

# Existential Concerns, Meaning, and College Adjustment Among Undergraduate College Students

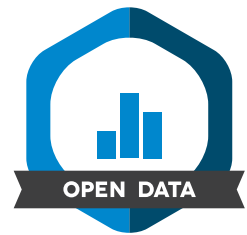
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**ABSTRACT.** Transitioning to college is a psychologically vulnerable time for students, and existential anxiety (EA) may create additional adjustment challenges. EA describes the psychological distress that can arise from central metaphysical concerns. Established research has highlighted potential sources of EA in college such as social isolation, identity disruption and meaninglessness (Diehl et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2021; Shin & Steger, 2016). This article examines the role of existential anxiety and meaning in relation to college adjustment and the coping process. A survey was administered over 14 weeks with undergraduate students ( $n = 178$ ) measuring EA, meaning in life, college adjustment, and coping methods. We expected EA and meaninglessness to correspond with worsening college adjustment and predicted Emotion and Avoidant Focused coping to be the most commonly endorsed methods of coping. Pearson's correlations found a positive relationship between college adjustment and Presence of Meaning,  $r(177) = .29, p > .001$ , and a negative relationship with EA,  $r(177) = -.36, p > .001$ . In a linear regression Searching for Meaning, Presence of Meaning, and psychological distress predicted college adjustment,  $R^2 = .48$ ,  $F(7, 166) = 23.71, p < .001$ . We conclude that EA has an indirect relationship to college adjustment through a magnification of existing psychological distress. Similarly, meaning proved to be a powerful variable. These findings present college students as a relevant population for existential psychology as well as highlighting the impact of meaning in existential psychology.

**Keywords:** existential anxiety, meaning, coping, adjustment, college



Open Data badge earned for transparent research practices. Data are available at <https://osf.io/5a78s>

For some students, the adjustment to college presents new challenges and stressors (Lu, 1994). This significant period of transformation can raise existential concerns surrounding purpose, passions, and meaning in life (LeSueur, 2019). The goal of this article was to investigate the experience of these existential concerns, their associated impacts on college adjustment, and the coping strategies deployed to deal with such concerns.

## Existential Anxiety

Although existential ponderings have been traditionally relegated to the realm of philosophy (Wild, 1960), psychology has increasingly recognized these intangible topics as relevant to a more empirically based field (Leontiev, 2013; Pervin, 1960). With its origins in existentialism, existential psychology focuses on the human experience and motivation, in addition to questions on freedom, death, and meaning (Koole et al.,

SUMMER 2025

PSI CHI  
JOURNAL OF  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
RESEARCH

2006). The metaphysical and intractable nature of these concerns can produce friction or emotional distress, a phenomenon referred to as existential anxiety (EA; Weems et al., 2004). EA was conceptualized originally in philosophical writing through works such as Sartre's *Nausea* or Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* (Sartre, 2000; Kierkegaard, 1980). For more information, refer to *Kierkegaard's Influence on the Social Sciences*, particularly the chapters on Irvin Yalom, Ernest Becker, and Rollo May (Stewart, 2016).

EA would later be identified in clinical settings by psychotherapists such as Irvin Yalom and Rollo May (May, 2015; Yalom, 1980). Their initial methodologies focused on individual-centered psychotherapy to address exact existential concerns (Yalom, 1980). Similar forms of existential-inspired psychotherapy continue to this day (Vos et al., 2015). At the core of EA is a fundamental gap between one's knowledge of self and the ragged uncertainty of our existence (Ullmann, 2024). EA is believed to be an extension of personality, coupled with both self-awareness and gaps in our knowledge of the world (Shumaker et al., 2020). In this study, EA was measured via the Existential Concerns Questionnaire (ECQ) as developed by Van Bruggen et al. (2015, 2017, 2018). The ECQ highlights five distinct domains (i.e., death, meaninglessness, guilt, social isolation, and identity; Van Bruggen et al., 2017).

### Domains

**Death.** Heightened concerns about death are suspended in a lack of certainty or control over death (Lehto & Stein, 2009). This is often centered in the realization that one's own life will eventually come to an end, and that, as humans, our existence is fragile and subject to risk (Tomer & Eliason, 1996). At a baseline, death anxiety is insufficient to raise clinical concern; however, it can present in such a way as to necessitate intervention (Furer & Walker, 2008). Similarly, Terror Management Theory takes an anthropological approach by trying to explain social and cultural behaviors within human societies as an extension of existential predicaments (Greenberg, 2012). The theory proposes that an awareness of our own mortality is a byproduct of whatever advanced consciousness humans may possess. In doing so, the awareness of mortality is processed as a potential threat. Thus, when faced with this mortality awareness, people act in a way as to reduce or evade the discomfort that comes with awareness. Given this, it may be possible that the transition to college creates a confrontation with the awareness of death during a time of growth.

**Guilt.** For some, the possibility of death can come to represent a conclusive ending point that can create further concerns about the life that one has

lived (Binder, 2022). This manifests as a guilt that one may have left important things undone, failed in their purpose, or otherwise failed to find a purpose (Lucas, 2004). Guilt can also emerge as a result of unfulfilled expectations or accomplishments in addition to a struggle with feelings of directionless or lacking in purpose. As such, heightened concerns about death are often comorbid with fears of existential guilt or lack of meaning (Breitbart, 2017). In a college population students may face pressures to get the most out of their college experience or have difficulty facing pressures of accomplishing something or finding their purpose.

**Social Isolation.** This refers to a perceived lack of connection to the broader social world (Helm, Jimenez et al., 2020). Here, social isolation is also tied to the inability to share the same perspective as a peer, and thus the futility of complete understanding of another (Yalom, 1980, p. 355). As Yalom wrote, social isolation "derives from the fact that each of us inhabits a world fully known only to ourselves" (2008, p. 121). However, connection and a shared perspective were found in one study to detract from existential feelings of isolation (Pinel et al., 2006). While similar to traditional notions of loneliness, social isolation encompasses an existential component in its engagement with how one may feel wholly isolated in their beliefs and values (Becker, 2014). Social isolation can lead to psychological distress that may be tied to sense of identity (Helm, Medrano et al., 2020). This is particularly relevant with college students, especially first-year students who must work to create new social connections and who reevaluate themselves next to their peers.

**Identity.** The term identity has come to take on a multifaceted use. In the existential context, identity refers to an understanding of how people view themselves, and how we as agents fit as actors on the stage of life (Koole et al., 2006). Identity has been recognized as an important existential concept even in adolescents that forms how we understand our purpose and the ways in which we rationalize the world around us (Berman et al., 2006). Identity is often tied to career development as well as social connection (Campbell et al., 2019; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Both of these are important considerations, given that college can be viewed as a period to make both major career choices and form social connections (Brown et al., 2023). Furthermore, because self-identity has been found to have an impact on adjustment processes, we consider conflicts in identity to be possible contributors to EA (Campbell et al., 2019).

**Meaninglessness.** All of these previous domains can create symptomatic meaninglessness. The concept of meaning in human lives is a concept that philosophers

SUMMER 2025

PSI CHI  
JOURNAL OF  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
RESEARCH

and, increasingly, scientists have had to engage with (Metz, 2013). At some level, the meaningful life holds an inherent appeal with clear psychosocial benefits such as reduced stress and adaptive methods of coping (Hooker et al., 2018). Meaning is broadly construed as a possession of perceptibly important things or as a sense of purpose (Dezelic, 2017). Certain forms of psychotherapy have been developed to target meaninglessness as a root cause of psychic unrest given its importance for holistic wellbeing (Wong, 2010). Meaning is difficult to define but here we treat it as a binary variable consisting of the presence of meaning and a tendency to search for meaning (Steger et al., 2008). For an overview of meaning in existential psychology see Batthyany and Russo-Netzer (2014). In college populations, meaninglessness may primarily present alongside career indecision or a lack of purpose (Miller & Rottinghaus, 2014).

### *Coping With EA*

When it comes to existential psychology, EA carries with it a unique set of challenges (Heidenreich et al., 2021). EA intrinsically holds an intangible, if not unresolvable, nature, and due to this, minimal concrete work has focused explicitly on the how people cope with existential concerns or questions. While pioneers of existential psychology pushed for meaning-centered models of psychotherapy, there is a lack of material that focuses on how people work to resolve EA independent of formal clinical intervention (Yalom, 1980). Here we use the transactional model of stress developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) in which coping serves as a means to deal with stressful events. The research here examines coping from three independent styles. Emotion focused coping involves the resolution of distressing emotion through strategies such as meditation or substance abuse (Austenfeld & Stanton, 2004). Problem focused coping is the resolution of distress through concrete attempts to resolve the stressor (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007). Avoidant coping involves avoidance or denial of the stressor (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985).

Prior research presents a clear relationship between factors of coping and psychosocial health in college populations (Cousins et al., 2017), such as aspects of wellbeing (Chen, 2016), and suicidality and meaningfulness (Yi et al., 2021). However, there is a definitive lack of material examining coping in response to EA. This dearth extends to the role of coping as a buffer between the effects of EA on college adjustment. However, given the abstract and unsolvable nature of EA, emotion-based coping may be better equipped to confront the experience of EA compared to avoidant or problem-based coping.

### *EA in College Populations*

In the contemporary environment of higher-learning, student well-being is vital (Jones et al., 2021). Late teenage years into the early twenties marks a remarkable time of psychological changes (Arnett, 2000). Roughly one third of people in this age range will go off to college in an American context (Arnett, 2000). These psychological changes are especially pertinent in a college population owing to the increased choices, family separation, and responsibility that can be associated with leaving for college (Rice, 1992). Coping is an important moderator of psychosocial wellbeing in college populations. Coping strategies serve as barriers for stress, burnout, and other mental health issues for college students (Stallman et al., 2022; Straud & McNaughton-Cassill, 2019). However, maladaptive coping strategies may be detrimental to adjustment (McNaughton-Cassill et al., 2021).

College students represent a psychosocially vulnerable population, particularly during the initial adjustment process (Eisenberg et al., 2013). College adjustment refers to the process of acclimating to the college environment both academically and socially (Katz & Somers, 2017). These existing vulnerabilities can exacerbate the confrontation with existential topics, thereby producing EA (Didehvar & Wada, 2023). College presents a unique environment for EA to develop. Students face a new environment, major life and career choices, all while being away from home often, for the first time. These factors may create increased concerns about identity, social isolation, and meaninglessness noted previously in college populations. Diehl et al. (2018), for example, identified loneliness, or social isolation, as an important factor in college adjustment. Dezutter et al. (2014) similarly found that dimensions of meaning played a crucial role in psychosocial functioning in a college sample. In one instance, thematic coding of college focus groups showed that social connection, uncertainty of the future, and making meaning were identified as important existential themes (Brown et al., 2023). Furthermore, students coming into college may feel pressure to make the most of their time at college, reflecting a form of existential guilt or otherwise struggle with their own identity (Jones & Abes, 2013). Often, particularly in college populations, meaninglessness presents as lack of direction in career or personal dynamics (Miller & Rottinghaus, 2014). Similarly, research done with first-year Chinese college students found meaning to be a significant predictor of college adjustment (Wei et al., 2024).

In a college environment, existential concerns were found to contribute to suicidal ideation, though coping strategies moderated the presence of suicidality

(Yi et al., 2021). For many, college is a time of what can be, or feel like, life altering decisions in a space where developing teens are granted increased freedoms and responsibilities. EA may then develop as a result of a pressure to make meaningful social and career decisions (Miller & Rottinghaus, 2014), out of a struggle to form social connections, or in a sense of isolation among one's peers (Helm, Medrano et al., 2020).

### Study Aims

The present research aimed to fill existing gaps in the literature on how EA manifests in college populations. Although college students may not seem like a relevant demographic for studying EA given their youth, in actuality, the college population is highly vulnerable to EA (Brown et al., 2023). We additionally aimed to understand how specific coping methods can mitigate the impact of EA on college adjustment. Finally, we hoped that these results may be useful as action research in order to inform programs designed to meet the needs of college students.

Better college adjustment was hypothesized to correlate with lower psychological distress, EA, and greater Presence of Meaning. EA was expected to be correlated with heightened psychological distress and lower Presence of Meaning. When measuring coping subscales, we expected that worse college adjustment would correlate with Problem and Emotion focused coping since Avoidant coping may be more difficult in a residential college experience. We hypothesized that EA would correlate more with Avoidant coping and Emotion Focused coping, but not Problem Focused coping given the intractable nature of EA that fails to present tangible problems for Problem Focused coping. We expected that specific coping methods like Substance Use, Denial, or Emotional Support for example would be highly associated with worse college adjustment and increased EA. For the regressions we expected that college adjustment would be predicted by EA, the Presence of Meaning, psychological distress, and Problem and Emotion Focused coping.

## Methods

### Recruitment and Demographics

Data was collected from a small liberal-arts college in the United States. The study was evaluated and approved by the Colgate University Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. All participants were enrolled undergraduate college students recruited from active psychology department courses eligible to receive class research credit for survey completion. Data were collected via SONA data collection systems. Participants were assigned a unique identifier to dispense

research credit and to protect anonymity. There were 187 responses, of which nine were eliminated due to missing or incomplete data. Out of 178 complete responses, demographic data was available for 149 of the participants (see Table 1). For participants with demographic data, the average age was 18.85 ( $SD = 0.92$ ). In total, 45.6% of participants were first-year students, though 35.6% of respondents failed to identify their class year. The relative youth of this sample is primarily due to the fact that psychology classes involving a research participation component are skewed towards students in their first two years of college. This may be a benefit though since college students in their first year may experience greater disruption in the college adjustment processes given the lack of time they may have had to acclimate.

### Measures

Participants completed an online survey through the Qualtrics platform. Completion was voluntary and did not use the "forced response" option.

**Existential Anxiety.** EA was measured using the Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (ECQ). An English adaptation of ECQ was used (Van Bruggen et al., 2017). The ECQ was originally developed by Van Bruggen following the five previously introduced conceptual domains (2018). Developed using three rounds of interviews by Van Bruggen and colleagues, the ECQ demonstrated adequate internal consistency in both clinical and nonclinical samples (Van Bruggen, 2017). The current sample demonstrated similarly appropriate reliability ( $\alpha = .93$ ). Participants are asked to rate how frequently they may have certain experiences or thoughts on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). A sample item related to the domain of death

**TABLE 1**

### Demographics

| Variable                      | N   |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| Gender                        |     |
| Male                          | 39  |
| Female                        | 110 |
| No gender data                | 29  |
| Race                          |     |
| White or European American    | 114 |
| Asian or Asian American       | 16  |
| Black/African American        | 8   |
| Native American or Indigenous | 1   |
| No race data                  | 39  |

*Note.* Demographic data was collected via a separate prescreen survey. Twenty-nine participants failed to complete the prescreen survey creating a dearth of demographic data.

SUMMER 2025

PSI CHI  
JOURNAL OF  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
RESEARCH

is “It frightens me that at some point in time I will be dead.” A sample item for the guilt domain is “I worry about not living the life that I could live.” Based on factor analysis in its development the ECQ is considered a unidimensional scale. Thus, although the ECQ includes questions across all five of the theoretical domains, statistical analyses were done using the average score across all questions with higher scores indicating higher EA.

Meaning in Life was measured independently from EA using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006). Although meaninglessness is one of the domains captured by the ECQ, the ECQ is unidimensional. Given the potential significance of meaninglessness, this additional measure was used to enable statistical analysis independent of the ECQ (Steger et al., 2006). An additional strength of using the MLQ is that it measures both the Presence of Meaning and Searching

for Meaning. In its conception, both subscales of the MLQ exhibited Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values above .80 (Steger et al., 2006). The Presence of Meaning category identified participants current sense of having meaning in their lives. Participants ranked their agreeableness with statements such as “I understand my life's meaning.” Searching for Meaning identified how strongly people move to find meaning, using items such as “I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life.” Participants ranked the statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). For both categories, the mean score was used. Presence of Meaning was scored so that increased scores indicated a greater sense of meaning while increased Searching for Meaning scores indicated a greater tendency to be searching for meaning. In this study, both Presence and Searching subscales were found to be internally consistent in our sample with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .84 and .82 respectively.

**Psychological Distress.** Psychological distress was measured using the DASS-21 (Henry & Crawford, 2005). Developed for nondiagnostic use on a 4-point scale it identifies three distinct subscales of Depression, Anxiety, and Stress. Sample items include; “I found it hard to wind down...” for the Anxiety subscale or “I felt down-hearted and blue...” for the Depression scale. In testing the DASS-21 exhibited a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .88. Psychological distress is measured based on these three subscales, with higher scores indicating increased levels of distress. Scores range from 0 (*did not at all apply to me*) to 3 (*applied a great deal*). For analyses an average score was computed from the sum of scores from the three subscales referred to here as psychological distress. The DASS-21 was deemed to be internally consistent ( $\alpha = .93$ ). The scale for the variable Psychological Distress was from 0 to 21 with increased scores being indicative of greater psychological distress.

**Coping Styles.** Coping strategies were evaluated using the Brief-COPE. Based on an initially developed 60-item measure this abbreviated 28-item version distinguishes between problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant types of coping (Carver, 1997). Measured on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*a great deal*), the Brief-COPE provides an additional 14 two-item subscales identifying specific types of coping. For example, people are asked how often they have “been making jokes about it” to measure humor or “I've been using alcohol or other drugs to help me get through it” to measure substance use. Scale validity was established in Carver (1997) where the subscales exhibited internal consistency with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values above .50 as deemed acceptable (1997). Scoring was done by computing the average score across problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant types of coping with a scale from 1 to 4. The subscales were

TABLE 2

## Correlations Between All Variables of Interest

| Variable                    | M    | SD   | 1      | 2      | 3      | 4     | 5      | 6     | 7     | 8    |
|-----------------------------|------|------|--------|--------|--------|-------|--------|-------|-------|------|
| 1. College Adjustment (CAQ) | 4.74 | 0.95 | -      |        |        |       |        |       |       |      |
| 2. College Adjustment (CAT) | 2.92 | 0.50 | .71**  | -      |        |       |        |       |       |      |
| 3. Existential Anxiety      | 2.64 | 0.75 | -.36** | -.51** | -      |       |        |       |       |      |
| 4. Searching for Meaning    | 3.60 | 0.79 | -.22*  | -.33** | .29**  | -     |        |       |       |      |
| 5. Presence of Meaning      | 3.21 | 0.84 | .29**  | .36**  | -.36** | -.13  | -      |       |       |      |
| 6. Psychological Distress   | 5.83 | 4.10 | -.53** | -.66** | .63**  | .27** | -.30** | -     |       |      |
| 7. Emotion Focused Coping   | 2.29 | 0.54 | -.21*  | -.37** | .41**  | .30** | -.16   | .59** | -     |      |
| 8. Problem Focused Coping   | 2.51 | 0.62 | -.00   | -.12   | .17    | .24*  | .05    | .25** | .65** | -    |
| 9. Avoidant Coping          | 1.80 | 0.51 | -.33** | -.43** | .43**  | .20*  | -.20*  | .55** | .55** | .26* |

Note. \* $p < .01$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

TABLE 3

## Correlations Between All Coping Subscales of Interest

| Variable                    | M    | SD   | 1      | 2      | 3     | 4      | 5     | 6     | 7     | 8    | 9    | 10  |
|-----------------------------|------|------|--------|--------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|------|------|-----|
| 1. College Adjustment (CAQ) | 4.74 | 0.95 | -      |        |       |        |       |       |       |      |      |     |
| 2. Existential Anxiety      | 2.64 | 0.75 | -.36** | -      |       |        |       |       |       |      |      |     |
| 3. Searching for Meaning    | 4.74 | 0.95 | -.22*  | .29**  | -     |        |       |       |       |      |      |     |
| 4. Presence of Meaning      | 3.60 | 0.79 | .29**  | -.36** | .13   | -      |       |       |       |      |      |     |
| 5. Psychological Distress   | 3.21 | 0.84 | -.52** | .63**  | .27** | -.30** | -     |       |       |      |      |     |
| 6. Humor                    | 4.58 | 1.94 | -.22*  | .33**  | .15   | -.21*  | .49** | -     |       |      |      |     |
| 7. Venting                  | 4.35 | 1.49 | -.27** | .32**  | .29** | -.24*  | .51** | .54** | -     |      |      |     |
| 8. Self-Blame               | 4.59 | 1.88 | -.36** | .48**  | .27** | -.34** | .68** | .31** | .50** | -    |      |     |
| 9. Denial                   | 3.03 | 1.42 | -.23*  | .31**  | .16   | -.01   | .34** | .35** | .23*  | .23* | -    |     |
| 10. Substance Use           | 2.87 | 1.47 | -.14   | .22*   | .12   | -.25** | .29** | .19   | .23*  | .24* | .23* | -   |
| 11. Emotional Support       | 5.36 | 1.81 | .08    | .22*   | .22*  | .10    | .23*  | .18   | .46** | .21* | .12  | .13 |

Note. \* $p < .01$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

scored by adding the two questions together to have a scale from 2 to 8. Here, the Brief-COPE scale had a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .89.

**College Adjustment.** Participants general adaptation to the college environment was measured using two independent scales. The College Adaptation Test (CAT) is a 19-item measure assessing the experience of adjusting to college (Pennebaker et al., 1990). It uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). In its conception, the CAT exhibited a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .79 and demonstrated similar reliability with our sample. ( $\alpha$  = .75; Pennebaker et al., 1990). A sample item is "I have worried about the impression I make on others." The CAT was reverse scored so that increasing scores indicate better adjustment.

The College Adaptation Questionnaire (CAQ) measures college adjustment across 18 items that were rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*; Crombag, 1968). A sample item is "I am very satisfied with the course of my studies." Reliability and validity of the CAQ was externally established (Van Rooijen, 1986). In our sample, the CAQ exhibited a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .89. The CAQ uses the average scores with increasing scores indicating better adjust.

## Results

Data was analyzed using IBM's SPSS Statistics program version 29.0.1.0. Data is available at <https://osf.io/5a78s>.

### Descriptive and Correlational Analysis

First, we assessed means, standard deviations, and Pearson's correlations between all variables of interest (see Table 2). College adjustment (as measured with the CAQ) had a positive correlation with the Presence of Meaning,  $r(176) = .29, p < .001$ , and was negatively correlated with Avoidant coping,  $r(176) = -.33, p < .001$ . In addition, the CAQ was negatively correlated with EA,  $r(177) = -.36, p < .001$ , Searching for Meaning,  $r(176) = -.22, p = .003$ , psychological distress,  $r(175) = -.52, p < .001$ , and Emotion Focused coping,  $r(177) = -.22, p = .005$ .

EA was positively correlated with Searching for Meaning,  $r(177) = .29, p < .001$ , psychological distress,  $r(176) = .63, p < .001$ , Emotion Focused coping,  $r(177) = .41, p < .001$ , and Avoidant coping,  $r(176) = .43, p < .001$ . EA was negatively correlated with Presence of Meaning,  $r(177) = -.36, p < .001$ , and the CAQ,  $r(177) = -.36, p < .001$ .

### Coping Subscales

Individual coping subscales outlined in the Brief-COPE were also analyzed (see Table 3). In measuring the college adjustment process, the CAQ was used where increasing

scores indicate better adjustment. Certain positive types of coping were negatively correlated with the CAQ like Venting,  $r(177) = -.27, p < .001$ , and Humor,  $r(177) = -.22, p = .004$ . Certain potentially maladaptive methods were negatively correlated with the CAQ including Self-blame,  $r(177) = -.36, p < .001$ , and Denial,  $r(177) = -.23, p = .002$ . The correlation between worsening college adjustment and Substance Use was only approaching significance,  $r(177) = -.14, p = .057$ . Neither Planning nor Emotional Support were significantly correlated with either college adjustment scales.

EA demonstrated a strong positively correlation with Humor,  $r(178) = .33, p < .001$ , and Venting,  $r(177) = .32, p < .001$ . Certain potentially maladaptive strategies exhibited a strong positive correlation with EA such as Self-blame,  $r(178) = .48, p < .001$ , and Denial,  $r(177) = .31, p < .001$ . Additionally, there was a weak positive relationship between EA and Substance Use,  $r(178) = .22, p = .004$ , as well as Emotional Support,  $r(177) = .22, p = .003$ .

**TABLE 4**

#### Multiple Linear Regression Predicting College Adjustment (CAT; $n = 173$ )

| Effect                 | $\beta$      | SE  | 95% CI |      | $p$   |
|------------------------|--------------|-----|--------|------|-------|
|                        | Standardized |     | LL     | UL   |       |
| Existential Anxiety    | -.07         | .05 | -.14   | .05  | .376  |
| Searching for Meaning  | -.16         | .04 | -.17   | -.03 | .009  |
| Presence of Meaning    | .15          | .04 | .02    | .16  | .014  |
| Psychological Distress | -.53         | .01 | -.08   | -.04 | <.001 |
| Emotion Focused Coping | .08          | .07 | -.10   | .24  | .408  |
| Problem Focused Coping | .03          | .06 | -.10   | .15  | .671  |
| Avoidant Coping        | -.11         | .07 | -.24   | .03  | .131  |

Note. Adjusted  $R^2 = .48, F(7, 166) = 23.71, p < .001$ , 95% CI [2.98, 3.90].

**TABLE 5**

#### Multiple Linear Regression Predicting College Adjustment (CAQ; $n = 173$ )

| Effect                 | $\beta$      | SE  | 95% CI |      | $p$   |
|------------------------|--------------|-----|--------|------|-------|
|                        | Standardized |     | LL     | UL   |       |
| Existential Anxiety    | .02          | .11 | -.20   | .23  | .858  |
| Searching for Meaning  | -.11         | .08 | -.30   | .03  | .114  |
| Presence of Meaning    | .13          | .08 | -.01   | .31  | .057  |
| Psychological Distress | -.51         | .02 | -.16   | -.07 | <.001 |
| Emotion Focused Coping | .16          | .19 | -.11   | .65  | .156  |
| Problem Focused Coping | .07          | .13 | -.16   | .37  | .439  |
| Avoidant Coping        | -.11         | .15 | -.50   | .10  | .186  |

Note. Adjusted  $R^2 = .29, F(7, 166) = 11.31, p < .001$ , 95% CI [3.81, 5.85].

SUMMER 2025

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### Predicting College Adjustment

To test the hypothesis that EA would predict college adjustment we ran a multiple regression predicting college adjustment from EA, Searching for Meaning, psychological distress, Emotion Focused coping, Problem Focused coping, and Avoidant coping. Data were initially scanned to remove participants with significant portions of missing data. Listwise exclusion was used to handle missing values, out of 178 initial participants 173 were used in the regressions. In order to simplify the model, coping subscales were not included in the regression. Independent regressions were used for each measure of college adjustment (i.e., the College Adaptation Test [see Table 4] and the College Adaptation Questionnaire [see Table 5]). The CAT exhibited an adjusted  $R^2$  of .48,  $F(7, 166) = 23.71$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [2.98, 3.90]. The CAQ had an adjusted  $R^2$  of .29,  $F(7, 166) = 11.31$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Contrary to hypotheses, EA was not a significant predictor in either regression. However, in the regression using the CAT both Searching for Meaning and the Presence of Meaning were significant predictors of college adjustment ( $\beta = -.16$ ,  $p = .009$ ;  $\beta = .15$ ,  $p = .014$ ) though this did not hold true using the CAQ. Psychological distress significantly predicted college adjustment in the CAT ( $\beta = -.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the CAQ ( $\beta = -.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, psychological distress predicted both the CAT ( $\beta = -.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the CAQ ( $\beta = -.51$ ,  $p < .001$ ). On both adjustment measures, the three coping subscales did not appear to predict college adjustment.

It is interesting to note that college adjustment as measured through the CAT was better predicted by EA and coping variables than college adjustment as measured through the CAQ. It is unclear what aspect of these college adjustment measures accounts for this difference.

### Discussion

The study confirmed hypotheses that college adjustment correlates with lower distress, EA, and more meaning, and that EA correlates with increased distress and lower levels of meaning. As hypothesized, EA correlated with increased Avoidant and Emotion Focused coping but not Problem Focused. Contrary to hypotheses, while college adjustment was minorly correlated with Emotion Focused coping it did not correlate with Problem Focused coping. The regressions confirmed hypotheses that college adjustment is predicted by distress, however the three coping focuses did not predict adjustment. Perhaps most significantly, existential anxiety alone was not predictive of college adjustment.

EA appears to have a negative relationship to college adjustment, though later regressions did not immediately reinforce this. Similarly, college adjustment

was positively correlated with Presence of Meaning and negatively correlated with Searching for Meaning, which is reflective of previous research that found meaning to have a positive academic effect (Wei et al., 2024). These two points, that heightened EA worsens adjustment while meaning supports it, highlights the heavy importance of meaning in influencing EA and college adjustment independently. The importance of meaning may stem from the presence of important activities in student's lives (Boone et al., 2023), that reflects a connection between extracurriculars and student happiness (King et al., 2021).

Additionally, in line with hypotheses, EA was positively correlated with Emotion Focused coping. emotional and avoidant methods were more strongly correlated with EA however problem-solving styles had a far weaker association which suggests that higher frequencies of emotional and avoidant coping were the primary ways that students dealt with heightened EA (Langle, 2008). This would be appropriately reflective of the unresolvable nature of EA, such that there is no tangibly resolvable problem for Problem Focused coping to target.

There were significant positive correlations between EA, self-blame, and denial indicating that higher levels of EA were associated with these coping methods. We believe this to reflect the inherent difficulty people have with accepting the inexplicable circumstances of their lives. This is because EA is rooted in an uncertainty about ourselves and existence (Van Den Bos, 2009). Because the confrontation with EA is an internal one the approaches people take to coping reflect an internal struggle.

The college adjustment regressions reinforced the strong relationship between college adjustment and psychological distress (Olmstead et al., 2016). Given the CAT regression predicting college adjustment from psychological distress and both domains of meaning, we believe this to be an indicator of the importance of meaning in college adjustment (Garrosa et al., 2017). However, EA was not a strong predictor of either college adjustment scales.

Despite this, other included variables were significant in combination within the regression models. We believe that EA was not a direct predictor, and that it may have played an indirect role in college adjustment by influencing psychological distress, and due to its overlap with the domains of meaningfulness. This notion reflects the theoretical background of key figures such as Yalom that treat the unanswerable nature of these existential answers as innately anxiety-producing. It is likely that EA is not making it difficult to adjust to college but rather that EA is producing psychological distress that is compounding the psychological detriments of poor college adjustment. Additionally, because domains

of meaning had a stronger relationship to college adjustment, it is likely that meaninglessness as a domain of the ECQ was the driving factor behind the ECQ while the other domains were less potent. It may be that the domains of social isolation, guilt, and identity constitute what is prioritized and therefore meaningful in the lives of college students. In a college environment social isolation is most evident in the pressure to create novel social networks and the contrasting sense of distance from childhood social connections and family systems. A sense of guilt is reflected in the chance to make the most of opportunity and pressure to make impactful choices. Both guilt and isolation are two of many factors in college that contribute to a rapidly developing identity. These three domains above all may contribute to meaning or meaninglessness in the ECQ that is the most impactful.

Regardless, the conception of meaning played the greatest roll across variables. This suggests that, going forward, meaningfulness or domains measuring meaning should continue to be treated as significant effectors in existential future models, and that the ECQ would benefit from more research into its individual domains.

Overall, despite a limited sample size, all scales demonstrated excellent reliability. The most significant limitation to the study was in the deficient range of diversity in our respondents. Additionally, the study suffered a lack of other demographic data such as socioeconomic and religious status that may limit conclusions. Because the ECQ scale used to measure EA was unidimensional we were unable to distinguish the impact that the individual domains of EA may have had, and instead had to use a variable of general EA. This means that certain domains captured by the ECQ most likely had a far greater effect on other variables. However, the use of the MLQ successfully identified the heightened effect that the concept of meaning played in the formation of EA. Additionally, though the Brief-COPE scale demonstrated validity both in its conception and in our sample, the scale exhibited fluctuating factor structure which may sway values (Solberg et al., 2022). One further consideration is the lack of standardization within the Likert scales used across measures.

Despite these limitations, this work has emphasized the importance of the human concept of meaning, as well as having demonstrated the detrimental effects of meaninglessness. The use of the Brief-COPE reinforces prior research demonstrating the popularity of certain coping methods in college populations while shedding light on how people may use avoidant and emotionally centered methods of coping to deal with existential friction (Brougham et al., 2009). The work done here further reinforces the prior research identifying the concept of meaning as a relevant factor in the lives of college students

(Shin & Steger, 2016). Notably, this research marks the first tangible body of research to our knowledge that examines specific coping methods alongside EA and the concept of meaning. Other work has established emotion focused coping as a response to EA (Abeyta et al., 2015). What we have attempted to do though is to position existential concerns in relation to specific coping strategies such as humor, substance use, and denial. The results suggest a relationship between EA and specific coping strategies that is worth investigating further.

The results from this data set highlight the importance that meaning plays in the college adjustment process. This is important given the connection between a sense of meaning and suicidality (Allen, 2022). Further work in the field of existential psychology should be done to better understand how people cope with existential challenges particularly dealing with specific strategies such as substance use, denial and peer support. Additionally, given the strength of both the presence of, and tendency to search for meaning, further work is called for to evaluate the concept of meaning in both domains as a relevant factor for psychosocial wellness in younger populations. These findings hold important implications for facilitating student wellbeing in college such by addressing social relationships, identity security, and creating meaningful college experiences. Both the importance of meaning and the risk for existential anxiety in college populations should direct further research and standing programs to focus increased attention on the concept of meaning to inform further action research in college communities, and to build on standing programs to facilitate meaning in the population to cater to the specific challenges faced by college students (Baxter Magolda, 2009). Furthermore, both the importance of meaning and the risk for existential anxiety in college populations will play an important role in the realm of suicide prevention programming (Fitzpatrick, 2009; Wong, 2013).

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SUMMER 2025

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 We have no conflicts of interest to disclose. Data is available for viewing via <https://osf.io/5a78s>  
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