

The Relationship between Personality Traits and COVID-19 Anxiety

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The COVID-19 pandemic has created a lot of fear and anxiety globally. The current study attempted to investigate the association among the big five personality traits and the two factors of COVID-19 pandemic anxiety (fear and somatic concern). Further, sleep quality as a mediator between personality traits and pandemic anxiety was also assessed. The study involved a cross-sectional sample of 296 adult Indians who were administered the 10-item short version of BFI along with the COVID-19 Pandemic Anxiety Scale and Sleep Quality Scale. Path analysis was used to test the theoretical model that we proposed. The overall model has explained 6% and 36% of the variance, respectively, for the factors of fear and somatic concern of COVID-19 pandemic anxiety. The path analysis model indicated that only the trait of neuroticism showed a significant direct and indirect effect on pandemic anxiety in the sample. Those scoring high on neuroticism indicated high levels of fear as well as somatic concern. Neuroticism also showed partial mediation through sleep quality on the factor of somatic concern. Agreeableness was the only other personality trait that indicated a significantly negative relationship with the factor of somatic concern. These relationships were independent of age, gender, and occupational status. These findings provide a preliminary insight into the slightly different relationship which has emerged between personality and COVID-19 pandemic anxiety in comparison to general anxiety.

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fear

somatic concern

COVID-19

personality traits

neuroticism

covid 19 anxiety

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has threatened the lives of human beings and has impacted every aspect of human life. The pandemic has affected those infected by the virus and those who were not. The life-threatening nature of the virus combined with an uncertain environment has created anxiety among the masses. It has altered the way people work, travel, communicate, and live their everyday lives. Any disruption of this kind can have an adverse psychological impact on individuals. Being anxious is part of human nature. However, when the anxiety level goes high and becomes chronic, it may adversely impact an individual's well-being. Most of the time, for individuals suffering from general anxiety, the cause is unknown. One of the differentiating factors between general anxiety and pandemic anxiety is that the cause of worry points to the pandemic (e.g., COVID-19) for human uneasiness and worry.

It seems COVID-19 pandemic anxiety stems from two components, i.e., fear and somatic concern [1]. First, continuous information overload related to the virus spreads triggered fear in individuals. People feared that if the virus infected them, it could lead to a painful death. It led them to be wary of going out to public places or meeting people. They started isolating themselves. Lockdowns and restrictions to move around added more fear to the tense environment. The need to continuously check and monitor any symptoms related to the pandemic created pressure and disrupted the daily functioning of individuals. The insecurity due to the lack of control over the situation and subsequent overindulgence in performing safety behaviors have also enhanced fear. Second, any slight perceived physiological symptoms like palpitations, shortness of breath and giddiness, or changes in eating and sleep patterns made people hyper-vigilant and concerned that they may have the coronavirus. Thus, the anxiety-driven apprehensions made people dysfunctional at psychological and social levels. With the spread of coronavirus across the world, this phenomenon of COVID-19 anxiety became more evident. Studies have demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a severe negative bearing on mental health [2] and the psychological well-being of people across the world [3].

Since the onset of the current COVID-19 pandemic, it has been observed that the number of COVID-19 cases across nations keeps fluctuating. The virus is mutating, and the medical fraternity finds it quite challenging to make any concrete prediction regarding the end of the current pandemic. As the pandemic has been ravaging the planet for the last two years and with no end in sight, people can develop a sort of pandemic fatigue. This fatigue can prevent people from taking and maintaining precautionary measures against COVID-19. The probability of the current pandemic becoming an endemic also seems a possibility. The mental health challenges among the masses during the current pandemic can be pretty severe. Thus, identifying behavior that can help alleviate the mental health burden on individuals is quite significant. A highly anxious individual often finds it challenging to analyze, face, and successfully navigate challenging problems or situations. Somehow, the current COVID-19 pandemic has become a challenge for everyone. Identifying psychological variables that can help mitigate the mental health burdens of individuals can be beneficial in this scenario. An individual's personality plays an essential role in facilitating or obstructing how they perceive and respond to day-to-day events in unique or critical times. Personality traits can be markers for understanding the individual differences found in the way people show concern, readiness, and adaptability to environmental tragedies and exigencies. Similarly, improving sleep quality may help reduce anxiety due to the pandemic. Understanding the relationship between the variables can enable researchers and mental health professionals to develop intervention programs to help individuals manage COVID-19 pandemic anxiety.

2. Current Insights

As hypothesized in the conceptual model, neuroticism indicated significant effects on COVID-19 anxiety components of fear and somatic concerns. The personality trait of neuroticism is characterized by emotional instability, moodiness, irritability, and sadness. Thus, the results indicated that as these tendencies increased in individuals, COVID-19 anxiety components, i.e., fear and somatic concerns, also increased. COVID-19 anxiety in individuals is driven by the fear of getting infected by COVID-19, leading to a painful death. Thus, interacting with

people and going to public places evokes fear. However, sleep quality only partially mediated the relationship between neuroticism and somatic concern. Expressly, the results indicated that the individuals who are higher on emotional instability report poor sleep quality and report more somatic concerns. Thus, it can also be mentioned that if the sleep quality enhances, somatic concern in the individuals can reduce. Somatic concern has been marked by excessive focus on physiological discomfort. Any slight physiological symptoms like palpitations, shortness of breath, fatigue, giddiness, or change in eating patterns make people hyper-vigilant. Thus, these individuals are forced to check and recheck to confirm the absence of perceived symptoms. Over-indulgence in safety behaviors has also created pressure in the daily life of individuals and disrupted daily functioning. Further fear of lockdowns has also enhanced fear and insecurity due to the lack of control over the situation.

In the current study, neuroticism is the only big five traits related to the COVID-19 pandemic anxiety factors, i.e., fear and somatic concern. Therefore, it aligns with the expected results as neuroticism is considered a risk factor for heightened anxiety. The current results are further corroborated by findings of the other previous research on general anxiety [4][5][6]. However, the other personality traits, except agreeableness, have not shown any significant relationship with pandemic anxiety, indicating that COVID-19 pandemic anxiety may be slightly different in its form and impact from the general anxiety.

The trait of agreeableness has shown a significant negative relationship with somatic concern. This indicates that individuals with agreeableness demonstrate less somatic concerns. In addition, agreeableness enables individuals to demonstrate higher trust, modesty, cooperation, and sympathy with others. These relationships possibly indicate that agreeableness functions as a protective personality trait that can buffer the impact of COVID-19 pandemic anxiety related to somatic concerns. Earlier research has also indicated that agreeableness makes people more adaptable to the new and changing environment [4].

The individuals scoring high on agreeableness tend to be more trusting and plausibly have faith that preventive measures will control the spread of the virus. Their faith and trust in others enhance their ability to deal with anxiety. Thus, they are better equipped to deal with the required changes in their lifestyle to match the sudden changes and the new normal created due to the COVID-19. The path diagram also indicates that sleep quality did not mediate the relationship with somatic concern for agreeableness trait. Similarly, agreeableness did not significantly affect fear directly or indirectly through the mediator of sleep quality.

Other personality traits, namely, extraversion, openness to experience, and conscientiousness, have not significantly influenced the factors of COVID-19 pandemic anxiety, namely fear and somatic concerns. This may be due to the different nature of the pandemic anxiety compared to general anxiety. The possible difference in both could be attributed to the definitive known source of pandemic anxiety compared to the unknown in the case of anxiety experienced by individuals diagnosed with anxiety disorders. People are anxious only when they fear getting infected by being in unknown places outside their secure bio-bubble. Anxiety is usually pervasive and cannot be zeroed down to any specific source. In the case of pandemic anxiety, there is a known source of the infection from the coronavirus (SARS-COV-2). Thus, due to this discrete nature of anxiety, the other personality traits may not have influenced the experience of pandemic anxiety. People who are high on neuroticism are more

inclined to be negatively influenced by anxiety arising from the two factors. Other individuals can handle the pandemic anxiety as they are only required to follow the protective measures, and the fear and related somatic concern can be managed.

The present study results further revealed that of the big five personality traits, the factor of fear had been predicted only by neuroticism out of the four traits. A pandemic like COVID-19, which affects various parts of the world with differing intensities across time, spreads in waves regarding the number of people infected with the virus. Thus, the fear component may vary across time. As the number of COVID-19 cases rises, the fear also rises. There are often restrictions, like lockdown which enhance fear among people. However, lockdown cannot be imposed indefinitely. The adverse economic impact on nations and individuals can be immense. Thus, we have seen that as the number of COVID-19 infections goes down, the restrictions are lifted. With the easing of restriction, the fear component also reduces. However, as the virus has frequently mutated, the world needs to be vigilant.

The current data was collected during July-September 2021 when the cases were waning in India after reaching peaks during the devastating second wave of infections during May 2021. Therefore, the fear may have probably waned due to the decrease in the positivity rate of COVID-19. Thus, the study's findings can be explained considering the changed scenario. Another plausible reason could be that as the pandemic has become so pervasive, people have started to accept it as a part of their life, and thus, it may be ignored consciously. Furthermore, the coverage of news related to the status of COVID-19 in media has also reduced a bit. Thus, it may not arouse anxiety in people compared to earlier times when there was a continuous bombardment of coronavirus-related news. Thus, it may be presumed that these factors may have reduced fear in people. However, longitudinal studies are needed to assess these plausible explanations.

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