

How Personality and Culture Impact Anxiety and Resilience During Global Crises

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Abstract

Global pandemics, economic recessions, climate change, and warfare are just some of the few crises plaguing the population worldwide, bringing major changes to the ways people work, live, and connect to others. This time of uncertainty has ushered in a wave of anxiety that threatens to crush some while it propels others to new levels of resilience. Recent publications in positive psychology ask why this is—Why are some individuals able to find social and emotional balance after trauma? Why do others struggle? What interventions can improve mental health outcomes in times of crisis? The purpose of this paper is to examine how anxiety and resilience are shaped by both personality traits and cultural context during periods of global crisis, with a particular focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on the Big Five personality framework, the paper first explores how traits such as agreeableness, extraversion, and neuroticism predict variations in anxiety levels and how they correspond to resilience. Then, the paper investigates how cultural dynamics—specifically collectivism and individualism—influences the way people manage trauma, positing predictions for various types of global crises. By analyzing both internal dispositions and external cultural values, this paper offers a dynamic perspective of the psychological mechanisms that underlie resilience in the face of global crises.

Keywords: Anxiety, Resilience, Personality, Culture, COVID-19

Introduction

Between a global pandemic, climate disasters, and political conflicts, it would not be an exaggeration to say that we are living in a time of perpetual crisis. As these events unfold, they not only challenge public health and infrastructure but also affect psychological well-being. Chronic exposure to crisis has led to rising levels of anxiety worldwide and even greater disparities in mental health outcomes, which prompts the question, “What enables some individuals and communities to recover or adapt while others struggle?” This paper asserts that personality and culture modulate the relationship between anxiety and resilience during traumatic global events. For the context of this paper, anxiety will be defined as the trait of a heightened sense of uncertainty, worry, and perceived lack of control that emerges as a result of a crisis. Resilience can be understood as a dynamic process of positive adaptation under adversity with the support of personal strengths, relational support, and differing environments (Luthar et. al, 2006). The paper will first review existing positive psychology research about the relationship between anxiety, resilience, and personality theory (the Big Five model). Then, it will explore how personality traits enable or inhibit resilience within the context of COVID-19 as a primary example of a global crisis.

Theoretical Foundation

This paper relies on personality theory to examine the relationship between anxiety and resilience in times of global crisis. Personality theories are frameworks that seek to describe and explain an individual’s consistent patterns of thought and behavior. Trait theories are a category of personality theories that conceptualize personality through a combination of stable traits. One

such theory, called The Big 5, asserts that human personalities consist of the following five dimensions: extraversion (sociability, talkativeness), agreeableness (cooperativeness), conscientiousness (dutifulness), neuroticism (instability), and openness (curiosity, imagination) (McCrae & Costa, 1997). These traits exist on a spectrum and individuals exhibit varying degrees of each.

Existing psychology research has shown that there is an association between The Big 5 personality traits, anxiety symptoms, and resilience. For example, a study about Chinese medical students found that agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness were negatively associated with anxiety and neuroticism was positively associated with it (Shi et al., 2015). Resilience, on the other hand, was negatively associated with neuroticism and positively associated with extraversion and conscientiousness among American students (Campbell-Sills et al., 2006). In a study about Australian general practitioners, researchers found that resilience was negatively associated with anxiety and anxiety disorders (Eley et al., 2013). The same study further asserts that personality components associated with anxiety and resilience can vary within different demographic groups because of cultural and socioeconomic factors. From this body of literature we can conclude that resilience is a product of interaction between personality traits and environmental factors, and it can be important when predicting an individual's response to traumas inflicted by global crises.

Anxiety and Resilience During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the clearest examples of a global event that caused widespread anxiety. COVID-19 introduced an invisible threat, which led to fears of not just illness and death, but also of the spread of the virus in everyday social interactions, which is

proven by a study that estimated around 50.9% of people showed traits of anxiety during the beginning of the global COVID-19 pandemic (Shah et al., 2020). However, levels of anxiety differed based on factors such as one's living areas, isolation, and the level exposure to the disease. Those in medium and large urban areas showed the least amounts of anxiety due to urban areas having the least unemployed workers and most economic investment to prevent the spread of the disease (Rotărescu et al., 2020). Similarly, rural areas had low levels of anxiety due to social distancing being a part of daily life, allowing living and working to continue unchanged (Rotărescu et al., 2020). Lastly, the level of exposure to the disease changed anxiety levels. This was most prevalent among healthcare workers like nurses who experienced higher levels of anxiety and burnout due to concerns such as infection or infection of family members, insufficient information, and inadequate staff and equipment (Georgousopoulou et al., 2024).

With such high levels of anxiety, resilience was an essential protective psychological factor that enabled adaptive coping strategies that promoted psychological well-being and reduced depression and anxiety (Rotărescu et al., 2020). One study by Sahni et al. (2020) examined if the Big 5 factors could predict and build emotional resilience in individuals facing anxiety due to the pandemic. Using a stepwise regression model, researchers found that traits of conscientiousness, openness to experience and neuroticism produced the maximum change in emotional resilience, meaning that those traits were most salient in forming coping strategies. Participants who exhibited high levels of extraversion and agreeableness, however, had trouble building resilience during the pandemic because they lacked the social connection they needed to establish coping strategies during the time of social distancing. Additionally, participants who exhibited these personality traits also felt a sense of guilt for not being able to help others, rendering them emotionally weaker and further dampening their ability to bounce back from

traumas inflicted by COVID. These results are interesting because previous studies suggested that agreeableness and extraversion were the traits that correlated with resilience. In this case, the opposite seems to be true—they struggled to build resilience the most. Therefore, the circumstances of the global crisis, along with personality traits, seems to influence the relationship between anxiety and resilience.

The Influence of Culture in Building Psychological Resilience during COVID-19

Another important note from the Sahni et al. study is the claim that certain personality traits are more prevalent in certain cultures or countries. While this issue was behind the scope of their study, other scholarship about COVID posits that cultural contexts can also shape anxiety symptoms and resilience outcomes during times of global crises. For example, collectivist cultures, such as those in many Asian, African, and Latin American countries, often demonstrate stronger communal coping mechanisms during crises. Shared values of mutual aid help reduce individual anxiety (Pei et al., 2023). In countries like Pakistan which center family and community involvement, social isolation caused by lockdowns or social distancing can produce higher levels of loneliness, especially the elderly that are highly susceptible to depression and other problems (Shah et al., 2020). Conversely, in such cultural contexts increased family presence is associated with decreased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, as individuals have the culturally-appropriate tools to process trauma and build resilience (Shah et al., 2020).

In contrast, individualistic cultures, such as those in the United States and many Western European countries, may emphasize self-reliance and personal responsibility when it comes to building resilience in times of crisis. Individuals belonging to these cultures may be more inclined to rely on internal coping strategies like self-reflection, self-imposed routines, or seeking

professional help to overcome anxieties inflicted by the pandemic. If these coping mechanisms fail, it could lead to increased feelings of isolation and deflated sense of self. However, individualism can also foster innovative coping strategies and personal resilience, showing that cultural norms can both protect and challenge psychological adaptation.

Conclusion

This paper thus far has shown how personality traits and cultural context shapes resilience in global crises, identifying personality traits that form protective barriers against traumatic experiences. However, this is merely a surface-level understanding of the complex relationship between resilience and anxiety, as many other personal characteristics influence how anxiety is experienced and trauma, processed. These factors, which go beyond the scope of this paper, include: gender, (Iimura & Taku, 2018; Weisberg et al., 2011), age, socio-economic status, personal life stressors, self-efficacy, expressive flexibility, (Lass-Hennemann, 2023), and even genetics, as anxiety disorders are largely influenced by genetics—ranging from 32% for generalized anxiety disorder to 67% for agoraphobia (Schiele & Domschke, 2018). These kinds of genetic predispositions can further interact with environmental stressors like global crises to increase the signs of anxiety in individuals (Schiele & Domschke, 2018). Thus, while personality theories and cultural dynamics can produce a robust theoretical framework, in practice the relationship between anxiety and resilience looks different for each individual, and more research is required to understand the full interplay of factors.

Although there are many ongoing efforts to support those affected by global crises, completely eradicating anxiety and building resilience in every individual is impossible because each situation is unique. However, culturally-sensitive reforms—ranging from small social

circles like family and friends to federal policy initiatives—can help bring communities together and promote positive thinking. Support systems that encourage a sense of community and hope are essential in mitigating the psychological impact of global crises. These measures not only help alleviate mental health challenges but also motivate individuals to use their agency amidst these crises. Practicing agency, even in small ways, can help people regain a sense of control, reduce anxiety, and foster resilience over time.

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