

The Emotional Sphere Impact on Existential Fears Actualization and Intensity

Elena V. Turik*¹ , Lidiya A. Dyatlova^{1,2} 

¹ Don State Technical University, Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation

² Southern Federal University, Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation

*Corresponding author: turikelena@gmail.com

Abstract

Introduction. The article addresses the problem of increasing existential fears, their growing prevalence and intensity among the population due to changes in objective reality associated with the deterioration of the social, ecological, and political situation in the country and the world. Despite numerous studies devoted to fears, the age-related characteristics of experiencing existential fears and their connection with psycho-emotional states remain insufficiently studied.

Methods. The sample included 317 respondents. The first group consisted of respondents aged 15–17, the second group of respondents aged 20–25, and the third group of respondents aged 30–45. We examined the prevalence and intensity of fears in three age groups, taking into account gender, using the authors' questionnaire, "Features of the Actualization of Existential Fears in Individuals". We also assessed the levels of personal anxiety and depression using the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). The Mann-Whitney U-test was used to confirm the reliability of differences between subgroups of respondents, and Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was used to confirm relationships between variables.

Results. Fears were present in all participants, with intense fears being more common among women regardless of age group. The older age group showed a decrease in the frequency of high-intensity fears compared to the younger groups, regardless of gender. Additionally, direct significant correlations were found between the intensity of fears and the increase in anxiety and depression levels in all participants, regardless of age.

Discussion. The data suggest that a person's psycho-emotional status influences how

they experience fears, with an increase in their intensity, regardless of age and gender. Since high-intensity fears can lead to disruptions in normal adaptation and socialization, it seems necessary to create a program aimed at overcoming fears, taking into account certain psychological characteristics of the individual, including their emotional sphere (personal anxiety and depression).

Keywords

psycho-emotional status, existential fears, personal anxiety, depression, age groups

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Introduction

Fear, as a physiological phenomenon, plays a positive role: it restructures the functioning of the body in case of danger (increased heart rate, faster breathing, redistribution in the circulatory system), which ultimately has a positive effect on species survival. Sociological studies indicate that the prevalence of fears among the population is very high (NAFI Analytical Center): 92% of respondents reported experiencing fears of varying intensity; the most common fears are for the health and life of loved ones, fear of losing a job, and fear of terrorist attacks. The socio-political situation in the country and the world, the increasing number of large-scale disasters of social, biological, and technological nature, negatively affect people's emotional state, causing psychological and psychosomatic problems. Existential fears are related to the very essence of a person, to individual emotional experiences and the role of the individual in society. These fears are not always consciously recognized by a person but are present in everyone. If the biological role of fear is lost—that is, it ceases to serve as a signal related to danger or a threatening situation, and is characterized by prolonged duration and high intensity—fear becomes pathological and leads to vegetative disorders (e.g., sleep disturbances, constant tension, etc.). Individual experiences of fear and its intensity can affect the formation of a person's motivational attitudes, linked with negative emotional complexes, and can influence the individual's consciousness, making their behavior and activities less effective. Many fears are formed at an early age and are expressed both verbally and non-verbally (Akopyan, 2012). And in adolescence, in a situation of nervous system mobility and new life challenges, the problem of increased anxiety, existential fears, stress and depressive states becomes a pressing psychological problem (Simachenko, 2011).

Existential Fears

Existential fears have been a subject of study by philosophers and psychologists for many years (Kierkegaard, 2016). Significant contributions to understanding the nature of this phenomenon were made by Sigmund Freud (1925), who suggested that the formation of fears occurs in childhood and may lead to disorders in adulthood, such as sexual dysfunctions if the fear becomes neurotic (Freud, 1927).

From the behavioral perspective, reinforced maladaptive behaviors can lead to the development of fears triggered by initially neutral stimuli (Watson, 1914). Prominent Russian researchers such as L.S. Vygotsky (1993), A.N. Leontiev (2010), and S.L. Rubinstein (2017), examining phobias from a subject-activity approach, noted that fears can cause social maladjustment of a person. Russian scholar A.I. Zakharov (2000) developed Freudian ideas, distinguishing between imaginary and real fears. I.D. Yalom (1989) considered fear of death to be the primary fear experienced by every person throughout their conscious life. M. Yang (2020) pointed out that social, economic, and political crises significantly influence the formation and intensification of fears in the population, as demonstrated in studies related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Bodner et al., 2022). Courtney et al. (2020) also associate the emergence of fears with external global factors. For defining extremely intense fears caused by various adverse, threatening population-wide events, or individually significant events threatening a person's life, foreign scholars introduced the term "existential terror," which can be translated as "existential horror" (Greenberg & Arndt, 2012; Routledge, 2019; Vess, 2021).

Emotional States

Emotions are indicators of the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of needs. Persistent emotional states, which affect not only emotions but also other aspects of personality, fall into a separate category (Sudakov, 2002). Depression is a state characterized by a negative emotional background, disturbances in motivation, cognitive functions, and a decline in behavioral activity. Depression can lead to memory impairments, indirectly worsening other cognitive functions, and can thus negatively affect control over the intensity of existential fears, maladapting the individual and leading to disruptions in their socialization. Anxiety is a state characterized by an unpleasant anticipation of threat or danger, often imaginary (Chand et al., 2022). Prolonged, unfounded anxiety becomes a stable personality trait (Robinson et al., 2019). Existential fears can be subject to conscious control (Bregman, 2009; Greenberg et al., 2008; Greenberg & Arndt, 2012), while negative emotional states indirectly affect cognitive functions, leading to their decline. Could it be assumed that anxiety and depression influence the actualization of fears and the strength of their experience?

Research Objective

The aim of this study was to examine the intensity of existential fears in individuals of different ages and genders, to investigate the emotional sphere of respondents, including levels of anxiety and depression, and to explore the relationship between respondents' emotional sphere and the intensity of their existential fears. The following hypothesis was formulated: there is a relationship between the intensity of respondents' existential fears and changes in the psycho-emotional sphere of the individual.

Methods

Sample

317 people from three age groups were involved in this work:

- 15–17 years old (52 boys and 59 girls) secondary school students;
- 20–25 years old (52 boys and 53 girls) third-year university students;
- 30–45 years old (50 men and 51 women) conditionally healthy patients from among those who underwent medical examination at the medical center.

Methods

- The author's questionnaire "Peculiarities of actualization of existential fears of personality". The questionnaire contains open and closed questions, as well as several blocks aimed at studying various aspects of experiencing fears, and allows you to determine the intensity of fears (Turik, 2023);
- "Beck Depression Inventory Scale" (adapted by N. V. Tarabrin, 2001);
- "Spielberger's Anxiety Scale" (State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, STAI) (adapted by Y. L. Khanin, 1976).

The methods were used to confirm the hypothesis about the connection of existential fears of a person with stable emotional states that indirectly affect the characteristics of responding to fear and adapting to it.

Statistical processing of the results

The Mann-Whitney U-test was used, confirming the validity of differences between gender and age groups, and Spearman's rank correlation coefficient to confirm the links between variables in subgroups of subjects. The average values and standard deviation for all subgroups of respondents were also analyzed.

Results

At the first stage, we studied the existential fears of respondents based on their intensity levels. The results in the groups of respondents were distributed as follows (table 1):

- Low-intensity fears were characteristic of 46.3% of respondents in the first age group, 38.0% in the second group, and 43.6% in the third group.
- Medium-intensity fears were reported by 22.7% of respondents in the first group, 30.4% in the second group, and 33.6% in the third group.
- High-intensity fears were found in 34.5% of respondents in the first group, 30.4% in the second group, and 22.7% in the third age group.

Table 1
Intensity of Fears (%) in the Studied Gender-Age Groups

Groups of Respondents	Fear Intensity (%)		
	Low	Medium	High
Male Youth (Group 1)	61.7	23.4	17.3
Female Youth (Group 1)	27.2	22	48.2
Male Youth (Group 2)	48.0	21.2	21.2
Female Youth (Group 2)	24.5	39.6	39.6
Male Adults (Group 3)	44.0	36	20
Female Adults (Group 3)	43.1	31.4	25.5

The results show that most respondents experience strong fears, but there is an age-related trend: a decrease in the intensity of fears with age in the studied population. Young men in the younger age group exhibit fewer high-intensity fears than men in the older age groups. This may be related to the fact that individuals in the second and third age groups have a better understanding of reality.

When comparing these indicators using the Mann-Whitney U-test between gender groups, the following results were obtained: in the first age group, the intensity of fears in girls was significantly higher than in boys ($p \leq 0.01$); in the second age group, the intensity

of fears in girls was also higher ($p \leq 0.05$); in the third age group, the previously observed pattern was not registered—differences in fear intensity between men and women were not statistically significant.

At the second stage of the study, we analyzed personal anxiety and depression as aspects of the respondents' psycho-emotional state, as well as their situational anxiety. When assessing the emotional state of respondents, it was found that in the first age group, girls exhibited high levels of personal anxiety, while boys in the same age group showed moderate levels (table 2).

Table 2
Average levels of personal anxiety in the studied groups

Average levels of personal anxiety in the studied groups					
First Group		Second Group		Third Group	
Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
47.22 ±9.21	42.67±9.79	49.00±7.13	41.13±8.67	45.27±7.35	43.3±8.14

Using Spearman's correlation analysis, we found a pattern: the higher the personal anxiety level of respondents, the greater the intensity of fears. For girls, this indicator is higher (up to $11.523 \pm 19.31\%$), while for boys, it reaches $12.216 \pm 33.12\%$. A positive correlation was established between anxiety levels and the increase in fear intensity in both gender subgroups (for men: $r = 0.34$, $p \leq 0.05$; for women: $r = 0.36$, $p \leq 0.05$) (Table 3).

Table 3
Significant Correlation (r) Between Personal Anxiety and Fear Intensity in Different Gender-Age Groups

First Group		Second Group		Third Group	
Men	Women	Men	Men	Women	Men
$r=0.34^*$	$r=0.36^*$	$r=0.35^*$	$r=0.34^*$	$r=0.36^*$	$r=0.35^*$

Note: *Correlation is significant at $p \leq 0.05$

It was also established that there is a positive relationship between fear intensity and situational anxiety (for men: $r = 0.37$, $p \leq 0.05$; for women: $r = 0.34$, $p \leq 0.05$) (table 4).

Table 4

Significant Correlation (r) Between Situational Anxiety and Fear Intensity in Different Gender-Age Groups

First Group		Second Group		Third Group	
Men	Women	Men	Men	Women	Men
$r=0.37^{****}$	$r=0.34^{****}$	$r=0.68^*$	$r=0.35^{***}$	$r=0.64^{**}$	$r=0.56^{***}$

Note: *Correlation is significant at $p \leq 0.01$, **Correlation is significant at $p \leq 0.02$, ***Correlation is significant at $p \leq 0.03$, ****Correlation is significant at $p \leq 0.05$

In the second age group, average levels of personal anxiety were high for women, while men showed moderate levels of anxiety (Table 2). This group also exhibited the earlier established trend: an increase in fear levels with an increase in respondents' personal anxiety. Among women, it reached $11.623 \pm 18.09\%$, while among men it was $11.599 \pm 18.94\%$. A positive correlation was observed between fear intensity and personal anxiety (for men: $r = 0.35$, $p \leq 0.05$; for women: $r = 0.34$, $p \leq 0.05$) (Table 3). The relationship between situational anxiety and fear intensity was confirmed (for men: $r = 0.68$, $p \leq 0.01$; for women: $r = 0.35$, $p \leq 0.03$) (Table 4).

In the older age group, the average levels of personal anxiety among women corresponded to high levels, while for men, the levels were moderate (Table 2). In this group, as in the previous two, there is a consistent pattern of increased personal anxiety with increased fear intensity. Anxiety was higher among women (up to $11.024 \pm 18.69\%$) and among men (up to $11.242 \pm 19.96\%$). The data in groups with high and low fear intensity did not differ significantly. A positive correlation between fear intensity and personal anxiety was observed (for men: $r = 0.36$, $p \leq 0.05$; for women: $r = 0.35$, $p \leq 0.05$) (Table 3). A correlation between situational anxiety and fear intensity was also established in the older group (for men: $r = 0.64$, $p \leq 0.02$; for women: $r = 0.56$, $p \leq 0.03$) (Table 4).

Across all age groups, nearly identical results confirmed the assumption that there is a positive relationship between existential fear intensity and anxiety, regardless of age or gender. It was also noted that higher levels of personal anxiety are characteristic of women, regardless of age.

When examining the presence or absence of depressive symptoms in individuals with varying levels of fear intensity across different gender and age groups, the following results were obtained: in the first age group, average scores indicated no depressive symptoms in either gender subgroup (Table 5).

Table 5
Average Depression Scores in the Studied Groups

First Group		Second Group		Third Group	
Men	Women	Men	Men	Women	Men
4.59 ± 1.51	8.81 ± 7.06	6.22 ± 5.45	8.92 ± 10.38	6.77 ± 5.07	6.86 ± 4.24

When studying the indicators of depression in groups with high and low intensity of fear, a pattern was established: the higher the intensity of the respondents' existential fears, the higher the recorded level of depression, it was also found that in boys with high intensity of fear, the average values of this indicator are at a level corresponding to mild depression, in girls these values are at the upper limit of the norm. It was found that the values of the depression index in people with low and high intensity of fear significantly differ: in girls, depression reaches 131.02 ± 79.32% ($p \leq 0.05$), in boys 463.17 ± 231.74% ($p \leq 0.01$). In this subgroup, a strong direct relationship was established between the values of depression and indicators of the intensity of fear in males $r = 0.41$, $p \leq 0.01$, in females $r = 0.32$, $p \leq 0.05$ (Table 6).

Table 6
Significant correlation (r) between depression and the intensity of fears in different gender and age groups

First Group		Second Group		Third Group	
Men	Women	Men	Men	Women	Men
$r = 0.41^*$	$r = 0.32^{**}$	$r = 0.31^{**}$	$r = 0.41^*$	$r = 0.32^{**}$	$r = 0.31^{**}$

Note: *correlation is significant at 0.01, ** correlation is significant at 0.05

We also studied the indicators of personal anxiety and depression in this subgroup for the presence of a connection, as a result, we established a positive correlation between these indicators in women ($r = 0.51, p \leq 0.01$) and men ($r = 0.62, p \leq 0.01$) (Table 7).

Table 7

Significant correlation (r) between depression and personal anxiety in different gender and age groups

First Group		Second Group		Third Group	
Men	Women	Men	Men	Women	Men
$r = 0.51^*$	$r = 0.62^*$	$r = 0.63^*$	$r = 1^*$	$r = 0.65^{**}$	$r = 0.59^{**}$

Note: *correlation is significant at 0.01

Studies of the second age group did not reveal depressive manifestations in female and male individuals according to the average data (Table 5). The average values of depression in women and men with high intensity of fear correspond to a state of mild depression. When studying the relationship between the recorded intensity of fears and indicators of depression, a significant positive correlation was obtained with values in women ($r = 0.41, p \leq 0.05$) and men ($r = 0.31, p \leq 0.05$) (Table 6). In the older age group, the average values also did not show the presence of depressive manifestations in the subgroup. An increase in depression values was noted in persons with high intensity of fear, as well as in the first and second groups, for women the increase was up to $131.02 \pm 79.32\%$, for men $189.09 \pm 113.49\%$, the reliability of differences in indicators between these subgroups was established ($p \leq 0.05$). Just as in the two younger groups, a direct relationship was obtained between the values of depression and the intensity of fears in both gender subgroups (in men $r = 0.32, p \leq 0.05$; in women $r = 0.31, p \leq 0.05$) (Table 6). A significant correlation was obtained between personal anxiety and depression ($r = 0.65, p \leq 0.01$; $r = 0.59, p \leq 0.01$) in the subgroup of women and men.

Discussion

The obtained data indicate that existential fears of high intensity are widespread across different age groups, and their prevalence decreases with age, which is consistent with the findings of Russo-Netzer and Davidov (2019), who discussed the increase in existential anxiety during periods of various threats, including pandemics and worsening geopolitical situations, as well as personal tragedies (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

In all studied age groups, similar results were observed for average personal anxiety levels, with higher values noted among women. This result is most likely related to the characteristics of female socialization, as well as innate physiological differences between men and women. Similar results were obtained when studying situational anxiety, and a relationship was found between these indicators, consistent with the research of Chand, Marwaha, and Bender (2022), which revealed the mechanisms behind the development of personal anxiety.

Average depression scores in all subgroups indicated the absence of depressive conditions or the presence of only mild depressive symptoms within the sample, reflecting the prevalence of depression within the population. Depression leads to the actualization of negative memories and psychological maladjustment, likely exacerbating and intensifying personal fears.

Consequently, the existence of reliable correlations between the growth of fear intensity and stable emotional states suggests that anxiety and depression influence the experience of fear and control over its intensity. This is especially pronounced in male adolescents aged 15–17, who exhibit a lower frequency of high-intensity fears compared to the other two age groups. This could be indicative of an immature perception of objective reality, including geopolitical, economic, and social threats.

Conclusion

The study demonstrated that a person's psychological status plays a significant role in experiencing existential fears, regardless of age or gender. The research results showed that depression levels in each subgroup are within the normal range or indicate rare cases of depression. The increase in depression levels was reliably confirmed in groups with higher fear intensity. Across the entire sample, the results confirmed the relationship between depression and anxiety, suggesting the existence of an anxious-depressive emotional status. This status, given the relationship between the increase in existential fear intensity and the increase in anxiety and depression indicators, actualizes and intensifies existential fears. Further research aims to develop a preventive program aimed at reducing the intensity of personal fears, taking into account the individual's psycho-emotional state.

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Author Contributions

Elena V. Turik – research planning, literature analysis, preparation and writing of the text of the article, preparation of the sections "Introduction" and "Discussion of results", statistical data processing, description and analysis of the results, final approval of the version for publication.

Lidiya A. Dyatlova – preparation and writing of the text of the article.

Author Details

Elena V. Turik – Assistant, Don State Technical University, Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation; ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2451-0183>; email: turikelena@gmail.com

Lidiya A. Dyatlova – Ph.D. student in psychology, Don State Technical University, Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation; Research assistant, Regional Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Education (Southern Federal University), Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation; ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2157-3521>; email: dyatloval@bk.ru

Conflict of Interest Information

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.