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Death education: The importance of terror management theory and of the active methods

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# Evidence-Based Nursing

**The effect of death education course utilizing constructivist learning theory on first grade undergraduate nursing student attitudes and coping abilities towards death: A mixed study design - Wu et al**

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Ines Testoni

**Category:** Nursing issues

**Study Type:** Mixed method

**Author's declarative title:** Death education: The importance of terror management theory and of the active methods

**Commentary on:** Wu, Q., Zhu, P., Ji, Q., Shi, G., Qian, M., Xu, H., . . . Zhang, Q. (2023). The effect of death education course utilizing constructivist learning theory on first grade undergraduate nursing student attitudes and coping abilities towards death: A mixed study design. *Nurse Education Today*, 126, 105809.

## Commentary

### *Implications for Practice and Research*

- Death education courses (DECs) prepare healthcare students to manage future relationships with end-of-life (EOL) patients and their relatives. It would be better for DECs to use active methodologies, e.g. creative arts therapies and constructivist and narrative techniques.
- Research should longitudinally monitor students who have completed a DEC to check their levels of willingness to work in palliative care and their levels of work satisfaction versus burnout in both the EOL and other hospital wards after they become healthcare professionals.

### *Context*

Many healthcare practitioners suffer from a lack of competence in death and palliative care. This gap in clinical experience and knowledge causes negative effects when they must face dying people, such as anxiety, grief, distress, anguish, feelings of helplessness and frustration. Indeed, fear and acceptance of death can be improved through DECs;<sup>1</sup> however, there is a need to better disseminate DECs and improve the teaching methods used.

### *Methods*

The DEC chosen for this study of Wu and collaborators<sup>2</sup> adopted constructivist learning theory. The purpose was to examine, with a mixed-method design, the effects of a DEC using a constructivist approach (Group A) compared with a DEC with face-to-face lectures (Group B) on Chinese students. Data collection included a quantitative part utilising the Death Attitude Profile-Revised, Coping with Death Scale, The Palliative Care Quiz for Nursing and a qualitative part consisting of reflective writing after class task.

### *Findings*

Students who participated in the constructivist DEC achieved significantly greater levels of death acceptance, coping and psycho-spiritual social support abilities than those of the control group. As hypothesised, the constructivist method yielded more promising results.

### *Commentary*

The necessity of training university healthcare profession students to be prepared to deal with death and dying is widely complained. The Lancet Commission has launched a scholarly debate aimed at redefining the value of death to close this gap,<sup>3</sup> and DEC's are recognised as an excellent instrument for this aim. However, as demonstrated by terror management theory (TMT), the removal of death is the effect of the instinctive need to deal with the paralysing anguish it causes (mortality salience effect [MSE]).<sup>4</sup> This means that DEC's should pay great attention to the fact that talking about death MSE is activated. Therefore, it is necessary that DEC's also provide teaching methodologies that deal effectively with MSEs. Some DEC experiences have already demonstrated the effectiveness of using active techniques related to creative arts therapies, which are analogous to the constructivist approach, and presenting TMT- and MSE-related content.<sup>5</sup>

Wu and collaborators<sup>2</sup> confirmed the effectiveness of the active methods applied to reflection on death and dying because of the potential to construct new meanings. These activities, e.g. roleplay and group discussion, allowed students to actively construct their own meaning and integrate with others by sharing opinions, listening to others' perspectives and interacting with each other. This experience of DEC realised by Wu

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3 and collaborators<sup>2</sup> implemented collaboration, providing motivation to cope with  
4 anguishing issues. The study confirmed the importance of active techniques for DECs;  
5 however, it must be underlined that, as demonstrated in other experiences,<sup>5,6</sup> it would be  
6 advisable to include content concerning TMT to make students aware of their  
7 unconscious MSEs.  
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**Competing Interests**

No competing interests

For Peer Review

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- 16 1) I have reduced the implications to two, combining the first two.
- 17 2) I reviewed the language in the second bullet, deleting the word 'followed'.
- 18 3) I removed brackets from around the in-text reference numbers and then used  
19 superscript in word to format the numbers.
- 20 4) I reviewed the use of the word 'denouced' in the first sentence of the commentary  
21 section and changed it with "complained".  
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