



**BUILDING BRIDGES: FOSTERING HOPE THROUGH FAITH-BASED
DEATH EDUCATION**

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NACSW Death Education Project Summary 2016

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Most people are very uncomfortable learning about death since the fear of dying is common. Since social workers often encounter death in professional practice, it is vital they understand death and be self-aware so they can manage their own fears about dying. Culturally sensitive death education is an intervention that can be used for reducing death anxiety for both practitioners and clients to increase their self-awareness, reduce their anxiety, and help them prepare for the future.

The NACSW Conference poster examined a three-year study (six semesters) of the effectiveness of general death education in decreasing death anxiety among BSW students in a rural, secular university located in the MS Delta. The research design was a quasi-experimental mixed methods pre/posttest intervention without a control group. The intervention consisted of a two-week interactive didactic unit on death, dying, grief and bereavement. This was combined with reflective and experiential learning activities designed to increase student self-awareness of their own fears and mortality, reduce their fears about death, enhance their empathy toward people who are dying or grieving, and allow them to design their own death education program so they can do the same for clients in their future practices. Students discussed various key components of general and specific death education, and learn how to integrate death education programs in the classroom and with various client populations to make death education spiritually and culturally relevant. Faith-based handouts that could be used in death education personally or professionally with clients who are Christians were provided as part of the cultural sensitivity and competence component (see attachments). Similar handouts could be designed for students and/or clients of any religion or culture to “tailor” death education to meet the needs of specific clients. As part of the project, students prepared their own obituaries and bucket lists and discussed the advanced directive documentation and funeral/burial preparation processes. Templar’s *Death Anxiety Scale* (DAS) was used to assess the impact of the unit on decreasing student death anxiety before and after the two-week unit. A qualitative questionnaire was also used to assess pre- and posttest student reports of the impact of the unit in increasing their empathy and practice preparation for working with people who are dying or grieving. The obituary and bucket list assignments were used to enhance and assess self-awareness and reflection. The intervention was replicated in an Aging course for six semesters. For each semester, statistically significant differences were found between the mean and median pre- and posttest scores on the DAS. The intervention made a significant difference in reducing student death anxiety. Parametric dependent sample t-tests were used along with the nonparametric Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test to test the research hypothesis that the death education intervention would indeed decrease student death anxiety. The research poster presented at the NACSW 2016 Conference depicted graphical and narrative descriptions of the qualitative and quantitative research results. It documented that the two-week unit with interactive discussion and practical application components of the death education unit was effective. Students reported that it made learning about the difficult and uncomfortable subject of death and dying easier to understand and showed how useful death education can be in social work education and practice. (Note: The poster and additional graphs depicting the study’s results will be submitted to the *NACSW 2016 Conference Proceedings*. Additional information is available upon request to jdonahoe@deltastate.edu)