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Aged people with chronic diseases dying

An investigation of metaphorical perceptions and cognitive structure

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Abstract

Purpose: This study was designed to examine the metaphorical perceptions and cognitive structures of aged individuals with chronic diseases towards death.

Methods: The research was conducted as a qualitative study based on metaphor analysis. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview form that investigated the metaphorical perceptions of 15 individuals with chronic diseases towards death and a form that was asked to be explained with drawing technique. In the semi-structured interview form “Death is like ... because ...”; metaphor expression was included, and in the other part “Describe your thoughts about death with drawings”; the form containing the expression was used. The data were analyzed using the content analysis technique. The study was conducted and reported according to the COREQ checklist.

Results: It was determined that the old individuals with chronic diseases who participated in the study produced 4 metaphors with the writing technique and 4 metaphors with the drawing technique. As metaphors, the themes of end of life and a new beginning, extinction and feeling of emptiness, journey of life, salvation and reunion were determined.

Conclusion: As a result of the study, it was determined that old individuals with chronic diseases had anxiety about death. In addition, it was determined that old individuals had negative and positive cognitive schemas about death. In this context, old individuals with chronic diseases may need psychosocial support systems.

Keywords

Old age · Chronic disease · Cognitive structures · Death · Metaphor

Introduction

Chronic diseases are a major public health problem worldwide. Older people are more likely to die from chronic diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer and dementia, which involve complex care needs [1]. Worldwide, deaths from chronic noncommunicable diseases account for 71% of all deaths and 58% of these occurred in older adults aged 70 years and older [2]. In recent years, the leading

causes of death have shifted from acute and infectious diseases to chronic noncommunicable diseases, giving people time to discuss and prepare for death [3]. The concept of death, which is influenced by many factors, such as society, culture, religion and taboo, is expressed as an experience for all living organisms, where vital functions are irreversibly terminated, which is the last stop of life in physical and psychological terms [4]. Although the concept of death is an inevitable period of life, it can

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cause fear and anxiety in people with its termination of life and the sense of uncertainty afterwards [5]. Approaches to the fear of death in old people are seen as sociocultural approaches, which are characteristic of our social identity such as gender and ethnicity, and critical approaches, which are characterized by understanding the problems of aging and age-related problems. It is stated that aged individuals experience moderate death anxiety during and after hospitalization for various reasons and that this death anxiety in aged patients negatively affects recovery [6]. It is worth noting that older adults often suffer from functional impairments due to chronic diseases or aging, which can affect achieving optimal care goals. As a result of the training and nursing care provided, older adults can provide opportunities to express their end-of-life thoughts and facilitate communication of end-of-life problems with family members and health professionals. The findings to be obtained in this context will provide important contributions for nurses to provide individualized care for the end-of-life period and to support patient-family communication. In this context, this study aims to examine the metaphorical perceptions and cognitive structures of old individuals with chronic diseases towards death.

In line with this purpose, answers to the following sub-objectives were sought:

1. What are the metaphorical perceptions of older individuals with chronic diseases towards death?
2. What are the cognitive perceptions of older individuals with chronic diseases towards death?

Method

Throughout this study, the authors followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) [7].

Study design

The research was conducted as a qualitative study based on metaphor analysis. In this study using metaphor analysis, which is one of the qualitative research methods, the metaphorical perceptions and cognitive structures of old individuals with chronic diseases towards death were

examined [8]. Metaphor is a perception process and can be defined as the perceptions that a concept or event evokes in an individual [9].

Research team and reflexivity

All three members of the research team are active faculty members in nursing schools. One of the researchers has a PhD in internal medicine, one in psychiatric nursing and one in nursing principles. Of the researchers two have experience working as clinical nurses in hospitals and both have received training in qualitative research methods. The fourth researcher has a bachelor's degree in social work.

Study group

Criterion sampling method, which is one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used to determine the study group of the research. Criterion sampling is the sampling of people, events, objects or situations that have the qualities determined for the problem [10, 11]. The study was conducted face-to-face with individuals with chronic diseases living in the northern region of the country. Data collection was completed with 15 individuals with chronic diseases.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) having a chronic disease, (b) being over 65 years of age, (c) being open to communication and (d) agreeing to participate in the study. The exclusion criteria were as follows: (a) have a speech, language or hearing impairment that prevents communication and (b) refusal to participate in the study.

Data collection tools

The data were collected using the "Semi-structured Interview Form" and the "Data Collection Form on Death of Elderly Individuals with Chronic Diseases".

Metaphor technique. Semi-structured interview form is a tool that helps to generate questions about the determined topics and areas. This method covers all dimensions related to the research problem [12, 13]. Semi-structured interview is one of the most preferred data collection tools

in metaphor analysis methods [14]. It is stated that it is used in studies based on metaphor analysis [14, 15]. The semi-structured interview form was created by the researchers in line with the literature on the perception of older individuals with chronic diseases towards death [14]. The form includes a metaphor question. In order to determine with which metaphor the participants associate the concept of death, a section starting with the words "Death is like ... because ...", they were asked to fill in the section starting with the words.

Drawing-writing technique. In the second part of the data collection tool, data were collected with the drawing-writing technique.

Data collection

During the research process, an appropriate interview environment was provided at dates and times convenient for the participants. Using the snowball sampling method, in-depth individual face-to-face interviews were conducted at the home addresses of a total of 15 aged individuals residing in Trabzon province who had chronic illnesses and were over 65 years of age. The interviewer only knew the first participant; the other participants were reached using the snowball method by the fourth researcher, a social worker (S.A.), under the supervision of a specialist in psychiatric nursing and qualitative interviews (S.U.). The face-to-face interviews with the aged individuals lasted an average of 10–15 min, and the individuals were asked to express their thoughts about death on a piece of paper and to draw their thoughts about death. The research was conducted on a voluntary basis and no individuals wished to withdraw from the study. All transcripts have been approved by the participants. The validity of the qualitative data was ensured by direct quotations from the participants' views and its reliability was ensured by academics with experience in qualitative research (psychiatric nursing, internal medicine nursing, and social work) reviewing and confirming the data.

Table 1 Characteristics of the 15 participants in the study				
Participant	Age (years)	Gender	Marital status	Chronic disease
K1	74	Woman	Her husband had passed away	Hypertension
K2	71	Male	Married	Hypertension
K3	74	Woman	Her husband had passed away	Hypertension
K4	74	Woman	Her husband had passed away	Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
K5	71	Male	Married	Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
K6	69	Male	Married	Hypertension
K7	70	Male	His wife passed away	Type 2 diabetes
K8	66	Woman	Married	Asthma
K9	75	Woman	Her husband had passed away	Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
K10	73	Woman	Married	Hypertension
K11	69	Male	Married	Type 2 diabetes
K12	71	Male	His wife passed away	Hypertension
K13	74	Male	Married	Hypertension
K14	79	Woman	Her husband had passed away	Heart disease
K15	71	Male	Married	Hypertension

Data analysis

Document analysis and content analysis will be used in the evaluation of the metaphors created by aged individuals about death. Document analysis, one of the innovative data collection methods, facilitates data transfer and accelerates analysis [8]. Content analysis is based on grouping relevant information into predetermined themes and concepts and interpreting them in an understandable way [13]. Content analysis is carried out in five stages: naming, classifying, categorizing, ensuring validity and reliability and quantifying the data.

Validity and reliability

The two most important criteria for ensuring the validity of metaphor studies are analyzing the data in detail and categorizing each metaphor appropriately [8, 13, 14]. In this study, metaphors were presented in the writing technique and drawing technique through a comprehensive data analysis process. In the fifth stage, the reliability of the research was determined using the reliability formula according to Miles and Huberman (1994) [16].

An agreement of 80% or higher between expert and researcher evaluations was accepted as an indicator of research reliability. If the reliability calculations exceeded 70%, the research was considered reliable [16].

Ethical aspects of the study

Regarding ethical issues, the study was approved by the University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (E-18457941-050.99-159657; Date: 11 December 2024). Informed consent was obtained from the participants before starting the interview. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and the ethical standards of the National Research Committee.

Results

All participants are Muslims and share a common cultural background. The demographic characteristics of the individuals who participated in the study are presented in Table 1.

In the metaphorical perceptions of old individuals with chronic diseases towards death, 5 thematic metaphors were

determined with the writing technique (Table 2).

In the perceptions of aged individuals with chronic diseases towards death, 4 thematic metaphors were determined with the drawing technique (Table 3).

Discussion

Metaphors enable complex concepts to be interpreted in a new light by associating a familiar concept with another familiar concept [17]. This study aimed to examine the metaphorical perceptions and cognitive structures of older individuals with chronic diseases towards death. The metaphorical perceptions and cognitive structures of older individuals with chronic diseases towards death are discussed under two headings.

Metaphors revealed by older individuals with chronic diseases through writing technique

As a result of the study, it was determined that individuals perceive death as the end of life and a new beginning. When old individuals approach the end of their lives, they think more about the phenomenon of death and begin to question the meaning of life in this process. In this period, religion is an internal guide to existential questions for individuals who try to develop a meaning for both the purpose of life and posthumous existence. The belief system helps individuals go through this process in a mentally and spiritually healthier way [18]. Although it is generally accepted that death is an inevitable reality, individuals' approaches to this inevitability vary depending on personal and social characteristics [19].

As a result of the analysis, the themes of extinction and feeling of emptiness were found in the metaphorical perceptions of older individuals towards death. Individuals approaching the last period of life begin to realize more deeply that they are a lonely being as their awareness of time, space and self increases. This period is often characterized by experiences such as meaningless waiting, feeling of social exclusion and restriction of freedoms [20]. Older adults' beliefs and attitudes towards the concept of death can affect

Table 2 Metaphors produced by older individuals with chronic diseases with the writing technique for death		
Theme	Sub-theme	Quotes
1. End of life and a new beginning	A. End of a semester	“Death is like the end of all living things. It is necessary for the continuation of future generations. This is how God maintains ecological balance, it is sad. Death is salvation in some places. Some people suffer and they seek salvation in death.” (K7) “It is like breathing, because breathing air is very valuable, but it is very difficult for me now” (K19).
	B. The beginning of a new era	“Death is not the end but a beginning. People whose faith is strong and who fulfil the commands of The Creator are not afraid of death” (K11).
2. Extinction and emptiness	A. Loneliness and meaninglessness	“Death is like emptiness for me. Death is also real. Every living thing will taste death when the time comes. Death is an unknown loneliness that is painful and real.” (K13).
	B. Unknown and fear	“It is like emptiness, because there is too much uncertainty.” (K7). “Death is like fear because it is painful.” (K12)
3. The journey of life	A. Seeing life as a journey	“Death is like a journey, because you are always on a long road and when the road ends, everything ends.” (K15). “Death is the process of completing the journey” (K12).
4. Salvation and reunion	A. Salvation from the world	“Death is liberation from the world, real life, eternal happiness, reunion with loved ones” (K8).
	B. Reunion with The Creator	“Death is reunion with God and seeing paradise if your sins are few and your faith is strong.” (K3).

their adaptation to the aging process and their overall quality of life. In particular, the uncertainty about the process after death can cause emotional reactions and depressive symptoms in individuals, which can further increase death anxiety by reducing quality of life [21]. On the other hand, the losses encountered during old age lead to an intensified sense of loneliness in individuals. Factors such as narrowing of the social environment, loss of friends and spouses cause older individuals to experience more loneliness than younger individuals [22].

Another theme identified according to the data obtained from the study is the journey of life. Some of the participants described death as the completion of a long journey. This metaphor shows that older individuals see the phenomenon of death as a natural consequence of life and the completion of the existential process. Physical and psychosocial difficulties related to chronic diseases weaken older adults’ sense of autonomy and dignity, which can lead to a deepening sense of loneliness [23]. In this process, it is reported that many older individuals turn to religion and spirituality in order to make sense of life and cope with difficulties. As a matter of fact, some individuals consider this period as a process of spiritual development and inner maturation [24]. These findings overlap with the metaphorical perceptions obtained in our study.

One of the themes identified as a result of the study is that individuals perceive death as a kind of salvation and reunion. Care including emotional and spiritual aspects plays an important role in coping with loneliness. Holistic and specialized care provided by nurses to individuals at the end of life contributes to patients feeling stronger, peaceful and in control. This approach facilitates coping with the lack of self-confidence and uncertainty in life purpose that occur with existential loneliness [25].

Meeting the spiritual needs of patients supports the healing process, strengthens coping skills and improves health-related quality of life. In this process, nurses should support the religious and spiritual activities of individuals; facilitate their access to religious resources in line with their demands and guide appropriate interventions [26]. In studies it is stated that older individuals receive social support through religious and spiritual beliefs, interact more strongly with their environment and develop a sense of belonging [27].

Metaphors of older individuals with chronic diseases revealed by drawing technique

The analyses show that the metaphorical perceptions of older individuals towards death revealed by the drawing technique are the same with the themes obtained

by the writing technique. One of these themes is that individuals consider death as the end of life and a new beginning. Belief is an important spiritual source that contributes not only to the individual’s daily life but also to the meaning of the process after death. In this context, the understanding of the afterlife, especially in the Islamic faith, encourages seeing life as a temporary stage and preparing for the existence after death. In this respect, religion becomes a powerful element of inner balance that reduces the fear of death while guiding the individual’s life [18]. While some individuals consider death as a reunion with their loved ones, a spiritual transformation or a new beginning, others define death as a negative experience of extinction, nothingness or the end of existence [19]. This diversity is related to individuals’ cognitive schemas formed in line with their life experiences, belief levels and social relationships.

As a result of the study, it was determined that older individuals perceived death as extinction and a feeling of emptiness. These metaphors show that death is associated not only with an end but also with loss of meaning, helplessness and loneliness. It is also stated in the literature that the aging process is not only limited to physical problems but also includes cognitive and emotional difficulties accompanied by chronic diseases. These multi-dimensional difficulties can cause many

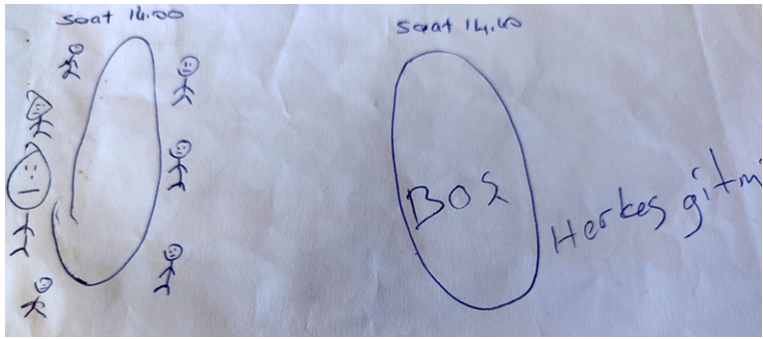
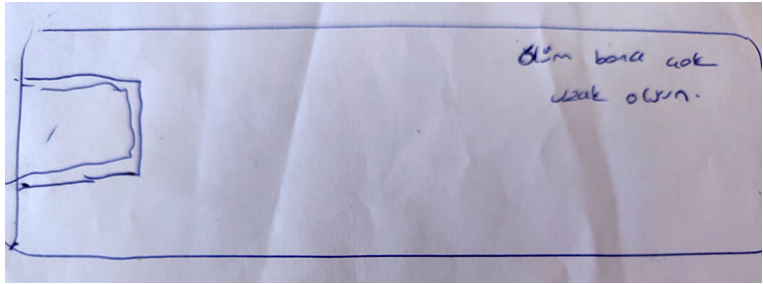
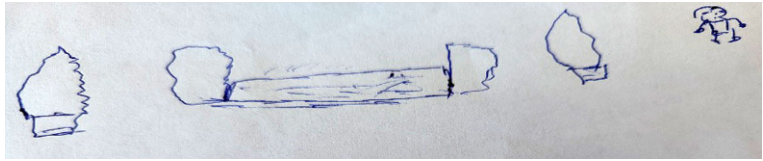
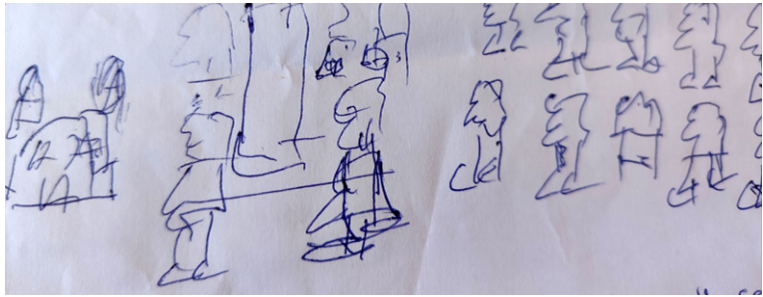

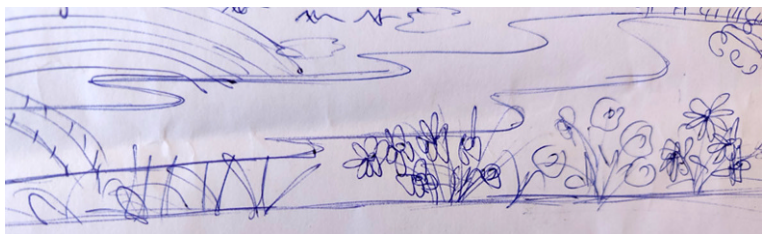
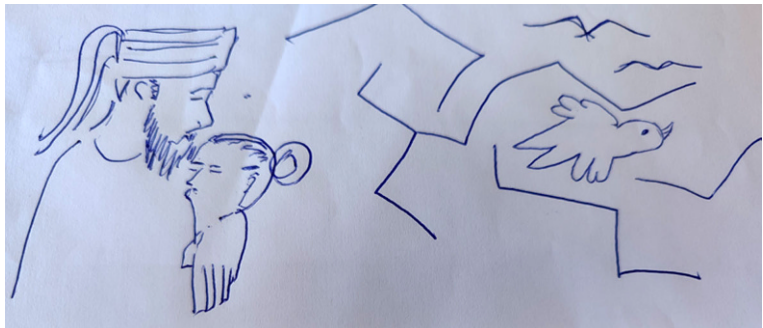
Table 3 Metaphors produced by aged individuals with chronic diseases with the drawing technique for death		
Theme	Sub Theme	Quotes
1. End of life and a new beginning	A. End of a semester	<p>K9</p> 
	B. The beginning of a new era	<p>K6</p> 
2. Extinction and emptiness	A. Loneliness and meaninglessness	<p>K11</p> 
	B. Uncertainty and fear	<p>K4</p> 
3. The journey of life	A. Seeing life as a journey	<p>K7</p> 

Table 3 (Continued)		
Theme	Sub Theme	Quotes
4. Salvation and re-union	A. Salvation from the world	K10 
	B. Reunion with God	K2 

psychosocial problems such as identity confusion, feelings of worthlessness, depression, hopelessness, social withdrawal, loneliness and anxiety about being a burden on the individual's family or society [28]. Loneliness is defined as a subjective experience that one's social and emotional ties are not satisfying enough. This situation arises from the difference between the relationships that the person has and the relationships that the person needs. In particular, the quality of relationships rather than the number of relationships emerges as a determining factor in the formation of the feeling of loneliness [22].

Another theme identified in the study is that death is the journey of life. Spirituality is a dynamic dimension of humanity in which individuals question the ultimate meaning, purpose and transcendent dimension of life and experience their connections with themselves, their families, society, nature and a supreme being at an inner level [27]. Accordingly, accepting one's life experiences as they are and attributing a holistic meaning to the past contribute to a decrease in the fear of death and an easier acceptance of death. In particular, limited regrets about the past and satisfaction with life are among the factors that facilitate the individual's adaptation to the death process [29]. Indeed,

in other studies it has been reported that ego integrity and productivity level have significant effects on acceptance of death [30].

According to the data obtained through drawing, it is seen that death is embraced as salvation and reunion. Spirituality and religiosity play an important role in individuals' capacity to face death and cope with the dying process. While a faith-based commitment helps the individual to make sense of the losses and pains experienced; it can also strengthen spiritual resilience [31]; however, not only physical and psychological health but also existential questions, life purpose and spiritual concerns have an impact on an individual's life satisfaction, inner peace and happiness. Religious beliefs and spiritual values are an important part of an individual's search for fulfilment and peace of mind, and these elements interact holistically with physical, mental and social dimensions [32]. Especially when individuals with intrinsic religiosity build their lives on religious foundations, they can cope with existential conflicts in a healthier way, which may contribute to a decrease in the fear of death [31]. Various studies reveal that spirituality improves the capacity of older individuals to cope with stress and positively affects their psychosocial well-being by strength-

ening social relationships [27]. Advanced stage chronic diseases are accompanied by increasing physical and psychosocial burdens over time. While this situation weakens the individual's sense of autonomy and independence, it can also negatively affect the perception of dignity. This process can lead to a deepening sense of loneliness [23].

It is observed that older individuals turn to religion and spirituality more than other age groups when they face disadvantages related to the aging process. Religion and spirituality play a decisive role in helping these individuals make sense of life, develop an existential purpose and cope with the challenges of old age. Indeed, many older adults consider this period as a process of spiritual development and inner maturation [24]. This approach shows that the last stage of the life journey is seen as an inner completion and meaning-making. It encompasses elements such as the meaning and purpose of life, orientation towards inner sources of power, individual integrity and a sense of transcendence. It is also associated with values, hopes and beliefs that lead the individual to connect with a supreme being and in this respect it also supports the individual's spiritual resilience [24].

Furthermore, the study found that all participants being Muslim could influence individuals' perception of death, particularly among those with strong religious and spiritual beliefs, who expressed death as a beginning, a reunion, and a return to God.

Based on the study results, it was determined that individuals who had lost their spouse also viewed death as a reunion and a new beginning. It can be said that the death of a spouse can influence thoughts about death.

Conclusion

As a result of the study, it was determined that older individuals with chronic diseases had anxiety about death. In addition, it was determined that older individuals have negative and positive cognitive schemas about death. Older individuals experience hopelessness, fear and depressive feelings due to reasons such as approaching death and living alone. It is important for nurses to make individualized care planning by considering the cognitive and emotional reactions of the individual in this process. In addition, teaching older individuals to recognize the social support resources they need and to use them by making the necessary interventions to mobilize them will increase the level of perceived social support. In this direction, nursing care should be provided with a holistic approach to include psychosocial and spiritual aspects. Providing healthcare services to older individuals with chronic illnesses places significant responsibilities on all healthcare professionals, including nurses. In the care of older individuals with chronic illnesses, it is essential that care workers possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and understanding to meet the physical and psychosocial needs of the patient, and that they understand and accept the feelings of the patient and their family in order to provide effective psychosocial support. Furthermore, it is crucial for nurses to receive continuous and comprehensive training in caring for individuals with chronic illnesses in terms of geriatric care services. It is also believed that nurses and all healthcare providers need training in recognizing the spiritual and existential needs of older individuals

approaching the end of life and responding to these needs.

It is recommended that in-house training be provided to increase nurses' knowledge about death and that qualitative studies be conducted to assess the views of healthcare personnel working in different clinics, as well as patients and their families, regarding death.

Limitations

A limitation of the study is that all participants were selected from a small sample group of individuals living in the northern region of Turkey. The results may vary depending on the participants and the environment in which the study was conducted, and generalizations cannot be made.

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Data availability. The datasets generated during the study are not publicly available due to an ethical restriction but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest. S. Demir Çam, S. Uzun, E. Aydın and S. Altındaş declare that they have no competing interests.

The study was approved by the University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (E-18457941-050.99-159657; Date: 11.12.2024). Informed consent was obtained from the participants before starting the interview.

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Sterbende ältere Menschen mit chronischen Erkrankungen. Eine Untersuchung metaphorischer Wahrnehmungen und kognitiver Strukturen

Ziel: Diese Studie wurde konzipiert, um die metaphorischen Wahrnehmungen und kognitiven Strukturen älterer Menschen mit chronischen Erkrankungen in Bezug auf den Tod zu untersuchen.

Methoden: Die Untersuchung wurde als qualitative Studie auf der Grundlage einer Metaphernanalyse durchgeführt. Die Daten wurden mithilfe eines halbstrukturierten Interviewformulars erhoben, das die metaphorischen Wahrnehmungen von 15 Menschen mit chronischen Erkrankungen gegenüber dem Tod untersuchte, sowie mithilfe eines Formulars, das mit Zeichnungen erläutert werden sollte. Das halbstrukturierte Interviewformular „Der Tod ist wie ... weil ...“ enthielt metaphorische Ausdrücke, während das andere Formular „Beschreiben Sie Ihre Gedanken zum Tod mit Zeichnungen“ Ausdrücke enthielt. Die Daten wurden mit Hilfe der Inhaltsanalyse-Technik ausgewertet. Die Studie wurde gemäß der COREQ-Checkliste durchgeführt und dokumentiert.

Ergebnisse: Die älteren Menschen mit chronischen Erkrankungen, die an der Studie teilnahmen, erstellten 4 Metaphern mit der Schreibtechnik und 4 Metaphern mit der Zeichentechnik. Als Metaphern wurden die Themen Lebensende und Neuanfang, Auslöschung und Gefühl der Leere, Lebensreise, Erlösung und Wiedervereinigung ermittelt.

Schlussfolgerung: Als Ergebnis der Studie wurde festgestellt, dass ältere Menschen mit chronischen Erkrankungen Angst vor dem Tod haben. Darüber hinaus wurde festgestellt, dass ältere Menschen negative und positive kognitive Schemata zum Thema Tod haben. In diesem Zusammenhang benötigen ältere Menschen mit chronischen Erkrankungen möglicherweise psychosoziale Unterstützungssysteme.

Schlüsselwörter

Alter · Chronische Erkrankung · Kognitive Strukturen · Tod · Metaphern

Hier steht eine Anzeige.

