



# Fear of Death between Nursing Students in the Academic and Professional Programs

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## Abstract

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**BACKGROUND:** Nursing students inevitably witness dying and death during their education and continue throughout their professional practice. These experiences can trigger fear of a patient's death, fear of their own death, or fear of the dying process. Knowing students' level of fear is necessary to enhance the preparation of the students cognitively, emotionally, physiologically, psychologically, and spiritually. Students' fear of death also needs to be identified and addressed because this can affect their attitude in facing death, dying patients, carrying out nursing care for patients at the end of their lives, and their confidence. There is no study regarding feelings towards the dying process, particularly fear of death among students in the Indonesian context.

**AIM:** This study explored the levels of fear of death and the differences between students enrolled in the sophomore academic program and students in the professional program.

**METHODS:** This study used a quantitative comparative with a cross-sectional design. Collett-Lester's Fear of Death Scale was translated to Indonesia and used to measure the fear of death among the respondents. Independent t-test was used to determine the difference between the two groups. All 50 professional students and 50 students in the academic program were included in this study.

**RESULTS:** The fear of death among the sophomore students in the academic program was moderate to high, while those in the professional program were moderate. Furthermore, the t-test revealed a p-value of 0.010, indicating a significant difference in the level of fear of death among sophomore academic program students compared to students in the professional program.

**CONCLUSION:** There is a significant difference in the level of fear of death between sophomore nursing students in the academic program compared to those in the professional nursing program.

## Introduction

Death is an inevitable human element often regarded as the end of life. This can either activate people to act and prolong life or arouse fear. Health professionals encounter death anytime, anywhere. Death may occur as a gradual process that will be experienced and observed when the cardiovascular and respiratory systems malfunction; when uncorrected, the brain stem also fails, proving fatal [1].

Nurses are vital members of the health team. Before becoming professionals, they are expected to overcome many challenges as student nurses that affect them physiologically, psychologically, and emotionally [2], [3], [4]. They inevitably witness dying and death throughout their professional practice [5], [6]. These experiences can trigger fear of a patient's death or fear of their own death. In some cases, nurses are confronted with death having less psychological preparation and minimal or no support from management. This may result in inadequate communication with a terminally ill client or unpreparedness in facing a client's dying or actual death.

A study conducted in Mexico by Mondragon-Sanchez et al. in 2015 [7] stated that professional nurses have a lower fear level than sophomore nursing students who have a higher level of fear of death. A nurse needs to be prepared cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually to face life and death. This shows the importance of end-of-life care as an integral component of current medical practice and health care in general [8]. The end goal is to achieve quality care in medical and nursing management. This enhances nurses' competence in providing holistic, safe, and compassionate care. It is critical then that the educational curriculum includes concepts of death and dying, whether their own or others and interventions to effectively manage these phenomena. Knowing students' level of fear is also necessary, so that appropriate measures can be taken to assist them in coping well.

Indonesia has two different programs of nursing education to be a professional nurse. Nursing students will spend three to 4 years in the academic program to achieve the Bachelor's degree, and then continue with one to 2 years of clinical practice in a professional program to accomplish the professional nurse degree called Ners in Indonesia's nursing

profession. To date, there is no study regarding fear of death among nursing students in Indonesia. This study is essential to have data that may help nursing education institutions prepare nursing students to effectively face the dying or death of patients. Because of the inevitability of encountering the dying process and death in a nursing student's clinical preparation [6], this study explored the level of fear of dying and death among sophomores enrolled in the academic program and those enrolled in the professional program, the level of fear of death in every four types of fear of death, and the difference in their levels of fear.

## Methods

This study used a quantitative comparative design with a cross-sectional approach conducted in October 2016. Ethical approval and permission were obtained from the ethics committee of the Faculty of Nursing, Pelita Harapan University. Respondents were informed of the right to participate in this study, including the confidentiality of the information given. Respondents have a right to withdraw from this study at any time without an excuse. The professional nursing student population included all students enrolled in a professional nursing program (n = 50). Simple random sampling selected another 50 2-year students from the academic program.

The Collett-Lester Fear of Death Scale, modified in 2007 by Tomas-Sabado *et al.* [9], was used. The original version of this instrument was in Spanish, and the author permitted to use a modified version in English [10]. The instrument was translated to Indonesian by a certified translator. The revised version has 28 items and was tested for validity and reliability. The Cronbach Alpha 0.820 indicated that the instrument was valid and reliable. The items are categorized in four subscales: Fear of one's own death, fear of one's own dying process, fear of the death of others, and fear of the dying process of others. Each of the four subscales contains seven items with the 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = not to 5 = very). Scores are obtained for the total scale and each subscale, calculating the average of the respective answers. The highest mean score indicates greater fear of death or of the process of dying.

Data collected were tested for normality with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ( $p > 0.05$ ), while Levene's test was used to gauge their homogeneity ( $p > 0.05$ ). An independent t-test was used to compare the level of fear of death between the sophomore students in the academic program and nursing students in the professional program with a significant level of 5% or  $>0.05$ .

## Results

The participants of this study consisted of 50 students in the professional program and 50 students in the academic program.

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the respondents. Most of the students in the professional program were in age 17–25 (94%), and 42 (84%) were female. The students in the academic program were 50 (100%) in age 17–25, 39 (78%) were female.

**Table 1: The demographic characteristics of the participant**

Variable	Professional program students (n=50) n (%)	Academic program students (n=50) n (%)
Age		
17–25	47 (94)	50 (100)
26–45	3 (6)	0 (0)
Gender		
Female	42 (84)	39 (78)
Male	8 (16)	11 (22)

Most of the students in the professional program have "moderate" and "moderate-high" levels of fear compared to those in the academic program (Table 2). However, 25 (50%) of the academic program students have a moderate to high fear of death compared to only 32% in the other group.

**Table 2: Level of fear of death**

Level of fear	Students in the professional program (n=50) n (%)	Students in the academic program (n=50) n (%)
Low	2 (4)	0 (0)
Low-moderate	6 (12)	3 (6)
Moderate	17 (34)	12 (24)
Moderate-high	16 (32)	25 (50)
High	9 (18)	10 (20)

Both groups were afraid of the death of others (Table 3). Moreover, it is noteworthy that the sophomore students in the academic program have higher levels of fear in four subscales: Fear of one's own death, fear of one's own dying process, fear of the death of others, and fear of the dying process of others. This was confirmed by the group's average level of fear = 3.432 (moderate-high), compared to the professional program's average level of fear = 2.974 (moderate).

**Table 3: The mean of fear of death score**

Type of fear of death	Students in the professional program (n=50)	Students in the academic program (n=50)
One's own death	2.70	3.02
One's own dying process	3.15	3.57
Death of others	3.26	3.78
Dying process of others	2.80	3.35
Total (average)	2.974	3.432

Table 4 shows the result of the bivariate analysis using the independent t-test that yielded a p-value of 0.010. This result indicated a significant

**Table 4. The comparison of the mean scores of fears of death between professional nursing students and academic program students**

Groups	n	Mean	Mean difference	p-value
Students in the professional program	50	2.974	0.4580	0.010
Sophomore students in the academic program	50	3.432		

difference in the levels of fear of death between the two groups that the sophomore students in the academic program have a higher level of fear of death than those enrolled in the professional program.

## Discussion

### **Level of fear of death**

This study showed that most nursing students in the professional program have a moderate fear of death. In contrast, the majority of the academic program sophomore students have moderate to high levels of fear of death. This finding concurs with a previous study conducted in Mexico [7]. The educational level also affects an individuals' fear of death [11]. Exposure to the clinical area begins in the 2 year, so clinical practice and experience are still limited. When they are confronted with dying clients and actual death, the fear of death is more significant [6] than their seniors in the professional program. The lack of experience facing death compared to those in the professional program might be the main reason for their higher fear of death [11], [12], [13]. It is also likely that some 2-year students faced death for the 1 time in their clinical practice. Their first experience may affect their attitudes and emotions toward death in their future practice [8], [14].

Studies on nursing students' perspectives, perceptions, and experiences with death are minimal [15]. No survey of students' beliefs and attitudes on death and dying has been conducted in Indonesia. This study does not aim to identify the factors that affect the fear of death in nursing students.

### **Type of fear of death**

The results showed that both groups identified "death of others" as the type of death they were mainly afraid of. This type included "losing a loved one," "seeing a dead body," "regretting not getting along better with the person when they were still alive," and "feeling guilty regarding the relief provoked by their death." This feeling may have been caused by the nurse's emotional and physiological breakdown when confronted with the death of another person [16]. Emotional and physiological disorders can be in the form of anxiety and fear, even guilt for not providing utmost care to others [17], and the onset of negative attitudes in the face of death [14], [18]. On the other hand, fear of one's own death was the lowest type identified. Marti-Garcia *et al.* [19], in their study in 2017, state that nursing students' fear of their own death may be due to personal reasons such as inability to achieve goals, leave the family, and the dying process itself. They also identified that fear of one's own death

is affected by each person's worldview, cultural values, and beliefs.

### **Fear of death between sophomore students in the academic program and students in the professional program**

There is a significant difference in the level of fear of death between sophomore nursing students in the academic program and those in the professional program. Previous studies revealed that fear of death and dying among nursing students vary depending on their level of education that is mainly related to their clinical experience and psychological and emotional maturity [4], [6], [11], [20]. Nursing students are often afraid of caring for patients with terminal illnesses when death is inescapable [21]. Students' fear of death needs to be identified and addressed because this can affect their attitude in facing death, dying patients, carrying out nursing care for patients at the end of their lives [22], and their confidence [23]. Nursing students need to have thorough theoretical and clinical skills to be better prepared when encountering dying patients or who have died under their care [24]. The nursing curriculum implemented in Indonesia introduces palliative care in the 3 year with only two credit units [25], whereas in other countries, this course is taught in the 2 year; thus, students are assisted in understanding and reflecting on their thoughts and feelings when dealing with the process of dying and facing death [20].

In the COVID-19 pandemic, the high risk of being infected and ill while doing clinical practice might bring fear of death in nursing students. A study from Saha and Jena (2021) [26] states that nurses as front-line workers significantly affect their emotional reaction due to the extreme cases of COVID-19 disease. They also say that nursing students experience severe fear and anxiety and female nursing students have more fear than male students. A study by Alsolais *et al.* (2021) [27] declared that nursing students in Saudi Arabia experience depression, anxiety, and stress during the pandemic of COVID-19. A study in Mexico by Fernandez *et al.* (2021) [28] also stated that nursing students have high levels of stress and fear regarding the COVID-19 outbreak.

This study has limitations because it did not examine what factors influence the fear of death in nursing students and is also limited in updated references related to the same topic as this study, especially in Indonesia. The researchers recommend that educational institutions pay more attention to nursing students' psychological and emotional preparation, particularly the demanding responsibility of coping, caring, and assisting patients in their end-of-life to have a peaceful death. Furthermore, studies should explore students' beliefs on death and dying and factors that influence their beliefs and practices. Future studies also recommended studying the pandemic of

the COVID-19 era to identify the level of fear of death among nursing students.

## Conclusion

There was a significant difference in fear of death between the sophomore students in the academic program and the students in the professional program. This difference may be attributed to their educational preparation and psychological and emotional maturity. Further research is recommended to identify the factors that influence the fear of death among nursing students and the strategies that may strengthen their ability to manage the fear of death effectively.

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