

Exploration of Separation Anxiety Disorder in Emerging Adults of General Population

Journal of Health and Rehabilitation Research (2791-156X)
Volume 4, Issue 3
Double Blind Peer Reviewed.
<https://jhrrmc.com/>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61919/jhrr.v4i3.1339>
www.lmi.education/



Riffat Sadiq¹, Maryam Abdul Razaq¹, Manahil Tahir¹, Farheen Khalid¹, Jaweria Anwar¹

Correspondence

Riffat Sadiq
riffat.sadiq@gcwuf.edu.pk

Affiliations

¹ Department of Applied Psychology, Government College Women University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

Keywords

Separation Anxiety Disorder, Emerging Adults, Gender Differences, Prevalence, Anxiety Disorders, Mental Health, SPSS Analysis, Severity Measure, Public Health.

Disclaimers

Authors' Contributions All authors contributed equally to the study design, data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation.

Conflict of Interest None declared

Data/supplements Available on request.

Funding None

Ethical Approval Respective Ethical Review Board

Study Registration N/A

Acknowledgments N/A



Open Access: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License

ABSTRACT

Background: Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD), traditionally associated with children and adolescents, is increasingly recognized in adults, impacting their social, academic, and personal functioning. Emerging adults, in particular, may experience SAD due to significant life transitions and relational dynamics.

Objective: This study aimed to explore the prevalence and gender differences of separation anxiety disorder in emerging adults of the general population.

Methods: A total of 176 emerging adults (88 boys and 88 girls), aged 18 to 27 years ($M = 21.29$; $SD = 2.51$), were recruited from public sector educational institutes in Faisalabad using convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Demographic Information Form and the Severity Measure for Separation Anxiety Disorder-Adult. Statistical analyses, including descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests, were performed using SPSS Version 25.

Results: The study found that 62.5% of boys and 59.09% of girls experienced mild separation anxiety, with 23.8% of girls and 14.7% of boys reporting moderate levels. A non-significant gender difference was observed ($t = -1.59$, $df = 174$, $p = 0.11$, $d = 0.21$).

Conclusion: Separation anxiety disorder is prevalent among emerging adults, with mild to moderate levels noted regardless of gender. Early intervention is crucial to prevent escalation of symptoms.

INTRODUCTION

Separation Anxiety Disorder is characterized by intense worry and discomfort associated with thoughts of being separated from a significant person, fear of losing a loved one, anticipation of unpleasant events, and an unwillingness to stay alone or go to bed. It also includes complaints of various physical symptoms (1). Separation Anxiety Disorder has now been included in the category of anxiety disorders, drawing attention to its emergence during other phases of life, such as adulthood. Besides children and adolescents, adults may also suffer from separation anxiety, often manifesting as anticipation of a terrible event or a fear of separation from significant others. Recent scientific literature has demonstrated separation anxiety as an emerging problem in adults, who also report persistent fear of being taken away from their significant ones (2). About 41% of adult patients reported symptoms of Separation Anxiety Disorder along with Major Depressive Disorder (3). Approximately 6.6% suffered from separation anxiety that became prominent over the age of eighteen (4). The lifetime prevalence of adult Separation Anxiety Disorder was 5.9%, associated with factors such as gender, income, past traumatic experiences (childhood), and family illness (5). Young adults, compared to children, seem to be anxious about different issues, such as changes in living environment or home (6). The inception of separation anxiety at an early age is likely to continue into adulthood, potentially going unnoticed or being masked by secondary features (7).

Excessive fear of separation from a significant person is the salient feature of Separation Anxiety Disorder. Sufferers may experience intense unhappiness when separating from loved ones, which can aggravate other negative emotional and behavioral issues, regardless of age. Emerging adults, too, are often in relationships infused with intimacy, attachment, and emotional security. For these reasons, emerging adults, like children, may also develop the fear of being taken away from their loved ones. However, few scientific investigations have been conducted on emerging adult separation anxiety, possibly due to the perception that it is primarily a problem of children and adolescents. Moreover, in some societies, individuals rarely seek professional consultancy until they experience severe to profound mental health problems, resulting in insufficient reporting of clinical cases. Due to the scarcity of scientific evidence and clinical cases, the present innovative work was undertaken to answer the following research questions: The objectives of this study were to determine whether emerging adults suffer from Separation Anxiety Disorder, to assess the prevalence of Separation Anxiety Disorder among emerging adults in the general population, and to examine whether there are gender differences in relation to Separation Anxiety Disorder.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The present study was conducted from February 2024 to May 2024 in Faisalabad city. A total sample of 176 participants, including boys ($n = 88$) and girls ($n = 88$), was recruited from public sector educational institutes of Faisalabad using a convenient sampling technique. The

sample size was computed through G*Power9. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 27 years ($M = 21.29$; $SD = 2.51$). All participants were recruited after providing written consent to share personal and essential information during data collection. At the time of sample recruitment, individuals with physical disabilities, chronic illnesses, hostilities, those from broken families, and children of single parents or parents with addiction or chronic illness were excluded to control for extraneous variables.

Personal information was collected using a Demographic Information Form, followed by the administration of the "Severity Measure for Separation Anxiety Disorder-Adult" (10) to screen for the presence of separation anxiety disorder among emerging adults. This measure comprised 10 items scored on a 5-point Likert scale (Never = 0, Occasionally = 1, Half of the time = 2, Most of the time = 3,

All the time = 4). The reliability of this measure for the present data was found to be ($\alpha = 0.81$). The data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests via SPSS Version 21. The study adhered to ethical standards in line with the Declaration of Helsinki.

RESULTS

The internal consistency of the Severity Measure for Separation Anxiety Disorder-Adult was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a value of 0.81, indicating good reliability for the measure in the current sample (Table 1). The normality of the data was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test, revealing that the data for girls were normally distributed ($p = 0.12$), while the data for boys were not normally distributed ($p = 0.01$) (Table 2).

Table 1: Internal Consistency for the Severity Measure for Separation Anxiety Disorder-Adult

Measure	Items (k)	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Severity Measure for Separation Anxiety Disorder	10	0.81	13.39	8.03

Table 2: Normality Test for Separation Anxiety Disorder Data

Group	Shapiro-Wilk Statistic	Degrees of Freedom (df)	p-value
Boys	0.96	88	0.01
Girls	0.97	88	0.12

The demographic characteristics of the participants showed that the majority (68.1%) were aged between 18 to 22 years, with an equal gender distribution (50% boys, 50% girls).

Most participants had at least an intermediate level of education (72.7%), and 62.5% belonged to nuclear families with more than five members (59.6%) (Table 3).

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n = 176)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Age	18-22	120	68.1
	23-27	56	31.8
Gender	Boys	88	50.0
	Girls	88	50.0
Educational Level	Intermediate	128	72.7
	Graduation	48	27.2
Family System	Nuclear	110	62.5
	Joint	66	37.5
Number of Family Members	Less than 5	71	40.3
	More than 5	105	59.6

An independent samples t-test was conducted to assess gender differences in separation anxiety disorder among emerging adults. The analysis revealed a non-significant difference between boys and girls ($t = -1.59$, $df = 174$, $p =$

0.11 , $d = 0.21$). Although the mean scores suggested higher levels of separation anxiety in girls ($M = 14.39$, $SD = 7.58$) compared to boys ($M = 12.50$, $SD = 8.16$).

Table 4: Prevalence of Separation Anxiety Disorder in Emerging Adults

Severity Level	Boys (f%)	Girls (f%)
None	17 (19.3%)	13 (14.7%)
Mild	55 (62.5%)	52 (59.09%)
Moderate	13 (14.7%)	21 (23.8%)
Severe	3 (3.4%)	2 (2.2%)
Extreme	0	0

Table 5: Independent Samples t-Test for Gender Differences in Separation Anxiety Disorder

Group	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Degrees of Freedom (df)	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
Boys	12.50	8.16	174	-1.59	0.11	0.21
Girls	14.39	7.58				

These results indicate that separation anxiety disorder is prevalent among emerging adults, with moderate to mild levels being the most reported. The findings suggest that separation anxiety in this population is not significantly influenced by gender, though there is a trend towards higher anxiety symptoms among girls.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the present research data (Table 1) demonstrated the reliability of the instrument used to detect separation anxiety in emerging adults. The measure of Separation Anxiety Disorder was found to be applicable to the general population of Pakistan as well. However, the data for only one group (girls) were found to be normally distributed. The main objective of the current study was to explore Separation Anxiety Disorder in emerging adults of the general population. From a developmental psychological perspective, the life stage between 18 to 29 years is referred to as emerging adulthood, characterized by distinct features, responsibilities, and issues (11). Therefore, the issues and concerns of emerging adults need to be addressed as they are transitioning into a real world that is rarely different from the one perceived during childhood and adolescence. Separation anxiety is one of the mental health issues addressed in the present study. The findings depicted moderate to mild levels of separation anxiety among both boys and girls. Previous studies have also explored separation anxiety in families with emerging adults, reporting that it often results from personal characteristics, mother-child relationships, father-mother marital relations, and family environment (12). In the present study, emerging adults experiencing moderate to mild levels of separation anxiety might have been worried due to their family environment, the marital relationship of their parents, their connection with their parents, and the way they were treated by family members, caregivers, or parents. Separation anxiety in adults has also been predicted by over-permissive, boundless, and overprotective parenting styles (13).

In the present study, although a non-significant gender difference was noted, girls had higher mean scores, indicating more separation anxiety symptoms in them. This might be due to their emotional response to stressful situations, as evident in a previous study that found young female adults reporting higher levels of separation anxiety (14). It has been suggested that females harbor more negative emotions, have aggressive tendencies, feel alienated, and are overwhelmed by sensory experiences. Another study depicted that patients with Separation Anxiety Disorder reported more stress, higher neuroticism, and disability (15). Unclear self-concept was prominent in young females suffering from Separation Anxiety Disorder

(16). Overall, anxious attachment of adults with their family, friends, and romantic partners intensified the separation anxiety symptoms (17). In the present study, these reasons might have contributed to the moderate to mild levels of separation anxiety disorder expressed among emerging adults, regardless of gender differences.

The present study only examined the prevalence and gender differences in Separation Anxiety Disorder among emerging adults. The factors causing and correlating with separation anxiety could more vividly illustrate this emerging problem and guide treatment approaches. Future researchers need to explore the reasons and consequences of Separation Anxiety Disorder for its timely recognition, detection, and treatment, to help make emerging adults more productive and functional.

CONCLUSION

Separation Anxiety Disorder is likely to develop during the emerging adulthood phase of life, irrespective of gender differences. The moderate to mild levels of Separation Anxiety Disorder observed in emerging adults of the general population are significant, as symptoms of mild problems may worsen if left unresolved for a long time. Prevention, management, and treatment of Separation Anxiety Disorder are essential, as it may impede the personal, social, and academic functioning of young adults if not given clinical attention on time.

REFERENCES

1. American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*. American Psychiatric Association; 2022.
2. Manicavasagar V, Silove D. *Separation Anxiety Disorder in Adults: Clinical Features, Diagnostic Dilemmas, and Treatment Guidelines*. Elsevier Academic Press; 2020.
3. Elbay RY, Gormez A, Kilic A, Avci SH. Separation Anxiety Disorder Among Outpatients with Major Depressive Disorder: Prevalence and Clinical Correlates. *Compr Psychiatry*. 2021;105:152219.
4. Baldwin DS, Gordon R, Abelli M, Pini S. The Separation of Adult Separation Anxiety Disorder. *CNS Spectr*. 2016;21(4):289–294.
5. Ekici F, Karaoglan G, Kandeger A, Demir LS, Guler O. Exploring Overlooked Anxiety Disorders: A Study on the Prevalence of Adult Separation Anxiety Disorder and Specific Phobia in the General Population. *Genel Tip Derg*. 2023;33(6):796-805.
6. Lourens ME, Shet LP, Effendy F, Islam A. An Empirical Study on Adult Separation Anxiety and the Effect on Children. *J Posit Psychol*. 2022;6(4):8363-8370.
7. Orgiles M, Espada JP, Garica-Fernandez JM, Mendez X, Hidalgo MD. Most Feared Situations Related to Separation Anxiety and Characteristics by Age and

- Gender in Late Childhood. *Ann Psychol.* 2011;27(1):80-85.
8. Manicavasagar V, Silove D, Curtis J, Wagner R. Continuities of Separation Anxiety from Early Life into Adulthood. *J Anxiety Disord.* 2000;14(1):1-18.
 9. Faul F, Erdfelder E, Lang AG, Buchner A. G*Power 3: A Flexible Statistical Power Analysis Program for the Social, Behavioral, and Biomedical Sciences. *Behav Res Methods.* 2007;39:175-91.
 10. American Psychiatric Association. Severity Measure for Separation Anxiety Disorder-Adult. American Psychiatric Association; 2013.
 11. Arnett JJ, Žukauskienė R, Sugimura K. The New Life Stage of Emerging Adulthood at Ages 18-29 Years: Implications for Mental Health. *Lancet Psychiatry.* 2014;1(7):569-76.
 12. Kin E, Soenens B, Beyers W. Separation Anxiety in Families with Emerging Adults. *J Fam Psychol.* 2013;27(3):495-505.
 13. Basbug S, Cesur G, Batingun YD. Perceived Parental Styles and Adult Separation Anxiety: The Mediating Role of Interpersonal Cognitive Distortions. *Turk J Psychiatry.* 2017;1-12.
 14. Finsaas MC, Klein DN. Adult Separation Anxiety: Personality Characteristics of a Neglected Clinical Syndrome. *J Abnorm Psychol.* 2021;130(6):620-626.
 15. Silove DM, Marnane CL, Wagner R, Manicavasagar VL, Rees S. The Prevalence and Correlates of Adult Separation Anxiety Disorder in an Anxiety Clinic. *BMC Psychiatry.* 2010;10:21.
 16. Posavac SS, Posavac HD. Adult Separation Anxiety Disorder Symptomology as a Risk Factor for Thin-Ideal Internalization: The Role of Self-Concept Clarity. *Psychol Rep.* 2020;123(3):674-686.
 17. Mabilia D, Di Riso D, Lis A, Bobbio A. A Prediction Model for Separation Anxiety: The Role of Attachment Styles and Internalizing Symptoms in Italian Young Adults. *J Adult Dev.* 2019;26(4):286-294.