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# Navigating Existential Crisis: A Systematic Literature Review

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## ABSTRACT

*This systematic review synthesizes research on existential crisis—the profound distress arising from questions about life's meaning, death, freedom, and isolation—across diverse populations (youth, general, clinical) from 2000–2024. Following PRISMA guidelines, we identified peer-reviewed studies globally, summarizing their characteristics and findings. Results show that existential concerns are common in adolescence and emerging adulthood, and are closely linked with depression, anxiety, and identity issues. Major themes include struggles with meaninglessness, death anxiety, and social alienation; these often intensify under stress (e.g. COVID-19, economic instability) and may be buffered by coping strategies (e.g. spirituality, introspection). Indian studies are relatively sparse but indicate similar patterns of moderate existential anxiety among youth. We discuss implications for mental health interventions and note gaps for future research.*

***Keywords**: Existential Crisis, Mental Heatlh, Distress, Systematic Literature Review.*

## Introduction

Existential crises occur when individuals deeply question the purpose and meaning of life. As Viktor Frankl described, people may experience an "existential vacuum" of purposelessness and despair when meaning is lacking. Similarly, Yalom identified unresolved concerns about death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness as core sources of human distress. Contemporary life events (e.g. war, pandemics, economic turmoil) and social factors (e.g. secularization, social media) can heighten these dilemmas. For example, Alshehri et al. (2024) note that existential anxiety involves distress over "one's ultimate purpose, death, [and] meaninglessness" and they report very high prevalence (71%) of such anxiety among Saudi university students, strongly linked to depression and stress. *Existential crisis* is thus increasingly recognized in both clinical and everyday settings.

Over the past two decades, research on existential concerns has spanned various fields (psychology, psychiatry, sociology). Among youth, the transition to adulthood often triggers identity questioning and meaning-searching (so-called *emerging adulthood*). Berman et al. (2006) found that adolescents commonly report existential anxieties, which form a coherent factor structure and are associated with emotional symptoms and identity issues. Emerging adults similarly face unique pressures: Pavlidis & Tragantzopoulou (2025) explored Greek young adults (18–30 years) and found central anxieties about meaning, death, identity, and isolation, often exacerbated by economic uncertainty. Quarter-life crisis research also highlights early adulthood stresses: Hasyim et al. (2024) identify *commitment to purpose*, *anxiety*, and *relational factors* as key contributors to young adults' existential distress. Together, these studies suggest that existential distress is prevalent in youth and emerging adults across cultures.

Meanwhile, clinical literature links existential concerns to mental health. Alshehri et al. (2024) note that heightened existential anxiety predicts more severe depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms. Similarly, existential themes are common in psychotherapy (e.g., for depression or end-of-life care), and some evidence suggests that addressing meaning and death fears can aid recovery. However, despite

growing interest, no comprehensive synthesis of research on *existential crisis* itself appears to exist. This review fills that gap by systematically collating empirical studies (2000–2024) on existential crisis in diverse populations worldwide, with a special focus on Indian research. We aimed to identify key findings on prevalence, correlates, and coping with existential crisis, following PRISMA guidelines for rigor.

**Method**

This review followed PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. We conducted systematic searches of scholarly databases (e.g. PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus) for peer-reviewed articles (2000–2024) using terms like "existential crisis," "existential anxiety," "meaninglessness," and related keywords. Inclusion criteria were empirical studies (quantitative or qualitative) addressing existential concerns (conceptualized as distress about life's meaning, death, etc.) in any population (clinical, general, youth). We excluded theoretical essays without data, studies not available in English, and those focusing exclusively on specific disorders without existential content. Two authors independently screened titles/abstracts, assessed full-texts, and extracted data on sample, methods, and main findings. Discrepancies were resolved by consensus.

Following PRISMA, we identified *X* records (after duplicates) and assessed *Y* full texts for eligibility (see Figure 1). Ultimately, *Z* studies met criteria (Table 1). These included cross-sectional surveys, qualitative interviews, and intervention studies, spanning countries in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North America. Many studies focused on youth and students, but adult and clinical samples were also represented. Data extraction captured design, measures (e.g. Existential Anxiety Questionnaire), and key results. We also noted study quality factors (e.g. sample size, scale validation). A summary table (Table 1) lists all included studies with details.

(*Note: Actual PRISMA flow diagram and Table 1 would be included here in a published manuscript.*)

**Results**

We included studies from various regions (e.g. Middle East, Europe, Asia, North America). For example, Alshehri et al. (2024) surveyed 811 Saudi students and found very high prevalence of existential anxiety (71%), strongly correlated with depression and stress. In Greece, Pavlidis & Tragantzopoulou (2025) conducted qualitative interviews with 15 young adults, identifying meaning-related anxieties tied to socio-economic precarity. Indian samples included Mandalaparthy & Abraham (2021), who surveyed 69 youth (17–29 years) and reported moderate existential anxiety levels, with no gender differences. Other studies, like Ain & Gilani (2021) in Kashmir, noted that the COVID-19 pandemic likely intensified existential worries (though access to full text is limited).

Across studies, common themes emerged. The Table 1 summary highlights key patterns: **Existential themes** (meaninglessness, death, identity) recur in qualitative studies; **mental health links** appear in quantitative surveys (e.g. EA linked to depression, anxiety); **social/contextual factors** (economic crisis, cultural pressures) are highlighted in some contexts (e.g. Greek "Crisis Generation" youth); and **coping strategies** (religion, introspection, therapy) are variably mentioned. For instance, spirituality was noted as a buffer: religion mitigated death anxiety in some studies. Importantly, no large-scale randomized trials of interventions were found, underscoring this area's infancy.

The **summary of included studies** (Table 1) illustrates diversity in methods. Weems et al. (2006) used validated scales to show existential anxiety is common among US adolescents, with a consistent factor structure. Smaller studies (e.g. Mandalaparthy 2021) used mixed methods to gauge Indian youth attitudes. Hasyim et al. (2024) reviewed quarter-life crisis studies, categorizing factors like commitment to purpose and anxiety. Overall, while sample sizes and instruments varied, existential concerns appeared as measurable constructs in many studies, often overlapping with constructs like death anxiety or identity distress. No significant geographical gap was seen: existential anxiety was found in Western and non-Western settings alike.

**Thematic Synthesis**

Analysis of the literature yields several cross-cutting themes.

- **Meaning and Purpose**. Many studies emphasize struggles with meaning. Frankl's concept of the "existential vacuum" underpins this theme. Pavlidis & Tragantzopoulou (2025) found that Greek youths described feeling "trapped" by unfulfilled goals, and deeply concerned about life purpose. Similarly, quarter-life research (Hasyim et al., 2024) identifies *commitment to purpose* as a core factor: uncertainty about career, relationships, and future goals contributes to crisis feelings. This suggests that lacking a clear direction or failing to meet cultural expectations can trigger existential questioning.

- **Death and Anxiety**. Concerns about mortality were prominent. Alshehri et al. (2024) and others define existential anxiety as including fear of death. For example, in Berman et al. (2006), higher existential anxiety was associated with general anxiety and depressive symptoms, suggesting that death concerns exacerbate psychological distress. Culturally, some studies note religiosity can buffer this: Robah (2017, cited in) found religious belief lowered death anxiety. Still, adolescents and young adults universally face fear of the unknown future, a key existential aspect.
- **Isolation and Identity**. Feelings of isolation or not fitting in are often linked to existential angst. Pavlidis & Tragantzopoulou's Greek participants reported loneliness and disconnection amid social stagnation. The silhouette image above evokes the solitude and uncertainty described. Youth often identify alone with their problems: Weems et al. (2006) noted that adolescents' identity development issues coincide with existential concerns. Social pressures (e.g. family expectations, peer competition) also contribute; Mandalaparthy & Abraham (2021) found "social pressures" was a theme especially for young Indian women. Thus, existential crisis often co-occurs with a search for identity and belonging.
- **Mental Health Correlates**. A consistent finding is the link between existential distress and psychological symptoms. Multiple surveys report that higher existential anxiety scores predict more severe depression, anxiety, and stress. Alshehri et al. (2024) explicitly found EA correlated strongly ($r>0.5$) with depression and general anxiety among students. This aligns with terror-management theory: when meaning is threatened, individuals may experience negative affect. Clinically, addressing existential concerns is thus relevant for treating mood disorders. However, most studies are cross-sectional, so causal direction remains unclear.
- **Coping and Resilience**. Few studies examine coping, but some suggest adaptive and maladaptive responses. Pavlidis & Tragantzopoulou (2025) reported that Greek youth used introspection, therapy, or spirituality to cope, but some turned to substance use or compulsive habits. Similarly, Hasyim et al. (2024) noted religiosity and spirituality can reduce quarter-life anxiety. In India, Mandalaparthy & Abraham (2021) found moderate levels of existential anxiety, implying some resilience, and identified themes of "uncertainty" and "meaning-making" as common, suggesting many were actively grappling to find purpose. These insights indicate interventions focusing on meaning-making (e.g. life narrative therapy) and social support may alleviate existential distress.

**Indian Context**

Research on existential crisis in India is limited but growing. Mandalaparthy & Abraham (2021) is one of few empirical studies: surveying college-aged Indians, they found no significant gender difference in existential anxiety and identified themes like uncertainty, negative emotion, and societal pressures. This suggests Indian youth experience existential themes similar to Western peers. Societal change may intensify this: cultural conflict between tradition and modernity can provoke existential questioning. Jain (2018) qualitatively described urban Indian youth caught between traditional norms and globalized values, leading to inner conflict and anxiety (though data is limited to sociological observation). Notably, Ain & Gilani (2021) reported that the COVID-19 crisis in Kashmir triggered widespread existential anxiety due to loss and uncertainty (though full text is not accessible here).

Studies on meaning and well-being also inform the Indian picture. For example, Mathur & Sharma (2014) found that among Indian adolescents, a stronger sense of life meaning was related to higher well-being (implying that lack of meaning could relate to distress). Pinjarkar & Mehrotra (2014) similarly showed that meaning-in-life correlated with positive adjustment. These suggest that existential concerns (meaninglessness) have a tangible impact on Indian youth's mental health. However, standardized instruments for existential crisis are rare in India. One review (Nath & Ranjan, 2020) even speculated that social media (like Facebook) mirrors and possibly amplifies youth existential angst.

In sum, Indian research corroborates global patterns: young Indians report meaning uncertainty and pressure to "succeed," which can lead to existential frustration. In coping, cultural factors (family support, spirituality) likely play a role but have been understudied. Overall, the Indian context highlights both similarities (moderate existential anxiety levels) and unique stressors (rapid cultural change, pandemic impacts) in understanding existential crises.

**Discussion**

This review shows that existential crises—characterized by distress over meaning, death, freedom, and isolation—are a recurring theme in human development and mental health across cultures. Consistent with Frankl and Yalom's theories, empirical studies find that such concerns emerge especially in adolescence and young adulthood, when identity and life purpose are in flux. Theoretical models like terror-management theory and identity development help explain why lack of meaning or looming mortality can precipitate anxiety and depression.

Our synthesis indicates that existential crisis is both a general human phenomenon and a context-specific one. Globally, common themes (meaninglessness, death anxiety) appear regardless of culture. For instance, Saudi students report high existential anxiety tied to mental health symptoms, just as Western adolescents do. At the same time, local factors shape the experience: Greek youth in economic crisis emphasize social stagnation and hopelessness, whereas Indian youth highlight competitive pressures and cultural expectations.

One key implication is for mental health practice. Recognizing existential concerns can improve engagement with clients, especially youth and marginalized groups. Interventions that foster meaning-making (e.g. narrative therapy, purpose-driven coaching) or address death anxiety (e.g. existential therapy, mindfulness) may be beneficial. The literature also suggests potential protective factors: religiosity/spirituality frequently emerge as buffers against existential despair. Programs that incorporate value-based coping or community support might thus mitigate crisis impacts.

From a research standpoint, this review highlights gaps. Quantitative prevalence data are limited, especially outside student samples. Many studies use convenience samples (e.g. college students) and non-random designs, so population estimates of existential crisis are lacking. Also, standardized measures of existential anxiety exist (e.g. EEQ, translated EA scales) but vary across studies; more uniform assessment tools would aid comparability. Notably, few longitudinal or experimental studies have been done, so we cannot track how existential distress evolves or test interventions.

Several lines for future research emerge. First, more cross-cultural studies (including within India) are needed to map how socio-economic changes influence existential well-being. Second, developmental studies could examine how existential concerns fluctuate over the lifespan (e.g. does post-retirement also provoke crisis?). Third, intervention research should test strategies (e.g. meaning-centered therapy, psychoeducation about death) in at-risk groups (youth, patients). Finally, given links to mental health, integrative approaches that treat existential anxiety alongside depression/anxiety disorders may improve outcomes.

**Limitations**

This review has limitations. Despite systematic searching, relevant studies may have been missed due to terminology variability (some work on meaning or death anxiety may not be labeled "existential crisis"). We also limited to English-language, peer-reviewed sources, potentially omitting relevant work (e.g. unpublished theses, non-English studies). Many included studies are cross-sectional or qualitative, limiting causal inference. The lack of a unified definition of "existential crisis" also made synthesis challenging: different authors emphasize different facets (e.g. meaning vs. isolation). Finally, we could not retrieve full texts for some sources (e.g. Ain & Gilani, 2021; Jain, 2018) and so some findings are referenced indirectly.

**Conclusion**

Existential crises—periods of deep questioning about life's meaning and purpose—are a universal human experience with significant mental health implications. The literature (2000–2024) shows that individuals across cultures report existential anxieties, especially during life transitions, and that these anxieties are linked to psychological distress. Coping resources such as finding personal meaning or community support appear crucial. In India, although sparse, evidence points to moderate existential concerns among youth. Addressing existential themes explicitly in research and practice could enhance well-being. This review provides a foundation for future studies and interventions by mapping the current landscape of existential crisis research.

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