

Existential Anxiety in the Period of COVID -19 Pandemic

Aswathy Jonandharath Bharagavan^{1*}

ABSTRACT

Existentialism emphasizes action, freedom, and decision as fundamental to human existence; and is fundamentally opposed to the rationalist tradition and to positivism. That is, it argues against definitions of human beings as primarily rational. This article organized around what Irvin. D. Yalom identifies as the four “ultimate concerns of life” — death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. Death has been described as inevitable and although we may fear the latter in the short term, we have a deep, instinctive fear of death that only increases with age. One of the ultimate challenges of life is to find meaning in it, and we struggle to give reason for our daily actions. We have deep needs for belonging and, top cement this, the esteem of others. We join groups and take on their identity, trading independence for oneness with others. When we are separated from others our sense of control is increased and we can choose and create our own meaning. We can select the safest path for ourselves, even though that may not necessarily be the best for all others. We give up some freedom when we join groups to avoid isolation and death risks. Groups can also help give us meaning. India is one of those countries that have taken some of the strictest measures to contain the threat of COVID19. Here we consider Existential anxiety arising from the main four concepts mentioned above in the period of COVID -19 Pandemic. The objectives was to understand the existential anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: *Existentialism, Death, Meaninglessness, Isolation, freedom and responsibility, Covid- 19*

Most new pandemics have originated through the “zoonotic” transmission of pathogens from animals to humans, and the next pandemic is likely to be a zoonosis as well” aid Murphy 1998; Woolhouse and Gowtage-Sequeria 2005. A pandemic is basically a global epidemic -an epidemic that spreads to more than one continent,” says Dan Epstein, a spokesman for the Pan American Health Organization, a regional office of the World Health Organization. The 21st century pandemics include Ebola, A(H1N1) Influenza, SARS, Bird Flu and now COVID-19 (previously known as “2019 novel coronavirus”). Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Virus that was first detected in Wuhan, China, in late 2019 and has set off a global pandemic. The virus can spread from an infected person’s mouth or nose in small liquid particles when they cough, sneeze, speak, sing or breathe. These particles range from larger respiratory droplets to smaller aerosols. Globally, as of November 2021,

¹Psychologist, Fariya Clinic, Cherai, Ernakulam, Kerala, India

*Corresponding Author

Received: December 05, 2021; Revision Received: June 17, 2022; Accepted: June 30, 2022

Existential Anxiety in the Period of COVID -19 Pandemic

there have been 248,467,363 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 5,027,183 deaths. The global COVID-19 pandemic has created a crisis of Physical, mental Psychological and economical suffering. Suffering as a deeply existential issue that fundamentally changes people indelible ways and for which there are no easy solutions.

As of May 8th, 2020, in India, 56,342 positive cases have been reported. India, with a population of more than 1.34 billion—the second largest population in the world—will have difficulty in controlling the transmission of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 among its population. The pandemic has forced many governments to bring in strict laws to stop it from spreading (Adhikari et al., 2020). Moreover, the Indian government implemented a 55-days lockdown throughout the country that started on March 25th, 2020, to reduce the transmission of the virus. The unknowns and the virus's remarkably rapid spread incited fear among health professionals, scientists, and the public. Soon, restricted travel, lockdowns, mask mandates, and physical distancing protocols were implemented as a tactic to slow COVID-19's spread. Widespread media coverage detailed every nuance of an ever-changing pandemic landscape as world leaders and health experts' waged war on this invisible threat (Drake,K, 2021).It's a frightening time.

We're in the midst of a worldwide pandemic, with many places at least partially shut down, others struggling to reopen safely. Some of us are in areas where the coronavirus infection rates are getting worse. Others are bracing for what may come next. And all of us are watching the headlines and wondering, "When is this going to end?" "For many people, the uncertainty surrounding coronavirus is the hardest thing to handle. We still don't know exactly how we'll be impacted, how long this will last, or how bad things might get. And that makes it all too easy to catastrophize and spiral out into overwhelming dread and panic (Smith, M.A. & Lawrence Robinson, L. (2021). As lockdowns and restrictions ease in various locations, some people find it extremely challenging to become to "normal" life. For many, reopening comes with its own set of anxieties. Around half of people reporting, they feel uneasy about readjusting to in-person interaction post pandemic and anxious about ourselves. It is a wise situation in which one fear or become anxious about oneself and fear to mingle with others.

Experiencing occasional anxiety is a normal part of life. However, people with severe anxiety frequently have intense, excessive and persistent worry and fear about everyday situations. Often, anxiety disorders involve repeated episodes of sudden feelings of intense anxiety and fear or terror that reach a peak within minutes (panic attacks). These feelings of anxiety and panic interfere with daily activities, are difficult to control, are out of proportion to the actual danger and can last a long time. We may avoid places or situations to prevent these feelings. Symptoms may start during childhood or the teen years and continue into adulthood. (Mayo Clinic Family Health Book, 5th Edition).

Existential anxiety is hypothesized to be a core human issue in a great deal of theoretical and Philosophical writing (e.g., Kierkegaard, 1843/1954a1849/1954b; Sartre, 1957; Tillich, 1952a, b; Yalom, 1975). Our conceptualization of existential anxiety draws primarily from the work of Tillich (1952a) who provided an integrative view of existential concerns. Tillich wrote extensively on these topics; however, his view of existential anxiety articulated in his work "The Courage to Be". Experiencing anxiety occur when one face threat to life is existential anxiety. Existential anxiety is defined as a moment at which an individual questions the very foundations of his life: whether his life has any meaning, purpose or value (James, 2007). It all about existence of life. Existential anxiety is the struggle to

Existential Anxiety in the Period of COVID -19 Pandemic

understand oneself, life in general, and what we want out of it. It can cause feelings of discontent, distress, and unease that can be hard to pinpoint, and it can be highly uncomfortable. To experience existential anxiety is to experience all-encompassing doubt and deep questions about our future as well as life's meaning and purpose.

It's much more than superficial worry; a hallmark of existential anxiety is not just having a worry or thought but going deeper with it and examining its meaning. This examination, by extension, inevitably turns to not just the meaning of a single thought but of life itself. Existential anxiety deals not with ordinary aspects of daily life but with the emotional and spiritual experience of living (Peterson, T.J & Fuller, K, 2021). Existential anxiety may also help to understand psychopathology. People with mental health problems are more sensitive to the ultimate concerns of life, sometimes because they have been confronted with these concerns as a result of traumatic experiences (Fuchs, 2013).

In more recent years, psychiatrist Irvin Yalom established the four givens of existential therapy. These givens, or essential issues, have come to define the problems and roadblocks that prevent people from living their most fulfilled life and these are the cause of existential anxiety. According to Yalom, the four essential issues are: the inevitability of death, Meaninglessness, Isolation and Freedom and responsibility. It's easy to feel overwhelmed with worry or anxiety when we stop to think about our future, our purpose, our meaning. Those are big questions. In fact, for some people, contemplating these questions too often or without good resolution can lead to an existential anxiety. Everyday challenges and stresses may not provoke an existential anxiety. Available literature indicates that in normal circumstances, most people are quite able to manage these concerns. However, there are times (e.g., hardship, adversity, trauma, loss), when people are no longer able to cope and they are thrown into existential turmoil (Fuchs, 2013). There are four models that were developed by Tillich (1952), Yalom (1980), Glas (2003, 2013) and Terror Management Theory (TMT) (Koole et al., 2006) are available. Here we chose Irvin Yalom existential anxiety model for following study. The global COVID-19 pandemic has brought a significant threat to the safety, health and wellbeing of societies and communities around the world. It can or is enough for arise existential anxiety predominantly. It questions our survival and existence. It forces us to rethink about inevitability of death, Meaninglessness, Isolation and Freedom and responsibility of life.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data have been collected from the original works of Sartre, Kafka, Camus and Secondary data have been collected from different books, articles, research journals, internet, etc.

Covid 19 induced concern of inevitability of death

“Man... lives as if he is never going to die, and then dies having never really lived.”

– Dalai Lama

A Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives. Currently COVID 19 acting as atraumatic condition. Enduring emotional distress and fear, such as that created by COVID-19, can cause trauma in children and adults and old age as well. Trauma can carry long-term effects if left

Existential Anxiety in the Period of COVID -19 Pandemic

untreated; meaning the impact of COVID-19 could remain long after the pandemic is under control. During and after a disaster, it is natural to experience different and strong emotions. But in some people, it leads to commonly referred to as the fear of death. More specifically, it can be a fear of death or a fear of the dying process. As the same time certain question arises about our own existence and inevitability of death.

The novella, world's supreme masterpieces on the subject of death and dying written by Leo Tolstoy, "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" is the story of a worldly careerist, a high court judge who has never given the inevitability of his dying so much as a passing thought. But one day, death announces itself to him, and to his shocked surprise, he is brought face to face with his own mortality. At the last three days of his life was terrible and he understood the inevitability of death even it is hard. Finally, he faces his death with smile. We have no reliable information about death as an experience, and this emphasizes death's nature as a secret and mysterious event. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1992) argues that while death is the most trustworthy experience in human life, death still remains inexplicable and unknown. The best thing we could do to appreciate life was to keep the inevitability of our death always at the forefront of our minds.

Death is the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all Martin Heidegger said (Being and Time,1962).According to Martin Heidegger, who famously introduces the notion of human life as 'Being-towards-death'. Death as a philosophical, theological and spiritual phenomenon is amply covered by both the organized, scripture-based religions and the oral faith systems. But in our scientific world, death has also become purely biological and anatomical. We all know that death is something that we'll have to face one way or another. Whether it is the death of a loved one or the reality that we'll inevitably die ourselves someday.

Currently we are under the dare hands of corona pandemic which kills millions and millions of humans. An important characteristic of an infectious disease, particularly one caused by a COVID -19, is its severity, the ultimate measure of which is its ability to cause death. Fatality rates help us understand the severity of a disease. Infection by the new corona virus and its related syndrome COVID-19 has been associated with more than two million deaths worldwide. Patients of higher age and with preexisting chronic health conditions are at an increased risk of fatal disease outcome. More than 100 million confirmed cases of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and more than two million associated deaths have been counted around the globe by end-January, 2021.We are facing and encountering the death and news all the time around you. It is enough for making death anxiety. Thanatophobia is a form of anxiety characterized by a fear of one's own death or the process of dying. It is commonly referred to as death anxiety. Same time questions related to inevitability of death. Death anxiety is a universal and fundamental phenomenon, which affects humans to various degrees. Klein in 1948 described that actually death anxiety is one of the basic feelings of humanity and is the root to all anxiety. Humans are the only species who are aware of the limitations to life and impending death.

COVID-19 offers an unusual scenario, in which mortality is made salient nearly constantly, given the daily updates on death tolls from the news and social media, and ubiquitous visible death cues in the form of face masks, anti-bacterial sprays and wipes, social distancing and public health campaigns. Death anxiety may be driving a significant amount of psychological distress during this pandemic. Evaluation of the psychometric properties of the Fear of COVID-19 Scale revealed that the item 'I am afraid of losing my life because of

Existential Anxiety in the Period of COVID -19 Pandemic

coronavirus-19' had the highest factor loading, suggesting that one's worry about one's own fatality risk is highly predictive of broad fears of the virus (Ahorsu *et al.*, 2020). While death anxiety may indeed be a driving factor in everyday human behavior, it appears more relevant than ever in the context of the current pandemic. COVID-19 may be understood as a real-life and ever-present mortality salience prime, influencing people's behavior in ways they may not even be consciously aware of. (Menzies, R. E., & Menzies, R. G. (2020)

Researchers highlight that a new focus on these topics has been created by individuals, societies and humankind finding themselves being threatened by the experience of an existential crisis during the pandemic (Ali and Lalani, 2020) Age and gender are well-established risk factors for severe COVID-19 outcomes. Chronic illness like cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes, respiratory disease and cancers were associated with an increased risk of death. Older patients and those with chronic co morbidities, such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes, and pulmonary disease, are much more prone to critical and fatal disease outcomes. A study shows that the perception of aging can predict the anxiety of death among the elderly. When considered alongside the widely accepted notion that death anxiety has significant behavioral and emotional implications, especially for the elderly (Mohammadpour A, Sadeghmoghadam L, Shareinia H, Jahani S, Amiri F,2018). Another study was found that the elderly experienced moderate death anxiety (Guner TA, Erdogan Z, Demir I,2021). In the context of the current pandemic, death anxiety, a recently proposed trans diagnostic construct, appears especially relevant. Fear of death has recently been shown to predict not only anxiety related to COVID-19, but also to play a causal role in various mental health conditions. For older adults, frequent medical problems, loss of loved ones, and deteriorating cognitive abilities are just a few reminders that the end of life is drawing nearer. Terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) asserts that awareness of the inevitability of death has a potent impact on human judgment and behavior. In the period of COVID - 19 they seem to be realizing the near death in old age. And fear as if they caught by the pandemic. Almost same way of thinking goes through the mind of terminally ill patients.

Death is an unavoidable part of the cycle of life, yet many of us do everything we can to avoid accepting our mortality. But coming to terms with the inevitability of death can help teach us to live more fully in the here and now.) Under the tenets of positive psychology, death acts as a powerful and healthy reminder to live. Reflecting on death is an intrinsically positive endeavor, after all, precisely because it is life affirming (Wong, 2010). This science of what makes life most livable encourages an optimistic appreciation of death that's ostensibly planted in the living as opposed to the dying. In fact, consciousness of our mortality can enable us to cherish every moment of the life we have. The practice of memento mori— acting on the Latin phrase that translates to “remember we must die,” has the profound potential to wake us up and breathe more life into our lives. While focusing on the end of our days may sound more morbid than meaningful, the contemplation of death allows us to appreciate the scarcity of the very time we're looking to make the most of. (Wellman, Jodi, 2020)Our ways of dealing with death have changed substantially over our course of human history (Aries, 1975).

Research is starting to reveal that certain states of consciousness can have a powerful and positive effect on how we perceive our own mortality. There's a strong association between a decreased fear of death and undergoing a near-death experience (NDE), out-of-body experience (OBE), lucid dream and psychedelic experience. Coming to terms with our mortality is a challenge faced by us all. But accepting death can be hugely problematic. We

Existential Anxiety in the Period of COVID -19 Pandemic

each have to find our own way to process the reality of dying. Accepting our mortality can also be freeing, as one of the consequences can be making more conscious choices in the present. Indeed, if we can strive to control how anxiety about death impacts upon us, we can avoid potentially negative or destructive behavior and focus positively on the time we have. It's said that to remind himself of the shortness of life, the Italian saint Charles Borromeo kept a human skull on a little table in his house. That might be a bit too much for us today, and yet, the reality is that death can happen at any moment.

“Death is something inevitable. When a man has done what he considers to be his duty to his people and his country, he can rest in peace. I believe I have made that effort and that is, therefore, why I will sleep for the eternity.” Said Nelson Mandela. The words is such that for each and every one.

Covid 19 induced concern of meaninglessness

“The only knowledge that man can attain is that life is meaningless”

-Tolstoy

There is no overall point to human life. We are each of us born into a certain specific situation, at a particular place, in a particular historical epoch, and with particular parents, and from this unchosen starting point we must continue to exist until our time runs out. Day after day, we get up, do what we must, and go to bed. Then we repeat it the next day, and the day after that. And so on. If we ask what is the point of this? We are asking about the meaning and purpose of life. Throughout his long academic career, Heidegger was preoccupied with the question of the meaning of being. “If what-is is predicated in manifold meanings, then what is its leading fundamental meaning? What does being meant?” The question of being, unanswered at that time, becomes the leading question of Being and Time twenty years later. Nihilism is the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. Friedrich Nietzsche the nihilist reject of all religious and moral principles, in the belief that life is meaningless. Existential nihilism begins with the notion that the world is without meaning or purpose. Given this circumstance, existence itself—all action, suffering, and feeling—is ultimately senseless and empty. Peter van Inwagen's said that there is no more than one empty world. According to “Reginster” in its ‘broadest description, nihilism is the belief that existence is meaningless’. They have been trained to model the empty world on the empty set. Experiences of meaninglessness can be difficult.(Thomas &Will.2020).A meaningless life may mean we are going through an existential anxiety. If one feel that we are living a meaningless life, negativity will surround us like wildfire. We have to strive to find our life's meaning to continue to live a life of high motivation.

To better understand what meaninglessness is, it is essential to first define meaning. The Greek philosophers, “Plato” and “Aristotle” first came up with the concept that everything has an essence. They believed that our essence exists within us even before we were born. So our purpose was to find that essence and live accordingly. According to “Sarate”, the best thing to do is to live authentically according to the meaning you give yourself fal though life seems meaningless. A well studied construct in social psychology, meaning in life generally describes one's feelings of purpose and importance beyond themselves (Kleiman, 2013)., Meaning of life it is strongly associated with overall psychological wellness, happiness, life satisfaction and general positive affect (McMahan, 2011). Steger (2006) argues that meaning in life involves both the search for and the attainment of meaning. A person who seeks meaning may not have yet found it, while a person who believes they have found meaning

Existential Anxiety in the Period of COVID -19 Pandemic

may still continue to search for more understanding. Finding meaning in life is thus a continual process of discovery, in which the journey is as critical as the ultimate goal. Victor Frankl, one of the eminent psychologists who first inspired research in meaning, believed man is motivated not by innate drives or pleasure principles, but rather by a will to meaning (Frankl, 1963). Man is not simply driven to action, as any other animal, but rather, man is capable of striving for meaning and using free-will to achieve a goal (Yalom, 1980).

Martela and Steger (2016, p. 531) distinguished between three main types of meaning in life: coherence, purpose, and significance. Coherence refers to “a sense of comprehensibility and one’s life making sense.” Purpose means having “a sense of core goals, aims, and direction in life,” and significance refers to “a sense of life’s inherent value and having a life worth living”. In our digital and globalised age, we find ourselves floundering, divorced from nature, and not knowing what to believe or how to live. Living a meaningful life seems to be an increasingly difficult thing to do. If we are a person who is going through the dilemma of living a meaningless life, try to use these to seek out our own unique meaning. Cognitively, meaninglessness involves an inability to find truth, interest or purpose in life. A person experiencing meaninglessness shows symptoms of boredom, depression and listlessness, and a marked indifference and apathy towards any decision.

Several authors and scientists call for new reflections on the meaning of life and how to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic in a transformational and healthy way (Rodríguez-Rey et al., 2019; De Jong et al., 2020; Wong, 2020a, b). Frankl (1959) premise that meaning in life needs a conscious understanding through suffering and pain. Chowdhury (2020) points out that during these kinds of pandemic crises, existential approaches and paradigms emerge forcefully to deal with the absurdity of life and death and its impact on daily life situations. Meaningful thought and action are something we all want. The psychiatrist Viktor Frankl famously described how the innate human quest for meaning is so strong that, even in the direst circumstances, people seek out their purpose in life. The novel COVID-19 pandemic has created an extraordinary situation for our generation, with many countries being on lockdown. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic only drags death closer to the present. With this, new situation comes many psychological challenges not only for health care workers and people suffering from COVID-19 but also for the general population. Experts have suggested that emotions during this situation are very similar to grief, and people experience emptiness and sadness about the loss of their normal lives, which can even lead to a loss of meaning in life. Most countries around the world have implemented a “lockdown” in some form, and although some countries have stricter regulations than others, most of them involve at least some type of so-called “social distancing” (Hale et al., 2020). In a short period of time, the normal life that people were used to living has been drastically and unexpectedly changed. This has consequences for people’s mental and physical well-being (Schippers, 2020). Studies show that grief caused by COVID-19 pandemic is so huge and one felt it as losing the loved one and can lead to a sense of emptiness, and even a loss of meaning in life (Berinato, 2020; Taha, 2020) and different theories have shown that finding meaning is an important element for recovery in a grief process. There are some elements related to the pandemic that affect more the population, such as separation from loved ones, loss of freedom, uncertainty about the advancement of the disease, and the feeling of helplessness (Li and Wang, 2020; Cao et al., 2020). These aspects might lead to dramatic consequences (Weir, 2020), such as the rise of suicides (Kawohl and Nordt, 2020). Suicidal behaviors are often related to the feeling of anger associated with the stressful condition widely spread among people who lived/live in the most affected areas (Miles, 2014; Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, 2020; Mamun and Griffiths, 2020). In light

Existential Anxiety in the Period of COVID -19 Pandemic

of these consequences, a carefully evaluation of the potential benefits of the quarantine is needed, taking into account the high psychological costs (Day et al., 2006; Mazza et al., 2020). Pandemics are large scale outbreaks of infectious disease that can greatly increase morbidity and mortality over a wide geographic area and cause significant Physical, mental, economic, social, and political disruption. Such a rude circumstance is enough for an individual's life to become meaningless.

In January 1941, the twenty-eight year old French writer Albert Camus began work on a novel about a virus that spreads uncontrollably from animals to humans and ends up destroying half the population of a representative modern town. Something like happening now in modern pandemic era. It was called *La Peste/The Plague*. The book takes us through a catastrophic outbreak of a contagious disease in the lightly fictionalized town of Oran on the Algerian coast, as seen through the eyes of the novel's hero, a Doctor Rieux, a version of Camus himself. Camus did believe that people are capable of giving their lives meaning. The most meaningful action within the context of Camus' philosophy is to choose to fight death and suffering.

It is “absurd.” Franz Kafka believed that the whole human race was the product of one of “God's bad days.” There is no “meaning” to make sense of our lives.

Covid 19 induced concern of Isolation

“Isolation is a way to know ourselves”- Franz Kafka

We started our life physically connected to another organism. While we lived in the womb for around nine month we knew nothing of loss, sorrow, or loneliness. When we start to grow up re gradually realize our loneliness, the ultimate loneliness. “The process of deepest inquiry...leads us to recognize that we are finite, that we must die, that we are free, and that we cannot escape our freedom. We also learn that the individual is inexorably alone.” (Yalom, P.353). Existential isolation really refers to the concept that each of us is responsible for creating our own lives and living that life authentically. So, in fact, we are completely unique in every aspect of our existence and our death Yalom describes “existential isolation” as a more fundamental isolation—an isolation from every creature and every element of our perceived world. No matter how close one becomes to another (a child, a parent, a lover), there is an ultimate unbridgeable gap. No matter what our experience is of the world, it is not the same experience as anyone else's—no one else's. Existential isolation is bigger, more encompassing, and deeper. It is the realization that one is truly and ultimately alone. It is the awareness that creeps in once all distractions cease (for many this happens, but for some, it may not as the distractions of today's time are plentiful). Existential isolation is the realization that you are trapped inside of your human shell, and that no matter how many people surround you, you entered this world alone and you will die alone. Separation from the world, the experience of feeling lost and lonely, is the intrinsic state of the human condition that includes intrapsychic, interpersonal and existential isolation. Anxiety covers acceptance of the fact that human beings are born alone and die alone. Existential isolation is a feeling that usually occurs unconsciously but it's very real. As a conscious being you can never go back to that state of connection in the womb, No one can truly know what we are thinking except for us. No one can truly know what we are feeling. No one can know the underlying motivations for our actions except for us. All our joys, every sorrow, all our triumphs, and every defeat are ultimately ours. As much as we would like to share the most important moments of life with others it's impossible in an existential sense because you do not share a brain or a body with another organism. This

Existential Anxiety in the Period of COVID -19 Pandemic

feeling of isolation that nags at the edge of consciousness is painful and people resort to all types of life solutions to try to ignore it. The idea is that ignoring, avoiding, or distracting oneself from existential isolation is detrimental to one and one's relationships. To truly love in the healthiest possible way, one must face their isolation, realize it, and relate to others not for what they provide, but for who they are. Existential loneliness is the result of a broader separation related to the nature of existence and, in particular, a lack of meaning in life. An individual may be in the company of others but experience existential loneliness (Larsson et al., 2019). Findings indicate that men may be higher in existential isolation because they do not endorse communal values as much as women do. (Helm, Peter & Rothschild, Lyla & Greenberg, Jeff & Croft, Alyssa, 2018). Existential loneliness, on the other hand, has no permanent remedy according to the phenomenological approach (Mayers & Svartberg, 2001).

Even if we enjoy periods of isolation and solitude, humans are social beings. Strong relationships can give us mental and emotional support, bringing satisfaction and inner joy. The problem is that relationships aren't always permanent. People can drift apart physically and emotionally, and death often separates loved ones. This can lead to isolation and loneliness, causing some people to feel that their life is pointless (Higuera, V,2018). The symptom of existential isolation can be both physical and psychological. While experiencing existential isolation, we may find ourselves feeling less interested in being around friends, family, and other people in general. We may also feel that these relationships don't bring us as much joy and relief as they did before the existential anxiety set in. What truly sets existential isolation apart from general feelings of isolation is the assumption that we can never overcome our isolation in life--that we'll never find true satisfaction and unity within relationships with others.

The number of cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) is growing rapidly all over the world. COVID- 19 has pushed loneliness further into the public conversation as people across the country have stayed home, fearful of contracting a deadly virus and aiding its spread. Terms like "social distancing," "self- isolation," and "shelter in place" accentuate the idea that COVID-19 could have profound social implications. (Sweet, J ,2021). Even before COVID-19, loneliness among young adults was considered a domestic epidemic – and the social isolation forced by the pandemic has worsened those trends, research shows. These trends are creating so much more anxiety, depression, despair, and yes, even PTSD. "A major adverse consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to be increased social isolation and loneliness," John T. Cacioppo (2008), a pioneering neuroscientist, reveals that it is human nature to need social connection and relationships, and social isolation can have serious consequences for both mental and physical health. Ami Rokach, a clinical psychologist and author of *Loneliness, Love and All That's Between* (2013) also confirms that if we feel lonely, we are not alone. We never even ever before having experienced social isolation on such a massive scale as we have in the era of COVID-19. Over recent years, evidence has accumulated that perceived social isolation or loneliness may pose a serious threat to our survival, health, and longevity. The most difficult kind of loneliness is to blaze a new trail at great personal costs in search of the truth, even when no one truly understands your mission and shares your burden. Worse still, even your closest associates question your motive or betray you. In times of mandatory lockdown, social distancing or loneliness, when we are not actively engaged with the outside world, we become more alone than ever. The health implications of loneliness have become clearer over time. According to the research of Julianne Holt-Lunstad, professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University, and colleagues, the heightened risk of mortality from loneliness

Existential Anxiety in the Period of COVID -19 Pandemic

equals that of smoking 15 cigarettes a day or being an alcoholic and exceeds the health risks associated with obesity. Researchers are now actively studying the mechanisms by which loneliness affects health, including its relationship with inflammation and harmful changes in DNA expression.

The Bet' written by Anton Chekhov is so much more than a story: It is a meditation on the nature of isolation, a thought-provoking account of a journey into solitude and the self. The terms of the bet are that the lawyer must live in isolation for fifteen years. At the end of that time, if he fulfills his bet of having no human contact for this period, the banker will pay him two million rubles. The layer had experienced the wisdom of the ages in loneliness, but he had also ultimately seen through the trappings of the world-show. His words were those of a sage: 'Everything is void, frail, visionary and delusive as a mirage. Such a sage had now no use for either money or the company of men. And to prove his contempt for men and money he had written that he was going to deliberately breach the agreement and escape five minutes before the hour of his release struck.

"The trouble is not that I am single and likely to stay single, but that I am lonely and likely to stay lonely."— Charlotte Brontë once said.

Covid 19 induced concern of Freedom and responsibility

"May we think of freedom not as the right to do as we please, but as the opportunity to do what is right." - Peter Marshall

Philosophers have been pondering the notion of freedom for thousands of years. From Thucydides, through to Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, John Stuart Mill and Jean Jacques Rousseau, the concept of freedom has continually been dealt with to some degree in political thought. This is an important concept because we must decide whether individuals are free, whether they should be free, what this means and what kinds of institutions we are to build around these ideas. Existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre's "Being and Nothingness" deals almost entirely with questions of freedom. Freedom for Sartre is not the freedom to do something. He says, "you are free" because you always have a choice, "therefore choose" (Sartre 2007). But because this creates anxiety and anguish, individuals flee in self-deception and continue leading inauthentic lives. Man is free when his consciousness acknowledges that something is lacking, when he makes a purpose of himself, and when he commits. In Sartre's words, this is when he "transcends" himself. This was done well under occupation because what was lacking then was evident, almost palpable. Consequently, he argues, every action became a commitment. Man was thus asserting his freedom. He does not seek to say that individuals in peacetime are under illusory freedom. In peacetime they simply do not think about the same issues, and they are much less likely to realize what to be human truly means. The thinking of the existentialists is so radical and extreme that the implications of human freedom may be quite disturbing. In their writings the existentialists report of becoming quite disturbed and even physically ill as they would contemplate the full import of their ideas. It may be comforting to believe that we are free. For the existentialists that freedom is so extreme that it is part of our very being, our defining characteristic. The tremendous responsibility that accompanies that freedom can produce a "fear and trembling" and a "sickness unto death" even "nausea".

In fringing on freedom has become the main point of attack on restrictions and regulations during the Covid-19 pandemic, but freedom is more than simply being able to do what we want. Professor "Borja Santos (20121)" argues we must work to ensure all members of

Existential Anxiety in the Period of COVID -19 Pandemic

society have the opportunity to satisfy their needs and wants. The measures taken to combat the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus have limited our freedoms and prevented us from doing many of the things we enjoy, such as meeting our friends and family. These restrictions have led to the idea of freedom being bandied about as a rallying cry. Freedom in the time of Covid means responsibility because we know how each individual behaves will have a far-reaching impact on the community and the country as a whole. We need to participate responsibly and follow the rules, which we must, because a strong third wave will be devastating for the country. At this time freedom only means participative responsibility. (Naresh Treha,2021).

Vykam Muhammed Basheer, the great Indian writer's "Mathilukal" (Walls) is a story of freedom fighter Basheer, the same author who is imprisoned and finds solace in Narayani who is also imprisoned in the adjacent ladies prison. The only catch is that they are divided by a wall and hence are a mere sound across the wall to each other. Basheer's love affair with Narayani, whom he had never met, was experiencing the rain of love that the Malayalam novel had never experienced before. They plan to meet each other one day. Narayani's plan was to meet him at the hospital near the jail on the same day. Unfortunately, Basheer understood the shocking news that he is going to be free before the their planned meeting day. When the time of imprisonment ends, said the jailor. "You can go Mr. Basheer; you are free!" then Basheer asked. "Why should I be free. who wants freedom?"

CONCLUSION

Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes individual existence, inevitability of death, meaninglessness of life, ultimate isolation and freedom and choice. Existentialism gives us some tools for understanding (i) our essence, and (ii) how it is possible to live a meaningful life. The existentialism is not a complete philosophy. It is philosophy which combines with Virtue ethics and deontology. Existentialist understanding of what it is to be human can be summarized in his view that the underlying motivation for action is to be found in the nature of consciousness which is a desire for being. Existential therapists can help people to become more aware of their choices, their freedom to make decisions, and the consequences of their actions. This type of therapy helps people develop a better sense of how they are the "authors" of their lives. Existentialism today has a quiet relevance to the issues of everyday life as well as a special immediacy in times of crisis especially circumstances like Covid -19 pandemic.

REFERENCES

- Adhikari, S. P., Meng, S., Wu, Y. J., Mao, Y. P., Ye, R. X., Wang, Q. Z., et al. (2020). Epidemiology, causes, clinical manifestation and diagnosis, prevention and control of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) during the early outbreak period: a scoping review. *Infect. Dis. Poverty* 9, 1–12. Doi: 10.1186/s40249-020-00646-x
- Adms, N. (2020). The Impermanence of Life. Death, its inevitability, and raising awareness among future generations Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). *World Health organization*.
- Ahorsu, D. K., Chung-Ying, L., Imani, V., Saffari, M., Griffiths, M. D., & Pakpour, A. H. (2020). The Fear of COVID-19 Scale: development and initial validation. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*.
- Ali, G., and Lalani, N. (2020). Approaching spiritual and existential care needs in health education: applying SOPHIE (self-exploration through ontological, phenomenological, and humanistic, ideological, and existential expressions). *Pract. Method. Relig.* 11:451. doi: 10.3390/rel11090451

Existential Anxiety in the Period of COVID -19 Pandemic

- Ariés, P. (2000). *The hour of our death: The classic history of western attitudes toward death over the last one thousand years* (H. Weaver, Trans.). New York, NY: Knopf
- Berman, Steven & Weems, Carl & Stickle, Timothy. (2006). Existential Anxiety in Adolescents: Prevalence, Structure, Association with Psychological Symptoms and Identity Development. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 35. 285-292. 10.1007/s10964-006-9032-y.
- Bauman, Z. (1992). Survival as a Social Construct. *Theory, Culture & Society*. SAGE journal.
- Berinato, S. (2020). That discomfort you're feeling is grief. *Harvard Business Review*. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief> (Sept. 25, 2020).
- Berry, W. (2021). Existential Isolation Is Key to Healthy Relationships. Facing existential isolation is daunting but necessary for healthy relations. *Psychology today*.
- Cao, W., Fang, Z., Hou, G., Han, M., Xu, X., Dong, J., et al. (2020). The psychological impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on college students in China. *Psych. Res*. 287:112934. doi: 10.1016/j.psychres.2020.112934
- Cacioppo, J. T. (2008). *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Chowdhury, S. (2020). Making sense of the chaos: analysing the covid situation through a re-reading of albert camus' the plague and defoe's a journal of the plague. *Writers Ed. Crit.* 10, 11–17
- Day, T., Park, A., Madras, N., Gumel, A., and Wu, J. (2006). When Is Quarantine a Useful Control Strategy for Emerging Infectious Diseases? *Am. J. Epidemiol.* 163, 479–485. doi: 10.1093/aje/kwj056
- De Jong, E. M., Ziegler, N., and Schippers, M. C. (2020). From shattered goals to meaning in life: life crafting in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Front. Psychol.* 11:577708. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.577708
- Drake, K. (2021). COVID-19 anxiety syndrome: A pandemic phenomenon? *Medical news today*
- Downs, M. (2020). What Is a Pandemic?. *Med Hub*.
- Frankl, V. E. (1985). *Man's search for meaning*. Simon and Schuster
- Frankl, V. E. (1959). *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Fuchs, T. (2013). Existential vulnerability: toward a psychopathology of limit situations. *Psychopathology*, 46, 301-308.
- Guner TA, Erdogan Z, Demir I. The Effect of Loneliness on Death Anxiety in the Elderly During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*. April 2021. doi:10.1177/00302228211010587
- Gaitonde, S. (2015). Individual perceptions of meaning in life and meaninglessness. An undergraduate research scholars thesis. Texas a&m university
- Greenberg J, Pyszczynski T, Solomon S. (1986). The causes and consequences of a need for self-esteem: A terror management theory. In: Baumeister RF, editor. *Public self and private self*. New York: Springer-Verlag;. pp. 189–212.
- Hale, T., Angrist, N., Kira, B., Petherick, A., Phillips, T., and Webster, S. (2020). Variation in government responses to COVID-19 (Blavatnik school of government working paper, 31)
- Heidegger M. In: *Being and Time*. Macquarrie J, Robinson E, editors. London: SCM Press; 1962.
- Helm, Peter & Rothschild, Lyla & Greenberg, Jeff & Croft, Alyssa. (2018). Explaining sex differences in existential isolation research. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 134. 283-288. 10.1016/j.paid.2018.06.032.

Existential Anxiety in the Period of COVID -19 Pandemic

- Higuera, V.(2018). What Is an Existential Crisis, and How Do I Break Through It?.*Health line*. <https://www.healthline.com/health/existential-crisis>.
- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Martin Heidegger (1889—1976) Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Nihilism
- James, R.K. (2007). *Crisis Intervention Strategies* (6th ed.). USA, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole
- Frankl, V. E. (1985). *Man's search for meaning*. Simon and Schuster
- Frankl, V. E. (1959). *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Fuchs, T. (2013). Existential vulnerability: toward a psychopathology of limit situations. *Psychopathology*, 46, 301-308.
- Guner TA, Erdogan Z, Demir I. The Effect of Loneliness on Death Anxiety in the Elderly During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*. April 2021. doi:10.1177/00302228211010587
- Gaitonde, s.(2015). Individual perceptions of meaning in life and meaninglessness.An undergraduate research scholars thesis. Texas a&m university
- Greenberg J, Pyszczynski T, Solomon S. (1986).The causes and consequences of a need for self-esteem: A terror management theory. In: Baumeister RF, editor. *Public self and private self*. New York: Springer-Verlag;. pp. 189–212.
- Hale, T., Angrist, N., Kira, B., Petherick, A., Phillips, T., and Webster, S. (2020). Variation in government responses to COVID-19 (Blavatnik school of government working paper, 31)
- Heidegger M. In: *Being and Time*. Macquarrie J, Robinson E, editors. London: SCM Press; 1962.
- Helm, Peter & Rothschild, Lyla & Greenberg, Jeff & Croft, Alyssa. (2018). Explaining sex differences in existential isolation research. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 134. 283-288.10.1016/j.paid.2018.06.032.
- Higuera, V.(2018). What Is an Existential Crisis, and How Do I Break Through It?.*Health line*. <https://www.healthline.com/health/existential-crisis>.
- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Martin Heidegger (1889—1976) Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Nihilism
- James, R.K. (2007). *Crisis Intervention Strategies* (6th ed.). USA, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole
- Li, L. Z., and Wang, S. (2020). Prevalence and predictors of general psychiatric disorders and loneliness during COVID-19 in the United Kingdom. *Psych. Res.* 291, 0165–1781. doi: 10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113267
- Tongeren,D.R &Tongeren,A.S.(2021). Finding Meaning Amidst COVID-19: An Existential Positive Psychology Model of Suffering.*Personality and social Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.641747>
- Kawohl, W., and Nordt, C. (2020). COVID-19, unemployment, and suicide. *Lancet Psych.* 7, 389–390. doi: 10.1016/s2215-0366(20)30141-3
- Kierkegaard, S. (1843/1954a). *Fear and Trembling*.Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1849/1954b). *The Sickness Unto Death*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ
- Klein, M. (1948). A contribution to the theory of anxiety and guilt. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 29, 114–123.
- Kumar,S,U., Kumar, T.D, B., Christopher, P& Priya Doss,C.G.(2020). The Rise and Impact of COVID- 19 in India.Infectious disease-surveillance prevention and treatment. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmed.2020.00250>.

Existential Anxiety in the Period of COVID -19 Pandemic

- Larsson, H., Edberg, A.-K., Bolmsjö, I., & Rämngård, M. (2019). Contrasts in older persons' experiences and significant others' perceptions of existential loneliness. *Nursing Ethics*, 26(6), 1623–1637. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969733018774828>
- Martela, F., and Steger, M. F. (2016). The three meanings of meaning in life: distinguishing coherence, purpose, and significance. *J. Posit. Psychol.* 11, 531–545. doi: 10.1080/17439760.2015.1137623
- Mamun, M. A., and Griffiths, M. D. (2020). First COVID-19 suicide case in Bangladesh due to fear of COVID-19 and xenophobia: Possible suicide prevention strategies. *Asian J. Psych.* 51:102073. doi: 10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102073
- Manzi, Y. (2013). Jean-Paul Sartre: Existential "Freedom" and the Political. E-International relation. <https://www.e-ir.info/2013/01/23/jean-paul-sartre-existential-freedom-and-the-political/>
- Mayo Clinic Family Health Book, 5th Edition
- Mayers & Svartberg, (2021). Social, Emotional, and Existential Loneliness: A Test of the Multidimensional Concept. *The Gerontologist*, Volume 61, Issue 7, October 2021, Pages e335–e344, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnaa082>
- Mazza, C., Ricci, E., Biondi, S., Colasanti, M., Ferracuti, S., Napoli, C., et al. (2020). Nationwide Survey of Psychological Distress among Italian People during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Immediate Psychological Responses and Associated Factors. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Publ. Health* 17:3165. doi: 10.3390/ijerph17093165
- Menzies, R. E., & Menzies, R. G. (2020). Death anxiety in the time of COVID-19: theoretical explanations and clinical implications. *Cognitive behaviour therapist*, 13, e19. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1754470X20000215>
- McMahan, E. A., & Renken, M. D. (2011). Eudaimonic conceptions of well-being, meaning in life, and self-reported well-being: Initial test of a meditational model. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 51(5), 589-594
- Miles, S. (2014). Kaci Hickox: Public Health and the Politics of Fear. *Tratto da Bioethics*. Available online at: <http://www.bioethics.net/2014/11/kaci-hickox-public-health-and-the-politics-of-fear/> (accessed June 2, 2020).
- Mohammadpour A, Sadeghmoghadam L, Shareinia H, Jahani S, Amiri F. Investigating the role of perception of aging and associated factors in death anxiety among the elderly. *Clin Interv Aging*. 2018;13:405-410 <https://doi.org/10.2147/CIA.S150697>.
- Moor, L.J., & Vukov, M.J. (2009). The existential way to recovery. *Psychiatria Danubina*, 2009; Vol. 21, No. 4, pp 453–462
- Murphy F A. 1998. "Emerging Zoonoses." *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 4 (3): 429–35
- Past pandemics. *World health organization*
- Peterson & Fuller, K. (2021). Existential Anxiety: Causes, Treatments, & How to Cope. <https://www.choosingtherapy.com/existential-anxiety/>
- Rodríguez-Rey, R., Palacios, A., Alonso-Tapia, J., Pérez, E., Álvarez, E., Coca, A., et al. (2019). Burnout and posttraumatic stress in paediatric critical care personnel: prediction from resilience and coping styles. *Aust. Crit. Care* 32, 46-53. doi: 10.1016/j.aucc.2018.02.003
- Rokach, A. (Ed.). (2013). *Loneliness, Love & all that's between*. Nova Science Pub Inc
- Santos, B. (2021). (Re). Defining Freedom: Covid 19. *Insight Knowledge driven content*. <https://www.ie.edu/insights/>
- Sartre, J. (1957). *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. Philosophical Library, New York
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: an essay on phenomenological ontology*. 1943. Reprint, London: Methuen & co, 1972.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism and humanism*. New ed. London: Methuen, 2007.

Existential Anxiety in the Period of COVID -19 Pandemic

- Schippers, M. C., Scheepers, A. W., and Peterson, J. B. (2015). A scalable goal-setting intervention closes both the gender and ethnic minority achievement gap. *Palgrave Commun.* 1, 1–12. doi: 10.1057/palcomms.2015.14
- Schreiner, M.(2012). Existential Isolation. *Evolution counseling.*
- Smith, M.A. & Lawrence Robinson, L.(2021). Coronavirus Anxiety: Coping with Stress, Fear, and Worry. *Help guide.* <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/anxiety/coronavirus-anxiety.htm>
- Steger, M. F. (2006). Making meaning in life. *Psychological Inquiry*, 23, 381-385. Sweet,J .(2021).The loneliness pandemic. *Harvard Magazine.*
- Taha, N. (2020). Veel stress en angst om coronacrisis: ‘Mensenervarenemoties die sterklijken op rouw’.
- AlgemeenDagblad. Available at: <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/veel-stress-en-angst-om-coronacrisis-mensen-ervaren-emoties-die-sterk-lijken-op-rouw~a306b3f2/?referrer=https://www.google.com/> (September 25, 2020).
- Tartadlia,J (2016)Philosophy in a Meaningless Life, A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Thomas &Will. (2020). Overcoming Meaninglessness and Existential Depression A humble guide to navigating a pointless, empty, dead-end world. Or is it? Live real.
- Tillich, P. (1952a). *The Courage To Be.* Yale University Press, New Haven
- Van Bruggen, V. (2018). Assessment of Existential Anxiety: Development and Validation of the Existential Concerns Questionnaire (ECQ).
- Weir, K. (2020). *Grief and COVID-19: Mourning our bygone lives.* Washington: American Psychological Association.
- Wellman, Jodi, "Memento Mori: Reflecting on Mortality to Inspire Vitality and Meaning in Life" (2020).
- Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) Capstone Projects. 181. https://repository.u-penn.edu/mapp_capstone/181
- Woolhouse M E J, Gowtage- Sequeria S. 2005. “Host Range and Emerging and Reemerging Pathogens.” *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 11 (12): 1842–47.
- Wong, P.T.P. (2010, July). What is existential positive psychology? *International Journal of Existential Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 3(1)
- Wong, P. T. P. (2020a). *Made for Resilience and Happiness. Effective Coping with Covid-19.* Toronto, ON: IMPN Press.
- Wong, P. T. P. (2020b). *Existential Positive Psychology According to Paul T.P. Wong. Exploring your mind.* Available online at: <https://exploringyourmind.com/existential-positive-psychology-according-to-paul-t-p-wong/>
- Yalom, I. D. (1975). *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy.* Basic Books, New York
- Yalom, I. D. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy.* New York: Basic Books

Acknowledgement

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Aswathy J. B. (2022). Existential Anxiety in the Period of COVID-19 Pandemic. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 10(2), 762-776. DIP:18.01.076.20221002, DOI:10.25215/1002.076