

# Reasons for Joining a Right-to-Die Society: Differences Depending by the Characteristics of Members

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## BACKGROUND

In Switzerland, assisted suicide in case of incurable diseases is tolerated. Various right-to-die societies are striving for people rights at the end-of-life and offer personal guidance to suicide. Members are more likely to be female, older, and better educated than the general population.

Several researches have been conducted on people who request an assisted death, but little is known about personal reasons and motivations for joining a right-to-die society.

## OBJECTIVES

- Provide an overview of the motivations that led to the decision to join a right-to-die society.
- Determine to what extent the reasons for membership vary according to personal characteristics.

## METHODS & SAMPLE

The data come from a large study on the members of one of the main Swiss right-to-die societies: *EXIT A.D.M.D. Suisse romande*.

The objectives are to investigate the reasons for membership, the adherence to the values of the organization, and the anticipation of the future life course. The study design includes both quantitative (see below) and qualitative (54 semi-structured interviews) approaches.

A self-administered questionnaire was sent by mail in 2016 to a random sample of members aged of 65 years old and more. 1,214 people agreed to participate (response rate of 29%).

Open-ended question:

*For what reason(s) did you join EXIT?  
(You may mention up to 4 reasons)*

**Table 1: Sample characteristics**

|                  | n   | %    |
|------------------|-----|------|
| Male             | 422 | 34.8 |
| Female           | 792 | 65.2 |
| 65-74            | 629 | 51.8 |
| 75-84            | 444 | 36.6 |
| 85+              | 141 | 11.6 |
| Education:       |     |      |
| Low              | 362 | 30.4 |
| Medium           | 530 | 44.7 |
| High             | 296 | 24.9 |
| Living alone     | 526 | 44.0 |
| Not living alone | 670 | 56.0 |
| Health:          |     |      |
| (Very) good      | 657 | 54.7 |
| Satisfying       | 379 | 31.6 |
| (Pretty) bad     | 165 | 13.7 |
| Religion         |     |      |
| None             | 429 | 36.4 |
| Catholic         | 272 | 23.1 |
| Protestant       | 448 | 38.0 |
| Other            | 30  | 2.5  |

## RESULTS

**Table 2: Reasons for joining EXIT (n and % of people mentioning at least one reason in each categories, with examples of responses)**

|  | n          | %           |
|--|------------|-------------|
| <b>Ideological commitment</b>  | <b>243</b> | <b>20.0</b> |
| General  | 181        | 14.9        |
| Reference to EXIT  | 85         | 7.0         |
| <b>Experience</b>  | <b>310</b> | <b>25.5</b> |
| Illness (self or others)   | 128        | 10.5        |
| Death of a closed one  | 124        | 10.2        |
| Others / several   | 123        | 10.1        |
| <b>Anticipation</b>  | <b>984</b> | <b>81.1</b> |
| End-of-life (e.g., self-determination, dying with dignity, aid EXIT) | 604        | 49.8        |
| Health (e.g., suffering, vegetable, dementia, disabled)              | 503        | 41.4        |
| Altruistic (e.g., be a burden on others or society)                  | 327        | 26.9        |
| Institutions   | 86         | 7.1         |
| Others / several   | 79         | 6.5         |
| <b>Others / several</b>  | <b>43</b>  | <b>3.5</b>  |

**Table 3: Differences in reasons for joining EXIT according to personal characteristics**

*Explanations:*

We crossed different variables (socio-demographic, relational, health, etc.) with the fact of having cited at least once one type of reason.

The table reports all the variables for which there is a significant difference, indicating in brackets the category where the reason is most mentioned.

Pearson's Chi<sup>2</sup>: ° p ≤ .1; \* p ≤ .05; \*\* p ≤ .01; \*\*\* p ≤ .001

| Ideological commitment        | Experience                               | Anticipation                  |
|-------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| Environment (rural) °         | Gender (female) ***                      | Grandchildren (yes) *         |
| Membership (early joiner) *** | Marital status (divorced or widowed) *** | Living alone (no) *           |
| Religion (none) °             | Living alone (yes) ***                   | Loneliness (no) °             |
| Education (high) ***          | Well-being (poor) **                     | Visit to friends (frequent) ° |
| Profession (high) *           | Loneliness (yes) *                       |                               |
| Activism EXIT (high) ***      | Religion (Christian) *                   |                               |
|                               | Profession (low) *                       |                               |

**Table 4: Mentioning self-determination according personal characteristics**

| Self-determination            |                           |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Gender (female) *             | Health (very good/good) * |
| Age (65-74) **                | Religion (other) **       |
| Marital status (divorced) *   | Education (high) °        |
| Living alone (yes) *          | Activism EXIT (high) ***  |
| Membership (early joiner) *** |                           |

## DISCUSSION

Motives for membership include the commitment to right-to-die philosophy (*ideology*), the past involvement with serious illness or deaths of loved ones (*experience*), and the concerns related to their own end of life (*anticipation*).

Reasons for joining vary according to the characteristics of the respondents. On the basis of these differences, three profiles of members emerge:

- **Ideological commitment:** People with high educational and professional status, having joined EXIT during its first years of existence and activists (e.g., participate in the general assembly, promote the association), without any religion affiliation, and living in a rural environment.
- **Experience:** Members more inclined to assume the role of caregiver (women, Christians, low professional status) and that today bear the scars of this experience (no longer married, living alone, suffering from loneliness, with poor well-being).
- **Anticipation:** The majority of respondents adhere in order to anticipate their future and end of life; people who make more use of this reason seem to be well surrounded (have grandchildren, live with others, often visit friends and do not feel alone).

Logistic regressions show that the probability to mention **self-determination** decline with age and health problems (cohort effect or proximity to death?) and is stronger among early joiners, activists and more educated members.