

## Loneliness in Emerging Adults: Role of Meaning in Life and Death Anxiety

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### ABSTRACT

The profound impact of existential concerns on mental health during the critical period of emerging adulthood is increasingly recognized. As young adults transition from adolescence to adulthood, they face significant challenges, including uncertainty, increased responsibilities, and the search for personal and professional identity. These challenges can intensify feelings of loneliness, making it crucial to understand the underlying factors contributing to this experience. The present study investigates the role of meaning in life and death anxiety in predicting loneliness among emerging adults. The sample consists of 200 emerging adults (57% females and 43% males), aged 18-29 years, from various departments of Central University of Haryana, Mahendergarh, Haryana. Results revealed a significant positive correlation between loneliness, death anxiety, and the search for meaning, while a negative relationship exists between the presence of meaning and loneliness. Multiple linear regression analysis found that search for meaning, death anxiety, and presence of meaning shares 34% of the variance in predicting loneliness. Death anxiety and the search for meaning can intensify feelings of loneliness, but having a clear sense of presence of meaning shields individuals from loneliness by strengthening their relationships with others. Understanding this relationship will aid in developing tailored interventions for the emerging adult population dealing with loneliness.

**Keywords:** *Loneliness, Presence of Meaning, Death Anxiety, Search for Meaning*

Over the past few years, there has been a noticeable rise in individuals expressing feelings of loneliness (Nemecek, 2020). This emotion primarily originates from the belief that there is a disparity between the expected and real level of social engagements for a person (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). In a dimensional domain of meaning, loneliness is the experience of being alone, lost, or confused (Stuewe-Portnoff, 1988). Loneliness is a condition that affects almost everyone and might show up at various stages of life. The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in feelings of loneliness across the globe (Ernst et al., 2022). Lasgaard et al. (2016) found that emerging adulthood is a time when loneliness is more likely to occur. This stage of life is rife with numerous challenging and complicated conflicts. During this period individuals are away from their families, friends, and other loved ones, consequently they may experience

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Received: July 01, 2024; Revision Received: September 27, 2024; Accepted: September 30, 2024

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loneliness (Ráczová, 2006). Loneliness is a more nuanced human feeling than merely missing someone or something. A personal experience of being lost is what constitutes loneliness rather than the seeming loss of an object (Stuewe-Portnoff, 1988).

Death anxiety is defined as an emotional condition characterized by a sense of fear in response to the realization of their own mortality (Tomer & Eliason, 1996). From an existential perspective, death is an unavoidable aspect of life, inherently intertwined with it, thereby encompassing every individual with the fear of mortality (Gectan, 1990). Russac et al. (2007) found that both men and women experience the highest levels of death anxiety during their twenties. As individuals grow older, death anxiety tends to decrease due to the reduced threat posed by death to their values, and due to an ongoing process of personal development through which individuals gradually come to accept their mortality (Kastenbaum, 2000). Death anxiety has the potential to influence various facets of existence, including aspects such as quality of life, well-being, and self-esteem etc. This study specifically centers on exploring the relationship between loneliness and death anxiety, a relatively underexplored association in existing research.

Meaning in life is referred to as the ability to assign meaning and value to one's life (Steger, 2012). The definition of meaning in life includes cohesiveness, comprehension of life, knowledge of the world, and purposefulness (King et al., 2006; Reker & Wong, 1988). It entails establishing a feeling of consistency in one's life and making significant investments in long-term objectives (Steger, 2013). Though there are many different theories and explanations for what gives life its meaning (MIL), MIL is defined in terms of two separate elements, namely, presence of meaning and search of meaning (Steger et al., 2006). Search for meaning is the desire to discover significance in one's life, whereas presence of meaning is conceptualized as an individual's perception of whether their life holds significance or lacks it (Steger et al., 2008). According to Baumeister (1991) and Frankl (1963), the desire to find purpose in one's life is a fundamental aspect of maintaining a psychologically sound state of mind. Previous research shows that search for meaning has a positive relation with loneliness, whereas presence of meaning has a negative correlation (Borawski & Zakrzewska, 2022; Yıldırım et al., 2021; Jia et al., 2021).

The present study investigates the relationship between loneliness, death anxiety and dimensions of meaning in life. Another objective of the current study is to investigate the predictors of loneliness, considering death anxiety, presence of meaning and search for meaning as independent variables. Based on above stated objective and review of literature, following hypothesis are framed:

- **H<sub>1</sub>:** There would be a significant positive correlation between loneliness, death anxiety and search for meaning.
- **H<sub>2</sub>:** There would be a significant negative correlation between loneliness and presence of meaning.
- **H<sub>3</sub>:** There would be a significant negative correlation between death anxiety and search for meaning.
- **H<sub>4</sub>:** Search for meaning, death anxiety and presence of meaning would significantly predict loneliness.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Participants*

The research sample consisted of 200 university students, with 57% being females and 43% being males. The participants, aged between 18 and 29 years, and all were affiliated with the Central University of Haryana, Mahendergarh, Haryana. The participants' mean age was 23.20 years, with SD of 3.05.

### *Measures*

The present research employed the following tools to measure loneliness, death anxiety and meaning in life among emerging adults:

- **Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults- Short form (SELSA-S):** The scale consisting of 15 items, assesses loneliness across three dimensions – 'Romantic,' 'Family,' and 'Social.' Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Its internal consistency, as measured by the alpha coefficient, stood at .92 for 'Romantic,' .77 for 'Family,' and .83 for 'Social' loneliness (DiTomasso, Brannen & Best, 2004).
- **Death Anxiety Scale (DAS):** The Death Anxiety Scale (DAS) is developed by Dr. Vijay Lakshmi Chauhan and Dr. Gayatri Tiwari (1971). The scale consists of 20 items, which are answered with either 'yes' or 'no.' The scale demonstrates a Split-Half Reliability Coefficient of 0.93 and displays a Content Validity of 0.74.
- **The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ):** The MLQ comprises a set of 10 items, each evaluated using a 7-point Likert scale. Among these items, 5 are allocated to the Presence of Meaning (PoM) subscale, while the remaining 5 pertain to the Search for Meaning (SfM) subscale. The MLQ demonstrates strong internal consistency, with reliability coefficients of 0.81 for the PoM subscale and 0.84 for the SfM subscale. Additionally, it exhibits notable temporal stability, displaying coefficients of 0.70 for PoM and 0.73 for SfM in a one-month test-retest scenario. Furthermore, MLQ has a good discriminant and convergent validity (Steger et al., 2006).

### *Procedure*

After taking informed consent, subjects were asked to fill a Google form consisting of personal data sheet (demographic information), Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults- short form, Death Anxiety Scale and The Meaning in Life Questionnaire. All instructions were written clearly in the online form. Confidentiality, along with privacy was ensured for the information that is collected from all participants. The collected data was subsequently analyzed employing the SPSS.

## RESULTS

The relationship between loneliness, death anxiety, presence of meaning and search for meaning were assessed using the Pearson's product moment correlation. To know the variance of search for meaning, death anxiety, and presence of meaning in predicting loneliness, multiple linear regression analysis was done. Results of correlation analysis and multiple linear regression analysis are presented in Table 1 and Table 2 respectively.

**Table 1 Showing Intercorrelation matrix of Loneliness, Death Anxiety, Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning (N=200)**

Variables	Loneliness	Death Anxiety	PoM	SfM
Loneliness	-			
Death Anxiety	.369**	-		
PoM	-.425**	-.176*	-	
SfM	.352**	.192*	-.124	-

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Note. PoM = Presence of Meaning, SfM = Search for Meaning

The analysis of Table 1 reveals that loneliness has a positive relationship with death anxiety ( $r = .369, p < .01$ ). Similarly, a positive correlation is evident between loneliness and the search for meaning ( $r = .352, p < .01$ ). Conversely, presence of significance is significantly negatively correlated with loneliness. ( $r = -.425, p < .01$ ). Furthermore, the presence of meaning has a significantly negative correlation with death anxiety ( $r = -.176, p < .05$ ). Whereas search for meaning has a positive correlation with death anxiety ( $r = .192, p < .05$ ).

**Table 2 Showing Stepwise Regression analysis of Death Anxiety, Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning as Predictor Variables and Loneliness as Criterion Variable**

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Unstd. B	Std. Error	Std. coefficient $\beta$	F-ratio
1	0.425 <sup>a</sup>	0.181	-0.837	0.127	-0.425	43.72**
2	.521 <sup>b</sup>	0.272	0.611	0.123	0.304	36.78**
3	.578 <sup>c</sup>	0.335	0.822	0.191	0.258	32.84**

Note. \*\* $p < .01$

Predictor: Presence of meaning Total

Predictors: Presence of meaning Total, Search for meaning Total

Predictors: Presence of meaning Total, Search for meaning Total, Death Anxiety

The examination of Table 2 reveals that the presence of meaning, search for meaning, and death anxiety collectively account for 33.5% of the variance in predicting loneliness. The results indicate that when presence of meaning was entered into the regression model, it emerged as the most significant predictor ( $F = 43.72, df = 1,198, p < 0.01$ ) of loneliness, accounting for 18.1% of the variance ( $R = 0.425, R^2 = 0.181, \text{Model 1}$ ). When search for meaning was added to the regression model as the second significant predictor ( $F = 36.78, df = 1,197, p < 0.01$ ), it increased the variance explained to 27.2% ( $R = 0.521, R^2 = 0.272, \text{Model 2}$ ). Similarly, when death anxiety was included in the regression model, it was identified as the third significant predictor ( $F = 32.84, df = 1,196, p < 0.01$ ) of loneliness, increasing the explained variance to 33.5% ( $R = 0.578, R^2 = 0.335, \text{Model 3}$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The first aim of the present study was to examine the relationship between loneliness, death anxiety and dimensions of meaning in life namely, presence of meaning and search for meaning. The findings show that loneliness has a significant positive correlation with death anxiety. Results are congruent with the findings of Chow (2017); Greenblatt-Kimron (2021) and Pinson (2010). The fear of death often raises existential concerns about the unknown and the potential lack of control over life's trajectory. These concerns might lead to a sense of isolation and detachment from others and magnify a person's sense of being alone in their thoughts and experiences, contributing to a heightened feeling of loneliness. Furthermore,

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the study revealed a significant negative correlation between loneliness and the presence of meaning, consistent with findings reported by Borawski and Zakrzewska (2022) and Yildirim et al. (2021). It implies that, the sense of presence of meaning in life provides an individual with a feeling of belonging and significance, which helps to mitigate existential fears and cultivate deeper connections with others. Essentially, having a sense of meaning and direction in life acts as a buffer against feelings of loneliness by offering individuals a sense of fulfillment and belongingness, thereby strengthening their social ties and enhancing their overall well-being. Close relationships and strong connections have been associated with a greater sense of life's meaning (Klinger, 1977; Ebersole, 1998).

Additionally, the research found a significant positive relationship between loneliness and the search for meaning, in line with prior studies by Ozawa-de Silva (2020), Borawski and Zakrzewska (2022), and Jia et al. (2021). Studies suggest that loneliness may serve as a catalyst for personal growth and the pursuit of meaning following adversity (Stuewe-Portnoff, 1988), prompting individuals to actively seek purpose and significance in their lives (Rosedale, 2007). Moreover, the findings indicated a positive relationship between death anxiety and the search for meaning, while the presence of meaning exhibited a negative correlation with death anxiety, consistent with previous research (Baltaci, 2023; Dursun et al., 2022; Ozanne et al., 2023). When confronted with thoughts of mortality, individuals often experience heightened awareness of life's impermanence, prompting a deliberate search for meaning (Yalom, 2008).

Another aim of the study was to explore the predictors contributing to feelings of loneliness, with the search for meaning, death anxiety, and presence of meaning serving as independent variables. Results revealed that these variables collectively explain significant variance in predicting loneliness. This aligns with findings suggesting that having meaning in life fosters interpersonal relationships and social interactions (Stillman & Lambert, 2013; Steptoe & Fancourt, 2019). Moreover, the ability to attribute significance and meaning to one's life emerges as a pivotal factor in predicting loneliness (Macià et al., 2021), with individuals experiencing heightened death anxiety and diminished sense of life's meaning potentially perceiving exclusion or invalidation from society (Aisenberg, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

The outcomes of the present study reveal that heightened death anxiety, along with an increased search for meaning and a diminished sense of presence of meaning in life, serve as noteworthy indicators of loneliness during emerging adulthood. This period is characterized by awareness of mortality, as individuals confront the reality of their own mortality and the mortality of loved ones. This heightened sensitivity to the concept of death and mortality sometimes result in death anxiety. Humans, being a social species, throughout their lives, they normally look for social connections as well as meaning and purpose. Death anxiety makes individuals realize that their existence will come to an end, leading to the recognition that they could lose not just their lives but also their connection to the world, ultimately facing the possibility of becoming insignificant. This realization leads to the feeling of loneliness. Similarly, the search for meaning in life, especially during the formative years of emerging adulthood, can magnify feelings of loneliness when individuals struggle to find purpose or direction amidst life's complexities. Conversely, a sense of meaning and purpose acts as a shield against loneliness, providing individuals with a sense of connection and fulfillment that alleviates existential anxieties and fosters social bonds.

These findings have important implications for many stakeholders, including academic advisors, healthcare practitioners, and counselors. Understanding the complex relationship between existential concerns and loneliness allows interventions and support programs to be tailored to the specific requirements of the emerging adult population. By increasing resilience, improving coping mechanisms, and boosting social connectedness and meaning-making activities, such efforts have the potential to improve overall well-being and reduce loneliness among adults navigating the challenges of life.

### ***Limitations and Future Directions***

Even though the study had a sample of 200 participants, researchers only included a small, homogenous sample of Haryana-based university students. Future studies could potentially use these variables to conduct research for a wider population while placing a greater emphasis on the diversity of the data in order to gain more knowledge and insight. Future researchers can explore the effects of these variables on psychological wellbeing as well as other holistic aspects of personality through use of more advanced research methodologies that can provide further dimensions for these relations. Studies can also concentrate on entangling a wider range of factors that they believe will aid in a better understanding, and such findings might aid in making decisions in a more concrete way.

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### **Acknowledgment**

The authors appreciate all of the students who participated in this study.

### **Conflict of Interest**

Authors declare no conflict of interests.

**How to cite this article:** Chandel, P.K. & Kalonia, N. (2024). Loneliness in Emerging Adults: Role of Meaning in Life and Death Anxiety. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, *12*(3), 2821-2828. DIP:18.01.273.20241203, DOI:10.25215/1203.273