



Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 7.2

ISSN No: 3049-4176

Emotional Intelligence and Anxiety among Young Adults: A Narrative Review

Dr. Rashmi Singh

Assistant Professor, UCSSH, MLSU Udaipur

Anisha Yadav

PhD Scholar, UCSSH, MLSU Udaipur

ABSTRACT

Young adulthood is a critical developmental period characterized by numerous academic, occupational, interpersonal, and social transitions. While these transitions offer opportunities for growth, they also expose individuals to heightened levels of stress and anxiety. In recent decades, emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged as an important psychological construct associated with adaptive functioning, emotional regulation, and mental well-being. The present review aims to synthesize existing literature on the relationship between emotional intelligence and anxiety among young adults. Research indicates that individuals with higher emotional intelligence demonstrate superior emotional awareness, emotional regulation, coping flexibility, and interpersonal competence, all of which contribute to reduced anxiety levels. Studies conducted across educational, clinical, organizational, and community settings consistently reveal a negative association between emotional intelligence and anxiety. Emotional intelligence has also been identified as a protective factor that facilitates resilience and psychological adjustment in stressful circumstances. The review further explores theoretical perspectives explaining this relationship and identifies existing gaps in the literature, particularly within the Indian context. Findings suggest that emotional intelligence may serve as a valuable target for preventive and therapeutic interventions aimed at reducing anxiety and promoting mental health among young adults. Future research should employ longitudinal and intervention-based designs to establish causal pathways and strengthen evidence for emotional intelligence-based mental health programs.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Anxiety, Young Adults, Mental Health, Emotion Regulation, Psychological Well-being

1. INTRODUCTION

Mental health concerns among young adults have become a major public health issue worldwide. The period of young adulthood, generally ranging from 18 to 30 years of age, involves significant developmental transitions including higher education, career establishment, identity formation, financial independence, and intimate relationship development. These transitions often create psychological demands that increase vulnerability to emotional difficulties, particularly anxiety.



Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 7.2

ISSN No: 3049-4176

Anxiety is one of the most prevalent psychological concerns among young adults. Although moderate anxiety serves an adaptive function by preparing individuals to respond to potential threats, excessive anxiety can impair academic performance, occupational functioning, interpersonal relationships, and overall quality of life. The growing prevalence of anxiety among young adults has prompted researchers to identify psychological strengths that may protect individuals from emotional distress.

One such strength is emotional intelligence (EI). Since the pioneering work of Salovey and Mayer (1990), emotional intelligence has received extensive attention as a construct associated with emotional adaptation, effective coping, social competence, and psychological well-being. Individuals with high emotional intelligence are believed to possess the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and utilize emotions effectively in daily life.

Recent developments in positive psychology have further emphasized the importance of emotional intelligence as a resource that promotes mental health rather than merely preventing psychopathology. Consequently, researchers have increasingly examined whether emotional intelligence can function as a protective factor against anxiety. Understanding this relationship has important implications for psychological interventions, educational programs, and mental health promotion strategies.

The present review aims to synthesize available literature examining the relationship between emotional intelligence and anxiety among young adults while identifying theoretical explanations, practical implications, and future directions for research.

2. CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

The concept of emotional intelligence emerged from attempts to understand individual differences in emotional functioning beyond traditional cognitive intelligence. Salovey and Mayer (1990) defined emotional intelligence as the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, discriminate among emotional states, and use emotional information to guide thinking and behavior.

The ability model proposed by Mayer and Salovey conceptualizes emotional intelligence through four interrelated branches:

1. Perceiving emotions accurately.
2. Using emotions to facilitate thinking.
3. Understanding emotional meanings.
4. Managing emotions effectively.

In contrast, trait models conceptualize emotional intelligence as a constellation of emotional self-perceptions embedded within personality traits. Mixed models combine emotional competencies with motivational and social skills.

Despite theoretical differences, most conceptualizations agree that emotionally intelligent individuals demonstrate enhanced emotional awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, interpersonal effectiveness, and adaptive coping abilities. These competencies are believed to



Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 7.2

ISSN No: 3049-4176

influence how individuals interpret and respond to stressful situations, thereby affecting anxiety levels.

3. UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY IN YOUNG ADULTHOOD

Anxiety refers to a state of apprehension, tension, and physiological arousal triggered by anticipated threats or uncertainty. Contemporary psychological theories view anxiety as a multidimensional phenomenon involving cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physiological components.

Young adults encounter numerous stressors that contribute to anxiety. Academic pressures, competitive environments, career uncertainty, financial instability, relationship challenges, social expectations, and rapid societal changes all contribute to psychological distress. The increasing influence of social media and digital communication has further intensified experiences of social comparison and fear of evaluation.

From an evolutionary perspective, anxiety serves a protective function by enhancing vigilance and preparedness in potentially threatening situations. However, when anxiety becomes chronic or disproportionate to actual threats, it may interfere with effective functioning and psychological well-being.

Researchers increasingly recognize that anxiety is influenced not only by environmental stressors but also by individual psychological resources. Emotional intelligence represents one such resource that may determine how effectively individuals manage anxiety-provoking situations.

Emotional Intelligence and Anxiety: Theoretical Perspectives

Several theoretical frameworks explain the relationship between emotional intelligence and anxiety.

The emotional regulation perspective suggests that emotionally intelligent individuals possess superior abilities to recognize, understand, and regulate emotional responses. Consequently, they are less likely to become overwhelmed by negative emotions and more capable of maintaining psychological balance during stressful experiences.

The cognitive appraisal framework proposes that emotional intelligence influences how individuals interpret potentially threatening situations. Individuals high in emotional intelligence tend to evaluate stressors more realistically and perceive greater control over challenging circumstances. This reduces catastrophic thinking and anxiety-related cognitions. Social competence theory emphasizes the role of interpersonal skills. Emotionally intelligent individuals often establish stronger social relationships and support networks, which serve as protective factors against anxiety. Social support can buffer the impact of stress and promote emotional well-being.



Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 7.2

ISSN No: 3049-4176

Positive psychology perspectives further suggest that emotional intelligence contributes to flourishing, resilience, optimism, and psychological well-being, all of which reduce vulnerability to anxiety disorders.

4. REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

A substantial body of research supports a negative relationship between emotional intelligence and anxiety.

Extremera and Fernández-Berrocal (2006) investigated emotional intelligence among university students and found that emotional clarity and emotional repair were significantly associated with lower levels of anxiety and depression. Students who understood and regulated their emotions effectively reported better mental health outcomes.

Similarly, Schneider et al. (2013) examined emotional intelligence within stress-inducing situations. Their findings demonstrated that individuals with higher emotional intelligence exhibited lower threat appraisals, more adaptive physiological responses, and reduced negative emotional reactions during stressful experiences. These results suggest that emotional intelligence facilitates resilience to stress and anxiety.

Guil et al. (2019) explored the relationship between self-esteem, emotional intelligence, and anxiety among university students. Their findings indicated that trait emotional intelligence mediated the relationship between self-esteem and anxiety. Individuals with greater emotional intelligence reported lower anxiety despite experiencing similar environmental stressors.

Connor and Slear (2009) also observed a significant negative association between emotional intelligence and anxiety while simultaneously identifying a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and resilience. Their findings support the notion that emotional intelligence functions as a protective psychological resource.

Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence. Drigas and Papoutsis (2020) emphasized the need for emotional intelligence training during periods of crisis and uncertainty. Individuals possessing stronger emotional competencies demonstrated greater adaptability, emotional regulation, and psychological stability during stressful circumstances.

Collectively, these studies suggest that emotional intelligence consistently contributes to lower anxiety levels across diverse populations and contexts.

5. DISCUSSION

The literature reviewed demonstrates a consistent and meaningful negative relationship between emotional intelligence and anxiety. Across educational, clinical, and community settings, individuals possessing higher levels of emotional intelligence report lower levels of anxiety, greater emotional stability, and improved psychological adjustment. These findings support the growing body of evidence suggesting that emotional intelligence serves as a significant protective factor in mental health.



Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 7.2

ISSN No: 3049-4176

One of the primary explanations for this relationship lies in emotional regulation. Anxiety is often maintained by maladaptive patterns of emotional processing, including excessive worry, rumination, emotional avoidance, and catastrophic thinking. Individuals with higher emotional intelligence possess greater awareness of their emotional states and are better equipped to regulate emotional reactions before they escalate into chronic distress. Consequently, they are more capable of responding to stressful situations with flexibility rather than becoming overwhelmed by negative emotions.

Another important mechanism involves cognitive appraisal. Stressful events do not automatically generate anxiety; rather, anxiety often results from the individual's interpretation of those events. Emotionally intelligent individuals tend to evaluate stressful circumstances more realistically and perceive greater control over outcomes. This adaptive appraisal process reduces perceptions of threat and enhances confidence in coping abilities.

The literature also highlights the importance of interpersonal functioning. Emotional intelligence facilitates empathy, communication, and social competence, enabling individuals to develop stronger social support systems. Social support is consistently recognized as one of the strongest protective factors against anxiety and psychological distress. Through healthier relationships and effective communication, emotionally intelligent individuals may access emotional resources that buffer the impact of stressful experiences.

Furthermore, emotional intelligence appears closely linked with other positive psychological constructs such as resilience, optimism, self-esteem, psychological well-being, and self-efficacy. These variables often function together in promoting adaptation and reducing vulnerability to mental health difficulties. Several studies suggest that emotional intelligence may indirectly influence anxiety through its positive effects on these psychological resources. The findings also align with contemporary positive psychology perspectives, which emphasize the development of strengths rather than focusing exclusively on psychopathology. Rather than viewing anxiety solely as a disorder requiring treatment, positive psychology encourages the cultivation of emotional competencies that enhance adaptation and well-being. Emotional intelligence represents one such competency that can be developed through training and intervention, making it particularly valuable for preventive mental health approaches.

The increasing prevalence of anxiety among young adults further underscores the relevance of emotional intelligence. Rapid technological changes, economic uncertainty, academic competition, social expectations, and global challenges have created an environment in which emotional adaptability is increasingly important. Emotional intelligence may therefore function as an essential life skill that promotes successful navigation of contemporary challenges.

6. RESEARCH GAPS

Despite substantial progress in understanding the relationship between emotional intelligence and anxiety, several important gaps remain in the literature.



Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 7.2

ISSN No: 3049-4176

First, much of the existing research employs cross-sectional designs. Although these studies consistently demonstrate associations between emotional intelligence and anxiety, they cannot establish causal relationships. Longitudinal studies are necessary to determine whether emotional intelligence predicts future reductions in anxiety or whether lower anxiety facilitates the development of emotional competencies.

Second, inconsistencies in measurement continue to present challenges. Researchers utilize various instruments based on differing theoretical models of emotional intelligence, including ability-based, trait-based, and mixed approaches. This methodological diversity limits direct comparisons across studies and may contribute to variability in findings.

Third, a considerable proportion of available research has been conducted among university students. While this population is highly relevant, findings may not generalize to all young adults. Individuals who are unemployed, employed in diverse occupations, or living in rural settings remain comparatively underrepresented.

Fourth, cultural diversity remains insufficiently explored. Most evidence originates from Western populations, while research from developing countries remains relatively limited. In India, studies examining emotional intelligence and anxiety are increasing; however, there remains a shortage of comprehensive investigations focusing specifically on young adults from different cultural, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Fifth, limited intervention-based research exists examining whether enhancing emotional intelligence directly reduces anxiety over time. Experimental and quasi-experimental studies evaluating emotional intelligence training programs would provide valuable evidence regarding practical applications.

Finally, future studies should examine potential mediating and moderating variables such as resilience, mindfulness, social support, personality traits, coping strategies, and self-esteem. Understanding these mechanisms would contribute to a more comprehensive theoretical model explaining how emotional intelligence influences anxiety.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH PRACTICE

The findings of this review have significant implications for mental health professionals, educators, policymakers, and researchers.

Educational institutions represent important settings for emotional intelligence development. Universities and colleges increasingly recognize the importance of supporting student mental health. Integrating emotional intelligence training into academic curricula, orientation programs, and counseling services may contribute to reduced anxiety and improved psychological well-being.

Mental health practitioners may also benefit from incorporating emotional intelligence principles into therapeutic interventions. Cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness-based approaches, positive psychology interventions, and emotional skills training programs all contain elements that enhance emotional awareness and regulation. Strengthening these



Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 7.2

ISSN No: 3049-4176

competencies may improve treatment outcomes among individuals experiencing anxiety-related difficulties.

At the organizational level, emotional intelligence training may assist young professionals in managing occupational stress, workplace uncertainty, and interpersonal challenges. Given the growing emphasis on emotional competencies within professional environments, such interventions may simultaneously promote mental health and occupational effectiveness.

From a public health perspective, emotional intelligence development may function as a preventive strategy aimed at reducing the burden of anxiety disorders. Community-based mental health initiatives that focus on emotional literacy, stress management, and adaptive coping could strengthen psychological resilience among young adults.

8. CONCLUSION

The present review examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and anxiety among young adults. Evidence from theoretical and empirical literature consistently indicates a significant negative association between these constructs. Individuals with higher emotional intelligence demonstrate superior emotional awareness, emotional regulation, adaptive coping, social competence, and psychological resilience, all of which contribute to lower anxiety levels. The findings suggest that emotional intelligence functions as a protective psychological resource that enhances adaptation to life's challenges. Through improved emotional understanding and regulation, emotionally intelligent individuals are better equipped to manage stress, interpret difficult situations constructively, and maintain psychological well-being.

Despite encouraging findings, further research is required to address methodological limitations, explore cultural variations, and evaluate intervention effectiveness. Particular attention should be directed toward longitudinal and experimental studies capable of establishing causal relationships. Additional research within Indian populations is also necessary to enhance contextual understanding and applicability.

In an era characterized by increasing psychological demands and mental health challenges, emotional intelligence offers a promising avenue for anxiety prevention and mental health promotion. As a learnable and developable competency, emotional intelligence has the potential to improve individual well-being, strengthen resilience, and contribute to healthier adaptation during the critical stage of young adulthood.

REFERENCES

1. Connor, B., & Slear, S. (2009). Emotional intelligence and anxiety; Emotional intelligence and resiliency. *International Journal of Learning*, 16(1).
2. Drigas, A., & Papoutsis, C. (2020). The need for emotional intelligence training education in critical and stressful situations: The case of COVID-19. *International Journal of Recent Contributions from Engineering, Science & IT*, 8(3).



Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 7.2

ISSN No: 3049-4176

3. Extremera, N., & Fernández-Berrocal, P. (2006). Emotional intelligence as predictor of mental, social, and physical health in university students. *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 9(1), 45–51.
4. Freedman, J. M., Freedman, P. E., Choi, D. Y., & Miller, M. (2025). The emotional recession: Global declines in emotional intelligence and its impact on organizational retention, burnout, and workforce resilience. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16.
5. Guil, R., Gómez-Molinero, R., Merchan-Clavellino, A., Gil-Olarte, P., & Zayas, A. (2019). Facing anxiety, growing up: Trait emotional intelligence as a mediator of the relationship between self-esteem and university anxiety. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10.
6. Mayer, J. D., & Salovey, P. (1997). What is emotional intelligence? In P. Salovey & D. Sluyter (Eds.), *Emotional development and emotional intelligence: Educational implications* (pp. 3–31). Basic Books.
7. Salovey, P., & Mayer, J. D. (1990). Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 9(3), 185–211.
8. Schneider, T. R., Lyons, J. B., & Khazon, S. (2013). Emotional intelligence and resilience. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 55(8), 909–914.