



# **Humankind's Existential Crisis Amid COVID-19 Pandemic: A Theoretical Perspective**

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### **Author's contribution**

*The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

An existential crisis (EC) is a situation in which an individual provokes a storm of dread about the meaning, purpose, or value of life, and is unpleasantly disturbed by a series of thoughts in their lives. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the EC on humankind has further increased across the world. Although scholars have studied the effects of EC on humans, there are limited studies of the pandemic that induces EC in humans. The most neglected area in past research has been the lack of integration between different disciplines to find better solutions for EC disease. This study aims to identify the main factors that influence people's psychological stigma due to crisis and examine how the previous studies' contributions, evaluations, and insights on EC are interrelated and biased. This is an independent article based on a literature review. It took more than two months to review entire articles. As the guiding framework of the study, death and meaninglessness, loneliness and social isolation, freedom, and authenticity are emphasized succinctly to deliberate on EC. The study shows the limitations in views and findings with the previous studies including the usage of the jargon related to CE. The experience of death, loneliness, and isolation amid the COVID-19 pandemic isn't always alluring to many humankind as indicated in the study. Strong integration of psychology and Buddhism may offer the right solutions to overcome the EC during the pandemic. However, a large number of studies, seminars and conferences may need to be initiated by the respective academics and policy makers in order to advocate an integrated approach to the solutions for EC.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

An existential crisis is a psychological episode in which a person questions the meaning of their life and of existence itself [1]. In the digital age, everybody faces endless questions about the meaning of life, the meaning of death, connectedness, isolation, authenticity, freedom, emotional pain and depression which are the true symptoms of EC in life. On the other hand, the number of people suffering from depression, anxiety, emotional distress, and mental conditions is becoming amplified during the recent pandemic [2]. For instance, a third of Americans now show signs of clinical anxiety and depression amid the covid -19 pandemic [3]. Similarly, most young people studying in high schools suffer more from depression and other mental health problems. He further stated that among 2111 young people, 61% of them have been mentally affected and have a negative effect due to the pandemic [4]. Moreover, other incidences of EC amid COVID-pandemic was highlighted by [5] in which they have highlighted that despite high rates of anxiety/depression, 81.1% of people have been reported a loss of household income and while 95% of them felt insecure due to the pandemic. Though studies are viewed only from the perspectives of young people based on the COVID-19 pandemic in their own countries, the above findings substantiate the essence of the EC. Despite the researchers failed to use the term EC in their studies, there seemed to have ample evidence to show that their results and findings are highly connected with the key components of EC.

Additionally, the key emotional existential crisis is associated with emotional pain, despair, helplessness, disturbed sense of integrity, emotional vulnerability, guilt, fear, anxiety and loneliness [6]. The study also demonstrated that at the time of existential crisis, most people experience and endure these emotional suffers including depression and meaninglessness of life. People are guided by their intuition and feel emotionally vulnerable due to existential crisis. The study concluded that emotional vulnerability occurs variously in an existential crisis [7]. Furthermore, existential anxiety and concerns are more frequent among adolescents across the globe [8]. In adulthood, the existential crisis grows bigger if it is not eradicated at the early stage. He further claimed that career choice and

relationships in life, in general, are the main sources of crisis confronted by an adult [9]. Other main occurrences of EC include; career change, death of a loved one, life-threatening diseases, entering into a significant age category and divorce [10] However, for every crisis, systematic remedies are essential without which humankind may find difficulty in promoting peace and tranquillity within them. Therefore, to avoid crises of existence, we have to have more meaning for our lives because it gives us the reason to live [11]. On the other hand, existential reflection was found helpful to cultivate adaptive coping and it creates a positive relationship between maladaptive coping and mental health [12]. Therefore, the EC of a person can become dangerous to himself and other people if timely remedies and guides are not provided [7].

This study was conducted based on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and different levels of EC experienced by people around the world. The new insights from the literature review on the common causes of the crisis are echoed. The imbalances in areas of young adult lives affected by the crisis amid COVID-19 are also emphasized. The academic critiques are resonated in the review considering earlier research's findings, variables, and methodology adopted by scholars. In addition, a brief perspective of modern psychologists and spiritualists has been made based on the key elements of the crisis. The recommendations are made in this review to benefit policy-makers and future researchers who are aspiring to conduct similar research in the future.

## 2. JARGONS OF EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

The term existential crisis has been derived from Erikson [9] which was later termed as an identity crisis among scholars. Moreover, he coined different terms for EC depending upon different levels of people; a sophomore crisis for a teenager or a young adult who is likely to experience EC in early and adult existential crisis to the people who experience a crisis in the mid-late 20s. For instance, the term "existential anxiety" in the study was adopted and hypothesized it to be a core human issue in a great deal of theoretical and philosophical writing [8]. In the contrast, Ain & Ahmad Gilani (2021) adopted an "existential crisis" in the study to explore Buddhist approaches to the various crisis

in one's life. In addition, Blend(2020) has also adopted the term EC to study the four major elements of EC.

Therefore, the scholars used the above jargon in their studies based upon their academic background and convenience. This may often create misperception with the subsequent researchers across universities and research institutions. It has been observed that the term itself has no fixed jargon and definition. However, the term 'existential crisis' and 'existential anxiety' has been used more profusely in the previous studies. Thus, [9] also reinforced that the understanding of the EC perhaps differs depending upon different age groups and people at different stages.

### **3. DEATH AND MEANINGLESSNESS EXISTENTIAL CRISIS**

The COVID19 pandemic disrupted our lives and daily lives within a short period, creating uncertainty and fear. For most people, this time is extremely stressful because everybody has to adapt to staying at home and keeping a distance from others. This is especially difficult when someone's loved one dies during a pandemic, regardless of whether the death is the result of COVID19 or not. If someone undergoes such grief during this extremely difficult and isolated time, the thinking on death and its meaninglessness would also increase. The death toll has been increasing across the globe due to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. The most recent death report on coronavirus shows that the USA, India, Brazil, Russia, and France have the maximum death tolls until July 2021[13]. In addition, due to coronavirus, the fatality rate for patients under 45 years is 0.0026-0.3%, patients over 60 years is 4%, patients over 70 years is 8% and 15% for the patients over the age of 80 as reported in Oxford COVID-19 Evidence Service [14].

Most people realize the meaninglessness of their lives after hearing the news about someone's death through the media and upon seeing the dead body of someone so close to us. Physiologically, most humankind is disturbed during such a situation and the existential crisis on death [15]. Therefore, as a result, people in these countries may be sensing the meaninglessness of lives more than any other country across the globe. For example, India has lost more than 400,000 people to the coronavirus until July 2021 as reported in The Diplomat [16].

Maybe the people of this country experiencing the meaninglessness of human life and thus, the existential crisis on death as compared to other Asian countries. Thus, meaninglessness is the human confrontation with an indifferent universe that compels individuals to construct their meaning.

[17] indicated that death is viewed as an integral part of samsaric existence and comprehending death comprehends. Moreover, the death paradox is described as "we are alive but we will die, and we live in a world that both supports and negates life' [3]. In addition, the death of a loved one such as a parent and a friend caused massive disappointment and may lead to a serious existential crisis [18]. One of the main factors that promote an existential crisis regarding death is the unknown aspects of death(mystery) as it triggers deep feelings of anxiety and fear in some people [19]. Therefore, to overcome the feeling of death, a self-preoccupation and developing a greater sense of compassion and interdependence by recognizing death's universality is necessary. Developing a sense of self-empowerment and self-determination as an alternative to conforming to death anxiety in a country like the US is also another tactic suggested by [3]. It was argued even though people know about life-threatening illness via the news, their feelings on existential seemed insignificant [19].

On the other hand, understanding death through the Buddhist way of imagination and practices help to comprehend essential facts that reach beyond the domains of death and dying. It offers a distinct departure for understanding the relationship among people, monks, ritual experts, and other entities. It captures the diverse domains including agricultural fertility, human reproduction, political cults, and the economy which are the components of social fact. It was further expressed that death is the centre of Buddhist culture and plays a pivotal role on ritual, ideological and even economic levels for its development and successful transmission of Buddhism. Thus, they claimed that Buddhists are specialists in death across Asia [20]. Moreover, it has been supplemented the statements and resonated that Buddhist meditation on death may have a positive effect if applied to an area of modern education. He indicated that in Terror Management Theory (TMT) death is activated in consciousness called mortality salience where the meaning of life, happiness and tolerance of others become the main internal values of

human beings instead of external values (honour, wealth, success and appearance) [21]. Thus, he established that there is no difference in the positive psychological change in TMT and educational applications of Buddhist contemplations on death. He further concluded that Buddhist meditation on death has a great influence on modern society because mindfulness is applied in medicine, cognitive science, business and education. He further claimed that as mortality salience is triggered, the internal values of psychological changes occur in a human being. The existential crisis is related to a traumatic experience that may lead to a serious mental disorder and lead to loss of life meaning and satisfaction. They concluded that existential anxiety and life satisfaction plays an important role in learning the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) in the psychological field [22]

However, to overcome death anxiety, people may follow one's belief systems and a sense of specialness. The question of death is one part of the existential crisis experienced by most people during the pandemic across the globe. Viewing the situation from the Buddhist perspective seems greater outlook because the contemplation on death or meaninglessness is a reminder to humankind that everything in this universe is impermanence. Thus, the mindfulness application on death in modern education with referring to the Buddhist approach may help to overcome the fear of death during the pandemic [23].

#### **4. LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION EXISTENTIAL EXISTENCE**

The social impact of the COVID19 pandemic across the globe has become extensive and serious among the people. It has not even spared a normal social functioning of the lives of the people. Isolation and social distancing are necessary measures implemented by all countries to prevent the spread of the virus. However, it also leads to a high degree of loneliness and social isolation, which has led to negative physical and mental consequences. The pandemic reveals a pre-existing threat to happiness, and therefore, older people often experience social isolation and loneliness. In particular, before the pandemic, loneliness and social isolation were so prominent across Europe, the USA and China. The situation has

worsened with the implementation of COVID-19 Protocols to combat the virus in these countries [24].

Isolation is the fundamental separation of oneself from others and the world around. However, the main conflict exists between absolute isolation and the desire for belonging and protection. It was coined that interpersonal and existential isolation co-exists with each other despite human beings being separate to encounter aloneness [23]. On the other hand, the social isolation is a universal human experience that sometimes affects entire communities and reminds each individual of their need for connection [25]. An individual suffers from depression and anxiety if they live separately, are abused or deprived of a healthy support system and marginalized group members [26]. Further, the study also encapsulated that some level of existential isolation is unavoidable and bound to experience by all individuals. More interestingly, they conclude that loneliness can occur if even others are physically present. Additionally, it has been discovered that most likely, there is a higher rate of depression and anxiety experiences among children and adolescents because of isolation periods [27]. Therefore, the study established that as compared to the intensity of loneliness, the duration of loneliness is more strongly corrected with the mental health symptoms if isolation endures. A total of 53 past studies on existential isolation and found out that all studies have considered the impact of loneliness on mental health as an important measurement variable. The main findings of the study are, female participants undergo more depression of loneliness than male participants. Moreover, 398 parents whose children have exposure to the United States, Canada, and Mexico reported that 20.9% experienced social isolation and other experience of their children's on mental hygiene-related issues amid the COVID-19 situation. The study was carried out by a rapid systematic review of 63 studies of 51,576 participants. Thus, the study concluded that there is a correlation between loneliness and mental health problems among children and adolescents. Those who had experience enforced isolation or quarantine were five times likely to require mental health service and experienced higher levels of posttraumatic stress [28].

Another aspect of isolation is the people's experience of loneliness where there is an absence of business life and roles. It also triggers the deepest fears of not being enough or

not being connected with others. Thus, the insights are connected with the fact of the existential crisis, however, it limits the logical positivism of connectedness and isolation [29]. On the other hand, loneliness is an important element of an existential crisis as it helps to comprehend a better relationship with a new perspective and reinforces personal isolation. It also discovers the substance of relationship and experience of immediacy within [7].

*The feelings of mental distress and physical stress are the results of a negative experience of isolation. From empirical studies, the experience of isolation can take either the form of solitude or loneliness [30].* In addition, it has been also resonated with both positive and negative insights on existential isolation based on the previous studies. Positively, it is an individual's distinct experience often characterized as a growth-inducing force [31]. It is a negative force because it devastates and frightens tremendously [30]. Amid COVID-19, stress and isolation may impact health especially immune function and therefore, minimizing social isolation is essential as a person requires a strong immune system to combat the virus [32].

Therefore, to get rid of all negative impacts of loneliness and social isolation, the right strategies and interventions are critical at this juncture. It was discovered the guidance and behavioural training is necessary besides self-recognition of help from others to resolve the social existential crisis. He emphasized that the third person or social perspective-taking is effective in resolving the crisis [9]. The best alternatives to preventing the detrimental effect of loneliness and social isolation amid the COVID-19 pandemic such as spending more time with the family, maintaining a social connection with the technology, ensure basic needs, a structure every single day, physical and mental activities, manage emotion, cognition and mood, and taking special care of older people with dementia diseases. Nevertheless, loneliness and social isolation are often co-existed and common among older adults during the pandemic, abiding by the above recommendations may be the right pathways to break the detrimental effect of loneliness and social isolation [24].

## **5. FREEDOM EXISTENTIAL CRISIS**

Due to the continuing pandemic, freedom has a chilling effect on the entire world. 59 out of 192

countries have experienced some form of violence and abuse of power when implementing the COVID-19 protocols. For example, the United Nations Human Rights Office received reports that the Zimbabwean police forcefully arrested at least 12 nurses and frontline workers who protested on the streets to raise wages and working conditions. The Zimbabwean police acted against the people using COVID19 restrictions through harassment, physical assault and detention despite the U.N warned the fundamental freedom of speech and rights [33]. The above statement has been supplemented by the Freedom House report that the pandemic has caused a global democratic crisis. After the outbreak of the coronavirus, the democratic and human rights conditions in 80 countries have deteriorated and some governments have even abused their power to suppress critics, weaken or shut down key institutions and often undermine the accountability needed to protect public health. In addition, Freedom House's research on the democratic and human rights impacts of 398 journalists, civil society officials, activists, and others found that the pandemic has exacerbated the 14 consecutive years of decline in freedom in 80 countries, and also in troubled democracies across the world [34].

The devastating impact of the COVID19 virus has forced countries around the world to restrict the freedom of movement of their citizens. For instance, the country like the USA and their communities have been badly affected by the current pandemic and to fight the virus, people will have to stay at home, give up work or school, and start a new process of social distancing. However, this has led to freedom restriction in their society [35]. The pandemic has distorted elections, demonstrations, and activists across the world. It has been stated that political impact may feel strong after it gets over. The countries like Guinea in West Africa, Nigeria and France have panned elections and enforced strict lockdown to fight against the virus. As a result, the democratic process and human rights have been also lockdown because of the pandemic [36].

Nevertheless, to explore the deeper meaning of freedom and its crisis apart from the pandemic, many scholars have emphasized it in their studies. For instance, freedom is the absence of an inherent design in life where the choices and actions lie with an individual. He also discovered that freedom is all about the absence of external structure and it gives human being the strongest

to amend destiny. He also argued that being responsible for life at the deepest level would bring a better understanding of the freedom and conflict in freedom [23]. The insights of freedom from the existential therapist point of view. He explained that the therapist puts an attempt to free one from their slanted or prejudiced and support them in understanding the right choices and stop blaming others to take shared responsibility [37]. Further, freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin. Therefore, he argued that people have the freedom to choose the actions at the same time responsible for the actions including the failures [38].

Therefore, the above interpretations of freedom serve the purpose to establish a connection with the current freedom crisis happening in the world. Freedom has been further impeded due to pandemics as most governments have initiated restrictions measures in their own countries to combat the spread of the virus [39]. Thus, such unusual restrictions on freedom and privacy have created unlimited chaos in society whereby causing freedom existential crisis internationally.

## 6. AUTHENTICITY EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

Authenticity encompasses the acceptance of one's preconceived lonely nature and the process of self-actualization of oneself. This means that there is a growth in awareness, insights and sensitivity. As a result, one may accomplish self-actualisation and know the whole meaning of life and better understands the connectedness with others [30]. In addition, authenticity is looked at differently and found that the whole concept of authenticity as "primitive", "basic", "appropriate", etc. now seems to be doubtful [40]. When we call ourselves people who reinvent ourselves from one moment to the next, the term "authenticity" can only refer to something that looks good at a certain point in time [41]. However, authenticity is transformative which is inseparable from life. Most of his findings are associated with learning and critical reflection in the context of existential authenticity [19]

As the fear of the current epidemic intensifies, the authenticity of an individual or organization becomes vital to all societies around the world. However, in this extraordinary period, the authenticity of social media and communication is essential to humans, because social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Linked In, Telegram,

WeChat, and WhatsApp provide people with reliable information in real-time. However, it was indicated that various forms of social media can sometimes become a space for conflict, and a person's pride statement may turn into laughter and irony of others which then lead to an authenticity crisis amid the pandemic [42]

Apart from this, the authenticity crisis has also been common in the corporate field where there are painful disruptions and anxiety caused by a coronavirus. However, the corporates have been proactive in identifying both the risk and opportunities in maintaining demand and customers engagement through an effective integrated communication approach [43]. Furthermore, the other incidences of the business world during the pandemic were perceptions and reactions to value and brands, six out of ten consumers said that in today's COVID19 environment, authenticity is more important than before the outbreak. Also, honesty is rated as the most important brand feature, followed by consistency and transparency. In addition, 36 per cent of consumers felt that health companies were more authentic after they were informed about the specific measures due to COVID19. The finding also highlighted that after taking conscious actions by healthcare companies amid the pandemic, 68 percent of consumers have shown some favourable views of the industry increasing its favourability dramatically as compared to the past levels [44].

Therefore, there has been both positive and negative impacts on authenticity because of the current pandemic [45]. The more authenticity crisis occurs when an individual and organization fail to demonstrate true honesty, accountability, value and spirit on social platforms amidst pandemic [46-48]. On the other hand, authenticity improves if the people communicate more, and uphold the value through accountability and honesty.

## 7. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the EC is to be understood as a situation that a person confronts with numerous questions about death, meaninglessness, loneliness, freedom and authenticity in his/her life. Therefore, the study emphasizes theoretical views about the elements of existential crisis during the onset pandemic. A collection of beyond research has been explored to understand the distinct views, insights, reviews

and arguments of the key elements of the EC. For instance, the finding indicates that the fear of death and meaningless lifestyles may aren't always desirable to many people. Thus, to overcome the fear of death, the personal belief system plays a pivotal role and one may have to develop a sense of specialness. For instance, the Buddhist philosopher viewed death as an impermanent phenomenon of all sentient beings on this earth and no escapes its occurrence. Moreover, the study shows that the current pandemic has further intensified the death crisis around the world and therefore, the meaningless of lives have been experienced by many people, especially felt by the frontline workers such as nurses and policemen combating the spread of the virus across. The study also shows that such crisis is hypothesised to be a core human issue, but little is known about the origin of such crisis and how it is correlated to emotions.

Furthermore, the study also identifies the major chaos due to loneliness and isolation amid pandemic especially, after the implementation of COVID-19 protocols. The negative experience of isolation such as depression, despair, helplessness, loneliness, emotional pains, anxiety, and fear are much higher when the governments enforce lockdown and quarantine. *Another hand, the study also suggests that perceived social isolation is a significant element of the psychological wellbeing of human beings amid the COVID-19 pandemic and minimize the isolation to boost the immune system.* One of the common existential crises is the question related to freedom during the pandemic. So the study discloses that there have been freedom restrictions after coronavirus around the world. One such example noted is the banning of elections, demonstrations and activities of the activists in some African and European countries.

Finally, the study also reveals that like other elements, the authenticity crisis has been viewed in both positive and negative senses during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is argued that authenticity as a personal virtue might further create a problem for an individual amidst a pandemic. Thus, all elements of existential crisis need further in-depth explorations and evaluations. In particular, research on each element of EC may be necessary to conduct based on different age categories of the people to learn how coronavirus has harmed societies across the world. Besides, to deliberate more about the existential crisis, integration of both

Psychology and Buddhism may be the best alternative to overcome the various existential crisis amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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