

Understanding Arjuna's Emotional Conflict in Vishada Yoga Using Contemporary Psychological Frameworks

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ABSTRACT

The Bhagavad Gita, a profound text of Indian philosophy, is not merely a text to understand spirituality but also could be used to understand human psychology, as it offers insight into moral dilemma, emotional conflict, resilience, psychological guidance, and much more. Among its eighteen chapters, Chapter 1, also known as Arjuna Vishada Yoga, gives insight into the psychological conflict of the warrior Arjuna as he faces emotional conflict and turmoil on the very first day at the onset of the battle in Kurukshetra when he is faced with fighting against his own kin and teachers. His emotional conflict, characterized by anxiety, confusion, loss of meaning of life, moral dilemma, and emotional paralysis, leads to cognitive confusion, psychosomatic symptoms, avoidant behaviour, and existential crisis. This review paper aims to understand and explore such conflicts faced by Arjuna with the help of modern psychological literature to have a more profound and holistic understanding of our indigenous grasps over psychological wisdom.

Keywords: *Bhagavad Gita, Counselling, Indigenous, Arjuna, Emotional Conflict*

The Arjuna Vishada Yoga (Chapter 1) of the Bhagavad Gita talks about the start of the battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas, where one of the Pandavas, Arjuna, the Commander in Chief from the Pandavas side, starts to feel conflicting emotions and turmoil regarding the battle. The dialogues spoken by Arjuna to Lord Krishna showcase his psychological state, which encompasses anxiety, fear, confusion, moral dilemma, and cognitive distortions. The dialogues could be reinterpreted to have a better understanding in the modern era by comparing and analysing them with the help of contemporary psychological literature.

As the modern educational system recognizes the importance of indigenous and culturally grounded texts and models, Arjuna Vishada Yoga presents an opportunity to examine ancient wisdom through contemporary psychological frameworks. Integrating indigenous and modern works together helps us have a better and more profound understanding through our scriptures and models, which could be applied in today's world. This study contributes to the growing discourse on indigenous psychology and its relevance to promoting psychological excellence and sustainable human development.

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Received: March 19, 2026; Revision Received: March 22, 2026; Accepted: March 25, 2026

Description of Arjuna's Emotional State

सीदन्ति मम गात्राणि मुखं च परिशुष्यति।

वेपथुश्च शरीरे मे रोमहर्षश्च जायते ॥ (1.29)

गाण्डीवं संसते हस्तात्त्वक्चैव परिदह्यते।

न च शक्नोम्यवस्थातुं भ्रमतीव च मे मनः ॥ (1.30)

These two slokas talk about the physical symptoms expressed by Arjuna as he tells how, at the sight of his kinsmen on the battlefield, his limbs are becoming limp, his mouth is parching, a shiver is running down his body, and his hair stands upright (1.29). He also says that his bow seems to be slipping from his hand, his skin burns all over, his brain is whirling, and he is unable to stand any longer (1.30).

निमित्तानि च पश्यामि विपरीतानि केशव ।

न च श्रेयोऽनुपश्यामि हत्वा स्वजनमाहवे ॥ (1.31)

This sloka talks about the conflict-avoiding behaviour of Arjuna as he sees the result of the battle as something opposite of what it could be and does not see any good in killing his kinsmen, hence his reason for not wanting to take part in the battle.

निहत्य धार्तराष्ट्रान्नः का प्रीतिः स्याज्जनार्दन।

पापमेवाश्रयेदस्मान् हत्वैतानाततायिनः ॥ (1.36)

This sloka shows the conflict between the emotional attachment with the family and the moral duty of being a warrior (kshatriya), as Arjuna thinks that he cannot hope to be happy after slaying the sons of Dhritarashtra, as killing these desperadoes will lead to sin taking hold of him.

यद्यप्येते न पश्यन्ति लोभोपहतचेतसः ।

कुलक्षयकृतं दोषं मित्रद्रोहे च पातकम् ॥ (1.38)

कथं न ज्ञेयमस्माभिः पापादस्मान्निवर्तितुम्।

कुलक्षयकृतं दोषं प्रपश्यद्विर्जनार्दन ॥ (1.39)

कुलक्षये प्रणश्यन्ति कुलधर्माः सनातनाः ।

धर्मो नष्टे कुलं कृत्वमधर्मोऽभिभवत्युत ॥ (1.40)

These slokas show the irrational beliefs and maximization of the bad outcome, as Arjuna says that if these greed-sickened people (Duryodhana) do not see the wrongness of destroying their own race and the sin of going against his own friends (1.38), then why should not they, who perceive the sin acquired from the destruction of the family, try to find a way to not partake in those crimes (1.39)? He says that as righteousness dies with the destruction of the family and virtues having been lost, then vice takes hold of the entire race (1.40).

अधर्माभिभवात्कृष्ण प्रदुष्यन्ति कुलस्त्रियः ।

स्त्रीषु दुष्टासु वाङ्मणेय जायते वर्णसंकरः ॥ (1.41)

संकरो नरकार्यैव कुलघ्नानां कुलस्य च।

पतन्ति पितरो ह्येषां लुप्तपिण्डोदकक्रियाः ॥ (1.42)

दोषैरैतैः कुलघ्नानां वर्णसंकरकारकैः ।

उत्साद्यन्ते जातिधर्माःकुलधर्माश्च शाश्वताः ॥ (1.43)

उत्सन्नकुलधर्माणां मनुष्याणां जनार्दन ।

नरकेऽनियतं वासो भवतीत्यनुशुश्रुम ॥ (1.44)

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These slokas show cognitive distortions as Arjuna talks about how when vice is predominant, the women of the family become corrupt, and with such corruption of women, intermixture of clan begins (1.41). When admixture of blood happens the destroyers of the race as well as the race itself are damned. Deprived of the offerings of rice and water (Sraddha, Tarpana, etc.,) the manes of their race and their teachings also fall (1.42). Through these evils bringing about an intermixture of clans, the age-long clan-related traditions and family customs of the killers of kinsmen become extinct (1.43). He says that he has heard that when the society of the lost race and tradition dies, they get stuck in hell for an indefinite period of time (1.44).

यदि मामप्रतीकारमशस्त्रं शस्त्रपाणयः ।

धार्तराष्ट्रा रणे हन्युस्तन्मे क्षेमतरं भवेत् ॥ (1.46)

The second-to-last sloka of the first chapter, acceptance of death, could be seen as Arjuna says that it would be better for him if he were killed in the battle, unarmed and unresisting, by the sons of Dhritrashtra who are armed with weapons.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

Stress and Anxiety Response

Fight-Flight-Freeze Theory

The fight-or-flight response (Cannon, 2010) described the dynamics of the body's physiological arousal in surviving a threat. Later, freeze response or tonic immobility (Gallup Jr, 1977) a variation of flight response, was added to the system. Upon facing a threat in the fight response, the body prepares itself for attack; in the flight response the body prepares for escape; and in the freeze response the body shuts itself down (Katz, et al. 2021).

The fight-flight-freeze system is the primary system responsible for fear responses and could be seen being activated when actively avoiding the aversive or threatening stimulus. Upon detection of a threat, attacking responses (fight), freezing conduct (freezing block), and avoidance behaviour (flight) are activated depending on the aversive stimuli. To conditioned and unconditioned aversive stimuli, this system mediates fear and is responsible for escape or avoidance behaviour (Vecchio, et al. 2021).

Sympathetic and parasympathetic branches of the autonomic nervous system upon threat are simultaneously activated, and only in case of parasympathetic dominance do we observe defensive freezing. Freezing is a complete absence of movement except for movements associated with respiration and tense body posture that result from increased muscle tone in this defensive state (Katz, et al. 2021).

In slokas 1.29 and 1.30, it could be seen that Arjuna is grief-stricken when he sees that on the other side of the battlefield are his family members, friends, and teachers. His response to seeing his kinsmen is his limbs going limp, being unable to hold the bow, and finding himself unable to stand. This shows the activation of threat-inducing freezing. The fear response of the warrior could be due to the possibility of getting killed by his family (likely not the case as it is later seen that he believes that his own death could bring an end to his conflict) or having to kill his own family (a likely case as later Arjuna says that he does not want to kill his family and considers it to be a sin).

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Psychosomatic Symptoms of Stress and Anxiety

Distress is the biological response of the body. Generally during acute stress or anxiety, the sympathetic nervous system activates fight-or-flight response as a survival dynamic (Satsangi, et al., 2018). Many physiological reactions could occur during the response to prepare the body for movement or energy production to the perceived threat. When unfavourable conditions like socio-environmental conditions cause emotional stress or anxiety, they could cause psychosomatic disturbances (Kharchenko, et al. 2017).

In slokas 1.29 and 1.30, Arjuna could be seen depicting some psychosomatic symptoms like parching of the mouth, shivers in the body, body hair standing upright, burning of the skin, and whirling of the mind. These physical reactions could be seen as Arjuna is seen to be emotionally stressed as he does not want to partake in the battle but has to do so due to moral obligation. The emotional stress could also be because on the other side of the battlefield are the people he knows and are related by blood, teachings, and friendship, and he does not want to be the cause of their demise. His anxiety could also be seen increasing, and a panic-like condition arises when his mind starts racing and he is unable to stand any longer.

The biological response displayed by Arjuna shows the mind-body relationship, as the emotional turmoil leads to physical symptoms. As the biological response was only seen temporarily, therefore, his condition could not be classified into a disorder but rather as an immediate response associated with stress, anxiety, or fear. If the response persists for a long time along with other symptoms, many disorders like anxiety disorder or somatic symptom disorder could arise.

Conflict Avoidance

A conflict occurs due to the feelings of stress when a person has to choose between two or more opposing desires or outcomes. An approach-avoidance conflict is seen as a flight or escape response when one has to choose between two alternatives that could have both desirable and undesirable outcomes (Bravo-Rivera, et al. 2021).

In sloka 1.31 shows the signs of conflict avoidance as he says that he sees no good in killing his family and sees the result of the battle as bad rather than good. His words show that he does not want to partake in the war and is trying to give out reasons to not be part of it. As the results of the battle could be either good or bad, Arjuna chose to look at the bad side more, as it justifies his reasons for the battle to not happen and gives him a chance of escape.

Social Perspective

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1959) states that when two or more inconsistent thoughts or cognitions occur simultaneously, it generates a state of tension, hence the occurrence of dissonance. To reduce the tension, cognitive dissonance theory states that a motivational state arises to promote regulation, mainly through a change of opinion and behaviours (Vaidis, et al. 2019). Cognitive dissonance could lead to dread, guilt, anger, frustration, anxiety, stress, and other psychosomatic conditions (Yahya, et al. 2020).

In sloka 1.36, it is seen that Arjuna feels that he could not hope to be happy after killing his family and would become sinful for the same. A dissonance could be seen occurring here as he is stuck between his duty to preserve social justice as a warrior, to take part in the battle

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which would result in killing the other side, and his emotional connection to the people on the other side that he finds hard to kill. The tension arising from the conflict between the moral obligation and emotional connection makes Arjuna feel guilty as he thinks that he could never be happy again after killing his own family and makes him dread the future, as he thinks that he is doing a sin and will have to live with that, and as seen in slokas 1.29 and 1.30, he faces biological responses due to stress and anxiety.

Social Pain Theory

It is essential for human survival to build close social connections, and when some threat arises that could potentially harm the social bond, individuals may experience some negative range of emotions. Such emotional distress or psychological pain caused by a perceived threat to social connections that could result in social exclusion, rejection, or loss is known as social pain. In many cases social pain is seen acting as a potentiator to physical pain (Brooks, et al. 2025).

It could be seen in slokas 1.29, 1.30, 1.31, and 1.36 that Arjuna is distressed and unhappy about having to fight his family and friends in the battle and exhibits physical pain as a response to the distressing situation. Arjuna thinking that he will become sinful after killing his family could be considered a form of social exclusion, as he thinks that the damage of destroying his familial connection leads to worse outcomes for him. It could be seen that him experiencing social pain leads him to have more and more negative thoughts and emotions, eventually leading to the thought of his own death being a better outcome than having to break his connections with his family by killing them.

Cognitive Theoretical Perspective

Cognitive Appraisal Theory

The emotions are interpretation and evaluation of the stimuli, rather than being automatic responses to the stimuli. This process of interpretation is what is termed by Lazarus "cognitive appraisal." Emotions arise from certain kinds of adaptive transactions or commerce a person is having with their environment (Chadha, et al. 2019; Lazarus, 1974).

The cognitive appraisal theory comprises two appraisals: primary appraisals concerning the extent to which the encounter is relevant to one's well-being, including motivational relevance (evaluation of the extent to which the encounter is relevant to one's goals) and motivational congruence (evaluation of the extent to which the encounter is consistent with one's goals); and secondary appraisals concerning one's resources and options for coping with the encounter, including problem-focused coping potential (evaluations of one's ability to act directly on the situation to bring it in accord with one's goals) and emotion-focused coping potential (evaluations of one's ability to psychologically adjust to the situation by altering one's interpretations, desires, or beliefs) (Chadha, et al. 2019; Smith & Lazarus, 1993).

In Arjuna Vishada Yoga, it is seen that Arjuna, who thought that he was ready to fight the battle when he actually goes into the battlefield, starts to feel differently. The emotions and thoughts only arise when he evaluates and interprets the present scenario as well as the future outcomes. Arjuna's motivational relevance and motivational congruence occur when he starts questioning whether it was right for the battle to happen and if the battle leads to good outcomes. The problem-focused coping potential occurs when he asks Lord Krishna why they are not thinking about turning away from the sin of killing their own family, and

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emotion-focused coping potential occurs when he says that it would be better if he were to get killed before raising his own weapons.

ABC Model

Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy (Ellis, 1957) is a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy with the framework that when one's goals are compromised and are obstructed or thwarted by events and situations (A) which, depending on one's beliefs about the self, others, and the world in relation to the situation (B) can trigger healthy or unhealthy emotional and behavioural consequences (C) (Chadha, et al. 2019).

If an individual's beliefs are rigid, illogical, and extreme, these are then said to be irrational beliefs, which could result in unhealthy emotions and maladaptive behaviours. REBT has included irrational beliefs as the fundamental cognitions that determine psychological ill-being and have been consistently associated with various types of emotional distress. It is suggested that individuals often adopt irrational beliefs in situations that are of utmost importance to them (Chadha, et al. 2019).

In slokas 1.38, 1.39, and 1.40, Arjuna seems to have irrational beliefs as he states that why should they who are not mind-blinded by greed not think of an alternative, as if they don't, vice will take hold of them all. In slokas 1.41, 1.42, 1.43, and 1.44, Arjuna starts thinking about what would happen if he were to kill his family and, hence, starts thinking about future consequences. It can be seen here that Arjuna thinks that his values and morals are being compromised by this battle (A), as if he does not take part in it, he will not fulfil his duty as a warrior and let the evil people win, but if he does take part in it, then he'd have to kill his own family, and doing that would result in him being sinful and the world being a place with no values (B), and these beliefs lead Arjuna to feel so distressed that he starts exhibiting physical symptoms as well (C).

Cognitive Distortions

When automatic thoughts are experienced by individuals in response to events, which in turn result to emotional and behavioural responses, and if there are negatively biased thinking errors, they then are called "cognitive distortions." The individual's core beliefs about important aspects of themselves, others, and the world are consistent with the content of automatic thoughts. When negative core beliefs are activated and negative automatic thoughts are elicited (comprised of errors in reasoning that are not evidence-based), a negative, neutral, or even positive event may occur but its influence will lead to negative affect and maladaptive behaviours (Rnic, et al. 2016).

Cognitive distortions were first listed and described by Beck, et al. (2024). Later 10 thinking errors were included on the list. These include mindreading (assuming that others are thinking negatively about them), catastrophizing (making negative predictions about the future based on little or no evidence), all-or-nothing thinking (viewing something without considering the full spectrum and range of possible evaluations), emotional reasoning (believing something to be true based on emotional responses rather than objective evidence), labelling (classifying oneself negatively after the occurrence of an adverse event), mental filtering (focusing on negative information and devaluing positive information), overgeneralization (assuming that the occurrence of one negative event means that additional bad things will happen), personalization (assuming that they are the cause of a negative event), should statements (thinking that things should or must be a certain way

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without relevant reasoning), and minimizing or disqualifying the positive (ignoring or dismissing positive things that have happened) (Rnic, et al. 2016).

In slokas 1.41, 1.42, 1.43, and 1.44, Arjuna is seen catastrophizing the future, thinking that if he kills his family, then people will start to lose their values and traditions and will take part in evil, which will eventually lead to everyone dwelling in hell. All-or-nothing thinking is occurring as he is only considering the negative outcome of the battle. He is seen labelling himself as a sinner if he did take part in the battle. Overgeneralization is occurring as he thinks that killing his family will lead to many more other bad events. The should statements are occurring as he believes that the society or the family should be a certain way only. All these signify that Arjuna is having some errors in his thinking, eventually leading to the occurrence of cognitive distortions.

The irrational beliefs of Arjuna led him to have distorted cognitions, which were later helped by Lord Krishna when he talked about Nishkama Karma and emotional regulation and helped in the cognitive restructuring of Arjuna. Techniques like REBT or CBT are used to reduce irrational beliefs and for cognitive restructuring in modern days.

Existential perspective

Existential Vacuum

Some individuals may find themselves being devoid of a meaningful life, experiencing an existential vacuum that is accompanied by a sense of helplessness to bring about positive changes in their lives (Frankl, 2014). Symptoms such as incapacity, boredom, despair, apathy, and pessimism are manifested by those grappling with an existential vacuum, which is indicative of a crisis of frustration that could culminate in suicidal tendencies. The state of existential vacuum is associated with an inability to ascribe worth and value to one's accomplished endeavours or the ones they want to embark on. It is also recognized as a challenge impacting individuals' lives, resulting in poor psychological and social adaptation characterized by stress, anxiety, and depression (Abood, et al. 2024).

In sloka 1.31, Arjuna experiences meaninglessness as he states that he does not see any good outcome of the battle. This shows his disconnection from the battle, as he does not find any purpose in it, saying that either way the outcome would result in the emergence of sin (slokas 1.31, 1.39, 1.40, 1.41, 1.42, 1.43, and 1.44). In sloka 1.46 Arjuna is seen accepting his death, which shows that he does not find any meaning to life. His pessimism, hopelessness, meaninglessness, and acceptance of death (which could be seen as a form of suicidal tendency) show that he is in a state of existential vacuum. He also shows symptoms of stress and anxiety in the earlier slokas.

Lord Krishna helped reduce this existential vacuum by making Arjuna understand the meaning of his life, understanding his warrior's duty (Kshatriya Dharma), and his actions (Karma) that should be void of any emotional attachment. This understanding helped reduce the pessimistic, hopeless, and meaningless feelings experienced by Arjuna. In modern days, logotherapy is one of the ways to find the meaning of life and reduce this existential vacuum.

Seeking Counselling

काप्रणयदोषोपहतस्वभावः पृच्छामि त्वां धर्मसम्मूढचेताः।

यच्छ्रेयः स्यान्निश्चितं ब्रूहि तन्मे, शिष्यस्तेऽहं शाधि मां त्वां प्रपन्नम् ॥ 2.7

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In chapter 2 of the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna asks Lord Krishna to guide him. This shows the help-seeking behaviour of Arjuna as he understands that he was not in the right state of mind then, and needed some external help. This awareness of his internal turmoil leads him to have an insight which one can achieve through introspection or self-reflection, leading him to seek help. This help-seeking behaviour is a modern-day approach to counselling or therapy. The role of Lord Krishna could be understood as that of a counsellor and Arjuna as that of a client. In the context of Indian psychology, this help-seeking behaviour could be seen as surrendering oneself to the higher power (Ishwarpranidhan). Through the ways of Nishkama Karma, Lord Krishna showed Arjuna how he can do his duty and not think about the consequences it would result in. He also told him about emotional regulation and how one can achieve the state of samadhi through the ways of Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga and Gyan Yoga. The later text from the book showcases how Lord Krishna helps guide Arjuna, which too could be understood using contemporary therapeutic practices like person/client-centered, cognitive-behavioural, logotherapy, and much more.

Table 1. Arjuna's mental conflicts and their modern psychological interpretation

Sloka	Mental Conflicts	Modern Psychological Framework	Psychological Interpretation
1.29-1.30	Limp limbs, unable to hold the bow, unable to stand	Fight-Flight-Freeze Response	Freeze reaction under perceived threat
1.29-1.30	Parched mouth, burning skin, upright body hair	Psychosomatic symptoms of stress and anxiety	Physiological symptoms indicating stress and anxiety
1.31	Unable to see any good in killing his family and do not want to partake in the battle	Conflict avoidance	Avoidant behaviour
1.36	Moral and emotional confusion about killing family	Cognitive dissonance	Conflict between moral duty and emotional attachment
1.29, 1.30, 1.31, 1.36	Distress about killing family	Social pain	Emotional distress caused by social exclusion
Entire Arjuna Vishada Yoga	Evaluation of the battle and its outcome	Cognitive appraisal	Interpretation and evaluation of stimuli
1.38, 1.39, 1.40, 1.41, 1.42, 1.43, 1.44	Irrational beliefs of the outcome of the battle	ABC model	Irrational beliefs
1.41, 1.42, 1.43, 1.44	Negative thinking errors about the battle	Cognitive distortion	Catastrophizing, all-or-nothing, overgeneralisation, and should statements
1.31, 1.39, 1.40, 1.41, 1.42, 1.43, 1.44, 1.46	Meaninglessness of the battle, hopelessness about the future, pessimistic thoughts, acceptance of death	Existential vacuum	Loss of perceived control, meaninglessness, hopelessness, pessimism, passive acceptance of death
2.7	Confessing confusion and asking for help	Help-seeking behaviour	Insight and help-seeking attitude for change

CONCLUSION

The emotional conflict displayed by Arjuna in Arjuna Vishada Yoga provides a profound multidimensional psychological understanding. Through the application of multiple frameworks and perspectives, his experience on the battlefield could be broken down into various segments to understand and have a deeper knowledge of the ancient text as well as understanding and integrating the knowledge of modern psychological concepts into the pre-existing literature. Arjuna's breakdown leads him to a psychological turning point as he seeks guidance, hence marking the journey of help-seeking behaviour, cognitive restructuring, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping.

The dialogue between Arjuna and Lord Krishna integrates not only the psychological issues faced by the warrior but also different therapeutic or counselling techniques applied by Lord Krishna in order to help Arjuna. The dialogue also helps us understand that psychological problems have always been there and are not a new thing, and counselling was ever present as well and was mainly done by the teachers. This review helps establish the relevance of indigenous texts in understanding mental health by integrating ancient wisdom with contemporary psychological frameworks.

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Acknowledgment

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: Joshi, D. (2026). Understanding Arjuna's Emotional Conflict in Vishada Yoga Using Contemporary Psychological Frameworks. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(1), 064-073. DIP:18.01.506.20261401, DOI:10.25215/1401.506