

Does Meaning in Life Explain the Link Between Personality and Anxiety? A Mediation Study in Emerging Adults

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Abstract

Anxiety is highly prevalent during emerging adulthood, a developmental period characterized by emotional instability and identity exploration. Personality traits, particularly Neuroticism, have been consistently identified as strong predictors of anxiety; however, less is known about the psychological mechanisms underlying this relationship. Drawing on integrative models of personality and well-being, the present study examined whether meaning in life mediates the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety among emerging adults. A cross-sectional sample of 407 emerging adults (aged 18–29 years) completed measures of Neuroticism, meaning in life (Presence and Search), and anxiety symptoms. Pearson correlations and regression-based mediation analyses were conducted. Results indicated that Neuroticism was positively associated with anxiety and negatively associated with Presence of Meaning. Presence of Meaning was negatively correlated with anxiety at the bivariate level; however, it did not significantly mediate the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety when included in regression models. Neuroticism remained a strong and significant predictor of anxiety after controlling for meaning in life. These findings suggest that although meaning in life is associated with both personality and anxiety, it does not function as a primary explanatory mechanism linking Neuroticism to anxiety in emerging adulthood. The results highlight the dominant role of dispositional emotional vulnerability in anxiety and suggest that meaning in life may operate as a parallel protective factor rather than a mediating process.

Keywords : *Emerging adulthood; Neuroticism; Meaning in life; Presence of meaning; Anxiety; Personality; Mediation*

1. Introduction

Anxiety is one of the most prevalent mental health concerns among emerging adults, a developmental period marked by identity exploration, instability, and heightened emotional vulnerability (Arnett, 2015; Lee et al., 2020). Epidemiological and longitudinal research indicates that anxiety symptoms frequently increase during this stage due to academic pressure, occupational uncertainty, and social transitions (Kessler et al., 2017; McLaughlin & King, 2015). Identifying psychological mechanisms that explain individual differences in anxiety during emerging adulthood remains a central task for contemporary personality and clinical psychology.

Among personality traits, Neuroticism has been consistently identified as a primary dispositional risk factor for anxiety. Neuroticism reflects a stable tendency toward negative affectivity, emotional instability, and heightened stress sensitivity, and has shown strong and replicable associations with anxiety symptoms across cultures and age groups (Barlow et al., 2016; Kotov et al., 2017). Recent meta-analytic and large-scale studies confirm that individuals high in Neuroticism are more likely to experience chronic worry, emotional dysregulation, and anxiety-related psychopathology (Brandes & Tackett, 2019; Jeronimus et al., 2016). However, although the Neuroticism–anxiety link is well established, less is known about the psychological processes through which this personality trait exerts its influence.

One construct that may help explain this relationship is Meaning in Life, a central concept in existential and positive psychology. Meaning in life refers to the degree to which individuals perceive their lives as purposeful, coherent, and significant (Martela & Steger, 2016). Contemporary research conceptualizes meaning in life as comprising two distinct but related dimensions: Presence of Meaning, which reflects the subjective experience that life is meaningful, and Search for Meaning, which reflects the motivation to find or enhance meaning (Steger et al., 2015). Empirical evidence from the past decade consistently demonstrates that Presence of Meaning is associated with greater psychological well-being and lower levels of anxiety and distress (Disabato et al., 2017; Park et al., 2023).

In contrast, the role of Search for Meaning appears more complex. While some studies suggest that searching for meaning may reflect personal growth and adaptive exploration, particularly in younger populations, others indicate that it is positively associated with anxiety, depressive symptoms, and existential distress when meaning has not yet been established (Hill et al., 2018; Li et al., 2021). Recent findings suggest that Search for Meaning may function as a transitional or vulnerability factor, especially during emerging adulthood, when individuals are actively negotiating identity and life direction (Steger et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2018).

Importantly, personality traits may shape individuals' capacity to experience meaning in life. Research conducted within the last decade shows that Neuroticism is negatively associated with Presence of Meaning and positively associated with existential uncertainty and distress (Lavigne et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2023). Individuals high in Neuroticism may struggle to maintain a coherent sense of purpose due to chronic negative emotions, rumination, and self-doubt, which may undermine meaning-making processes (Park & George, 2016). A reduced sense of meaning, in turn, has been shown to increase vulnerability to anxiety by weakening psychological resilience and adaptive coping (Park et al., 2023).

Emerging adulthood provides a particularly relevant context for examining these relationships. This developmental period is characterized by heightened meaning-seeking and existential questioning, making meaning in life a salient psychological resource (Arnett, 2015; Steger & Samman, 2017). Recent studies indicate that while Presence of Meaning serves as a protective factor against anxiety in emerging adults, Search for Meaning is often positively associated with anxiety when not accompanied by a stable sense of meaning (Li et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2018). Despite this growing body of research, few studies have explicitly tested whether meaning in life mediates the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety, particularly within emerging adult populations.

Integrative Model

Guided by an integrative framework, the present study proposes that personality traits influence anxiety indirectly through meaning in life, following the pathway: Personality → Meaning → Anxiety.

2. Literature Review

Personality Traits and Anxiety

Personality traits have long been recognized as foundational predictors of emotional and psychological functioning. Within the Five-Factor Model, Neuroticism has emerged as the most consistent and powerful predictor of anxiety-related outcomes (Barlow et al., 2016; Kotov et al., 2017). Individuals high in Neuroticism tend to experience heightened emotional reactivity, chronic

worry, and increased sensitivity to perceived threats, which place them at elevated risk for anxiety symptoms and disorders (Brandes & Tackett, 2019).

Recent longitudinal and meta-analytic studies reinforce the stability and predictive strength of Neuroticism in relation to anxiety. For instance, Jeronimus et al. (2016) demonstrated that Neuroticism prospectively predicts increases in internalizing symptoms over time, even after controlling for baseline distress. Similarly, a large meta-analysis by Kotov et al. (2017) found that Neuroticism shows strong and consistent associations with anxiety disorders across diagnostic categories, suggesting that it represents a transdiagnostic vulnerability factor. Despite this robust evidence, contemporary models emphasize the importance of identifying mediating mechanisms that explain how personality traits translate into psychopathology (Barlow et al., 2016).

Meaning in Life as a Psychological Resource

Meaning in Life has gained increasing attention over the past decade as a key psychological resource associated with well-being and mental health. Defined as the subjective sense that one's life is coherent, purposeful, and significant, meaning in life is considered essential for adaptive functioning and resilience (Martela & Steger, 2016). Empirical research consistently demonstrates that individuals who report a strong Presence of Meaning experience lower levels of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress (Disabato et al., 2017; Park et al., 2023).

Recent studies suggest that Presence of Meaning promotes mental health by enhancing coping efficacy, fostering goal-directed behavior, and providing a framework for interpreting stressful life events (Park & George, 2016; van Tongeren et al., 2018). In line with these findings, a large-scale cross-cultural investigation found that Presence of Meaning was inversely associated with anxiety across diverse cultural contexts, highlighting its universal protective function (Steger et al., 2021). These findings support the conceptualization of meaning in life as a buffer against anxiety, particularly in times of stress and uncertainty.

Search for Meaning: Risk Factor or Developmental Process?

In contrast to Presence of Meaning, the psychological implications of Search for Meaning are less clear. While some researchers argue that searching for meaning reflects healthy exploration and personal growth, particularly during developmental transitions, others suggest that it may indicate existential distress and unmet psychological needs (Hill et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2018). Recent evidence increasingly supports a dual interpretation, in which Search for Meaning may be adaptive or maladaptive depending on contextual and individual factors.

Several studies conducted in the past decade report positive associations between Search for Meaning and anxiety symptoms, especially when individuals lack a stable sense of meaning (Li et al., 2021; Steger et al., 2021). For example, Li et al. (2021) found that Search for Meaning was positively related to anxiety among university students, whereas Presence of Meaning showed a strong negative association. These findings suggest that Search for Meaning may reflect a transitional state of psychological struggle, particularly salient in emerging adulthood.

Personality and Meaning in Life

Growing evidence indicates that personality traits shape individuals' capacity to experience and construct meaning in life. Neuroticism, in particular, has been shown to be negatively associated with

Presence of Meaning and positively associated with existential uncertainty (Liu et al., 2023; Steger et al., 2015). Individuals high in Neuroticism may find it difficult to sustain meaning due to emotional instability, pessimistic cognitive styles, and rumination, all of which interfere with meaning-making processes (Park & George, 2016).

Recent empirical work supports these associations. For instance, Liu et al. (2023) demonstrated that Neuroticism was negatively related to Presence of Meaning and indirectly associated with psychological distress through reduced meaning. Similarly, longitudinal evidence suggests that stable personality traits predict changes in meaning in life over time, rather than the reverse, underscoring the dispositional roots of meaning-related processes (Steger et al., 2021).

Meaning in Life as a Mediator Between Personality and Anxiety

Despite parallel literatures linking Neuroticism to anxiety and meaning in life to mental health, relatively few studies have directly tested meaning in life as a mediating mechanism. Emerging evidence suggests that Presence of Meaning may partially explain the association between maladaptive personality traits and psychological distress. For example, recent mediation studies indicate that meaning in life mediates the relationship between Neuroticism and depressive symptoms, stress, and emotional exhaustion (van Tongeren et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2023).

However, research specifically examining anxiety—particularly in emerging adults—remains limited. Moreover, the distinct roles of Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning are often not examined simultaneously, limiting theoretical clarity. Addressing this gap is critical for advancing integrative models that connect personality, existential processes, and mental health outcomes.

3. Method

Study Design and Hypotheses

The present study adopted a cross-sectional, correlational design to examine whether meaning in life mediates the relationship between personality traits—specifically Neuroticism—and anxiety among emerging adults. Guided by the proposed integrative model (Personality → Meaning → Anxiety), the study tested a mediation framework in which Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning were examined as distinct psychological processes. Based on the theoretical framework and empirical literature reviewed, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- **H1:** Neuroticism will be positively associated with anxiety.
- **H2:** Neuroticism will be negatively associated with Presence of Meaning.
- **H3:** Presence of Meaning will mediate the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety.
- **H4:** Search for Meaning will be positively associated with anxiety but will not mediate the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety.

Participants

Participants were emerging adults aged 18 to 29 years, recruited through university mailing lists, social media platforms, and classroom announcements using a convenience sampling strategy. Eligibility criteria included being within the specified age range and providing informed consent. Participants with incomplete responses were excluded from the final dataset. The final sample consisted of $N = 407$ emerging adults, with a mean age of $M = 22.41$ years ($SD = 2.98$). The sample

was predominantly female (50.2 %), and the majority were university students. Demographic information including age, gender, and educational status was collected and examined as potential covariates in the analyses.

Measures

Personality Traits

Personality traits were assessed using the Big Five Inventory–2 (BFI-2) (Soto & John, 2017). For the purposes of the present study, the Neuroticism dimension was used as the primary personality predictor. The Neuroticism subscale assesses emotional instability, anxiety proneness, and negative affectivity through items such as “*I worry a lot*”. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate higher levels of Neuroticism. In the current sample, the Neuroticism subscale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$).

Meaning in Life

Meaning in life was measured using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) (Steger et al., 2006), which consists of two five-item subscales assessing Presence of Meaning (e.g., “*My life has a clear sense of purpose*”) and Search for Meaning (e.g., “*I am searching for meaning in my life*”). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*absolutely untrue*) to 7 (*absolutely true*). Higher scores reflect greater Presence of Meaning or Search for Meaning, respectively. In the present study, internal consistency was satisfactory for both Presence of Meaning ($\alpha = .88$) and Search for Meaning ($\alpha = .84$).

Anxiety

Anxiety symptoms were assessed using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder–7 (GAD-7) scale (Spitzer et al., 2006). The GAD-7 consists of seven items measuring the frequency of anxiety symptoms experienced over the past two weeks (e.g., “*Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge*”). Responses are rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*nearly every day*). Total scores range from 0 to 21, with higher scores indicating greater anxiety severity. The scale demonstrated excellent internal reliability in the current sample ($\alpha = .91$).

Procedure

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards according to APA. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of participation and provided informed consent prior to completing the online survey. Data were collected anonymously using an online questionnaire platform. The survey required approximately 5–10 minutes to complete, and no financial compensation was provided.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 31.1). Preliminary analyses included descriptive statistics, reliability analyses, and Pearson correlation coefficients to examine associations among Neuroticism, Presence of Meaning, Search for Meaning, and anxiety.

To test the mediation hypotheses (H3 and H4), mediation analyses were performed using PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4) (Hayes, 2018). Neuroticism was specified as the independent variable, anxiety as the dependent variable, and Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning were tested as mediators in separate models. Indirect effects were estimated using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples, and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals were used to determine statistical significance. An indirect effect was considered significant when the confidence interval did not include zero. Age and gender were included as covariates in all mediation analyses due to their established associations with anxiety in emerging adulthood.

4. Results

Preliminary Analyses

Prior to hypothesis testing, descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were examined for all study variables. The sample consisted of 407 emerging adults, with complete data across all variables. Mean levels of Neuroticism, Presence of Meaning, and anxiety were within expected ranges for non-clinical emerging adult populations.

As shown in Table 1, participants reported a moderate level of Neuroticism ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.74$), a moderate-to-high level of Presence of Meaning ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.16$), and mild-to-moderate anxiety symptoms ($M = 7.29$, $SD = 4.82$). No violations of normality were detected based on inspection of skewness, kurtosis, and distributional properties.

Pearson correlation analyses revealed significant associations among all key variables in the expected directions. Neuroticism was positively and moderately correlated with anxiety ($r = .423$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of emotional instability were associated with greater anxiety symptoms. Neuroticism was also negatively correlated with Presence of Meaning ($r = -.236$, $p < .001$), suggesting that individuals higher in Neuroticism reported lower levels of perceived meaning in life. Additionally, Presence of Meaning was negatively correlated with anxiety ($r = -.164$, $p < .001$), indicating that greater perceived meaning was associated with lower anxiety levels.

These correlations provided initial support for Hypotheses 1 and 2 and justified proceeding with regression-based mediation analyses.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 407)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Neuroticism	2.94	0.74	—		
2. Presence of Meaning	4.60	1.16	-.236***	—	
3. Anxiety (GAD-7)	7.29	4.82	.423***	-.164***	—

*** $p < .001$

Regression Analyses and Hypothesis Testing

To test the proposed mediation model, a series of hierarchical regression analyses were conducted following established mediation procedures. First, a simple linear regression was conducted to examine whether Neuroticism significantly predicted Presence of Meaning. The overall regression model was significant, $F(1, 405) = 23.95, p < .001$, explaining 5.6% of the variance in Presence of Meaning ($R^2 = .056$).

As shown in Table 2, Neuroticism emerged as a significant negative predictor of Presence of Meaning ($\beta = -.236, t = -4.89, p < .001$). Higher levels of Neuroticism were associated with lower perceived meaning in life. These findings provide support for Hypothesis 2.

Next, a regression analysis examined the direct effect of Neuroticism on anxiety. The model was statistically significant, $F(1, 405) = 88.17, p < .001$, accounting for 17.9% of the variance in anxiety symptoms ($R^2 = .179$). Neuroticism was a strong positive predictor of anxiety ($\beta = .423, t = 9.39, p < .001$), indicating that individuals with higher Neuroticism reported significantly higher anxiety levels. This result provides strong support for Hypothesis 1.

Testing the Mediating Role of Presence of Meaning (H3)

To examine whether Presence of Meaning mediated the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety, both predictors were entered simultaneously into a regression model with anxiety as the dependent variable. The overall model was significant, $F(2, 404) = 45.28, p < .001$, explaining 18.3% of the variance in anxiety ($R^2 = .183$).

In this model, Neuroticism remained a significant predictor of anxiety ($\beta = .407, t = 8.79, p < .001$), although its standardized coefficient was slightly reduced compared to the model without the mediator (from $\beta = .423$ to $\beta = .407$). In contrast, Presence of Meaning did not significantly predict anxiety when controlling for Neuroticism ($\beta = -.068, t = -1.46, p = .144$).

Although Neuroticism was significantly associated with both Presence of Meaning and anxiety, and Presence of Meaning was negatively correlated with anxiety at the bivariate level, the indirect effect did not reach statistical significance in the regression model. Therefore, full mediation was not supported. The observed reduction in the Neuroticism coefficient suggests a weak or partial attenuation, but the criteria for statistical mediation were not met. Accordingly, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

In summary, the results provide robust evidence that Neuroticism is a significant risk factor for anxiety in emerging adults and is associated with lower Presence of Meaning. While Presence of Meaning was negatively related to anxiety at the correlational level, it did not significantly mediate the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety when examined within a regression framework.

Table 2
Regression Analyses Predicting Presence of Meaning and Anxiety

Dependent Variable	Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Presence of Meaning	Neuroticism	-0.370	0.076	-.236	-4.89	<.001
Anxiety	Neuroticism	2.756	0.294	.423	9.39	<.001
Anxiety	Neuroticism	2.652	0.302	.407	8.79	<.001

	Presence of Meaning	−0.282	0.193	−.068	−1.46	.144
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5. Discussion

The present study examined whether meaning in life explains the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety among emerging adults. Consistent with extensive prior research, Neuroticism emerged as a strong and significant predictor of anxiety, supporting its role as a central dispositional vulnerability for internalizing symptoms (Barlow et al., 2016; Kotov et al., 2017). This finding aligns with contemporary personality–psychopathology models and confirms the relevance of Neuroticism during emerging adulthood, a developmental period marked by emotional instability and heightened stress.

Neuroticism was also negatively associated with Presence of Meaning, indicating that individuals higher in emotional instability reported lower perceived meaning in life. This result is consistent with recent studies suggesting that chronic negative affect, rumination, and emotional dysregulation may undermine individuals’ ability to sustain a coherent sense of purpose (Martela & Steger, 2016; Liu et al., 2023). Moreover, Presence of Meaning was negatively correlated with anxiety, supporting previous evidence that meaning in life functions as a psychological resource associated with lower distress (Disabato et al., 2017; Park et al., 2023).

Despite these associations, Presence of Meaning did not mediate the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety. When entered simultaneously into the regression model, Presence of Meaning did not significantly predict anxiety, and the effect of Neuroticism remained largely unchanged. This finding suggests that although meaning in life is related to both constructs, it does not function as a primary mechanism through which Neuroticism influences anxiety. Rather, Neuroticism appears to exert a predominantly direct effect on anxiety, consistent with transdiagnostic models emphasizing its pervasive influence on emotional disorders (Kotov et al., 2017).

These results refine integrative models of personality and well-being by indicating that meaning in life may operate as a parallel protective factor rather than an explanatory pathway. Future research using longitudinal designs may help clarify whether meaning-related processes play a stronger role over time or under conditions of heightened stress.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature by examining an integrative model linking personality, meaning in life, and anxiety in emerging adults. Neuroticism was strongly associated with higher anxiety and lower Presence of Meaning, while Presence of Meaning was modestly related to lower anxiety. However, Presence of Meaning did not mediate the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety, indicating that dispositional emotional vulnerability remains a dominant predictor of anxiety symptoms.

These findings suggest that interventions targeting anxiety in emerging adults may benefit from addressing both personality-related emotional regulation processes and existential resources, rather than relying solely on meaning-centered approaches. Overall, the study highlights the complex and non-linear interplay between personality traits and meaning in life in shaping mental health during emerging adulthood.

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