

# Impact of Self-Compassion on Existential Anxiety in Young Adults of Pakistan

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## Abstract

It's not much about the existential isolation but about our existential uniqueness, the feeling that no matter how deeply connected we are with someone, there is still an unbridgeable gap between every individual and all the elements of our perceived world which can't be covered in any way possible. Young adulthood is an age where the self-creation process starts hence, the initiation of process of understanding life experiences, experimentation and exploration of meaning in life. All these processes comes with the consequences of overwhelming experiences of existential questioning, concern, and anxiety, leading to various other negative or positive psychological outcomes, depending upon the subjective experiences. Hence the current research was aimed to study the impact of self-compassion on existential anxiety in adolescents and young adults. The population consisted of both male and females ( $N=280$ ). Current study is based on a quantitative correlation survey research design and the statistical analyses was done through SPSS (version 22). Neff's Compassion Scale-Short Form (SCS-SF), and Existential anxiety questionnaire (EAQ) and Existential concern questionnaire (ECQ) scales were used. The statistical analysis involved Pearson product moment correlation, and Stepwise Regression. The finding of the study revealed that there was a significant weak negative relationship between Self-compassion and Existential Anxiety and a significant positive relationship between self-criticism and existential anxiety. Moreover, the isolation (subdomain of self-compassion) predicted 20.4% -variance in level of Existential anxiety scale and 29.7% variance in Existential concern questionnaire. Following findings are significantly important regarding generating appropriate clinical interventions and provides beneficial insight into developing awareness programs on a community level.

**Keywords:** Existential anxiety; Self-compassion; Self-criticism; Isolation.

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## 1. Introduction

Young adulthood is a stage where the goal setting behavior starts and hence the initiation of ongoing experience of identity formation and existential crisis. During this time a person may experience depression, symptoms might include loss of interest in favorite activities, fatigue, headaches, feelings of hopelessness, and persistent sadness. Pakistan constitutes young adults as a major chunk of its population. Besides having a significantly greater chunk of young adults, limited work is done on their well-being specifically when they enter the stage of experiencing existential crisis, let alone how to cope with it on their own using their strengths and traits like self-kindness, self-judgment, and mindfulness (domains of self-compassion [21]). Hence this research focused on studying the role of self-compassion in existential crisis among young-adults. The theories and researches indicates that existential anxiety concerns are very fundamental phenomenon and mostly associated with symptoms of anxiety, depression and psychological distress, related to identity problems [3]. The more we allow our self to experience our pain the more we learn to remain in the present moment mindfully, the lesser the chances of experiencing existential anxiety, and meaninglessness in life. On this premise it was hypothesized that while experiencing existential anxiety, if a person tends to practice self-compassion in life i.e. evaluates oneself, treat oneself in a humane manner, be kind to her/himself significantly impacts the experience of anxiety. Therefore, the hypothesis of the current study state that Self-compassion and Existential Anxiety would be related negatively in Young adult of Pakistan. Furthermore, Self-criticism and Existential anxiety would be positively related. The current study aimed to find the impact of self-compassion on existential anxiety among young adults.

### 1.1. *Existential Anxiety*

The concept of existential anxiety has been defined as apprehension regarding one's purpose of existence, death, taking responsibility for one's own life decision and fear of becoming "nonbeing". The model put forward by Tillich [33] described three types of anxiety: Anxiety about death and fate (threat of death and anxiety induced by contingent nature of fate), meaninglessness and emptiness (anxiety about ultimate concern and importance of life) and guilt and condemnation (the anxiety of self-rejection & self-disapproval). On the other hand, Yalom [37] had discussed the four concern of life which leads to existential anxiety: death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness. It can be seen that young adults usually come across this anxiety [3] and hence, identification of those factors is needed which can reduce them, hence current study is focusing on self-compassion.

### 1.2. *Self-compassion*

Self-compassion refers to treating oneself without harsh judgment and with kind attitudes when feel pain, rejection or make mistakes. The key is one must let him/herself experience the pain arouse from life event with the awareness of present thought [19]. Based on the teaching of Buddhist, self-compassion has been conceptualize into three components: self-kindness (being supportive and understanding towards one self), common humanity (recognition of failure and mistake and sense of being not the only person who did wrong or is imperfect in the world) and mindfulness (Experiencing negative emotion with mindful awareness) [21]. A growing body of research has suggested that self-compassion is positively correlated with psychological well-

being of an individual. Higher level of self-compassion is associated with decrease in anxiety, self-criticism, rumination and perfectionism and linked with the increase in life satisfaction, emotional intelligence and social connectedness as well. [25]. It has been observed that the self-compassion is a positive predictor of well-being among individuals. A person who feels a strong sense of well-being tends to focus more on the positive aspects because self-compassion helps a person to construct a positive mindset [8, 9, 10]. However, self-compassion has also been studied with conflict resolution and it has been explored that the people who are more self-compassionate are more likely to handle the conflictual situation because of their greater emotional resilience in challenging positions [1]. The degree to which people cope efficiently with the stressful and negative life events is influenced by the positive relationship of emotional coping strategy with person well-being and level of self-compassion, as person does not try to escape from the problem rather they focus on solving the issue and regulating the negative emotions. [24]. Existential anxiety was thought to be the crux issue of a man. Existential anxiety has been the topic of interest of philosophers and religious researchers. A mountain of research has suggested that those individuals who are compelled to confront their own mortality tends to be preoccupied with the question about meaning of life and death, which eventually leads to increase in the existential anxiety and psychological distress [18,29]. Existential anxiety is seemed to be high in adolescents and younger adults as it is associated with psychological distress which is related to identity issues [36,3]. Existential anxiety is believed to be linked with aggression as it is observed that aggressive people use this behavior as a mean to compensate for the internalizing problems and cope with the existential anxiety by externalize aggression. [15]. There is a scarcity of researches which focus directly on the relationship between existential anxiety and self-compassion however meaning in life has been associated with self-compassion [13]. In the light of above literature review, it is concluded that where existential anxiety related with the psychological distress, self-compassion on the other hand aids the psychological well-being of an individual. Hence through the current study, it was aim to explore how would self-compassion will influence the level of Existential anxiety in the Young Adults of Pakistan. Hence it is being hypothesized that there will be a negative relationship between self-compassion and existential anxiety and positive relationship between self-criticism and existential anxiety.

### ***Self-criticism:***

Criticism is the social practice which aims at benefitting the person being criticized but Self-criticism is something which is majorly destructive. It has been defined as the tendency to criticize oneself which is not favorable in various aspects of self, such as personality, intellectual ability and physical appearance and it ultimately results in feeling of guilt, worthlessness, damaged self-esteem and negative emotional state [46, 47]. It ruins the lives and happiness of people. Self-critical individual engage in never ending and severe self-scrutinizing and they have a severe fear of being criticized [48]. Self-criticism strongly correlates with a lot of psychopathologies such as depression, anxiety and eating disorders. Researches have proved that self-criticism is one of the major predictor of later psychological problems [49]. A mountain of researches have suggested the idea that the people who are more self-critical tend to get depression and mood disorders and there is a high correlation between self-criticism and mood disorders [46, 47, 48]. It has been said that the enormous self-criticism is one of the form of internal harassment that is frustrating and undermining of the self [47]. Moreover, it has been observed that the depressed people who are more self-critical may not get better as much as low self-critical depressed people on cognitive therapies because their self-care abilities have been

undermined or underdeveloped [52]. Self-criticism is thought to be emerged from sense of shamed self, hence people can feel depressed by their own self-criticisms [50]. Whereas self-compassion is negatively linked to psychopathology as the people treat themselves with kindness and they are mindful which considering their negative aspects [51].

### 1.3. Method

#### Research design

To test the hypothesis of the current study, Quantitative Correlational Survey design was used.

#### Participants

**Table 1:** Demographic description of participants (N = 280)

Demographic Variable	<i>f</i>	%
Gender		
Male	48	17.1
Female	232	82.9
Marital Status		
Single	223	79.6
Married	24	8.6
Engaged	32	11.4
Widow	1	0.4
Employment Status		
Employed	68	24.3
Unemployed	212	75.7

A sample of 280 participants (17.1% boys & 82.9% girls) was selected through convenient sampling method all over the Pakistan through social media platforms. The age range of the participants was between 18-30 years (M=22.3; SD=2.43). The details of the participants are given above in the Table 1.

### 1.4. Measures

Following measures were used in the current study:

#### Demographic Sheet.

The demographic form used in the current study was to obtain information from participants about their age, gender, marital status and employment status.

#### Existential Concern Questionnaire (ECQ)

ECQ [5] is 22 item scale, developed by Bruggen, Klooster, Westeros, Kleine, Bohlmeijer and Glass [5]. In the current study English version of ECQ was used to measure the level of existential anxiety. Participants responded to each question on the 5 point scale with response option of *never (1), rarely (2), sometime (3), often (4) and always (5)*. Research indicates that the scale is unidimensional essentially and has good internal

reliability with the Cronbach’s alpha being .92 in non-clinical sample [5].

Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ)

EAQ [36] is a 13 item scale; with half positively worded and half negatively worded question, also used to measure existential anxiety level in participants. The participants responded on the 5 point scale from (strongly agree to strongly disagree). The analysis of reliability of scale indicates that it has adequate internal reliability ( $\alpha = 0.71$ ) and 2 week test-retest reliability ( $r = 0.72$ ) [36]

Self-compassion Scale (SCS)

The SCS [21], is 26 item scale divided into six subscales: self-judgment ( $\alpha = 0.809$ ), isolation ( $\alpha = 0.794$ ), over-identification ( $\alpha = 0.694$ ), Self-kindness ( $\alpha = 0.796$ ), Common humanity ( $\alpha = 0.730$ ) and Mindfulness ( $\alpha = 0.789$ ). The first three subscale had been grouped into Self-critical (SCr) item and later three subscale grouped into self-compassion item (SCm). The participants responded on 5 point scale from *Almost never 1 to Almost Always 5*. The SCS psychometric properties have been studied across different culture and the results of researches indicate that Self-compassion scale has good reliability and validity [41; 40].

**1.5. Procedure**

The participants were provided with google form to record their responses. Participants were provided with informed consent and they were assured about the confidentiality and anonymity. Furthermore, they had been provided with the right to withdraw from the study at any point. After the data collection of 280 participants, Pearson correlation test was applied on the data and regression analysis had been done through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.

**2. Result**

**Table 2:** Descriptive statistic and alpha reliability coefficient, univariate normality of study variables (N= 280)

Variables	items	$\alpha$	M	SD	SK	K	Range	
							Actual	Potential
EAQ	13	0.763	40.2321	7.89	-0.106	0.322	17-65	13-65
ECQ	22	0.933	60.203	18.78	0.112	0.539	22-109	22-110
SCr	13	0.903	38.1964	11.42	-0.022	-0.751	13-63	13-65
IS	4	0.794	11.8393	4.14	0.1	-0.705	4-20	4-20
SJ	5	0.809	14.4857	4.88	0.053	-0.689	5-25	5-25
OI	4	0.694	11.8714	3.64	-0.041	-0.674	4-20	4-20
SCm	13	0.902	38.1321	10.83	-0.053	-0.599	13-65	13-65
SK	5	0.796	14.2607	4.59	0.12	-0.692	5-25	5-25
CH	4	0.730	12.05	3.72	-0.089	-0.680	4-20	4-20
MIND	4	0.789	11.8214	3.74	0.055	-0.443	4-20	4-20

The SPSS (version 22) was used to analyze the data collected for current study. The Pearson correlation test was

used to study the relationship between existential anxiety and self- compassion. The regression analysis was used to identify the predictor variables in term of self- compassion and existential anxiety.

Table 2 report the Mean, Standard Deviation, Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient, skewness, kurtosis and Ranges of study variables. The skewness and kurtosis value were between the range of  $\pm 2$  which indicates that the data was normally distributed

**Table 3:** Pearson Correlations between Existential anxiety and self-compassion (N=280)

Variables	SCm	SK	CH	MIND	NSC	SJ	IS	OI	EAQ	ECQ
SCm	-	.90**	.87**	.91**	.18**	.19**	.07	.22**	-.22**	-.06
SK		-	.64**	.74**	.11*	.10*	.05	.17**	-.25**	-.09*
CH			-	.73**	.22**	.25**	.10*	.25**	-.12*	.02
MIND				-	.15**	.18**	.05	.17**	-.21**	-.09
SCr					-	.91**	.89**	.88**	.49**	.54**
SJ						-	.71**	.72**	.43**	.49**
IS							-	.70**	.45**	.54**
OI								-	.44**	.43**
EAQ									-	.65**
ECQ										-

Note: \* = Results are significant at  $p < 0.05$  level , \*\* = Results are significant at  $p < 0.01$  level

Table 3 indicates that Self-criticism items and its subscales, self-judgment, isolation and over-identification has a moderate significant positive correlation with existential anxiety. While, the self-compassion items and its subscales self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness has a weak significant negative relationship with existential anxiety. Moreover the significant correlation between EAQ and EAC indicates both scale were measuring same construct when used unidimensional.

**Table 4.1:** Regression Analysis showing self-criticism and its subscale as determinant of changes in level of Existential anxiety (Existential anxiety questionnaire) among young adults.(N = 280)

Criterion	B	$\beta$	Sig	R	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	95% CL	
							LL	UL
SCr	0.338	0.490	0.00	0.490	0.240	0.240	0.267	0.409

The above mentioned table indicates that 24% is being caused by self-criticism in existential anxiety.

**Table 4.2:** Regression Analysis showing self-criticism and its subscale as determinant of changes in level of Existential anxiety (Existential concern questionnaire) in young adults. (N = 280)

Criterion	B	$\beta$	Sig	R	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	95% CL	
							LL	UL
SCr	0.901	0.082	0.00	0.548	0.30	0.30	0.738	1.063

Table 4.1 indicates that unit change in predictor variable i.e. Self-criticism would positively influence the level of Existential anxiety in Existential anxiety questionnaire by 24%. Furthermore, Table 4.2 unit change in Self-criticism would positively influence the level of existential anxiety in Existential concern questionnaire scale by 30%. The self-compassion sub-scale was not included because of very weak correlation between Existential anxiety and Self compassion scale. Overall, the result shows that self-criticism determine the change in existential anxiety level positively i.e. with the increase in self-critical thought, level of existential anxiety would increase as well.

**Table 5.1:** Stepwise Regression Analysis of study variables with Isolation, Over-identification and self-judgment as a predictor and level of Existential Anxiety in EAQ as criterion

Existential Anxiety Questionnaire				
Model	SEB	$\beta$	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>
Step 1 (R = 0.452, $\Delta R^2 = 0.204$ )				
Isolation	0.102	0.452	8.442	0.00
Step 2 (R = 0.485, $\Delta R^2 = 0.031$ )				
Isolation	0.141	0.276	3.718	0.00
Over-identification	0.161	0.248	3.341	0.001

**Table 5.2:** Stepwise Regression Analysis of study variables with Isolation, Over-identification and self-judgment as a predictor and level of Existential Anxiety in ECQ as criterion

Existential Concern Questionnaire				
Model	SEB	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Step 1 (R = 0.545, $\Delta R^2 = 0.297$ )				
Isolation	0.228	0.545	10.833	0.00
Step 2 (R = 0.566, $\Delta R^2 = 0.024$ )				
Isolation	0.319	0.388	5.501	0.00
Self-judgment	0.271	0.220	3.116	0.002

Table 5.1 shows that Isolation predicts 20.4% variance in the level of existential anxiety in EAQ scale while Over-identification predicts 3.1% variance in the level of existential anxiety. Furthermore, Table 5.2 indicates that Isolation determine 29.7% variance in existential anxiety level in ECQ scale while Self-judgment predicts 2.4% variance in existential anxiety level. Overall the result shows that Isolation factor plays a significant role in predicting the level of existential anxiety experienced by young adult.

### 3. Discussion

There's an inherent tendency in humans to create their own different and unique self-identity, yet the need to be connected and belong to close relations, influence the meaning of life of a person. Whenever the sense of lack of perceived meaning in life, is experienced by an individual, there comes a point where judgement of one's own life initiates feelings of frustration. Hence, becoming the cause of experiencing existential anxiety and relevant symptoms of depression and anxiety [35]. There is not only a huge literature gap but rather lack of researches available regarding the construct of existential anxiety, let alone incorporating and studying the individual or intrapersonal factors and its relationship with existential concerns and anxiety. Hence, the current research studied the relationship between self-compassion and existential anxiety among young adults. Both the hypothesis were supported by the statistical outcome i.e. there was a negative relationship between self-compassion and existential anxiety, and a positive relationship between self-criticism and existential anxiety. The statistical analysis of the study supported the findings that there was a weak correlation between self-compassion and existential anxiety and concern ( $r = -.22, p = 0.01$ ). However, there was a moderate correlation between self-criticism and Existential Anxiety ( $r = .490, p = 0.01$ ) and Existential Concern Questionnaire items ( $r = .548, p = 0.01$ ), as shown in Table 3. The result indicates that with the increase in the level of negative self-evaluation, harsh self-treatment, and over-identification, individual's existential anxiety level also increases, which explains that how continuously telling oneself that their life is meaningless, can act as a self-fulfilling prophecy. While, self-compassion plays not as much of a significant role in decreasing existential anxiety because as humans, our more accessible thoughts are not along the lines of "our lives probably have more meaning than we think" but it's the totally opposite mindset altogether. Hence, explains that self-criticism plays significant role in increasing existential concerns in the individual. Furthermore, Table 4.1 and 4.2 indicates that Self-criticism predict 24% change in the level of existential anxiety as represented in Table 4.1, while in Table 4.2 Self-criticism predict 30% change in the level of Existential Anxiety. It means that with the increase in the value of self-criticism, existential anxiety level increases as well. Furthermore, as shown in Table 5.1, Self-criticism subdomain Isolation predicts 29.7% change in the level of Existential Anxiety, while Table 5.2 indicates that Isolation predicts 20.4% variance in the level of Existential Anxiety. While self-judgment predicted 2.4% variance and Over-Identification scale predicted 3.1% variance in Existential Anxiety level. It reflects that Isolation is a significant predictor of increase in the level of existential anxiety, i.e. the increase in the persistent irrational isolation thought lead towards the increase in the existential anxiety level in the individual. Knowing that humans are social animals, people can still drift apart either emotionally, or physically, and often death separates the loved ones. During those moments, people often isolates themselves and feel lonely, causing them to feel that their life is pointless. Feeling socially unfulfilled, dissatisfaction with oneself and isolating oneself in result, gives person a lot of spare time to ponder upon and reflect back to their choices in life and suddenly wanting answers to life's biggest questions of what, why, when, where they want and who they are. Hence, negative emotions can lead to deeper despair more than positive emotions facilitating a person in the process of finding a meaning in life. The findings supported that the relationship between self-compassion and existential anxiety exists, however working on or reducing negative self-compassion i.e. self-judgment, isolation and over identification is more beneficial and would be more effective as compared to inculcating and enhancing positive self-compassion i.e. self-kindness, Mindfulness and common humanity, in



face of experiencing or preventing existential anxiety or concerns. Factors like, (1) being not able to consciously identify when one is being judgmental and critical about personal inadequacies and failure (self-judgment), (2) viewing ones imperfections, challenging experiences as a part of individual experiences which cannot be shared but rather unique and individual, (3) feeling isolated rather than connected (isolation), and (4) unawareness of negative thoughts (over- identifying) contributes more towards the frequent experience of existential concerns and anxiety i.e. meaninglessness, despair, guilt, avoidance, anxiety, condemnation, emptiness and death [20]. Hence, appropriate intervention plans can be generated on the premise that components of negative self-compassion must be enhanced to overcome existential anxiety i.e. allowing oneself to feel negative emotions, not blocking out the pain and suffering with the underlying presumption that it will bring forth the happiness. Unprocessed, deeper, or negative emotions rather often leads to false sense of happiness, blocking a person from experiencing true happiness. Hence, life can feel empty when you don't experience the true happiness. On the other hand, acknowledging feelings of pain, suffering, and discontentment can improve the person's outlook of life and open the door to personal growth. Self-compassion i.e. caring, forgiving oneself, supporting oneself, specifically in the face of failures, shortcomings and sufferings, is associated with meaningfulness and subjective well- being [20, 42]. Moreover, higher the IQ or falling in gifted individual category, higher is the self-criticism. Hence, self-compassion is the strongest predictor of the subjective well-being in the gifted individuals, as for them, generativity is the ultimate form of meaningfulness [28]. Moreover self-compassion is also correlated with the positive psychological outcomes, such as meaning in life, optimism, wisdom, perceived self-efficacy, life satisfaction, and feeling of connectedness [28, 39, 12, 24, 25, 26,29] and is negatively correlated to negative psychological outcomes or psychopathologies like anxiety, depression, reduced stress, lesser fear of failure and perfectionistic tendencies [43, 17; 24, 26]. Other significant finding of the current study indicates that the isolation predict more variance in the level of existential anxiety and concern. Isolation, social or self-isolation, a concept prevalent in numerous cultures since ages and is characterized with developing traits of self- reflection, renewal, self-restraints etc. if associated with hermits, sages, Sufis and others while trying to connect with the God [45]. In general population, isolation is rather taken in totally different dimension. We as humans avoid isolation, we tend to consider connectedness, love and transcendence as antidotes to the terror of isolation. The process of self-creation, i.e. development of one's identity or conception of oneself, acquired through the life experiences, as a single, unitary, and autonomous being who is uniquely separate from others. It's a part of our basic psychological needs to belong and to be understood by relations around us. The self-creation process could be a lonely road to travel sometimes, causing despair, loneliness, and isolation, when one perceives to be less understood by others [44]. It's not so much existential isolation as it is our existential uniqueness [4]. More than the feeling of loneliness itself, the pre-assumption or realization that one's subjective experience of reality can never be fully shared and understood by others promotes the feeling of rejection, less connected to others, loneliness and hence, isolation. The population and the variables were chosen specifically because Pakistan has 60.8% population ranging from 15-60 years. Working on an age group with this much percentage would be very beneficial, as existential anxiety concerns have a theoretically consistent factor structure, are common among adolescents, and are associated with psychological symptoms, as well as identity issues [6]. Two scales were chosen for measuring Existential anxiety as both together focuses on the broader array of possible underlying factors and causes of existential anxiety. The findings of the study are of significant importance, as implications for clinicians while treating young adults who present with issues of identity crisis,

or any kind of internalizing symptoms due to existential anxiety i.e. focusing on dealing with negative self-compassion i.e. self-judgment (modifying thoughts regarding themselves) isolation (behavior, urge or coping mechanism to withdraw oneself from people or environment, physically and mentally) and over identification (the act of identifying oneself to an excessive degree with someone else, to weigh out the self-worth) are more beneficial rather than inculcating and enhancing positive self-compassion i.e. self-kindness, Mindfulness and common humanity. Constantly telling yourself that your life is meaningless, could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Hence, practically working on pessimistic and negative ideas, and practicing being compassionate would be more helpful.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Adolescence and young adulthood is an age of construction of self-concept, perceiving life experiences, paving their paths and finding meaning in life and to work towards those goals. Perceived social support, connectedness, shared individual experiences rather than walking alone and self-compassion, aids in preventing most of us from experiencing existential concerns and anxiety. Moreover, the study was of significant value for getting an insight into individual's intrapersonal characteristics that contributes to the experiences of existential anxiety, for further development of appropriate intervention plans or general awareness programs which would be helpful for the population of adolescents and young adults.

#### **5. Limitation and recommendation**

The sampling method used in the current study was less systematic and the sample size was limited. Therefore, it is recommended for future researches to use probability sampling methods to reduce the subject bias effect and study the relationship between variables in large sample. Moreover, it is recommended to study the effect of COVID-19 situation on the relationship between variables. Literature indicate that Intelligence and level of worry are negatively related in non-clinical sample, while positively related in Generalized Anxiety Disorder patients [7]. Furthermore, the researches indicates that higher emotional intelligence level predicts the decrease in the level of stress, worry and depression [15]. It is recommended to use the additional variable of Intelligence and Emotional Intelligence to draw a relationship between variables of the current study and other variable which held theoretical significance .

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