

## Mindfulness and Death Anxiety Among Emerging Adults of Kerala

Nihar Mahamood<sup>1</sup>, Joseph C Mamman<sup>2</sup> & Anagha K T<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

Emerging adulthood, a phase of intense self-exploration, heightens vulnerability to existential concerns, particularly death anxiety. Mindfulness may serve as a vital buffer, yet its role remains underexplored within Indian, particularly South Indian, contexts. This study investigates the relationship between mindfulness and death anxiety among emerging adults in Kerala, examining how specific facets of mindfulness relate to different dimensions of death anxiety and whether sociodemographic factors influence these constructs. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 440 emerging adults (aged 18–29 years). The Five-Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire and the Death Anxiety Beliefs and Behaviours Scale were administered through online platforms. Data were analysed using non-parametric tests. Additionally, both simple and multiple linear regressions were conducted to determine the predictive power of mindfulness and its facets on global death anxiety and its subscales. Mindfulness has a significant negative correlation with death anxiety, and it accounted for 1.9% of the variance ( $R^2 = .019$ ). Notably, the facets acting with awareness and non-judgmental inner experience were found to be the strongest negative predictors, while the description facet positively predicted the anxiety subscale. Death anxiety was elevated among females. Mindfulness may act as a buffer against death anxiety in emerging adults. Findings suggest that fostering specific mindfulness facets and integrating mindfulness-based practices into youth mental health initiatives and educational programs could enhance existential well-being and resilience in a culturally sensitive way.

**Keywords:** Mindfulness, death anxiety, emerging adults, nonjudgmental awareness, Kerala

<sup>1</sup>M.Sc. Student, Department of Applied Psychology, Central University of Tamil Nadu

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Applied Psychology, Central University of Tamil Nadu.

<sup>3</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Applied Psychology, Central University of Tamil Nadu

Mindfulness, with its origins in contemplative traditions, has gained prominence in contemporary psychology as a means of fostering emotional regulation, attentional clarity, and resilience. Kabat-Zinn (1994) defines mindfulness as “the awareness that arises through paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally”.

Traditional Buddhist practice conceptualises mindfulness as a central component of the path to insight, particularly into the nature of suffering and transience (Anāl Ayo, 2013). Within the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism, mindfulness is embedded not only to cultivate present-moment awareness, but also serves a purpose that extends far beyond stress reduction or relaxation. It serves to cultivate ‘insight’ into the nature of impermanence, suffering, and non-self. In traditional practice, mindfulness is not an isolated technique, but rather an integral facet of a path leading to liberation.

The clinical application of mindfulness was led by Jon Kabat-Zinn (Anālayo, Medvedev, Singh & Dhaussy, 2022; Niemiec et al., 2010), who developed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). His works were deeply influenced by both Buddhist practice and the psychological needs of Western patients (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2011). Kabat-Zinn (1994) reframed mindfulness as a secular practice of attentional and attitudinal dimensions, describing it as an art of conscious living.

Following its clinical establishment, research on mindfulness expanded rapidly, examining its cognitive and neurobiological underpinnings. Neuroimaging studies employing fMRI and EEG have revealed both structural and functional changes in the brains of experienced meditators, particularly in regions associated with attention regulation, emotion processing, and self-referential thinking. Mindfulness practice has also been linked to improvements in immune functioning, suggesting its influence on physiological health (Davidson et al., 2003; Tang, Hölzel & Posner, 2015).

From a cognitive science perspective, mindfulness is conceptualised as a metacognitive capacity, that is, the ability to observe one's thoughts and feelings as transient phenomena rather than absolute truths (Jankowski & Holas, 2014a).

Returning to its Buddhist roots, mindfulness has particularly emphasized cultivating insight into impermanence (*anicca*) (Anālayo, 2013). This perspective highlights that all experiences are inherently transient. Through repeated practice, individuals gradually reduce attachment to a fixed self, cultivate greater appreciation of impermanence, and become less prone to taking people and circumstances for granted (Novak, 1996). Such insights have important psychological implications: by loosening identification with permanence and selfhood, mindfulness can reduce existential distress, including death anxiety (Askarizadeh Poormirzaei, & Bagheri, 2022; Nazira, Yurliani, Yusuf & Nazriani, 2021). Furthermore, Kabat-Zinn (1990, 1994) emphasises that this shift in perception enhances resilience in the face of inevitable uncertainty.

The existential dimension of mindfulness resonates with Irvin Yalom's (1980) observation: "Though the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death may save us". Mindfulness, in this sense, enables one to sit with impermanence rather than evade it, transforming death awareness into a source of deeper appreciation of life. From the existential perspective, death anxiety is considered an unavoidable dimension of the human condition. Yalom (1980) described death as "the primal source of anxiety," framing it as a psychological presence that shapes human choices, emotions, and behaviours, regardless of conscious awareness. While the biological boundary between life and death is clear, psychological experience blurs these lines, with death anxiety manifesting in diverse ways (Lehto & Stein, 2009). Existential perspectives, while largely philosophical, emphasise the subjective meaning of death and the transformative role of mortality awareness in shaping human development.

Recent empirical works within Terror Management Theory (TMT) show that trait mindfulness can reduce defensive responses to mortality salience (Niemic et al., 2010). Similarly, Moon (2019) emphasised the positive effects of meditation on death anxiety, where “temporality” is a key dimension. Facets of mindfulness, like acting with awareness and non-reactivity, have emerged as strong predictors of lower death anxiety (Shukla & Nayak, 2024), while dispositional mindfulness and tranquil ego mediate the link between death attitudes and anxiety (Mandal et al., 2024).

Together, Buddhist and existential perspectives converge in their recognition of mortality as a central human concern, albeit approached differently: one through meditative insight into impermanence, and the other through philosophical confrontation with death anxiety. Modern psychology, by integrating these traditions with empirical methods, has begun to explore how mindfulness may buffer existential distress. Within this trajectory, the present study seeks to investigate the relationship between mindfulness and death anxiety among emerging adults in Kerala, a developmental stage and cultural context where these themes may be particularly salient. Emerging adult is a group for whom questions of identity, uncertainty, and cultural attitudes toward mortality may be especially significant.

Kerala presents a unique sociocultural context for examining mindfulness and death anxiety. The state is characterized by high literacy, strong educational aspirations, significant migration exposure, and increased mental health awareness, alongside deeply rooted cultural, spiritual, and familial beliefs about death and dying. Emerging adults in Kerala are often situated at the intersection of traditional worldviews and modern existential stressors, including academic pressure, employment uncertainty, and global exposure. This coexistence intensifies awareness of life transitions and mortality.

Furthermore, cultural narratives surrounding death in Kerala, shaped by religious pluralism and collectivistic family structures make death anxiety a particularly salient psychological

construct. Studying mindfulness and death anxiety within this context contributes culturally grounded evidence to an otherwise Western-dominated literature.

The following are the objectives of the study: 1) to identify the relationship between mindfulness and death anxiety among emerging adults of Kerala, 2) to examine the influence of mindfulness and its facets on death anxiety and its dimensions.

3) to identify whether there is any significant difference in mindfulness and death anxiety among emerging adults of Kerala with respect to selected sociodemographic variables.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

The study employed a cross-sectional correlational design to examine the relationship between mindfulness and death anxiety among emerging adults of Kerala.

### **Participants**

The sample comprised 440 emerging adults aged 18–26 years ( $M = 22.07$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ), residing of Kerala. The sample consisted of 284 females (64.5%) and 156 males (35.5%), acknowledging that gender identity may not be limited to cisgender categories. Participants were recruited using non-probability convenience sampling through online platforms such as WhatsApp, email, and social media.

The participants consisted of 257 students, 120 employed individuals, and 63 unemployed individuals, reflecting diversity across academic and occupational domains relevant to emerging adulthood. They represented a range of educational backgrounds. While a small number had completed 12th grade or below ( $n = 22$ ), most were undergraduates ( $n = 262$ ) or had attained postgraduate education or higher ( $n = 156$ ), indicating a strong representation of individuals with higher educational exposure.

A total of 440 responses were received, all of which were complete and included in the final analysis. The heterogeneity in age, gender distribution, educational attainment, and

professional status strengthens the developmental relevance of the sample and allows for a nuanced examination of mindfulness and death anxiety among emerging adults in the Kerala context.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

- Emerging adults from Kerala, aged 18–26 years.
- Ability to read and comprehend English, the language in which the questionnaires were administered.
- Access to the internet and a digital device capable of completing an online survey.
- Willingness to provide informed consent electronically prior to participation.

### **Exclusion Criteria**

- Individuals outside the specified age range.
- Lack of internet access or inability to complete the online survey independently.
- Incomplete responses or failure to provide informed consent.

### **Measures**

#### ***Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire – 15 (FFMQ-15)***

The FFMQ-15 (Baer et al., 2008) was used to assess dispositional mindfulness across five facets: observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judging of inner experience, and non-reactivity. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The reliability coefficient of the scale's subscales typically ranges from Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .56 to .85 in original and broader validation studies. In the current sample, the overall scale demonstrated a modest internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.52$ ) with a reliability coefficient varying across subscales.

The scale has demonstrated sound psychometric properties in diverse samples. Kim et al. (2023) validated the FFMQ-15 among an ethnically diverse group of university students, reporting a well-fitting five-facet model and theoretically consistent associations with related

constructs, supporting its construct validity. Further, the cultural relevance of the FFMQ framework in India has been examined by Raman et al. (2024), who highlighted strong content validity for core mindfulness facets.

### ***Death Anxiety Beliefs and Behaviours Scale (DABBS)***

The DABBS (Menzies et al., 2022) measures multidimensional aspects of death anxiety across cognitive, emotional, and behavioural domains. The scale's original validation demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .90). Comprising 18 items rated on tailored 5-point Likert scales, the tool also demonstrated strong internal consistency within your population within the study (Cronbach's alpha = 0.85). Although the DABBS has not been extensively used in Indian samples, it has been validated in diverse international contexts, making it suitable for exploring these constructs in an Indian student population.

### **Procedure**

Data were collected using an online survey via Google Forms and distributed through email and social media platforms. The survey included an informed consent form, socio-demographic data, and standardised instruments. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were assured.

### **Sociodemographic Proforma**

Participants provided information on basic demographic and professional details, including age, gender, and education level.

### **Statistical Analysis**

The normality was checked using IBM SPSS Statistics 21. Given the non-normal distribution of the data and the use of non-probability sampling, non-parametric tests were employed. Specifically, Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to examine associations between mindfulness and death anxiety, while group differences across demographic variables were assessed using the Mann–Whitney U test. To further explore the relationships and predictive

power of mindfulness on death anxiety, the visual inspection of histograms of standardized residuals, followed by both simple and multiple linear regressions, were conducted.

## Results

**Table 1**

*Correlation between Mindfulness (total and facets) and Death Anxiety (total and subscales)*

	Anxiety	Belief	Behaviour	Death Anxiety
Observation	.13**	.15**	.02	.12**
Description	.11*	-.05	.33**	.01
Acting with awareness	-.09	-.32***	.03	-.16**
Non-judgmental	-.14**	-.36***	-.05	-.24***
Non-reactivity	.10*	.18*	.02	-.14**
Mindfulness	-.03	-.25***	-.02	-.14**

Note: N = 440. \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

Table 1 shows the Spearman's rank correlation that examines the relationship between Mindfulness and its five facets with the dimensions of death anxiety, along with the total death anxiety score. It shows a significant negative correlation among the participants ( $\rho = -.14$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating that higher levels of mindfulness are associated with lower levels of death anxiety among the participants.

**Table 2**

*Simple Linear Regression Predicting Death Anxiety from Mindfulness*

Predictors	F	p	Beta	t	R <sup>2</sup>	P
Mindfulness	8.514	.004	-.138	-2.92	.019	.004

Table 2 presents the results of simple linear regression analysis, indicating that Mindfulness negatively predicts death anxiety among Young Adults. The negative beta coefficient ( $\beta = -$

.14,  $t = -2.29$ ,  $p = .004$ ) indicates that mindfulness is associated with a lower level of death anxiety. The model accounts for 1.9% of the variance ( $R^2 = .019$ ).

**Table 3**

*Multiple Regression Predicting the Anxiety, Belief and Behaviour dimensions from the 5 facets of mindfulness*

Dimensions	Predictor	$\beta$	t	P	R <sup>2</sup>	F	p
Anxiety	Observing	.04	.76	.450			
	Describing	.10	1.99	.048			
	Acting with Awareness	-.01	-.14	.890	.035	3.13	.009
	Non-judging	-.12	-1.93	.054			
	Non-reactivity	.02	.36	.721			
Belief	Observing	.01	.14	.893			
	Describing	.01	.19	.852			
	Acting with Awareness	-.14	-2.53	.012	.145	14.77	< .001
	Non-judging	-.28	-4.90	.000			
	Non-reactivity	.01	.23	.822			
Behaviour	Observing	-.01	-.13	.899			
	Describing	-.05	-1.00	.318			
	Acting with Awareness	.11	1.86	.064	.011	0.93	.460
	Non-judging	-.08	-1.25	.212			
	Non-reactivity	.04	.623	.531			

Table 3 shows the results of a multiple regression analysis that examines whether mindfulness facets predicted the three dimensions of death anxiety. The model was significant for Anxiety and Belief dimensions, explaining 3.5% ( $R^2 = .035$ , Adjusted  $R^2 =$

.024) and approximately 14.5% ( $R^2 = .145$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .136$ ) of the variance, respectively. Among the predictors, Describing was a significant positive predictor ( $\beta = .10$ ,  $P = .048$ ), while Nonjudgmental approached significance as a negative predictor ( $\beta = -.12$ ,  $P = .054$ ) of Anxiety. Acting with Awareness ( $\beta = -.14$ ,  $P = .012$ ) and Nonjudging ( $\beta = -.28$ ,  $P = .000$ ) significantly predicted Belief in the negative direction. The overall regression model is not statistically significant for the Behaviour dimension.

**Table 4**

*Difference in Death Anxiety with respect to Gender*

Gender	N	Mean Rank	U	p-value
Female	284	229.22	33305.00	.04
Male	155	203.11		

Table 4 presents the Mann–Whitney U test results comparing death anxiety between genders. A significant difference was found ( $U = 33,305.00$ ,  $p = .04$ ), with females showing a higher mean rank than males.

## Discussion

The present study tries to investigate the relationship between mindfulness and death anxiety, with an emphasis on the association between specific facets of mindfulness and multidimensional components of death anxiety. Furthermore, it examines how mindfulness and death anxiety differ with gender. The results highlight that mindfulness is not a uniform construct, and with variations in the relationship between its various facets and the dimensions of death anxiety.

The major finding of the study is that there is a significant negative correlation between mindfulness and death anxiety. This indicates that a higher level of mindfulness is associated

with a lower level of death anxiety among emerging adults. Nevertheless, the observation facet was positively correlated with the Anxiety and Belief subscales of death anxiety, possibly reflecting heightened awareness of distressing internal experiences. This finding among emerging adults is consistent with previous research indicating that heightened observation of internal sensation may be associated with increased anxiety in certain individuals, for instance, those with elevated anxiety sensitivity. However, this outcome is moderated by the presence of other facets of mindfulness, such as the Non-judgmental facet (Desrosiers, Klemanski, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2013; Moskow, Curtiss, Carpenter, Ito, & Hofmann, 2025).

Acting with awareness and non-judging of inner experience consistently buffers death anxiety. These facets of mindfulness showed a significant negative correlation with multiple dimensions of death anxiety. This indicates that being attentive to the present moment reduced death-related beliefs and death anxiety. Additionally, being less self-critical towards thoughts and feelings may act as a robust protective factor against existential distress across domains.

Furthermore, the Non-reactivity facet showed a mixed pattern of association, exhibiting a slight positive correlation with Anxiety and Belief subscales, yet protecting against global death anxiety, highlighting its complex role. These findings highlight the differential roles of mindfulness dimensions in buffering against death-related distress.

The regression analysis further clarified these relationships. The simple linear regression confirmed that overall mindfulness significantly predicted lower levels of global death anxiety, though the effect size was modest. When examining the specific mindfulness facets using multiple regression, distinct patterns emerged across the subscales of death anxiety. The Anxiety subscale was shown to be positively predicted by the Descriptive facet of

mindfulness, while the Non-judging Awareness showed a trend toward a negative relationship. This pattern suggests that labeling internal experiences and sensations, a core component of mindfulness, may heighten anxiety if not accompanied by non-judgmental awareness and acceptance. This finding is consistent with recent research, which has shown that mindfulness training, including acceptance-based training, but not monitoring-only training, significantly increases awareness of positive experiences during acute stress (Lindsay et al., 2025).

For the Belief subscale, both Acting with Awareness and Non-judging were found to be strong negative predictors. This aligns with Terror Management Theory (Solomon et al., 1991), suggesting that mindfulness does not rely on symbolic defences but instead promotes a direct, non-avoidant engagement with inner experience, thereby reducing the need for psychological buffers against existential threat.

The Behaviour subscale of death anxiety revealed no significant predictors among mindfulness facets. This may suggest that the behavioural manifestations of death anxiety, such as avoidance, obsessive thinking and compulsive behaviours might be influenced by factors beyond an individual's dispositional mindfulness (Lewis, Patricia, & Garland, 1999; Verin, Menzies & Menzies., 2022).

The study found a significant difference in death anxiety across gender; female participants reported higher levels of death anxiety compared to male participants. These findings align with the existing literature across cultures (Harding, Flannelly, Weaver & Costa., 2005; Madnawat & Kachhawa, 2007; Sharma et al., 2019). Harding et al. (2005) quantitatively demonstrated that being a woman was positively associated with death anxiety, accounting for 10.6% of the variance. The pattern is visible across several studies and cultural contexts, including India. For instance, Madnawat & Kachhawa (2007) found that older Indian women

living with their families exhibited greater death anxiety, which is also a reflection of the caregiving roles of women within the family dynamic. Adelirad et al. (2021) suggest that the factors contributing to death anxiety differ between women and men. Women were significantly associated with higher levels of physical and perceived social activity, which was found to offer support, but also heighten existential fear. In traditional societies, women tend to maintain more intimate social bonds with family and the community. Therefore, these findings suggest that cultural roles might further shape this difference in death anxiety.

These findings offer compelling evidence that mindfulness, specifically its non-judging and awareness-based facets, serves as a protective factor against death anxiety. In contrast to symbolic defences proposed by Terror Management Theory (Solomon, Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1991), mindfulness fosters a direct engagement with impermanence, suggesting an experiential path toward existential resilience (Niemic et al., 2010). Given that death anxiety often lies beneath the surface of various psychological symptoms, integrating mindfulness into preventive youth mental health programs may offer not only emotional regulation but a deeper existential grounding.

The findings of the present study have important implications for both mental health practice and psychological theory. Given the protective nature of mindfulness against death anxiety, mindfulness-based interventions can be systematically integrated into college counseling services, community mental health programs, and preventive mental health initiatives to address mortality-related concerns during emerging adulthood.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings extend Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) by empirically establishing death anxiety as a salient existential concern during this developmental stage. The study also strengthens existential and mindfulness-based frameworks by demonstrating that mindfulness facilitates adaptive engagement with

mortality-related cognitions rather than avoidance. By positioning mindfulness as a mechanism that supports meaning-making during identity exploration and instability, the study contributes to an integrative understanding of developmental, existential, and transdiagnostic processes.

Furthermore, the study adds to the limited Indian empirical literature on death anxiety and mindfulness, emphasizing the need for culturally grounded psychological research. These findings provide a foundation for future studies employing longitudinal designs, clinical samples, and intervention-based methodologies to further elucidate the role of mindfulness in buffering existential anxiety across developmental contexts.

Several limitations need to be acknowledged while interpreting this study. First, its cross-sectional design limits causal interpretations of mindfulness and death anxiety. Second, the use of self-report tools may be subject to social desirability or introspective limitations. Finally, the low reliability of the FFMQ-15 in this sample also suggests the need for scale adaptation or longer versions in future studies. Furthermore, the limited prior use of DABBS among Indian young adults may limit the cultural generalisability of the study. Longitudinal and qualitative inquiries could enrich our understanding of how mindfulness shapes one's relationship with death over time, especially within diverse Indian cultural contexts.

## **Conclusion**

The study examines the relationship between mindfulness and death anxiety among emerging adults of Kerala and found that cultivating mindfulness may buffer against existential crisis among this group. The study is promising in advancing our understanding of how mindfulness, particularly facets such as *Acting with Awareness* and *Non-judging*, can serve as a protective psychological resource in managing existential anxiety during a critical developmental period. By identifying the gender differences in death anxiety, the study

emphasizes the need for gender specific interventions. The findings also suggest practical implications for mental health practices, community awareness, and educational programming. Moreover, the study offers valuable recommendations for policymakers to incorporate mindfulness-based interventions into public health initiatives, especially given their sustainability and relevance in addressing youth-related challenges such as stress, substance use, and emotional dysregulation. To summarise, this study is instrumental in bridging theoretical understanding with applied psychological practice, highlighting mindfulness as a vital tool in fostering resilience, emotional regulation, and existential well-being among emerging adults.

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