

SUDDEN DEATH IN NIGERIA

PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE



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SUDDEN DEATH IN NIGERA: PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES: Analysis of Causes, Grief Processes and Management

Contents

- ❖ Sudden Death: An overview. A.O. Falase
- ❖ Sudden Death and Cardiac Resuscitation. A.O. Soyawo
- ❖ Sudden death and post-traumatic stress: some psychological consideration relevant to Nigeria (A psychological overview). P.O. Ebigbo
- ❖ Road Traffic Accident and Sudden Death. Commander Olagunju
- ❖ A cultural peep into sudden death: The Nigerian experience. M.C. Kayode and O.O. Omotade
- ❖ Spiritual causes of sudden death: A religious solution in social ethics and sociology of religion. A. Dzugba
- ❖ Using verbal autopsy to identify and proportionally assigned cause of sudden death: A population based prospective study. T.O. Lawoyin, M.C. Asuzu, J. Kaufmane, C. Rotimi, E. Owoaje. L. Johnson and R. Cooper
- ❖ Sudden death in Nigeria: Analysis of causes, impact implications for psychotherapy. H.O. Osinowo
- ❖ Abortion and sudden death among adolescents in Nigeria: A psychological enquiry. B.O. Olley and C.U. Okpara
- ❖ Impact of Gender, Educational Status and Residence on the fear of death and dying: The implication of its psychological consequences. J.O. Osiki and S. Aremu
- ❖ Psychological management of parental grief following perinatal death. D.A. Olorunshola
- ❖ Helping children cope with sudden death and bereavement. B.Y. Oladimeji
- ❖ Sudden death and the health professional: The need for death education. E.A Ayeni
- ❖ Behaviour Therapy approach to Grief and bereavement management. B.Y. Oladimeji and E.A. Ayeni
- ❖ Loss, Death, Grief and Caregivers. A. Onibokun
- ❖ Fear of Sudden Death and Dying among Resident Postgraduate Students of University of Ibadan. Shenge N.A and Balogun S.K.
- ❖ Influence of Sex of Parent, Timing of Loss and Age of Child on Unresolved Grief among Bereaved Parents. A.M. Olusakin
- ❖ Fear of Death and Armed Robbery Experience in Ibadan, Nigeria. S.E. Idemudia, H.O. Osinowo and C.C. Nwachukwu
- ❖ Psychological aspects of death. F.I. Tamen, A.O. Taiwo, H.O. Osinowo J.O. Ekorc, D. Edewor and S. Ojo
- ❖ Caring for the Terminally Ill. P.O. Ikuabe

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Preface

The variety of titles in this book shows how those who are interested in issues of sudden death for old and young people have all come to the same conclusion: that the phenomenon of sudden death deserves attention so as to control its increasing incidence and disheartening consequence in Nigeria.

It occurs to most of us that sudden death is sometimes actually preventable. In large part the cause of the death is occasionally shaped by victim's own decision and behaviour as well as the victims interactions with the social environment.

This is well observed and portrayed by creative writers, artists, musicians, and even in folk narratives. Nevertheless, it appears this has just dawned on those whose work is to advance health and development.

This book is relevant: it is a Nigerian Psychological Association, the papers presented at the Inaugural Conference on Sudden Death of the Nigerian Psychological Association, Clinical Psychology Division, South West Zone, Nigeria.

The chapters in the book depict to us the ramifications of Sudden Death in Nigeria. Mostly, deaths in the context of its causes, diversities, consequences preventive, management and control strategies. The book appears comprehensive in approach utilizing both rational and empirical analyses. The edited collection provides an accessible resource book that overcomes some of the deficiencies encountered in the literature, where the focus has often not addressed African cultural and societal issues of death.

The authors of the chapters are mostly experts working in various Nigerian universities, teaching hospitals and research institutions. In their contribution, they examine critically the enabling and controlling factors of sudden death that have arisen in their research. They are also able to draw on their own experience as members of Nigerian society with first-hand insights about occurrence of sudden death in the society, and in addition as experts in their fields to offer well-informed guidance on how to overcome the problematic occurrence of sudden death.

We are indeed grateful to the contributors for giving so generously of their time to reflect on their papers and to share their experience with others who are either new to the field of sudden death or looking to extend and appraise their knowledge of the field.

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Editors (1999)

**SUDDEN DEATH IN NIGERA: PSYCHOLOGICAL
PERSPECTIVES: Analysis of Causes, Grief Processes and
Management**

| | |
|---|-----|
| Forward | i |
| Preface | ii |
| Content | iii |
| Chapter One | |
| Sudden Death: An Overview - <i>A.O. Falase</i> | 1 |
| Chapter Two | |
| Sudden Death: Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation - <i>A.O. Soyawo</i> | 6 |
| Chapter Three | |
| Sudden Death And Post -Traumatic Stress: Some Psychological Considerations Relevant To Nigeria - <i>Peter O. Ebigbo</i> | 12 |
| Chapter Four | |
| Some Causes Of Road Accidents In Nigeria - <i>Commander Olagunju</i> | 23 |
| Chapter Five | |
| A Cultural Peep Into Sudden Death: The Nigerian Experience - <i>C.M. Kayode & O.O. Omotade</i> | 25 |
| Chapter Six | |
| Spiritual Causes Of Sudden Death: A Religious Solution - <i>A. Dzugba</i> | 32 |
| Chapter Seven | |
| Using Verbal Autopsy To Identify And Proportionally Assign Cause Of Sudden Death: A Population - Based, Prospective Study <i>T.O. Lawoyin, M.C. Asuzu, Jay Kaufman, C. Rotimi, E. Owoaje, L. Johnson and R. Cooper</i> | 42 |

| | | |
|------------------|---|-----|
| Chapter Eight | Sudden Death In Nigeria: Analysis Of Causes, Impact And Implication For Psychotherapy - <i>Helen O. Osinowo</i> | 50 |
| Chapter Nine | Abortion And Sudden Death Among Adolescents In Nigeria: A Hidden Psychological Enquiry - <i>B.O. Olley & C.U. Okpara</i> | 61 |
| Chapter Ten | Impact Of Gender, Educational Status And Residence On The Fear Of Death And Dying: Implication For Psychological Consequences - <i>Osiki, J.O. and Soji Aremu.</i> | 70 |
| Chapter Eleven | Psychological Management Of Parental Grief Following Perinatal Death - <i>D. A. Olorunshola</i> | 76 |
| Chapter Twelve | Helping Children Cope With Sudden Death And Bereavement - <i>B.Y. Oladimeji</i> | 79 |
| Chapter Thirteen | Sudden Death And The Health Professional: The Need For Death Education - <i>E.A Ayeni</i> | 86 |
| Chapter Fourteen | A Behaviour Therapy Approach to Grief and Bereavement Management - <i>B.Y. Oladimeji & E.A. Ayeni</i> | 93 |
| Chapter Fifteen | Loss, Death, Grief And Care Givers - <i>A. Onibokun</i> | 98 |
| Chapter Sixteen | Fear Of Sudden Death And Dying Among Resident Postgraduate Students of University of Ibadan - <i>A.N. Shenge and S.K. Balogun</i> | 103 |

Sudden death

Chapter Eighteen

Influence of Sex of Parent, Timing of Loss
and Age Of Child On Unresolved Grief Among
Bereaved Parents - *A.M. Olusakin*

109

Chapter Nineteen

Fear Of Death Among Armed Robbery Victims
In Ibadan, Nigeria
- *S.E. Idemudia, Helen O Osinowo,
and C.C. Nwachukwu*

117

Chapter Twenty

Psychological Aspects Of Death *Helen O Osinowo, PhD*
F.I. Tamen, A.O. Taiwo, J.O. Ekore, D. Edewor,
- *S. Ojo & O. Ojedokun*

124

Chapter Twenty-One

Caring For The Terminally Ill - *P.O. Ikuabe*

130

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CHAPTER TWENTY

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF DEATH

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Sudden death, by definition, means an unexpected death occurring instantaneously or within an estimated twenty-four hours of the onset of acute symptoms or signs. Sudden death has been seen as unnatural death, which is most closely associated with cardiovascular accident. Apart from this, other causes of sudden death have been linked up with injury, suicide, accidental poisoning, and even respiratory problems.

In Africa, data available still remains scanty on sudden death, its causes or rates of deaths. In some cases of knowing the causes of sudden death, verbal autopsies are usually used as a means of assigning the mode and cause of death. Persons dying suddenly are very likely to be taken to the nearest Accident and Emergency Department. The task of informing and counseling bereaved relatives therefore frequently falls on the staff of these Departments. It is of interest to note that breaking bad news, whether telling a patient about a poor prognosis or informing relatives of the sudden death of a loved one, is one of the most difficult tasks facing nurses. It requires a sensitive approach, based on individuals' right to know the truth. In support of this, the report of the working group on bereavement care in A and E departments recommended both the

provision of follow-up for relatives and the audit of bereavement care as examples of good practice (Stone, *et al.*, 1999).

Philips (1996) reported that compassionate reception of the 'cot death' baby and his family in the accident and emergency department is the first step in enabling families to come to terms with the grief that the death produces. He was also of the opinion that accident and emergency staff can facilitate the early grieving process by an understanding of the family's needs and the provision of appropriate information.

A particular type of sudden death known as sudden infant death (SID) has been studied by a number of researchers. In one of the studies linking up sudden infant death with obstructive sleep apnea COSAS, it was reported that the sudden infant death families had a greater frequency of two or more members with obstructive sleep apnea, reported more respiratory disease or allergy, were more frequently Brach cephalic, and had a smaller mean posterior nasal spine – bastion distance, and ratio of anterior mandibular/anterior maxillary dental height, (Tishler, *et al.*, 1996).

In the work of Malacrida, *et al.*, (1998) on reason for dissatisfaction: a survey of relatives of intensive care patients who died, it was found out that the relatives of patients who died were

most dissatisfied with the care received according to: (a) the type of death (e.g., sudden death versus death preceded by a gradual deterioration in the patient's condition); and (b) the manner in which the relatives were notified of the death (in person versus by telephone). The personal characteristics of the people interviewed by the authors, such as gender and the closeness of their relationship to the deceased, also seem to have some bearing on the opinions expressed. The results further indicated that a high percentage of respondents were satisfied with the treatment received by their dying relative and the information conveyed by caregivers. Nevertheless, the dissatisfaction expressed by some respondents indicates a need for improvement, especially in communicating information to the relatives of these patients.

METHOD

Design

The study employed the cross-sectional survey utilizing the ex post facto design. The study was conducted in Ibadan and its environs.

Participants

A total of fifty (50) respondents from Lagos, Ibadan participated in the study. The participants were made up of twenty (40%) males and thirty (60%) females. The study participants were also made up of seven (14%) singles and forty-three (86%) married respondents.

In terms of educational status of the participants twenty-one (42%) indicated they had no formal education; fourteen (28%) possessed primary six school leaving certificates while fifteen (30%) possessed secondary school leaving certificates. Age of participants ranged from 18-86 years.

As for the occupational affiliations of the subjects, seventeen (34%) of the respondents were farmers; two (4%) indicated that they were butchers; five (10%) were drivers eleven (22%) were traders; four (8%) were civil servants; while three (6%) were nurses.

Results

The results of the study are presented in percentages below:

Table 1: Nature of death of relatives

| T | N | Percent |
|------------------|----|---------|
| Sickness – Cough | 20 | 40% |
| Motor accident | 10 | 20% |
| Sudden death | 9 | 18% |
| Food poisoning | 2 | 4% |
| Fever | 6 | 12% |
| None | 3 | 6% |

Table 2: Victims of Relatives

| Victims | N | Percent |
|-------------------------------|----|---------|
| Son | 2 | 4% |
| Parent | 34 | 68% |
| Spouse | 8 | 16% |
| All died | 2 | 4% |
| Family –youngerBrother & Aunt | 2 | 4% |
| None | 2 | 4% |

The above table shows that 20 (40%) of victims died via a sickness involving cough. 10 (20%) died in motor accidents. 9 (18%) were reported to have died suddenly, 2 (4%) died of food poisoning, 6 (12%) died of fever while 3 (6%) died of unknown causes. Table 2

shows that 2 (4%) respondents reported loosing their sons, 34 (68%) lost their parents, 8 (16%) lost their spouse, 2 (4%) lost all members of their family, 2 (4%) lost their younger brother and aunty while 2 (4%) did not lose anybody.

Table 5 Reasons for fear of death

| Reasons | N | % |
|----------------------------------|----|-------|
| Old age | 18 | 10.6% |
| Regret for younger ones | 18 | 10.6% |
| Type of death and time not known | 16 | 9.4% |
| Death is certain | 4 | 2.4% |
| No knowledge of life after death | 11 | 6.5% |
| It must come | 46 | 27.1% |
| God giveth and taketh | 18 | 10.6% |
| Enjoyment of life | 6 | 3.5% |
| No reasons | 27 | 15.9% |

Table 5 shows that 18 (10.6%) were afraid of death because they felt they might not grow old, 18 (10.6%) fear death because they would regret not being able to care for their young ones, 16 (19.4%) feared death because the type of death and the time of death is unknown 4 (2.4%) feared death because it is certain, 11 (6.5%) feared death because they had no knowledge of life after death, 46 (27.1%) feared death because it must come, 18 (10.6%) feared death because God giveth and taketh, 6 (3.5%) feared death because it would cut short their enjoyment of life while 27 (15.9%) had no tangible reasons for fearing death.

Discussion

The results of analysis showed that sudden death accounted for 18% of all deaths reported in the study such a high proportion only reveal the prevalence or incidences of sudden death in Nigeria. Apart from this, there were other deaths reported which share similar nature as the sudden death. For example, 20% of deaths were reported to be from motor accidents while 4% were from food poisoning. These are deaths that share similar circumstances with, and could be classified as sudden in nature. However, parents were the most victims of death

reported by relatives. It accounted for as much as 68% of all the reported incidences.

The result is an indication of the high incidences of death in Nigeria. This is despite the fact that a higher proportion is rarely reported for official documentation. With such reports, it become a common knowledge among individuals that death is real and can occur irrespective of individuals' age, level of education perceived health status, gender, and other characteristic qualities. This makes it an ever-recurring issue in the thoughts of individuals. That is the knowledge, fear, and sometimes attitude to death and death issues.

In their reactions to death of relatives, 20.6% of the respondents saw the incidence as painful. This was the most reported reaction in the study. From all indications, there was no respondent that view the death of relative as a pleasant experience. In other words, it is an unwelcome experience despite the certainty of death.

Although, majority (80%) of the respondents reported no fear of death, there was however, a general knowledge in the entire sample of death issues. This seeming bold feeling toward death is a further indication of people's belief of its certainty. Therefore, attempt should be made to encourage people to prepare for

death. This is because the fear so generated from death of relatives has generally made people (as reported by 92%) to perceive death as an incidence that must come.

Literature is replete with individual reaction to death. Philips (1996) reported that compassionate reception of corpse or bodies of death relatives is the first step in family members coming to terms with the grief that the death produces. The Philips (1996) report only lend credence to what obtains in Nigeria where so much respect is accorded the dead. The several ceremonial activities lined up during funerals in Nigeria is a testimonial to the fact that such individuals have come to terms with the grief emanating from death of relatives.

As part of the psychological issues involved in death generally, sudden death and other deaths of similar circumstances as witnessed in relatives have made individuals to perceive death as an incidence that must come. However, it is of the view, based on findings in this study that such knowledge and beings in the certainty of death can be a major source of worry for individuals. Therefore, people should be so motivated to prepare adequately for possible event of sudden death.

Summary

The study investigated psychosocial aspects of sudden death among relatives of sudden death victims in Ibadan Nigerian. The 50 respondents that participated in the study were drawn from a general population in Ibadan. Participants were matched for age, gender, and occupational status.

Results revealed that sudden death *and deaths from related circumstances* such as motor accident and food poisoning were the most reported nature of death by respondents. Parents were reported by 68% of participants as mostly the victims of death. Although there was

a general knowledge of death in the study, majority (80%) of respondents were however not so fearful about death.

Nevertheless, sudden death and death in other circumstances have made relatives of victims to perceive the concept of death as a 'must' for individuals. Such knowledge and perception could serve as significant motivators to enable individuals prepare for death.

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