

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCES AND EXPRESSION OF EXISTENTIAL DILEMMAS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

As students begin their university journey, they will encounter numerous new experiences that could significantly impact their growth and development. But beyond this positive aspect lies a session of queries of confusion that would make the students question their true purpose, and position in life. Thus, this study explored the experiences of college students regarding existential crisis, its factors, effects, and its coping strategies. To attain the desired objectives, the research utilized a qualitative research design framed within the context of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to provide rich and detailed insights into the individual experiences. The six (6) participants of this study were chosen through a purposive sampling technique. It assisted the research in selecting respondents that are suitable for the descriptions and needs of the study. These respondents came from various university programs and levels, and they were asked to take part in semi-structured interviews, either in person or online. The findings showed that existential crises negatively affected their emotions, leading to feelings of numbness, emptiness, and isolation, which impacted their daily lives and social interactions. Their psychological issues arose from different causes. This includes academic and career pressures, familial and societal expectations, and being haunted by unfulfilled plans. As these things translate to tangible effects, the students seek aid through different coping mechanisms ranging from hobbies and spiritual help to clinical help. These findings imply that existential crisis is not trivial, as it encompasses a larger scope of feelings, emotions, and struggles that could potentially affect students' emotional well-being and everyday lives.

Keywords: *Existential Crises, Familial Pressures, Societal Norms, Academic Pressure, Career Pressure*

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INTRODUCTION

College life is often viewed as a time full of excitement, freedom, and self-discovery. It is a period when many students experience personal growth, try new things, and enjoy increasing independence. However, in addition to the freedom and new experiences it offers, college life may also lead to existential crises that cause students to question their purpose and meaning in life. According to Gardiner (2024), an existential crisis can be identified as a phase of extreme dilemma about one's identity, position in society, and capacity to present or express oneself. The type of existential crisis that college students may experience is the sophomore existential crisis, which happens within the ages of adolescents to young adults. This refers to the doubts and uncertainties about one's identity. College students may experience this in the form of difficulties about securing a career path and reaching their highest potential (Astilla et al., 2023). Additionally, existential crises among university students could also involve challenges about adjusting to university life, lack of effective studying strategies, pressures brought by examinations, and even interpersonal connections such as relationships with family, friends, and partners (Roy et al., 2023). Neupane (2022) discovered that the energy people contribute with their partners consequently affects their entire being, including their feelings, emotions, and their ability to process things. On the other hand, when familial problems transpire, one may feel upset, abandoned, and dejected. These emotions would lead them to inevitably develop depression. Moreover, Ezatpour et al. (2020) found the lack of social support significantly increases the likelihood of students experiencing existential distress. Social standards could also inflict existential dread. Brieva (2024) affirmed that social norms like the need to succeed, to be contented, and happy negatively impact a person by suffering in meaninglessness and dissatisfaction. This shows that these struggles are not only personal but are deeply influenced by social and family relationships.

Recent research highlights the prevalence and impact of these existential struggles among college students. For instance, a study by Monti and Dinero (2025) found that existential anxiety is significantly correlated with depression, general anxiety, and stress, affecting students' overall well-being and adjustment to college life. Similarly, Roy et al. (2025) identified themes such as anxiety-based existential crises, emotional turmoil, and a loss of meaning and purpose among university students in Bangladesh. These findings underscore the complex nature of existential concerns and their potential to disrupt students' academic and personal lives. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these issues. The study of Clabaugh et al. (2021) says that the global pandemic has caused a high amount of uncertainties about students' academic journey, high levels of stress, and difficulties in managing the effects of the situation. Similarly, according to a survey by Active Minds (2020), 80% of college students reported that COVID-19 negatively impacted their mental health, with many experiencing increased stress, anxiety, and depression. The shift to online learning and social isolation has intensified feelings of uncertainty and existential questioning among students. Research conducted by Vacchiano et al. (2023) also shares the same perspective, as it suggests that younger generations, namely Generation Y and Generation Z, were the most psychologically challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic. They particularly experienced existential threat or the feelings of being trapped and meaninglessness. Mohler-Kuo et al. (2021) reveals that young adolescents were particularly stressed during the first COVID-19 lockdown by the inability to engage in social activities and the cancellations of important events, highlighting that social connections were essential for their well-being. Likely, Singh et al. (2020) found out that prolonged closures of schools and activity centers during the pandemic had harmful effects on young adolescents' education, mental health, and development, as many of them experienced loneliness, anxiety, and uncertainty.

Meanwhile, Shanahan et al. (2020) shared that financial and social challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic caused more distress to the young adolescents than the risk of the virus itself. Moreover, the study also reveals that the main causes of stress were past emotional issues, financial problems, major life changes from the pandemic, and feelings of hopelessness. With the young adolescents already vulnerable to mental health challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has been hard for the age group. Stress from the pandemic, including social and relationship stress, led to more anxiety, depression, and lower life satisfaction compared to pre-pandemic years (Graupensperger et al., 2022).

Another instance that evokes existential crises among college students is the exposure to negative news presented by the media. A study by Shabahang et al. (2024) revealed that doomscrolling, or constantly consuming traumatic or negative information, can cause media-induced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression, which detriment the views of both Iranian and American participants about hope and the reason and importance of life. It has been found in the research of Veilleux (2023) that about 75% of college students doomscroll. They tend to read or watch information about different global events such as the Israel-Hamas war, the January 6th Capitol Attack, and the pandemic. Even if the news is tragic, most of the students choose to engage in it to stay informed. It is undeniable that being aware of global events like war, environmental destruction, and social injustices increases the level of empathy and consciousness of adolescents. However, it may also lead to being powerless and losing meaning (Youvan, 2024). The psychological concerns that tragic news has caused not just affect the viewers; they are also damaging to the actual people who experienced these tragic events. Zaichko (2024) revealed that the Ukraine war has contributed to different existential crises among the young people, particularly the students. This includes doubts about self-determination, identity, and personal choice.

Each student's experience is different and shaped by factors like personality, family background, and social pressures (Salsabila et al., 2023; Park & Lee, 2022); it is essential to explore how students make sense of their own existential concerns. These struggles can affect not just their emotional well-being, but also their academic performance, social relationships, and motivation. Thus, it is important to address the struggles that students are facing. In some cases, seeking help from others, such as family members or friends, could validate the existential concerns of a person. Albers (2024) said that opening up to others can assist rebuild social relationships and keep a person grounded. Even so, it would still be difficult to recommend this strategy to anyone experiencing existential discomfort, since some young adults see it as unattainable because they are afraid to be vulnerable in such a scenario (Lundvall et al., 2020, 2019). Still, Neupane (2022) argued that resolved crises could help the young adults, who are highly likely to face an existential crisis, to relieve their burden of uncertainty, confusion, anxiety, and depression, as well as depict an opportunity to redirect and reinvent their lives. Likely, Roy et al. (2023) claimed that it is undeniable that existential crises are existing in academic settings; thus, they must be addressed to improve the students' mental health and their academic performance. There are already different psychological approaches to resolve existential crises, such as existential therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and other psychological interventions. Moreover, Lundvall et al. al. (2022) highlighted that providing a safe space to rest helps the young adolescents reflect and move forward and that professionals should focus on the individual's life story rather than symptoms, as it creates meaningful care. In this way, the journey through existential questioning, while often difficult, can become a meaningful and transformative experience when supported by compassionate guidance and mental health resources.

To better understand these unique and personal experiences, this study uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as described by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). This approach allows researchers to deeply explore how college students who have gone through existential challenges interpret and give meaning to their experiences. By listening to their stories, this research hopes to offer helpful insights that can strengthen mental health programs, influence school policies, and raise awareness about the importance of supporting students through life's big questions (Wang et al., 2023).

Statement of the Problem

This study aims to understand how college students experience and make sense of their existential struggles. Specifically, it focuses on:

1. How do undergraduate students describe their experiences with existential crisis?
2. What factors contribute to the emergence of existential concerns among college students?
3. How do these feelings affect their studies, motivation, and daily life?
4. How do students cope with and express their existential dilemmas?

By answering these questions, this research hopes to provide useful insights that can help schools and mental health professionals create better support for students facing these difficult moments.

METHODS

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research design through the lens of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is suitable for exploring how individuals make sense of significant life experiences, particularly internal, emotional, and existential struggles (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The approach allows for a deep understanding of the lived experiences of individuals by focusing on their subjective interpretations and meaning-making processes. The goal of this study was not to generalize findings but to capture the richness of individual narratives and explore patterns of meaning among college students experiencing existential issues.

Sampling Technique

This study used purposive sampling, a method commonly used in qualitative research to select individuals who have direct and meaningful experience with the topic being studied. In this case, participants were chosen because they had personally experienced existential issues during their time in college. This approach made it possible to gather deeper, more personal insights into the thoughts, emotions, and coping experiences of students facing such concerns. As Palinkas et al. (2015) explain, purposive sampling helps ensure that participants are well-suited to provide detailed and relevant data that match the study's goals.

Participants of the Study

The study involved six undergraduate students from different year levels and academic programs. These students were selected based on the following criteria:

- a. currently enrolled in a college or university,

- b. self-identified as having experienced existential concerns, such as questioning life purpose, identity, or future direction, and
- c. were open and willing to share their experiences in depth during the interview.

Students were not limited to those about to graduate, to allow for a wider range of experiences and insights from different stages of the college journey. This helped capture how existential concerns can appear at any point in a student's academic life.

Basic demographic information such as age, gender, and year level was gathered to provide background context for each participant's story. However, these details were not used to compare participants, in line with the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which focuses on understanding each individual's unique experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted either in person or via a secure online platform, depending on participant preference and accessibility. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was guided by open-ended questions designed to elicit rich and reflective narratives. Some questions included:

"How would you describe what it feels like to go through an existential crisis?"

"What do you think caused or triggered these thoughts or feelings?"

"Were there times when you felt unmotivated or lost?"

"Do you talk to anyone about it? Is it easy for you to open up?"

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the six steps of IPA outlined by Smith et al. (2009):

1. Reading and re-reading transcripts to familiarize oneself with the content.
2. Making initial notes that capture descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual observations.
3. Developing emergent themes based on the notes.
4. Identifying connections among themes within each case.
5. Repeating the process for each individual transcript.
6. Looking for patterns across all participants to identify shared experiences and significant divergences.

The analysis remained idiographic and interpretative, emphasizing the unique meaning each participant attached to their experience, while also recognizing thematic overlaps. Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the process to bracket researcher biases and ensure transparency in interpretation.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

This study's findings, analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), reveal key themes that reflect the multifaceted and deeply personal nature of existential crises among college students. The themes that emerged from participants' narratives highlight the complex interplay of internal struggles, social pressures, and coping mechanisms within their academic and personal lives. Presented below are these themes, each supported by verbatim excerpts to capture the depth of their lived experiences.

Theme 1: Recurring Doubts and Search for Purpose

Participants frequently questioned their purpose in life, these thoughts were often triggered when they felt pressured by school, personal expectations, or moments of solitude. They articulated recurring doubts about their purpose, identity, and direction in life.

"Of course, it's really unavoidable to question yourself about your purpose in life... What is all this for? What's my real purpose?" - **Respondent 1**

Reflects how existential questioning became a constant, almost inevitable part of the inner experience. The use of "unavoidable" implies that these thoughts were persistent and intrusive, not occasional reflections but recurring struggles that demanded attention.

"There were nights when I'd just stare at the ceiling, asking myself, 'What am I even doing?'... You feel stuck, trying to make sense of everything." - **Respondent 3**

Describes a powerful image of lying in bed, unable to sleep, trapped in thought. The phrase "you feel stuck" speaks to a sense of mental paralysis, where thoughts become so heavy that they stop the person from moving forward.

"Especially at night... I just stare at the ceiling, and then it hits: 'Is this okay? What's really my purpose?'" - Respondent 1

Illustrates how moments of solitude particularly at night can trigger profound existential questioning. The act of "staring at the ceiling" suggests a pause from daily distractions, allowing intrusive thoughts about purpose and direction to surface. This highlights how existential crises often emerge during quiet, unstructured moments, revealing an inner struggle with meaning and uncertainty.

"There was a time I locked myself in my room and just cried... I felt like I had nothing left to give." - **Respondent 3**

Conveys emotional exhaustion and a sense of depletion. Locking oneself away and crying alone reflects not only deep distress but also withdrawal, possibly due to feeling overwhelmed, unsupported, or misunderstood. The phrase "nothing left to give" underscores a perceived collapse of emotional and psychological resources, resonating with themes of burnout, hopelessness, and existential fatigue.

This theme captures participants' persistent and deeply personal struggles with questions of meaning, identity, and direction. Many described an ongoing internal dialogue centered around their life's purpose, especially during quiet or solitary moments. The responses illustrate the psychological toll of existential uncertainty. It highlights how internal pressures and unmet expectations can lead to intense self-questioning, emotional fatigue, and a longing for direction and meaning. These struggles, though deeply internal, were powerful forces shaping participants' sense of self and well-being.

Theme 2: Emotional Weight – Emptiness, Confusion, and Sadness

Participants described the emotional weight of their existential crises through metaphors such as “heaviness,” “numbness,” and “emptiness.” These terms conveyed more than sadness, they pointed to a deeper emotional disconnection, capturing a sense of detachment from both themselves and their surroundings.

“I would describe it as emptiness... I don’t feel anything... I don’t know who I really am or what my purpose in life is.” - **Respondent 1**

Shows a loss of connection to self and purpose. The phrase “I don’t feel anything” highlights a kind of emotional numbness. It’s not just sadness, it’s a lack of feeling altogether.

You smile, but deep down, you’re barely holding it together. There’s this heavy emptiness you can’t explain.”
- **Respondent 3**

Reveals a contrast between their outer behavior and inner reality. May look fine on the outside—smiling, functioning—but inside, are struggling. This is an example of how people often hide their pain. The term “heavy emptiness” shows that emptiness itself can feel like a burden, like something weighing them down.

“It’s a profound and overwhelming sense of emptiness... Even the most ordinary routines feel meaningless.”
Respondent 5

Demonstrates how existential pain can invade even the smallest aspects of life, making everyday activities feel purposeless. The use of “profound” and “overwhelming” emphasizes just how deep and persistent this feeling is—existential crisis isn’t a passing emotion, but a lingering emotional state that affects daily function.

In this theme, participants use imagery and emotional language to give meaning to what they are going through. Because their pain is difficult to describe directly, they turn to imagery and contradictions—smiling outside while breaking inside—as a way to be understood. Further, the emotional distress also underscores a common theme across responses: the desire for meaning. The sadness, confusion, and numbness are not simply reactions to life stress—they stem from a deep longing to find purpose, connection, and a sense of belonging in the world.

Theme 3: Disrupted Academic Identity and Direction

Participants felt their studies didn’t align with their interests or identity, causing confusion, burnout, and discouragement, which deepened their existential struggles and resulted in poor focus, declining grades, and emotional exhaustion.

“When I entered college, it really felt different, like it wasn’t for me. It was like the university was trying to spit me out.” - **Respondent 1**

Reflects a deep sense of alienation within the academic system, feels out of place, as if they don’t belong or fit into the university environment. This suggests a fundamental mismatch between the individual and the institution.

“I felt like I lost my direction... I didn’t feel whole, like something was missing.” - **Respondent 2**

Conveys a sense of lost purpose and a fragmented identity, feels incomplete, highlighting an internal struggle beyond just academic difficulties.

"I can't focus. I don't have time to review or even listen. My grades really suffered... even if I love what I do... It's hard." - **Respondent 1**

"I became distant. I couldn't focus. My mind would wander even during lectures... Every small mistake felt like failure." - **Respondent 3**

Highlights how existential distress can undermine both motivation and academic performance. Their experiences illustrate how existential anxiety may exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and self-criticism, further impairing concentration and deepening emotional exhaustion. Respondents vividly described how their existential struggles translated into tangible academic difficulties, with emotional and cognitive overload significantly impeding their ability to fully engage with their studies.

In this theme, a disconnect between academic paths and evolving identities, leading to confusion, burnout, and a sense of meaninglessness. Phrases like "it wasn't for me" and "something was missing" revealed feelings of alienation and loss of direction within the academic system. This misalignment triggered emotional fatigue and hindered performance. Struggles with focus, declining grades, and self-doubt reflected how existential concerns affected their ability to engage with studies. Academic stress became more than workload, it was a reflection of deeper questions about identity, purpose, and personal fulfillment.

Theme 4: Familial Expectations and Role Burden

A significant number of participants described family-related pressures, such as financial dependence, emotional invalidation, or being seen as a provider, as central to their existential distress.

"At home, I felt like I was just created and sent to school to serve as a retirement plan... They never asked what I wanted or what my dreams were." - **Respondent 5**

This captures a deep sense of instrumentalization within the family context, where the individual's desires and aspirations are overlooked in favor of fulfilling familial obligations. This underscores how existential distress arises not only from external demands but also from the suppression of personal meaning.

"I always had to achieve something... but I wasn't sure if I was doing it for me or them." - **Respondent 3**

It highlights the blurred boundary between self-motivation and externally imposed goals, which can foster identity confusion and undermine authentic self-realization. The pressure to meet expectations can thus distort the individual's sense of purpose and exacerbate existential questioning.

"Family pressure is really the core of it. That's where you grow... Whatever they feed you, you absorb—even if you act like you're ignoring it." - **Respondent 1**

The statement points to the pervasive and often unconscious internalization of family values and demands, which shape one's self-concept and emotional experience. This internalization process can contribute to sustained existential tension, even when individuals outwardly resist or deny these influences.

"There weren't really expectations from my family or school, but from the church... people expect me to be knowledgeable, to be wise, to know the Bible well." - **Respondent 2**

Others noted that expectations extended beyond the family, including academic and religious communities. This illustrates how external pressures are multifaceted and intersect across different spheres of identity, compounding the weight of existential distress.

In this theme, highlights how family pressures contribute significantly to participants' existential distress. Many felt valued only for fulfilling family roles, with their dreams overlooked, leading to suppressed personal meaning and identity confusion. The blurred line between personal goals and external expectations intensified inner conflict and emotional strain. Family values were often deeply internalized, sustaining ongoing tension even when resisted. Additionally, pressures from academic and religious communities added layers to these burdens, compounding their impact on participants' sense of self and well-being.

Theme 5: Pressure from Unmet Plans and Social Comparison

Participants described how unmet goals and peer comparisons deepened their existential uncertainty. The pressure to meet societal standards led to feelings of regret and inadequacy.

"My original plan in life didn't come true... I wasn't prepared to change direction." - **Respondent 2**

This statement reveals a struggle to cope with an unforeseen change, emphasizing the emotional burden of unmet goals and a perceived loss of control. It illustrates the existential difficulty of confronting uncertainty without a clear path forward, often leading to anxiety and a diminished sense of purpose.

"I'd see other people making progress... and I'd start questioning if my decisions were right, it feels like what I did was meaningless—like everything I do has no value." - **Respondent 6**

Comparison with peers influences self-evaluation, observing others' progress prompts doubt and internal questioning, triggering a sense of worthlessness and discouragement. The feeling that one's efforts lack meaning points to a deeper existential struggle, where individual accomplishments seem insignificant in light of perceived shortcomings.

In this theme, captures how unmet expectations and peer comparisons contribute to existential distress. When life did not unfold as planned, people struggled with a sense of lost control and uncertainty about their direction. Observing others' success intensified self-doubt and led to questioning their own decisions and achievements. The interplay between internal disappointment and external comparison created a cycle of regret and existential questioning.

Theme 6: Coping in Solitude and in Faith

Participants used diverse coping strategies, including self-reflection, hobbies, spirituality, social interaction, and professional help. Some processed their emotions through prayer, journaling, or therapy, while others combined medication with spiritual practices, integrating both clinical and faith-based methods to manage their inner struggles.

"I go on hikes... jog, go to coffee shops... socialize with friends or do things I enjoy alone." - **Respondent 1**

"I mostly just read, listen to music, and watch shows... I enjoy making terrariums." - **Respondent 2**

"I try to think that if I vanish, I won't get to finish the anime I'm watching or the book I'm reading... little things keep me going." - **Respondent 4**

These highlight how simple, everyday activities can be meaningful coping strategies to manage existential distress. These activities served as small yet significant anchors, offering relief from overwhelming thoughts and reinforcing a sense of continuity and purpose. The seemingly minor pleasures—like watching a show, listening to music, having a good coffee, making terrariums, or spending time in nature—became symbolic of life's value and potential.

"I started going to counseling recently... I guess when you hold everything in for so long, it eventually comes out." - **Respondent 3**

The decision to seek counseling marks a moment of acknowledgment and release, indicating a shift from internalizing distress to seeking external support. It highlights the tension between concealment and the inevitable need for expression as part of healing.

"I pray... I journal—I write down everything I want to say but can't say out loud." - **Respondent 6**

This statement shows the struggle to verbalize difficult emotions directly to others, leading to alternative forms of expression. Prayer reflects a spiritual coping mechanism providing comfort and connection, while journaling offers a private, safe space to articulate unspoken thoughts. These practices represent attempts to manage emotional isolation and create meaning through reflection.

"I take medication (Propranolol), pray, and listen to music." - **Respondent 5**

It shows that coping is multifaceted, combining medical intervention with spiritual and sensory strategies. The use of medication indicates acknowledgment of physiological symptoms, while prayer and music serve emotional and existential needs. This integration reflects an adaptive approach to managing distress across different dimensions of experience.

Theme 7: Barriers to Emotional Disclosure

Despite the intensity of their struggles, many found it hard to share their feelings with others due to fears of being misunderstood, dismissed, or causing worry to loved ones. Even when they did open up, the reactions they received often felt lacking in true empathy. Still, some expressed a cautious hopefulness about being vulnerable, showing a tentative willingness to embrace openness.

"We're not very open in our family... I mostly open up to my friends." - **Respondent 1**

"I don't really share much... I'm afraid I might just add to other people's problems." - **Respondent 2**

"It's hard to talk about it... people will think I'm making excuses for my failures." - **Respondent 4**

These statements described difficulty opening up about their struggles due to a lack of openness in family settings; they feared burdening others or being judged, worrying their struggles might be seen as excuses rather than genuine pain.

"I tried to open up... but they just told me, 'You're being too dramatic.'" - **Respondent 5**

Highlights how attempts to share struggles can be met with dismissal or minimization, reinforcing feelings of invalidation and discouraging further openness and worsen existential distress by signaling that one's pain is not taken seriously.

This theme shows how barriers to emotional disclosure highlights participants' struggles to share their feelings due to fears of judgment, misunderstanding, or burdening others. Attempts to open up were sometimes dismissed, worsening feelings of invalidation and distress and limited openness in family settings often pushed them to confide only in trusted friends or select individuals. Despite these challenges, many showed cautious hope, gradually learning to trust and seek support. This theme emphasizes the importance of empathetic relationships in overcoming emotional isolation and fostering resilience amid existential struggles.

Summary Table of Superordinate Themes and Subthemes

Theme No.	Superordinate Theme	Brief Description	Key Participant Quotes	Participants Mentioned
1	Recurring Doubts and Search for Purpose	Persistent questioning of meaning, identity, and direction	"What is all this for? What's my real purpose?" – R1	R1, R3
2	Emotional Weight – Emptiness, Confusion, and Sadness	Intense inner sadness and emotional numbness	"I don't feel anything... I don't know who I really am." – R1	R1, R3, R5
3	Disrupted Academic Identity and Direction	Misalignment between academic path and sense of self	"The university was trying to spit me out." – R1	R1, R2, R3
4	Familial Expectations and Role Burden	Pressure from family roles, expectations, and obligations	"I was just created to be a retirement plan." – R5	R1, R2, R3, R5
5	Pressure from Unmet Plans and Social Comparison	Distress from unfulfilled goals and peer comparisons	"What I did was meaningless... no value." – R6	R2, R6
6	Coping in Solitude and in Faith	Strategies like hobbies, prayer, and counseling	"I try to think... I won't get to finish the anime..." – R4	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6
7	Barriers to Emotional Disclosure	Fear of judgment, invalidation, or burdening others	"You're being too dramatic." – R5	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6

This table shows the main themes found in the participants' experiences of existential crises. Each theme is briefly described and supported by a key quote from a participant. The last column shows which participants shared experiences related to each theme.

DISCUSSION

An existential crisis is an inevitable phenomenon that one may encounter at some point in their lives. In the case of the participants, their episodes of questions and confusions about their purposes and meanings could be derived from a particular existential dilemma known as the Sophomore Existential Crisis. This level refers to the doubts and uncertainties challenging adolescents' and young adults' perception of identity (Astilla et al., 2023). Students usually face these struggles during moments of silence or solitude. It gives them more space to think and to look back on past scenarios that affect their views of themselves. Isolation indeed opens an area for negative thoughts. It is often observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a survey conducted by Active Minds (2020), the switch from physical learning to online learning and social isolation raised the feelings of existential uncertainties and questions among the students. Undoubtedly, these psychological concerns are not just some random feeling that would disappear immediately, as they are a combination of a complex of emotions such as numbness, emptiness, and meaninglessness, detaching them not just from themselves but from external forces as well. Study of Roy et al. (2025) have identified similar themes, including existential crises, emotional turmoil, and a loss of purpose among university students, notably in Bangladesh. The emotional distress caused by these experiences can significantly impair students' academic performance and personal lives.

College students suffer from different existential crises as they stress over their university life and career path. These stressors emerge from the mismatch of their skills and interests with their programs. Family expectations contribute to this, as parents often view their children as a means to secure a better life, it pressures the students to pursue a career that does not align with their true aspirations. According to Roy et al. (2023), situations like adjusting to university life, lack of effective studying strategies, pressures brought by examinations, and even interpersonal connections such as relationships with partners, friends, and family lead to the development of existential anxiety. Moreover, the absence of social support heightens existential problems (Ezatpour et al., 2020). Another social factor that induces existential questions is the pressure from unsatisfied plans and social comparison. Disrupted dreams direct the students towards an unclear path, which makes them lose traction in their predefined direction. The emotional toll of failure to achieve plans often gets worse due to the standards that modern society has set. If someone sees others succeed in life, it will lead to questions about their own capabilities and worth. Brieva (2024) expressed that societal norms, which include the need for success, fulfillment, and happiness, are one of the causes that may lead a person to experience meaninglessness and inadequacy. This just indicates that aside from the internal forces, existential crises could also be traced to encounters with external factors such as the family, peers, and the society. These determinants could push the students to engage in an activity even if it's not what they truly want, just to cater to the pressures of others. This misalignment would eventually lead them to more confusion about their sense of meaning and motivations.

Since existential questioning frequently occurs in times of isolation, seeking help from others would be helpful to limit the impacts of this phenomenon in daily lives. It would not just resolve disconnection with other

people; it would also be a helpful aid to re-establish stability (Albers, 2024). However, since everyone does not have the same background, existential concerns could be formed from different roots like personality, family background, and social pressures (Salsabila et al., 2023; Park & Lee, 2022); it might be difficult for some to open up to other people. Lundvall et al. (2020, 2019) discovered that young adults are afraid to show vulnerability once they ask for assistance from other people. For them, this kind of solution is unachievable, leading them to feel hopeless and alone. Nevertheless, there are still different strategies that students can do to revive their burning passion and drive for meaning. This can include introspection, engaging in simple activities like different hobbies, and searching guides spiritually and medically. The study by Roy et al. (2023) presented that there are a wide range of psychological interventions that would reduce existential distress. Examples of it are existential therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and other psychological interventions. Also, Lundvall et al. (2022) claimed that leaving a safe space to rest helps the young adolescents reflect and move forward. Professionals should also listen more to individuals' life experiences rather than asking them for symptoms, as it could establish meaningful care. Students' experiences of existential crises are complex and multifaceted. That is why different approaches are made to determine what would be the best mechanism for each concern.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The rich, nuanced findings from this study highlight the complex and deeply personal nature of existential crises experienced by college students. Here are some recommendation and suggestions for future studies:

1. Facilitating Meaning-Making and Identity Exploration

Mental health professionals, including counselors and psychologists, should prioritize interventions that help students explore and construct personal meaning and coherent identity narratives.

2. Enhancing Academic Environments

Universities and colleges should create spaces where students feel they belong and can express their true selves. Offering flexible learning options and academic guidance can reduce feelings of isolation and burnout.

3. Incorporating Family and Culture in Support

Given the significant role of familial expectations and cultural values in shaping existential distress, therapeutic approaches should integrate family systems perspectives and culturally sensitive frameworks.

4. Promoting Social Support and Reducing Stigma

The barriers to emotional disclosure uncovered in this study underscore the urgent need to foster safe, empathetic environments both within families and peer groups. Educational campaigns and psychoeducation targeting stigma reduction around mental health.

5. Integrating Spiritual and Clinical Resources

The varied coping strategies described, ranging from prayer and spirituality to counseling and medication, indicate the value of integrative approaches that honor individual preferences. Mental health services should consider collaborations with faith-based organizations and offer holistic care options that combine clinical interventions with spiritual support, enhancing accessibility and cultural resonance.

Suggestions for Future Research

1. Longitudinal Studies on Existential Distress and Recovery

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track the trajectories of existential crises across the college years and beyond such as how students' struggles with meaning and identity change and what helps them recover.

2. Explore Digital and Peer Support

Given the increasing role of technology and peer influence in young adults' lives, future studies should investigate how digital platforms, online counseling, and peer support communities help or hinder their coping.

3. Study Different Cultures and Settings

While this study focuses on a particular cultural and academic context, further research is needed to explore how existential crises manifest across diverse cultural groups and educational settings.

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