliefs that affect our emotions and behavior, or distorted perception of events and allow the emergence of mental impediments. These statements are as follows:

- Death is nothing more than the soul abandoning the use of its tools, and these are the various parts of the body, the group of which is called the organism.
- It is exactly the same as when a craftsman leaves his tools. That is because the soul is an immaterial substance, not an occurrence or an accident¹. Therefore, it does not suffer decay.

¹ accident (lat. *accidens*: something that happens) (gr. τὸ συμβεβηκός: occasion), in philosophy, a changeable, accidental, external, irrelevant property of an object; something that can be different without affecting the essence of a thing. In scholasticism, accident, as opposed to substance, means that which does not exist independently, by itself, but exists in the other, as a part of the other. - Accidental, irrelevant, secondary, unintentional (Anonymous 2021).

- When this substance is separated from the organism, it still exists in the way that befits it; it becomes pure and cleansed from physical turmoil and happy with perfect happiness.
- It cannot perish, nor does it lose its being. Only the phenomena, properties and relations between the soul and the body decay because of their opposites.
- As far as the spiritual substance is concerned, it doesn't have an opposite, and everything that decays does so because of its opposites. If you were to observe the material substance carefully you would notice that it doesn't decay nor does it disappear as such, but only changes from one form to another and loses only some of its properties and features.
- As for the spiritual substance that does not suffer any change or changing, but only receives the perfections and completeness of its form, how could it be imagined and assumed that it can perish and be destroyed.

Ibn Sina does not omit to emphasize that this reasoning requires the expert knowledge that precedes it, which he elaborates in his other works (Pajević et al. 2021a, Ibn Sina 1999).

Fear of death in one who does not know what will happen to him after death

When it comes to fear in one who does not know what will happen to him after death, Ibn Sina immediately points out that the basis of such fear is his distorted opinion:

"...who thinks that once his organism is broken and destroyed his personality will perish and his soul will cease to exist with it and who doesn't know that the soul will still exist and doesn't know what its new life is like."

and concludes that such a person is not really afraid of death, but fear comes from what is unknown. Here Ibn Sina introduces the category of "the fear of the unknown" which is since 1894, after Freud's description of anxiety neurosis, called anxiety and today is one of the fundamental concepts in modern psychiatry and psychopathology. He believes that the task of science is to offer a solution to this unknown, and in that context, he explains how man can face himself and find a solution to this problem.

"And this ignorance actually encouraged scholars to seek science and to tire themselves by serving it. That is why they abandoned their bodily pleasures and peace and instead chose hard work and little sleep. They observed that the peace which man attains when he shakes off ignorance is true peace, and that true fatigue comes from ignorance, for ignorance is a mental illness, and to be cured of it means salvation, eternal peace, and lasting pleasure" (Pajević et al. 2021a, Ibn Sina 1999).

Ibn Sina believes that real fatigue is one that is based on ignorance, that is, on acting on the basis of wrong

assumptions, because such a thing does not benefit man, while work and effort based on knowledge are essentially rest and relaxation for man. This means that a person who has no knowledge of the true nature and relationship of body and soul, and that the soul is eternal and continues its life after the decay of the body, immoderately indulges in bodily pleasures in an effort to satisfy them and thus achieve physical peace, which is "Sisyphian task" because as soon as one bodily desire is satisfied, another is born and so on indefinitely. A constant effort to achieve this, in fact, puts a person in a state of chronic stress because a person can never reach a state of lasting peace and contentment in that way, given that he is exposed to a constant threat of losing what he has already achieved. This leads to the mobilization of internal mechanisms to combat stress and to the exhaustion and fatigue of the organism. Fatigue, anxiety, low mood, weight gain and sleep problems are just some of the consequences of chronic stress, and if it lasts too long it can cause various health problems. Until recently, modern medicine did not pay special attention to the phenomenon of fatigue, but as our knowledge of the mechanisms of stress and its impact on health progresses, fatigue is the focus of modern research. Fatigue caused by exposure to chronic distress is thought to be due to depletion of the adrenal glands that secrete adrenaline and other important hormones that mobilize our body to defend itself from impending danger. As restlessness, fear and danger are constantly present when exposed to chronic stress (read: lack of inner peace and harmony), the adrenal glands constantly activate the body to defend itself from stress, which leads to a state of exhaustion of the adrenal glands and the so-called stress syndrome i.e., chronic fatigue. This exhaustion from stress can be seen as the end result of ignorance, as Ibn Sina says, or cognitive distortions and accompanying distorted thoughts and emotions as it is referred to in the modern theory of cognitive psychotherapy. In addition to the fact that chronic stress leads to a whole range of physical illnesses, mental disorders related to stress, as well as anxiety disorders, already represent a separate chapter in modern textbooks on mental illness. Some authors use the term adrenal fatigue while others dispute it - future research will likely give the right answer to that question. In previous studies, the proposed methods for assessing adrenal fatigue have yielded conflicting results, and the methodology for assessing the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA) has often been inappropriate (Ross, Jones & Blockman 2018). But, regardless of such terminological disputes among researchers, based on the knowledge we have today, Ibn Sina's claim can be considered as quite justified that ignorance, in a broader sense, is a mental illness, or at least the basis on which various mental diseases and behavioral disorders develop. That is why his famous philosophical encyclopedia called *Kitab al-Shifa* (Book

of Healing) is, in fact, intended to help reasonable people to heal from delusions, that is, ignorance as a mental illness (Avicenna 2005). In that context, certain parts of this great work can be considered a superb reading material of modern holistic medicine.

The method that Ibn Sina offers in overcoming the fear of the unknown is the Sufi path (Tasawwuf) of self-knowledge and perfection through self-control and development of moral virtues on the basis of which one should organize one's feelings, thoughts, behavior and lifestyle. It is a complex holistically oriented approach which, from the perspective of modern psychotherapeutic science, contains elements of spiritual, psychoanalytic, existentialist, cognitive-behavioral and gestalt approaches in psychotherapy. Ibn Sina (1999) says:

“Therefore, a reasonable person is obliged to be afraid of shortcomings and flaws, and to be pleased with everything that perfects him. He is obliged to seek everything that will complete him, perfect him, bring him honor, elevate his degree and free him from his restraints in a way that he will be safe from danger, and not in a way that he will be even more restrained, more complicated, and connected.

He is obliged to be completely assured that the holy divine substance, when it gets rid of gross bodily substances becoming purer and clearer rather than connected and murky, ascends to the highest world, becomes happy, returns to its kingdom, and approaches its Creator. It manages to come into the neighborhood with the Lord of the Universe, mixes with good souls like itself and others similar to it, and saves itself from what is contrary to it. On the basis of this we know that the soul which parts with the body, longing for it and fearing that parting, will be unhappy to the extreme and in great pain in regard to itself and its essence; it will turn to the farthest side of its permanent abode and always seek peace and tranquility there” (Pajević et al. 2021a).

To understand this method, it is necessary to understand the concepts of spirit, soul and heart and their mutual relationship in the psychodynamics of spiritual improvement. The spirit is the essence in man and the soul is the appearance of that essence before the mental cognition. A heart, which in addition to signifying the bodily organ, in philosophy and religious psychology, today still represents a symbol of all-perceptibility and sensibility. Understanding and interpretation of these terms in Tasawwuf (Sufism) partly anticipates the psychodynamic understanding of psychic life. According to this understanding, these terms sometimes come in the same sense depending on which properties dominate the human spirit. If the spirit is dominated by bodily desires, instincts, it is denoted by the term *selfish soul* (as a center of passion / sexuality and anger / aggression, which would largely correspond to the psychoanalytic Id, which functions on the principle of pleasure, at the level of the primary process). If the spirit

overcomes the instincts and puts them under the control of reason, in the frameworks of reality, it is then called the mind, intellect, reason (the self-critical soul, the closest psychodynamic term is Ego, which functions according to the principle of reality, at the secondary process level). When the spirit is inspired by belief, it is then dominated by religious and moral feelings (*inspired soul*) and is then called *the heart* (the closest psychodynamic term is *Superego*). Usually, the spiritual reality of the heart is veiled by the awareness focused on *the self* (self-preoccupation); which can manifest as either thought or feeling in accordance with the aspirations of a particular being and his personality traits. If these contents sublimate and the aspirations move (relocation) towards the noble spiritual virtues embodied in the divine ideal (somewhat hinted at by the psychodynamic ideal-ego) the spiritual reality of the heart is reached, the true self, the divine in man, which is the very essence of man's individuality. By the true cognizance of God, the soul rejoins the Spirit and finds its peace, serenity (calm soul). This is the point where mental and spiritual meet, where man transcends himself and strives for the divine. The soul that has been reunited with its source (religion from the Latin *religare* - re-establishing a connection with God) enters the spiritual realm and there can further improve and ascend to different degrees, which is described in detail in the mystical teachings of different religious and spiritual traditions. (Pajević et al. 2021b, Pajević 2014, 2010, 2009, El-Gazali 2006a, 2006b, Ibn Sina 2000, Wilcox 1995, Shafii 1985).

Fear of death in one who thinks that death brings great pain in addition to the pain that comes with the disease that causes it

The very thought of how we will die, how our lives will end causes fear in the depths of the human soul because of the automatic association that dying is a process that causes bodily pain. On top of it, if we read or listened to religious teachings about how the angel of death "plucks" the soul from the body of the dying person, beginning the process of separating the soul from the body from the periphery to the center of the body; from the fingers, through the limbs all the way to the collarbones, etc., such associations lead us to believe that this process is accompanied by unbearable pain which causes a terrible fear because of which we do not even want to think about it. Feelings of fear and pain now flow into each other; fear of pain, pain due to fear. Even Al-Ghazali (2006b) linked fear to the heart as the seat of our feelings and wrote that "fear means enduring the pain of the heart and burning of the heart in anticipation of the undesirable in the near future."

Ibn Sina solves this delicate condition existentially important for every human being in a very simple way, stating that *“death, which is nothing but the parting of*

the soul with the body, cannot have pain at all, because the organism has suffered and felt due to the soul and its impact on it. So, when the organism becomes a body, on which there is no impact of the soul, then it does not feel or have any pain. From this, it is clear that death is a state of the organism that occurs due to the separation of the soul from it and therefore this state cannot be felt or painful, because the organism felt and had pain only by the means of the soul” (Pajević et al. 2021a, Ibn Sina 1999).

Fear of death in one who fears the punishment that will follow after death

With the insight of an experienced expert of the human soul, Ibn Sina draws a clear logical conclusion that a person who fears death because of punishment is not actually afraid of death but is afraid of punishment. Therefore, since this is so, as a remedy for that fear he recommends that that person, first of all, should refrain from doing what in his conscience creates a sense of guilt for which he should be punished.

“He who fears punishment for a sin is obliged to refrain from that sin and to be wary of it. The ugly deeds, which are called sins, originate from the rusty and negative sides of the soul, and these negative sides of the soul are the flaws that we enumerated (elsewhere) and listed the virtues that are opposite to them” (Pajević et al. 2021a, Ibn Sina 1999).

A person who develops a sense of guilt because of his actions, which entail appropriate punishment, admits his sins and ugly deeds for which he deserves punishment and thus acknowledges the existence of a Righteous Judge (The Exalted God) who punishes for ugly deeds. By clarifying in this way what is the basis of the mental state of a patient who is anxious because he expects punishment for his actions, Ibn Sina has a supportive effect on him by strengthening his belief system and infusing him with spiritual strength. He clearly shows him that it is necessary for him to return to himself, to repent of his sins as his faith dictates, and to align his actions with his deep conviction. In that way, he will get rid of the internal moral conflict from which his anxiety arises. Through the experience of such a conflict, its processing and overcoming, a person gains insight into what is useful for him and what is harmful. He thus adopts a new quality to be able to correct himself, change his patterns of thinking and behavior, put his instinctive needs under control, calm his emotions and set himself higher goals that can be achieved through self-knowledge, perfection of his personality and spiritual achievements.

“Therefore, he who fears death in this way, truly does not know what he should be afraid of, and he fears what there is no fear of and what has no action at all. The cure for ignorance is knowledge; the one who has knowledge, he is in the clear and the path of happiness

is clear to him and he will follow it. Whoever takes the right path to a goal, that path will undoubtedly bring him there. This certainty, which comes on the basis of science, is the belief held by one who is clear in regard to his faith and who adheres to wisdom” (Pajević et al. 2021a, Ibn Sina 1999).

Fear of death in the one who mourns for family, children, possessions and worldly pleasures and enjoyments

For this type of patient Ibn Sina says the following:

“Whoever thinks that he is not afraid of death, but mourns for his family, children and property he leaves behind and grieves for the worldly pleasures and enjoyments that will pass him by, should be explained that there is no use of grief over what must inevitably happen. Man belongs to a group of beings that perish and whatever becomes, that perishes. Therefore, the one who would like not to perish, at the same time he wants not to exist. Whoever doesn't want to exist, wants to perish. So, it seems that at the same time he wants to perish and not to perish; he wants to exist and not to exist. It is clear that this is an impossibility that cannot come to the mind of a reasonable person. Besides, if it were possible for man to remain eternal, those who were before us would have remained eternal. If, on the other hand, people remained eternal in addition to the reproduction that exists in them and if they did not die, the whole earth would become cramped for them” (Ibn Sina 1999).

By reaching the awareness of the existence of God the Creator, man overcomes the feeling of existential insecurity, which constantly forces him to seek confirmation of the reality of his own existence through relationships with the objects that surround him. Namely, in order to be sure of one's existence, one needs to have another point, some other certainty with which to maintain that consciousness. That is why a person is constantly binding to objects from his immediate environment (relatives, friends, like-minded people, property, work, hobbies, pets, passions, pleasures, food, intoxicants, etc.). As these objects themselves are unstable and transient, they do not provide a firm and lasting connection with reality, so man is in constant fear of losing such objects, and thus a vital connection with reality. That is the fear of separation (separation fear) that is the base source of discomfort that modern humanity suffers from. In this context, the fear of death is, in fact, a separation fear. Death cuts off all connection with this world, so if man takes this material world as a reality, death poses a terrible threat of its loss and of its consequent disappearance into "nothingness." On the other hand, the loss of any object a person is attached to, suggests an inevitable death that will separate him from everything he loved and enjoyed, so the separation fear is basically again, the fear of death (Pajević 2005).

CONCLUSION

Numerous researchers have concluded that the fear of death is certainly among the most universal fears and that religion may in one way or another have an impact on death-related anxiety. Modern psychiatry obviously does not pay enough attention to the phenomenon of fear of death as such. Therefore, there is a growing need today for innovative treatments that directly address fears of death, in order to achieve long-term improvements in mental health. The issues of life and death are inextricably linked to spirituality, which consists of a degree of security with regard to life after death, a level of satisfaction with life, and a degree of sense of purpose of life. Because of all this, the *Treatise on the cure for the fear of death and the treatment of anxiety caused by it* by the famous Islamic philosopher and physician Ibn Sina is of particular importance today for psychiatry, psychotherapy, and for approach to mental disorders and mental health in general. The author gives a clear, concise and logically flawless analysis of this problem, the way in which it should be approached and the precise method of the psychotherapeutic procedure in its treatment.

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Ahmed Pajević: made substantial contributions to interpretation of data, participated in revising the manuscript and gave final approval of the version to be submitted.

Izet Pajević: conception and design of the manuscript, collecting data and literature searches, analyses and interpretation of literature, manuscript preparation and writing the paper; and gave final approval of the version to be submitted.

Mevludin Hasanović: made substantial contributions to conception and design, literature searches, participated in revising the manuscript and gave final approval of the version to be submitted.

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Correspondence:

Ahmed Pajević, MD
School of Medicine, University of Tuzla
Univerzitetska 1, 75 000 Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina
E-mail: ahmedpajevic@live.com