

TRUTH IN LOVE

Generation Z and Their Attitudes Toward
Death

By Parris J. Baker
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Members of Generation Z, people born between 1997 and 2012, have inherited a “Brave New World.[1]” This cohort has directly or indirectly experienced international and domestic terrorism, threats of world war, daily reports of mass shootings in schools, religious institutions, recreational gathering places, and retail outlets. They have seen systematic attacks on marginalized and oppressed populations and felt the life-changing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

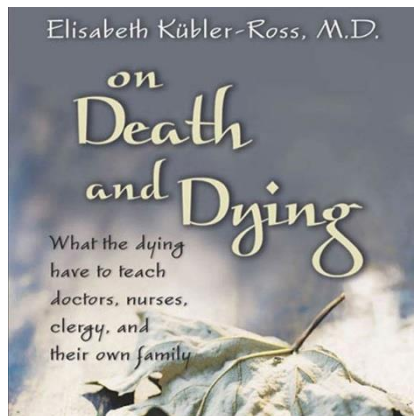
Moreover, members of Gen Z have suffered significantly from natural disasters and weather-related extremes (droughts, flooding, and fires). They have repeatedly witnessed the media-displayed deaths of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, George Floyd, and more recently Tyree Nichols by “wilding[2]” police officers. They are also dealing with the new emerging challenges of internet issues such as artificial intelligence, technology-induced social isolation, body dysmorphia, and cyberbullying.

Therefore, it should not be surprising to learn that Gen Z perceive depression and anxiety as major problems, that currently the second-leading cause of death for this cohort is suicide and they believe that school attendance is a major source of stress.[3] These children, adolescents, and young adults believe there are very few environments they can consider “safe spaces.” Gen Z live

continuously in stressful and anxiety-producing environments, have diminishing self-esteem and autonomy, and are often victims to necropolitics and necrospace. Gen Z grapples with death daily.

As part of a class discussion regarding the many issues facing Generation Z, Gannon University students, enrolled in SCWK 220, “Death, Dying, and Bereavement (DDB),” were asked to talk about their attitudes toward death. Students registered in DDB majored in social work, mortuary science, gerontology, criminal justice, and nursing. Eighteen students were asked to reflect and respond to the five questions listed below:

1. The idea of dying scares me.
2. Today, if I received a diagnosis that I was terminally ill I would live my life differently.
3. I believe there is life after death.
4. I rarely think about death.
5. My religion has helped shape my attitude(s) toward death.



Most students agreed that (1) the idea of death scared them, (2) that they would live their lives differently if they received a terminal diagnosis, (3) believed there is life after death, (4) thought about death often, and (5) that religion wasn't helpful in shaping their attitudes toward death. At the end of the class, students wanted to know if their attitudes and perceptions of death were consistent with their peer group. The class agreed to expand the discussion to include members of their peer group and other members of the Gannon University community.

The students constructed a simple one-page questionnaire to collect participant responses. Participants were recruited via a convenience sample.[4]

Over the course of the semester, 556 individuals responded to the five-item questionnaire.

In terms of the sex of the respondents, 52% ($N=287$) identified as female, 44% ($N=241$) identified as male. Regarding age, 56% were ages 17-21 ($N=303$); 19% were ages 22-34 ($N=117$); 16.8% were ages 35-64 ($N=91$); and 6% were greater than age 65 ($N=30$). Religious affiliation consisted of 38% Catholic ($N=198$), 22% Christian ($N=113$), and 6.3% Muslim ($N=33$). One-fifth (20%) of the sample indicated they had no religious affiliation (None - $N=102$).

When asked if they discuss death and dying with their friends and family, 55% of the participants said yes ($N=284$) and 45% responded no ($N=234$). Females are more likely to discuss death and dying with family and friends and to agree that the idea of death scares them, whereas men were more likely to disagree.

Women were also more likely to agree that there is life after death and that if they received a terminally ill diagnosis, they would live their life differently. Men were more likely to disagree there is life after death and that if they received a terminally ill diagnosis, they would live their life differently.

Gen Z participants ages 17-21 ($N = 303$) who responded to the questionnaire were more likely to agree that (1) they think more about death compared to other groups, that (2) if they received a terminally ill diagnosis they would live their life differently, (3) were more likely to disagree that there is life after death. Perhaps most interesting, (4) disagreed more than expected that their religion has shaped their attitudes toward death. The Centers for Disease Controls and Prevention[5] and the National Institutes of Health[6] both reported that females are more likely to plan and attempt suicide while males are more likely to commit suicide.

Healthy psychosocial development for the Gen Z cohort should find individuals who experience a maturing sense of autonomy, relational security, and an optimism for the future. Instead, what we are discovering is a group that feels lonelier and more depressed, isolated, and less committed to relationships. Members of Gen Z are less likely to perceive that their participation in religion will mitigate stress and reduce anxiety. Death Apprehension Theory[7] suggests the belief in or perception of a God who is overly demanding, distant, and punishing increases death apprehension.

Huxley's "Brave New World" describes a dystopian society that attempts through the integration of science and technology to increase pleasure and efficiencies for society. Citizens were created and organized to neatly fit and conform into society. Diversity is appreciated only as it is functional and those who are considered different are segregated from society. Truth is avoided and replaced with an insatiable desire for ease, comfort, and pleasure.



Generation Z is the fastest growing and most racially diverse generation in America. The rapid growth and varied perceptions of America by Gen Z have challenged Baby-boomer policymaking traditionalists who seemingly dislike diversity and are out of step with this younger generation. Huxley may have been farsighted in his depiction of a brave new world. His perception of the future, his brave new world, published

in 1932, may be our brave new reality, one hundred years later.

[1] Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. London: Vintage, 2010. A novel which describes a futuristic, dystopian (imagined state where there is great suffering and injustices) society where the population is produced, grown, and conditioned through a process known as sleep-teaching. Divisions in the population, engineered through reproductive technologies, created a hierarchical caste of citizens. The Office of Intellectual Freedom has identified *Brave New World* as one of the Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books, 2010-2019.

[2] Wilding - The action or practice by a gang of youths of going on a protracted and violent rampage in a street, park, or other public place, attacking or mugging people at random along the way. [Here](#)

[3] The Annie E. Casey Foundation. *Generation Z and Mental Health*. February 14, 2023. [Here](#)

[1] Convenience sample (also called accidental sampling or grab sampling) is a method of non-probability sampling where researchers will choose their sample based solely on convenience. Non-probability sampling means that researchers choose the sample as opposed to randomly selecting it, so not all members of the population have an equal chance of participating in the study. [Here](#)

[2] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* [Here](#)

[3] Miranda-Mendizabal, A., Castellví, P., Parés-Badell, O. (2019). Gender differences in suicidal behavior in adolescents and young adults: systematic review and met analysis of longitudinal studies. *International Journal of Public Health*, 64, 265-283. [Here](#)

[4] Ellis, L., Wahab, E. A., & Ratnasingan, M. (2013). Religiosity and fear of death: A three-nation comparison. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 16, (2), 179-199. [Here](#)

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