

A Critical Review of Contemporary Literature on Personality Traits as Predictors of Death Anxiety among Young Adults in Mumbai City

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ABSTRACT

Death anxiety, defined as the emotional, cognitive, and existential apprehension associated with one's own mortality, has emerged as an important psychological construct in contemporary mental health research. Although death anxiety has traditionally been examined within existential and clinical psychology, recent empirical evidence indicates that stable personality traits significantly influence how individuals perceive, interpret, and cope with mortality-related concerns. Young adulthood represents a critical developmental period characterized by identity formation, career uncertainty, interpersonal transitions, and increasing exposure to health-related and societal stressors. Consequently, understanding the personality correlates of death anxiety among young adults has become increasingly relevant. This review critically synthesizes contemporary literature on the predictive role of personality traits, particularly the Five-Factor Model, in explaining individual differences in death anxiety. The review integrates theoretical perspectives including Terror Management Theory, Existential Psychology, and Becker's conceptualization of death awareness. Recent empirical studies published between 2018 and 2025 consistently demonstrate that Neuroticism is positively associated with death anxiety, whereas Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness generally exhibit protective associations. Furthermore, the review discusses contextual factors specific to urban populations, including Mumbai City, where rapid urbanization, occupational stress, socioeconomic inequalities, and post-pandemic psychological challenges may intensify mortality-related concerns among young adults. Existing literature reveals a scarcity of Indian studies examining personality and death anxiety simultaneously, highlighting an important research gap. The review concludes by proposing directions for future empirical investigations employing standardized personality measures such as the NEO Five-Factor Inventory and validated death anxiety scales.

Keywords: Personality Traits, death Anxiety, Big Five Personality, young adults, Terror Management Theory, Mumbai City, mental health

INTRODUCTION

Death is a universal human experience, yet individuals differ considerably in their psychological responses to mortality. While some accept death as a natural part of life, others experience persistent fear and emotional distress, known as death anxiety. This multidimensional construct includes fear of dying, fear of the unknown, concerns about nonexistence, anxiety about the dying process, and separation from loved ones (Neimeyer et al., 2019). Death anxiety has received increasing attention because of its association with psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, health anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Recent evidence also identifies it as a transdiagnostic process underlying multiple forms of psychopathology.

Theoretical understanding of death anxiety has evolved from Freud's psychoanalytic perspective to existential theories proposed by Rollo May, Irvin Yalom, and Ernest Becker. Becker's (1973) work provided the basis for Terror Management Theory (TMT), which proposes that awareness of inevitable death generates existential

anxiety managed through cultural beliefs, self-esteem, meaningful goals, and interpersonal relationships (Greenberg et al., 1986).

Individual differences in death anxiety are partly explained by stable personality traits. The Five-Factor Model (FFM) identifies five broad dimensions—Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness (McCrae & Costa, 2008; Soto & John, 2017). These traits influence emotional regulation, coping strategies, resilience, and stress appraisal. Among them, Neuroticism consistently emerges as the strongest positive predictor of death anxiety, whereas Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness generally act as protective factors. Recent systematic reviews and meta-analyses further support the role of personality as a significant determinant of mortality-related fear.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, interest in death anxiety has increased, particularly among young adults (18–35 years), who face identity formation, career pressures, and interpersonal transitions. In metropolitan settings such as Mumbai City, rapid urbanization, occupational competition, economic inequality, and mental health challenges may further intensify mortality-related concerns.

Despite growing international evidence, research on personality traits and death anxiety in the Indian context remains limited. Most studies have been conducted in Western populations, with little attention to cultural factors influencing attitudes toward death. Therefore, this review synthesizes contemporary literature, identifies existing research gaps, and provides a theoretical foundation for future studies on personality traits as predictors of death anxiety among young adults in Mumbai City.

Personality Traits: Concept and Theoretical Foundation

Personality refers to relatively enduring patterns of thoughts, emotions, motivations, and behaviours that distinguish one individual from another. It reflects stable psychological characteristics that influence how people perceive, interpret, and respond to internal and external experiences. Among the numerous personality theories proposed during the twentieth century, the Five-Factor Model (FFM) has emerged as the most empirically supported framework for describing personality across cultures (McCrae & Costa, 2008; Soto & John, 2017).

The Five-Factor Model conceptualizes personality into five broad dimensions:

- Neuroticism
- Extraversion
- Openness to Experience
- Agreeableness
- Conscientiousness

Research conducted across more than fifty cultures has demonstrated that these dimensions possess strong psychometric validity and predict a wide range of psychological outcomes, including emotional well-being, resilience, coping, physical health, occupational success, interpersonal relationships, and psychopathology (McCrae & Costa, 2008; Soto & John, 2017).

Unlike transient emotional states, personality traits remain relatively stable throughout adulthood while allowing gradual developmental changes across the lifespan. Consequently, personality traits are increasingly viewed as important vulnerability and protective factors influencing individuals' responses to stressful life events, including awareness of mortality.

Personality Traits as Predictors of Death Anxiety

An emerging body of empirical research demonstrates that personality traits significantly influence mortality-related cognition.

Rather than affecting death anxiety directly, personality shapes:

- threat appraisal
- coping strategies

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- emotional regulation
 - cognitive flexibility
 - resilience
 - social connectedness

Consequently, individuals possessing different personality profiles experience markedly different psychological reactions to mortality awareness.

Neuroticism and Death Anxiety

Across contemporary literature, Neuroticism consistently emerges as the strongest positive predictor of death anxiety.

Individuals high in Neuroticism typically exhibit:

- excessive worry,
- catastrophic thinking,
- emotional instability,
- heightened physiological arousal
- intolerance of uncertainty,

These characteristics amplify mortality-related fears.

A recent meta-analysis demonstrated robust associations between death anxiety and broader psychological distress, reinforcing the importance of emotional vulnerability in mortality-related fears.

Similarly, systematic reviews identify death anxiety as an important transdiagnostic process underlying anxiety disorders, depressive symptoms, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, and illness anxiety.

Extraversion and Death Anxiety

Most contemporary investigations report a negative association between Extraversion and death anxiety.

Highly extraverted individuals generally benefit from:

- greater optimism
- adaptive coping
- stronger perceived social support
- resilience
- positive affect

These protective characteristics reduce the emotional impact of mortality awareness.

Conscientiousness and Death Anxiety

Conscientiousness demonstrates a modest but relatively consistent inverse association with death anxiety.

Researchers propose several mechanisms:

- healthier lifestyles
- stronger self-control
- greater emotional regulation
- reduced impulsive reactions
- structured coping

Such characteristics facilitate adaptive adjustment during existential stress.

Agreeableness and Death Anxiety

Agreeableness is generally associated with reduced death anxiety because interpersonal attachment and empathy serve as protective psychological resources.

Individuals with higher agreeableness often report:

- greater social integration
- increased compassion
- stronger family support
- higher life satisfaction

These factors reduce existential isolation.

Openness and Death Anxiety

Findings regarding Openness remain mixed. Some studies suggest openness promotes acceptance of uncertainty through intellectual curiosity and philosophical reflection.

Other investigations report weak or statistically insignificant relationships.

Researchers therefore recommend additional cross-cultural studies to clarify this association.

Critical Review of Contemporary Literature (2018–2025)

Recent literature demonstrates a growing interest in understanding death anxiety as a multidimensional psychological construct influenced by personality, emotional regulation, resilience, meaning in life, spirituality, and mental health. Earlier studies primarily investigated demographic variables such as age and gender; however, contemporary research increasingly emphasizes stable personality characteristics as important psychological predictors of mortality-related fear.

A significant advancement in this field is the recent systematic review and meta-analysis by Connery et al., which synthesized evidence from 31 eligible studies examining the association between the Big Five personality traits and death anxiety. The review reported a moderate positive association between Neuroticism and death anxiety, a small negative association with Extraversion, and generally negative associations for Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness, although evidence for the latter three traits remains comparatively limited. These findings support the Five-Factor Model as a valuable framework for identifying individuals at greater risk of elevated death anxiety.

Another major contribution comes from the meta-analysis by Dumitru et al. (2025), which established death anxiety as a transdiagnostic psychological factor associated with anxiety disorders, depression, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, health anxiety, and broader psychological distress. This work strengthens the theoretical position that death anxiety is not merely an isolated fear but a core process underlying multiple forms of psychopathology.

Systematic reviews have also highlighted the role of death anxiety in illness anxiety and medically unexplained symptoms, suggesting that excessive concern about mortality may amplify symptom perception and health-related worries.

Research on personality more broadly indicates that Neuroticism consistently predicts maladaptive coping, whereas Extraversion and Conscientiousness are associated with adaptive coping strategies, resilience, and better psychological adjustment. These findings provide plausible psychological mechanisms through which personality traits may influence death anxiety.

Furthermore, longitudinal evidence suggests that personality traits have implications extending beyond mental health. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis found that higher Neuroticism predicts increased premature

mortality risk, whereas Extraversion and Conscientiousness are associated with reduced mortality risk. These findings reinforce the importance of personality as a determinant of both psychological and physical well-being.

Collectively, the contemporary literature indicates that personality traits influence mortality-related cognition through several psychological pathways, including emotional regulation, coping style, resilience, self-esteem, intolerance of uncertainty, and social connectedness. However, studies conducted within Indian cultural settings remain scarce.

Recent literature increasingly conceptualizes death anxiety as a multidimensional construct influenced by personality, emotional regulation, resilience, meaning in life, spirituality, and psychological well-being. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, research interest has expanded considerably, with scholars recognizing death anxiety as a transdiagnostic factor contributing to anxiety disorders, depression, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, illness anxiety, and reduced quality of life (Dumitru et al., 2025). Contemporary evidence therefore suggests that death anxiety should be understood not merely as an isolated fear but as a central psychological process underlying various forms of psychopathology.

A major advancement in this field is the increasing application of the Five-Factor Model (FFM) to explain individual differences in mortality-related fear. Unlike earlier studies that primarily emphasized demographic variables such as age and gender, recent investigations have highlighted personality traits as stable psychological dispositions influencing emotional regulation, threat perception, coping strategies, and resilience (McCrae & Costa, 2008; Soto & John, 2017). Among the Big Five dimensions, Neuroticism consistently demonstrates the strongest positive association with death anxiety, whereas Extraversion generally exhibits a protective effect. Although Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness are also negatively associated with death anxiety, empirical evidence for these traits remains comparatively limited (Connery et al., 2025).

A recent systematic review and meta-analysis by Connery et al. (2025) synthesized findings from 31 empirical studies and provided the strongest evidence to date regarding the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and death anxiety. The review revealed a moderate positive association between Neuroticism and death anxiety and a small but consistent negative association with Extraversion. Although Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness generally demonstrated inverse relationships with death anxiety, the authors concluded that further research involving culturally diverse populations is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn. They also emphasized the value of personality assessment in identifying individuals at increased risk for elevated death anxiety and related psychological problems.

Another important trend in recent literature concerns the mechanisms through which personality traits influence death anxiety. Researchers increasingly argue that personality affects mortality-related fear indirectly through psychological variables such as emotional regulation, resilience, intolerance of uncertainty, self-esteem, perceived social support, and meaning in life. Individuals high in Neuroticism typically display greater emotional instability, catastrophic thinking, and maladaptive coping, whereas those high in Extraversion and Conscientiousness generally report greater resilience, adaptive coping, and psychological well-being (McCrae & Costa, 2008; Soto & John, 2017).

Recent meta-analytic evidence has also demonstrated that personality traits influence long-term health outcomes. Individuals with high Neuroticism are more likely to experience chronic stress, unhealthy behaviours, and poorer physical health, whereas Extraversion and Conscientiousness are associated with healthier lifestyles, effective stress management, and reduced mortality risk. These findings suggest that personality contributes not only to psychological adjustment but also to overall health and longevity through behavioural and physiological pathways.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further stimulated research examining mortality awareness among young adults. Frequent exposure to illness, bereavement, media coverage of death, and uncertainty regarding health and employment significantly increased death anxiety worldwide (Dumitru et al., 2025). Young adults experienced heightened existential concerns because this developmental stage involves identity formation, career establishment, financial independence, and intimate relationship development. Persistent mortality awareness

during and after the pandemic has been associated with increased psychological distress, future-oriented anxiety, and maladaptive coping behaviours.

Despite these advances, several methodological limitations remain. Most studies have employed cross-sectional research designs, limiting causal interpretation of the relationship between personality traits and death anxiety. Considerable variation also exists in sample characteristics, assessment instruments, and cultural settings, reducing comparability across studies. Furthermore, the majority of available evidence originates from Western countries, whereas empirical research from India remains scarce. Cultural factors such as spirituality, religious beliefs, collectivistic values, and family support systems, which may substantially shape attitudes toward death, have received comparatively little empirical attention.

Another limitation is the underrepresentation of metropolitan populations from developing countries. Cities such as Mumbai are characterized by rapid urbanization, occupational competition, socioeconomic inequality, environmental stressors, and increasing mental health concerns. These contextual factors may interact with personality characteristics in shaping mortality-related fears; however, this relationship remains insufficiently investigated. Future research should therefore employ standardized personality measures, validated death anxiety scales, and culturally diverse Indian samples to enhance the generalizability of existing findings and facilitate the development of culturally appropriate psychological interventions.

Research Gap

Despite the increasing volume of international literature, several important gaps remain.

1. Most studies have been conducted in Western countries, limiting generalizability to Indian cultural contexts.
2. Very few investigations have specifically examined young adults (18–35 years) using the Five-Factor Model and standardized measures of death anxiety.
3. Research conducted in metropolitan Indian settings, particularly Mumbai City, is extremely limited despite unique psychosocial stressors such as rapid urbanization, occupational competition, economic inequality, and post-pandemic mental health concerns.
4. Existing studies predominantly employ cross-sectional designs; longitudinal investigations remain scarce.
5. Few studies simultaneously examine personality traits while controlling for demographic variables such as gender, socioeconomic status, education, religious orientation, and previous exposure to bereavement.
6. Cultural factors including spirituality, collectivism, family support, and religious beliefs have received insufficient empirical attention as potential moderators.
7. Most available research focuses primarily on Neuroticism, whereas comparatively fewer studies investigate the combined predictive contribution of all five personality dimensions.

These gaps justify further empirical investigation among young adults residing in Mumbai City.

Implications for Mumbai City

Mumbai represents one of India's most densely populated metropolitan regions, characterized by rapid urbanization, occupational competition, financial pressures, transportation stress, housing challenges, and increasing psychological distress among young adults.

The COVID-19 pandemic further heightened awareness of mortality through widespread illness, bereavement, and economic uncertainty. These contextual factors may intensify death anxiety, particularly among individuals possessing vulnerable personality characteristics such as high Neuroticism.

Understanding personality-based vulnerability has several practical implications:

- Early psychological screening in colleges and universities.
- Development of personality-informed counselling interventions.
- Mental health promotion programs focusing on resilience and emotional regulation.
- Suicide prevention initiatives.
- Psychoeducational workshops addressing existential concerns among emerging adults.

CONCLUSION

The present review demonstrates that personality traits represent significant psychological predictors of death anxiety. Among the Five-Factor Model dimensions, Neuroticism consistently emerges as the strongest positive predictor, whereas Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and, to a lesser extent, Openness generally function as protective factors. Contemporary evidence suggests that these relationships are mediated through emotional regulation, coping strategies, resilience, social connectedness, and meaning-making processes.

Despite considerable international progress, empirical evidence from India remains limited. The absence of studies focusing specifically on young adults in Mumbai City highlights a substantial gap in the literature. Given the distinctive sociocultural and urban context of Mumbai, further research is warranted to examine how personality traits shape mortality-related fears among emerging adults.

Such investigations will contribute not only to personality psychology and thanatology but also to counselling psychology, clinical psychology, and preventive mental health by facilitating early identification of vulnerable individuals and informing culturally appropriate intervention strategies.

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